Chapter Three

EMPATHISING WITH FEMALE PAIN:

LINDEN HILLS
The African American writers realize the impact of displacement on characters in their writings, first from Africa, and then through migration from the South to the North. It has been an important and significant experience of their history. Hence, Gloria Naylor is very particular about creating a fictional world on similar lines as Toni Morrison and Faulkner. Her first and fifth novels are set in Brewster Place, and her second novel *Linden Hills* (1985) in Linden Hills, both are fictitious black suburbs, geographically set in the same area, and are inhabited mostly by blacks.

Linden Hills is a posh, upper middle class settlement, whereas, Brewster Place is the last stop on the road to the bottom in American Society where mostly poor blacks live. Linden Hills is perceived as a symbol of black achievement, while Brewster Place is seen as a manifestation of failure. Ironically, Naylor depicts Brewster Place as a community held together by women, but Linden Hills is projected as a group of houses that never become a community. In fact, both of them are affected by race, says Barbara Christian:

The physical separation of Brewster Place and Linden Hills from the surrounding areas - one imposed, the other chosen - is itself symbolic of Afro-Americans' dilemma in the United States. Race and Class distinctions are intertwined in Naylor's geography, for in attempting to transcend the racial separations on streets like Brewster Place, her middle class separates itself from less fortunate blacks. They
shut themselves in so that they might not be shut out from the possibility of achieving power in white America. And as Naylor's narrative in *Linden Hills* suggests, they also separate themselves from each other and are not able to become a community.

In 1981 when Naylor was studying B.A in the Brooklyn College, her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* was published. She set off for Spain on a brief journey, patterned after the expatriate adventures of Hemingway and Baldwin to write the second novel. As a single woman travelling alone, often she found herself approached by men. She began to resent the fact that she did not have the freedom as the male writers enjoy. Finally, she shut herself up in a boarding house in Cadiz and began writing *Linden Hills*. About the bitter experience of her stay in Spain, she says:

> After all I'd just written a book you know, I was ready to be continental. But, the experience was so different for me. I was harassed a lot on the streets because I was a woman travelling alone. In southern Spain the women don't walk alone. So they assumed I was a prostitute or that I wanted them to approach me, and it was really difficult. And the freedom that Hemingway and Baldwin experience I didn't have. I had it when I sequestered myself away in that boarding house in Cadiz and started working on *Linden Hills*.²
Naylor got the initial idea for *Linden Hills* from her reading of Dante’s *Inferno* in her Great Literature Course at Brooklyn. It served as a model for writing *Linden Hills*. It emphasizes the novel’s allegorical structure and serious moral tone, and gives a universalizing mythical dimension to what otherwise might be considered a simple and narrow subject; the price African Americans are pay for assimilating the white social order. In *Linden Hills*, she abandons the gritty realism of her first novel for an allegorical commentary on the fallacies of upward mobility and material success. The theme is indictment of the African American middle class that sacrifices their racial identity for their avarice. In the process to material success one of the things they lost in Linden Hills is a feeling of community including the bond of sisterhood among women.

Catherine C. Ward acknowledges the theme of the novel as a need and necessity of getting identified in the community:

Gloria Naylor’s second novel *Linden Hills*, is a modern Dante’s *Inferno* in which souls are damned not because they have offended God or have violated a religious system but because they have offended themselves. In their single-minded pursuit of upward mobility, the inhabitants of Linden Hills, a black, middle-class suburb, have turned away from their past and from their deepest sense of who they are. Naylor feels that the subject of who-we-are and what we are willing to give up of who-we-are to get where-we-want-to-go is a
question of the highest seriousness—as serious as a Christian’s concern over his salvation.

Mel Watkins views the theme differently:

The novel is allegorical: Simply stated, Miss Naylor’s version of the Inferno suggests that blacks who aspire to the white world and material success are prone of the Devil and will experience the torments of hell. It is an intriguing allegory.

Sherley Anne Williams is satirical about the theme of Linden Hills. “One of the implicit messages of Linden Hills and Sarah Philips is that the only real black is a poor black.” Williams sees similarities between Andrea Lee’s Sarah Philips and Naylor’s Linden Hills. Helen Fiddyment Levy makes the character study of Linden Hills, while analyzing its theme.

Naylor’s second book, Linden Hills, pictures the author’s Inferno of success, the competitive and isolated lives of the black “winners” of the competitive consumer culture, . . . Linden Hills represents a male controlled American dystopia in contrast to the ideal female pastoral of Mama Day’s Willow Springs. As with Dante’s Inferno, the guides to the infernal landscape are a pagan poet, Willie, the unbeliever from the outside, and a young poet seeking salvation from his sinful heritage, Lester.
Like Dante, Lester cannot renounce Linden Hills until he has viewed the centre of its evil.6

Linden Hills was founded in 1820 by Luther Nedeed on the worthless northern face of a plateau that Nedeed had bought upon coming north to Wayne Country. The V-shaped land, originally bordered on top by the white farmer Putney Wayne’s fields, sloped sharply down a rocky facing covered with briar bush and linden trees, curved through the town cemetery, and ended in a sharp point in front of an apple orchard owned by another white man named Patterson. Needed built a cabin at the very bottom of the land, and realizing that the land was worthless for farming, he began an undertaker’s business. He also built shacks up on the hill and began renting them out to poor blacks who worked in the local sawmills or tar pit. Through five generations of Nedeeds, Linden Hills eventually grew and prospered and has since become a wealthy, middle-class black community. The inhabitants are spatially situated along eight curved roads descending from First Crescent Drive through Fifth Crescent Drive, continuing down three more roads named Tupelo Drive, and ending in the home of Luther Nedeed, the fifth in a line of Luther Nedeeds, who presides over the community and still runs the undertaker’s business started by his great-great grandfather.

As the land value of Linden Hills increased, old Luther Nedeed’s son decided to protect the community from the encroaching white community by offering thousand-year-and-a-day leases to the poor blacks living there, provided that they
passed the plots on to their children, to another black family, or failing this, back to the Nedeed family itself. The integrity of the "blackness" of Linden Hills thus assured, the Nedeeds set out to create a showcase black community, one that would succeed on white terms, that would be 'a wad of spit-a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America.' To show up the white racists who had attempted to force the blacks out of Linden Hills and take over the now-valuable land, Nedeed had to create "a jewel-an ebony jewel that reflected the soul of Wayne Country but reflected it black." Needed thus founded the Tupelo Realty Corporation and began financing and building private developments in Linden Hills, as well as carefully selecting who would live in them. Only those who were willing to forget the "black" past of slavery and failure and to buy into the vision of a "black" material progress could be a part of Linden Hills; everyone else was either forced out by Nedeed or denied a mortgage by the Tupelo Realty Corporation. Linden Hills thus has become a model black success story, 'making it into Linden Hills meant 'making it'; blacks everywhere send in applications to Nedeed's real estate office, hoping for the chance to move to one of the curved drives with the possibility of one day moving down the hill toward Nedeed's house and the most exclusive properties on Tupelo Drive.

In an interview to Donna Parry, Naylor articulates that the assimilated blacks whose lives she studies in Linden Hills have too great a cost to pay for their upward mobility in search of material success:

It was about the stripping away of your soul when you move toward some sort of assimilation that happens
to any hyphenated American. When you lose that which makes your uniquely you, we have finally, thank God, stopped that nonsense in this country where the ideal concept was a melting pot. Now we are saying, "No, it's a patch-work quilt, not a melting pot". Because - guess what? - nobody was melting. It was not happening. The novel was a sort of cautionary tale about that, about attempting to do the impossible especially for the black American, because we are also a racist society. When you take on the account rements of success, you go to all the right schools. You wear the right clothes, you have all the right vocabulary and you go as high as you possibly can you still get that ceiling. You come up close to the fact that you are always going to be the other, you will always be black.

Naylor thus insists on the importance of communal identity in a racist society. Her argument shows her faith in cultural nationalism which argues for the retention of one's own identity of culture and tradition. Many others note that the novel updates the critical view of the black elite in a clear allegory with gothic element. Others acknowledge Naylor's obsession with the cultural history of African American community. Naylor takes the relationship between personal identity and cultural history as her theme. By setting her story in Linden Hills, a "buppified" suburb where members derive their self-worth from the location of their house, Naylor focuses on a community of soulless people who, in climbing the corporate
ladder toward a brighter monetary future, become disconnected from their cultural past. Through her female protagonist Willa Nedeed, who is buried alive in the cellar of the Nedeed house until the end of the book, Naylor outlines a recuperative vision of history, a vision which opposes the willed cultural amnesia of Linden Hills.

In *Linden Hills* Naylor meticulously plots the stories of the twentieth century assimilate blacks fit in the Dantian model of *Inferno* of the fourteenth century European literature. Naylor, like Dante, believes in the theory of preferences and choices people make. She believes that man is capable of making wise choices and that matters everything for him. The geographical location and moral intonation of Dante’s Hell is followed by Naylor to a large extent. In *Inferno* Satan is placed in the centre of Hell in a frozen lake. His three faces are that of traitors like Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Hell lies beneath the city of Jerusalem. It is surrounded by the Dark Wood that symbolizes confusion and ignorance. The sinners are categorized and placed in nine different circles of Hell. There are two special groups of souls called neutral who do fit in neither of them and hence hang in between Heaven and Hell. Even the other sinners are classified into two groups- the intentional sinners and the sinners making wrong choices. In accordance with the sins they had committed the sinners are confined to corresponding circles of Hell. The virtuous but unbaptized pagans are detained at the top in the first circle, the lustful in the second, the gluttons in the third, the avaricious and the prodigals in the fourth, the wrathful in the fifth, the heretical in the sixth, the violent in the seventh, the
fraudulent in the eighth, finally the traitors in the ninth, and Satan him-self in the tenth circle.

Naylor borrows the physical design and moral intonation of *Inferno* in *Linden Hills*. It is a fictitious black suburb owned by the Nedeeds. Instead of ten Circles as in Inferno, *Linden Hills* has only eight circles, each one known as a Crescent Drive. The first five are equal to Dante’s Upper Hell. They are marked by Tupelo Drive, parallel to the city of Dis. Naylor’s satanic figure Luther Nedeed lives at the centre of *Linden Hills*. His house is surrounded by a frozen lake. The suburb’s name like its allure, is deceptive. In fact, Linden Hills is not several hills, but only part of a hillside, a large V-shaped area intersected by eight streets. They curve around and down the slope. Unlike Dante’s Hell, in Linden Hills up is down. Hence, in *Linden Hills*, the most affluent families live in the lower hills while the less on the top. All these houses are leased out to the residents for thousand years and a day. In return, the residents give up something like their personal identity. The people in Linden Hills are placed in the circles meant for them according to the sins they had committed as in Dante’s *Inferno*. Most of them come to Linden Hills for having made wrong choices. The significance of the novel lies in its allegorical quality. It explores the lives of affluent African Americans who have attained the American Dream of material success, but at the expense of human values.

Naylor explains as to how the formulation of her novel had happened:
I was with Dante until second Crescent Drive. Winston and David, my two homosexual men, were Paolo and Francesca. Everything up to that point was transliterature with Dante and, the greed on the first crescent Drive, Mr. Tilson and all that. I left Dante there because I had my own scheme. Then I picked him up again at Sixth Crescent Drive when they enter into the lower region of Hell for the Tower of Dis and are stopped by the demons. And then Beatrice sent the archangel Michael, I think, to cast out the demons. I went to Dante for that I picked him up again at the very end with his image of Satan being a three headed creature frozen in this lake and, crying. That's what Willa and Nedeed and the baby are coming out of that house, one body fused together with three heads. But that was perhaps my most formulated work would. 8

Luther Needed is the owner of the Tupelo Reality Company and the undertaker for the African American community in Linden Hills. He holds the mortgages and leases the houses in Linden Hills. His ancestors were settled and laid out in Linden Hills. The present Luther Nedeed is the fifth on the line. In 1820, the first Luther Nedeed came from Tupelo, Mississippi, after selling his wife and six children to slavery. In this context, Naylor creates the mythical model of history. As Teresa Goddu argues:
The Nedeed Family history, which chronicles four generations of Luther Nedeeds, is based on repetition and replication instead of progression through difference. Each generation produces a single child: a “short, square, dark” son who is a carbon copy of his father.

Willie Mason, an idealistic twenty-year-old African American poet lives in a slum, bordering Linden Hills. He survives by working odd jobs. After completing the ninth grade, Willie had left school believing that he needed to live among the people in order to write poetry about them. He does not believe in formal education. He takes pride in memorizing and reciting poetry like a poet of African oral tradition. He recites them for money. He is intelligent and widely read but rather naïve. He often questions whether he has chosen the right path in his life or not. Contrary to her first novel, The Women of Brewster Place in which mostly women characters are found Linden Hills has many male characters. Willie is the narrator, a detached observer of Linden Hills. Along with his soul mate, Lester Tilson of the First Crescent Drive, he takes us on a journey through Linden Hills. Lester has finished high school but refuses to attend college. He too is a poet but, unlike Willie, he writes for publication. They both, while earning Christmas money by working at odd jobs in Linden Hills, take us beyond the walls of strange people’s homes of Linden Hills. They take us into their lives for an unforgettable experience. As they encounter them, Naylor presents the configuration of the lives of the residents. Willie and Lester introduce all the other characters of the novel. The list includes:
Luther Nedeed, Maxwell Smyth, Xavier Donnell, Laurel Dumont, Lester’s mother Mrs. Tilson and his sister Roxanna Tilson, Winston Alcott and his lover David, Chester Parker, Lycentia, the Reverend Michael T. Hollis, Daniel Braithwaite and on the woman’s story Willa Prescott Nedeed, the female counterpart to Willie, and her foremothers in her discovery. *Linden Hills* also attests Naylor’s obsession with exploring group history. Her intriguing interest in the history of Linden Hills and the malevolent Luther Nedeed, the founder and patriarch of Linden Hills are at the centre of *Linden Hills*. In the process of exploring cultural history Willie journeys through Linden Hills.

Naylor emphasizes on the journey of Willa Prescott Nedeed, the octoroon wife of Luther Nedeed. Her story begins with her imprisonment by Luther Nedeed in the basement of his house. In the course of it she attains self-realization. Her confinement is a symbolic presentation of patriarchal authority on women. But, Luther thinks it as an attempt to transform Willa from being a ‘whore’ into an ‘ideal’ wife, says Teresa Goddu. Willa fails to give a son, who is a physical replica of him. In the basement she comes to terms with the myth of marriage. The myth of marriage with Willa is obvious since it erases her name. It is said: “There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no name.”(*LN*, 277) she is confined to the basement because, Willa, in contrary to her foremothers, gave birth to a white skinned son. Luther suspects her fidelity and controls her water, food and light, confining her to morgue basement.
In the morgue basement, Willa begins her journey toward self-discovery. It is an outcome of her isolation with her dead son from the world. She howls out of despair which augurs her identity and discovery. Jenny Brantley refers to Katie Canon and Mae Henderson's argument in "The Black body is the Text." It contends if the body is the text, then the physical sounds, the sounds without words, become the sounds of the body. Jenny Brantley sums up and signifies Naylor's use of screams by her female characters. They continue from the screams of Ciel, as Mattie removes the splinter of her grief in *The Women of Brewster Place* to the screams of Mariam, when her virgin sewn nearly shut, and gives virgin birth to George in *Bailey's Café*. Willa from the basement, through howls and screams tries to make her. Jenny Brantley says that the earlier novels of Gloria Naylor are unified in part, by the sounds of screams and laughter. The patterns of screams are important to each novel separately where these human sounds often signal narrative turn. At the same time they serve as important connecting devices among the novels.

The same screams of Willa reach out to the other women over the time and distance. They respond to her from abandoned diaries, clothes, photographs, old Bibles, and cook books. All of them speak of their respective miseries in marriage. Luwana Parker Ville, the foremother personalizes biblical stories. Evelyn Creton gives an account of her autobiography in terms of modern day, woman's Bible, the cook book. Priscilla Mc Guire uses her family photographs to personalize her history in which she is symbolically erased by both the Nedeed's, her husband and her son.
Naylor admits the fact that Willa and her dead son Sinclair reflect on her for quite a long time. 'They were half my life for three or four years or so', she confesses:

I think of *Linden Hills* because I had stayed so long down in the basement with this dead child - that the children die in my books. I didn’t even give it a second thought in the first book because it was in [only] one story [CIEL] but with *Linden Hills* I began to wonder Willa and her dead boy were half my life for three or four years or so.\(^\text{10}\)

In the women’s story in *Linden Hills*, Christopher N. Okonkwo criticizes Naylor’s critics for virtually overlooking the novel’s concern with theology in the episodes of Willa. He emphasizes on the novel’s apocalyptic end of Willa which destroys the patriarchal establishment. The novel studies Willa as a feminist critic, a historian, and a successful heroine. Okonkwo refers to Teresa Goddu’s view of Willa’s death as self sacrifice and of Margaret Homan’s as suicide. Okonkwo amends such views by offering a ‘problematic reading’ of Willa’s death. Regarding the religious overtones of her death he says:

I read Willa as an irregular messiah as a gendered reification of both Moses and Christ. Willa’s messianic death her “self – sacrifice” – promises emancipation from Nedeed bondage for Linden
Hills erred citizen, particularly the sub divisions abused women.

The novel opens with Willie and Lester reading the inscription on the three bronze plaques over the doors of the high school. It is similar to the opening lines of *Inferno*. Together they visit Ruth and Norman Anderson who like Willie live outside Linden Hills in a poor street called Wayne Avenue. Like Lester, they too have an understanding of Linden Hills because they once lived in the Fifth Crescent Drive of Linden Hills. Now, Ruth never wants to get back to Linden Hills because she opines that the residents of Linden Hills are unreal. Ruth is one of the significant characters in the novel. She is perceptive enough to see the hollowness of the 'Linden Hills' residents and is convinced that their damning 'sins' had brought them to the 'modern Inferno' of Linden Hills. She is an embodiment of pure love, Naylor's version of Beatrice, as Beatrice in Dante's *Inferno* reflects the love and godliness of Christ and symbolizes divine love. Ruth is contended to live in poverty with Norman Anderson who often suffers from attacks of schizophrenia. He scrapes off everything that comes in his way while under the influence of psychological fits. Ruth, when wants to leave him in order to seek a better life, is down with pelvic infection. Norman, fighting his own fits, manages to bring her painkillers. Realizing his concern for her, Ruth decides to stay with him. They live with the barest of essentials- one sofa, one cheap kitchenette set, two towels and wash clothes, and three Styrofoam cups. They both share one cup, keeping the other two for guests.
James Robert Saunders sees Ruth as Naylor's Beatrice, Lester as Virgil, and Willie as Dante. Ruth is Christ to whom Beatrice in *Inferno* is attached. Naylor conventionalizes the theme of *Linden Hills* in Ruth's character. Realizing the significance of Ruth's character Saunders opines: "While Luther Nedeed has held his wife in captivity six years for the most insignificant reason, Ruth celebrates six years of being with someone she had every reason to leave."\(^\text{12}\) Ruth is the only one among the young women who has anything close to a successful relationship with a man. She is known for making choices. When Willie asks who rules in their house. Ruth and Norman agree to say: "Love rules in this house."(LN, 38)

Lester sees her as an object of fetish but for Willie, she is a 'saint'. He chides Lester for his opinion of Ruth, saying: "that's a lady, dammit! And she is too good for you to be wiping your greasy mind all over her body. You ain't worth six inches to her toe nails. She is a saint . . ." (LN, 43) To Willie, she is a source of inspiration, with a great spiritual intensity. It is Ruth who suggests Willie that he and Lester earn Christmas money by working in Linden Hills.

Among the eight concentric circles of Linden Hills, Lester Tilson, his mother Mrs. Tilson, and his sister Roxanna live on the First Crescent Drive. It is 'the smallest house on a street of brick ranch houses' (LN, 47) They are similar to the neutrals that stay outside Circle One of the *Inferno*. These neutrals are neither good nor bad. Saunders explains the use of green colour in the Tilsons' house:
The color green dominates, emphasizing the degree to which money itself becomes a god. Even house walls appear green when the sun shines through avocado-stupid, fern-printed curtains. Inside, the carpeting is jade; outside, the wooden frame is covered with aluminum siding, a clue to how artificiality has covered what was once natural.

Lester is critical of his mother's materialism and his sister's nominal interest in the Civil Rights Movement. They are never comfortable because they run after 'unreal' things. Grandma Tilson is a realistic woman, a woman of her own, but Lester's mother and Roxanna try for upward mobility and are sure to miss originality. Grandma Tilson's message of not losing the 'mirror' in their souls is unheeded by them.

In the Second Crescent Drive, Winston Alcott lives with his lover David. Winston is convinced to discontinue his eight year homosexual relationship with David, lest his legal profession would get affected. Luther Neeed announces him a reward for entering into an unhappy marriage. He wants to lease Winston a house in Tupelo Drive. Willie and Lester, on their first day of work in Linden Hills, go to work at Winston's wedding. Willie is secretly happy as to 'someone black could afford' (LN, 82). Later, he notices hypocrisy in the guests present. Catherine C. Ward analyses, "Willie sees that beneath the glittering surface, the wedding guests..."
are devoid of life and spontaneity. They are not living: they are watching themselves live."\(^{13}\)

Maxwell Smyth lives on the Third Crescent Drive. He is an assistant to the executive director of General Motors. He is very calculated and careful about his blackness. He takes all means and measures to hide his race, and is equal to Dante’s gluttons. His hunger is not for food, but for professional growth. Therefore, he is overambitious and cautious about self and status. Naylor comments: “In short, his entire life became a race against the natural – and he was winning.” (LN, 104) At Winston Alcott’s wedding Willie meets Xavier Donnell, who is also from the Third Crescent Drive. Xavier is as ambitious and voracious as Smyth. When asked for Smyth’s opinion on marrying Roxanne he advises Xavier not to marry her since she is a poor black woman who has limited opportunities for social success. Xavier is convinced as he too has similar opinions of black women. But he is in love with Roxanne Tilson. He knows that “the road was a lot more cluttered for a black woman and a successful journey meant sharpening her spirits to grind away all the garbage that stood in her way.” (LN, 111) Hence, he is not able to decide whether he should marry her, or not. Dante considers gluttony as a more serious sin than lust because gluttony involves self – indulgence while lust is shared.

The next day Willie and Lester go to the Fourth Crescent Drive to work at Chester Parker’s. Since his wife Lycentia is dead, Parker is making preparations for the wake. He is getting ready to receive the mourners. He also wants to repaper
his dead wife Lycentia's room for his new wife. He has already made arrangements for his marriage soon after Lycentia’s burial. During the wake, all kinds of greedy indulgences are seen. Parker is seated quietly at the head of a large oval shaped dining table. The twelve chairs around the table are being occupied continually. Food is served and the guests specially stuff the white cake Luther Nedeed had brought. The episode, as explained by Catherine C. Ward is relevant and significant since it foreshadows Chester’s intentions and the profile of Linden Hills:

This feeding frenzy is a paradigm of Linden Hills where new residents rush in to take over one of the leases as soon as it is available. The table is also a reflection of Chester’s marriage. Lycentia is not yet buried, but Chester has hired Willie and Lester to steam off the wallpaper in her bedroom so that the room will be repapered and new furniture moved in during the funeral; thus all will be ready for Chester’s next wife as soon as Lycentia is buried.

The Reverend Michael T. Hollis lives at 000 in the Fifth Crescent Drive. It is the last house on the last circle in the upper section of Linden Hills. This is parallel to Circle five in Inferno where the angry and the melancholic are confined. The mourners gather at Lycentia’s funeral where Reverend Hollis conflicts with Luther Nedeed. They both contest to dominate the occasion. Reverend Hollis is hostile and depressed with Nedeed, as a result he delivers an old style, emotional sermon for the mourners of Lycentia, which clearly lacks spiritual devotion. He has
been running after sensual pleasures for several years and is isolated in pursuit of material possessions. His avarice makes him lose touch with his own feelings while Luther Nedeed is cold and loves himself. Ironically, both men live at the lowest spot in the sections of Linden Hills. Both counter each other for power and domination. Their house numbers also ridicule each other; Hollis’s 000, and Nedeed’s 999. Naylor remarks: “Well, if this house (Nedeed’s) could be 999, the Hollis home could be 000. Luther Nedeed might see himself as the omega, but Reverend Michael T. Hollis was the alpha.” (LN, 165) Willie is sarcastic and compares Reverend Hollis to Luther Nedeed. ‘I found out it was your place, I said to myself, “I bet Reverend Hollis is as rich as Luther Nedeed.’ ” (LN, 170)

There are two brick pillars at the entrance of Tupelo Drive which cost three sections of Linden Hills. Laurel Dumont, Professor Daniel Braithwaite, and the Nedeeeds live in Tupelo Drive. Laurel has no available parents, her mother is dead, and her father lives with a young woman. Her grandmother Roberta Johnson takes care of her in summers. Laurel has two interests; music and swimming. Usually, all women writers choose music and dance but Naylor synchronizes swimming. Laurel is successful in Phi Beta Kappa, and marries rich Dumont. In spite of her laurels, she is denied self-identity, and is just an ornament to her husband. She feels awful when Luther Nedeed demands her to vacate the lease of her home in Tupelo Drive. In his view the lease cannot be executed on Laurel since she is separated from her husband, Dumont. Laurel realizes that according to Luther, she is non-existent:
“This conversation isn’t taking place,” Laurel shook her head. “There is no way that this conversation is taking place in my living room, with this man looking me straight in the face and telling me that I don’t exist. That I don’t live in this house. (LN, 245)

Laurel realizes that a woman’s space in the social order is small. She is denied a house in Tupelo Drive since she is single and is separated from her husband. She is unable to overcome her sense of rootlessness in Linden Hills. As a result, she takes up the extreme decision of killing herself by diving into an empty winter swimming pool. Her death is due to her inability to connect herself back to black female history and her failure to attain self identity:

When Luther comes to evict her from her house because her husband is gone and she has none of “his” children, she realizes that she has never really had an independent existence separate from that of her husband in Linden Hills. Like so many other dependent women, this modern woman finds herself with no identity that expresses her self and her female history.

In the penultimate section titled “December 23rd” Naylor presents the role of history through the character of Daniel Braithwaite. He is a History professor, and is one among the three who are paid for by Luther Nedeed for his studies. He has
been living in a house in Linden Hills gifted by Nedeed. As a result, Braithwaite becomes a hired pen to him. He also studies the full history of Tupelo Drive Realty Company and writes a twelve volume history of Linden Hills. He copiously records Linden Hills’ existence, its subsequent growth, development and aims at the Nobel Prize. He believes that history is a written photograph which emphasizes his belief in facts and reality. He kills the willow trees in front of his house that block the view of Luther Nedeed’s house. The dead trees symbolize the uselessness of his knowledge, his memory for his community:

He has killed his living knowledge of the community so that he could more easily keep the deadly Nedeed in sight. Hence, killing the willow trees symbolize the uselessness of his knowledge for his community.16

Along with Willie and Lester, Daniel Braithwaite is also a witness to Laurel’s suicide. But his reflections are different from that of Willie’s. His non-committal and detached conception of Laurel’s death is obvious in his words. He emphasizes that suicide is an ultimate and a common phenomenon with the black women and the black community. Therefore, Laurel’s suicide, he believes, is inevitable:

I’m talking about not being able to stop the course of human history, a collective history or an individual one. You can delay the inevitable, set up road blocks and
detours if you will, but that personal tragedy today was just a minute part of a greater tragedy that has afflicted this community for decades. And the person who watched it unfold understood that. He [Nedeed] understood that to try and stop her would be like trying to ward off a flood with a teacup. *(LN, 257)*

Thus, Braithwaite intends to record his ‘knowledge’ but not rectify the miserable situation of the community. He shuts himself and remains analytical about everything. His intention is not to stop the evil he observes, but to win an honour for himself. Willie is perplexed: *After such knowledge, what forgiveness?* *(LN, 262)*

Willa Nedeed’s personal journey toward self-discovery begins with an immersion in her material past. As Willa reads her foremothers’ records, she writes her own story, turning cultural history into personal autobiography. Naylor would seem to use Willa’s autobiographical relationship to history as the novel’s model of efficacious history-making. Teresa Goddu says, “However, to understand fully the nature of Willa’s revisionary female model, the novel’s alternative versions of history must first be examined: Luther Nedeed’s mythic, Daniel Braithwaite’s objective, and Willie Mason’s poetic histories.” Beginning with Luther’s and Braithwaite’s authorized white, male accounts, histories which deny the female subject and cover over a cultural past, and Willie’s and Willa’s opposing black female-centered stories, subjective histories that exhume the past in service of the present are studied by Goddu.
Luther Nedeed, the founder and patriarch of Linden Hills, creates a mythical model of history. Luther's male myth, which claims the justification of nature, is exposed as an ideologically contingent story through the birth of a white son. The boy's whiteness undermines years of patrilineal transmission since he resembles his pale-skinned mother instead of his dark father: he looks like his "grandmother. And the mother before that." This son represents the rupture that begins the process of revisionary Luther's patriarchal myth. With this rupture in Luther's repetitive history, the novel moves out of its timeless prologue back into chronological history and begins to give an identity to the generations of women which Luther's myth has reduced to a single sign—the pale-skinned bride. Luther, however, refuses to accept the female difference which contradicts his master narrative; instead of admitting the mother's son into his system, he represses the rupture by denying the mother's son his name and by burying both mother and son alive.

Like Luther's myth, which claims the justification of nature, Brathwaite's history invokes the authority of fact. If Luther thinks that he can step outside of history, Brathwaite believes that he can escape subjectivity. Arguing that "history is a written photograph," Brathwaite claims that he can record an objective reality. However, Brathwaite himself exposes the subjectivity inherent in his objective stance when he describes his role as a photographer history. What Brathwaite fails to take into account is the perspective of the viewer. As a product of Luther Nedeed (Luther finances his education, gives him his house, and allows him access to the
records he needs), Braithwaite’s eye is conditioned to see from Luther’s perspective: his house, which is among the final set of houses on Tupelo Drive and closest to Luther’s allows him the privilege of seeing what Luther Nedeed has seen. Moreover, by living within Linden Hills and participating in its functioning, he introduces a variable into his closes experiment-himself.

Like Luther’s myth, Braithwaite’s objective history, which universalizes his own subjective perspective, is phallocentric. Braithwaite acts not to change the history of Linden Hills, but to perpetuate it. Although, Willie, in identifying with the faceless woman that he dreams about, escapes his male gaze, it finally remains up to Willa to reconstruct the female face. Willie’s vernacular poem, “There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no name,” might attempt to reinsert the woman back into history, but it fails finally to name the woman. His poetic story might revise Luther’s and Braithwaite’s logocentric histories by insisting on a subjective rendering of reality situated in the body and by signalling a move toward a female-centred story, but finally the novel only allows Willa to reconstruct a female history only she can give face and a name to the woman buried at the bottom of the hill.

Crucial events occur in the novel’s final chapter “December 24th.” It ends, as Christopher N. Okonkwo describes on a ‘problematic’ and ‘memorable’ note. On December 24th, the final day, Nedeed employs Willie and Lester to carry out the family tradition of decorating the Christmas tree. He offers these handymen
an amount matching the amount they had earned that week through odd jobs at Linden Hills. Willie is reluctant to work at Nedeed’s but joins Lester being lured by the amount offered by Luther Nedeed. While helping Nedeed bring goods from the basement, Willie accidentally knocks open the bolt to the cellar door. At the same time Willa Prescott Nedeed, who has been imprisoned by her husband Luther Nedeed, is heading up the cellar steps. She forcefully enters the house with her son Sinclair’s dead body wrapped in white lace. She begins cleaning the house, trying to reclaim her legitimate role within the Nedeed family. As Willie, Lester, and Nedeed finish trimming the Christmas tree, Willa at once appears in the doorway and announces: “Luther” – her voice was cracked and husky as Willie’s hand went toward his tightening throat- “your son is dead.” (LN, 299)

Wille is horrified at her sudden appearance. He is about to scream. Nedeed hurriedly sends Willie and Lester away from his house, saying that their bills would be mailed later. He wants to divert their attention and also wants to stop Willa coming into his house. As a protest, he tries to grab the dead child away from her. Willa quickly responds to him by catching his neck with one hand, and the other around his waist. The dead body of their son is caught in between them. Naylor describes the ghostly incident with melodramatic undertones:

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.
In the struggle the Christmas tree crashes to the floor and the candles set the house on fire. Ironically, the family is united in death. Lester forces Willie to flee the scene. The residents of Linden Hills watch Nedeed's house burning down. The hypocritical, self-serv ing Linden Hills residents let the house burn. They do not join in solidarity as a community as in the case of 'The Block Party' in Naylor's first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*. They hate Luther for controlling, demanding, and dominating them continually. In contrast, Willie from Putney Wayne deplores the incident and complains repeatedly, "They let it burn." (*LN*, 304)

Barbara Christian notices the final message of *Linden Hills* which is different from that of *The Women of Brewster Place* because *Linden Hills* does not conclude with a scene in which all the residents appear as in the earlier-novel. But it signals the end of the place Linden Hills. But while the residents of Brewster Place are getting together to have a block party, the residents of Linden Hills unilaterally ignore the burning down of the Nedeeds' house by putting out their lights. Hence, the wall that separates Brewster Place from the outer world becomes their mark of community as well as their stigma, while the houses of Linden Hills are critical to the concluding section of that novel precisely because they are the measuring stick of these people's wealth as well as their unwillingness to interact with one another.
Only Lester and Willie, the outcasts from Linden Hills, are ‘hand anchored to hand’ in those last days of the year.

Naylor interprets Willa’s character as:

(But) what eventually evolved through all the pain that she went through was the discovery that she liked being where she was—a conventional housewife. And there is this moment when she says not only to the reader, but to me—“I was a good wife and good mother, And I’m not going to apologize to anyone for that”. That was real surprise to me. I hadn’t planned the character doing that. But what herself affirmation become was acknowledge her conventional position. I had such a character in Linden Hills. And when I put Willa in that basement my over all idea was to have this very conservative upper-middle class black woman through her discovery of all those remnants from the past wives who would lived in that house, just get up, walk out of there and say, “No, this is shallow. This is not for me” I wanted her to learn from those lessons in history.

Naylor is successful in her creation of male characters such as Willie and Lester in Linden Hills. Willie is a viable part of Putney Wayne, a working class. Lester is a descendent of Grammy Tilson, the only one who does not bend to the first Luther Nedeed’s will. Willie and Lester play an important part in the novel since
they both are witnesses to the stories of Linden Hills. They both are not opposite to each other's values. Naylor suggests that friendship among men with similar values is as significant as friendship among women in similar circumstances which is critical for the African American community in its search for empowerment. Luke Bouvier observes Willie as a transitional figure, embodying duality:

Willie represents the ideal figure for exposing and subverting the essential illusions of the community as they are manifested in the boundary and significant problems, the ravages of commodification, and the suppression of women. He is a luminal figure, living on Wayne Avenue, the problematic boundary between Linden Hills and Putney Wayne, which as a neighbourhood of poor blacks represents the heritage of black "failure" from which the Neeed's want to distinguish themselves.  

Further, Bouvier observes Willie who is just twenty year old, no longer a boy but not yet a man. His name takes on particular importance for the signification problems associated with naming, for he has been given the nickname "White" because he is so black that the kids said if he turned just a shade darker, there was nothing he could do but start going the other way. His nickname, thus appears as a figure of linguistic disjunction, blocking any essential, natural conception of names, because it suspends its "normal" referential function and points back towards itself as language with the power of constructing or instituting difference, rather than simply
reporting an essential pre-existing difference. In the same way, his last name, "Mason," defers and displaces its binary opposite, for Willie eventually helps to destroy the bases of Linden Hills. In addition, Willie in a certain sense appears on the borderline between masculine and feminine; he is defensive and somewhat secretive about his poetry because it seems having wrapped his own presents because it looks like something a woman would do. Later on, when thinking about Nedeed's wife and Linden Hills, and his ominous sense of foreboding, he thinks to himself, "Christ, now he really was turning into a woman—he sounded like somebody's superstitious old aunt." (LN, 273) Finally, Willie is a producer—both a worker in Linden Hills and a composer of poems who memorizes them all and refuses to write them down. He thus, avoids a certain alienation from his poetic creations, refusing to part with them and run the risk of a certain commodification, while at the same time, he incarnates an oral black literary tradition linked with the authentic black heritage that Needed wants to suppress.

Willie's passage through Linden Hills takes on the dimensions of the trajectory of a search for a name—the name of Luther Nedeed's wife. This name has the potential to subvert the Nedeed clan because it would essential presences and blackness of the name "Nedeed." As Willie makes his way down the hill with Lester becoming increasingly obsessed with the mystery surrounding this strangely absent name, Nedeed's wife proceeds on a journey of her own toward this name, unearthing the personal effects of the past Nedeed wives, which were stored away and forgotten in the basement morgue where she is now a prisoner. One by one, she discovers the
name and history of each of these women through a bible, a set of cookbooks, and a family photo album, constituting in sum a history of despair and madness, of a gradual loss of identity for each wife. Neeed's wife resurrects this buried history, through, and turns it against the Neeed men. The history of "failure" of these marginalized octoroon woman reveals the names of the past wives-Luwana Packerville, Evelyn Creton, and Priscilla McGuire-and thus introduces a resurgent element of difference, both between each Luther Neeed and his wife and between each Luther Needed and the other Luther Nedeeds. This formerly suppressed history of signification of the name "Luther Neeed" in a differential relationship with the names of the Neeed wives and the other "Luther Neeed" constitutes a sort of "internal" counterpart to the threat to Linden Hills posed by the problematic history of signification.

Catherine C. Ward sees his worth in emancipating the suppressed people. She points to the growth and development of his character from the beginning to the end of the novel:

Working temporarily as a handyman to earn money to buy Christmas presents Willie passes through Linden Hills and, like Dante, analyzes the moral failures of the lost souls he encounters. By the time Willie escapes from the frozen lake at the bottom of Linden Hills and crosses to the safety of a nearby apple orchard, he has experienced a spiritual awakening. The 'new' Willie has decided to give up aimless drifting and to take charge of his life. He becomes, as his name
implies, a decisive builder. He accepts responsibility for his life, he refuses to blame his problems on others or on fate, and he realizes that he can choose a middle way between the poverty of the ghetto and the depravity of Linden Hills 19.

Naylor, in her admiration for Willie and Lester sees in them "redeemers" of the women characters. To Toni Morrison she says:

I eventually began to love the two boys in Linden Hills, and as they went along I could applaud them or cry about whatever they did. You know, at first I actually introduced myself not, "Hi, Willie and Lester, here's Gloria" Don't, "Hey guys, now here's a woman and I really don't know what it's like to be twenty year old, at that threshold of man hood, but I'm going to try awfully hard. Naylor seems to have burdened Willie and Lester with their social responsibilities, and is convinced with their potentiality.20

Naylor posits Willie to serve as a communicator between her male and female characters. He is sensitive to women's sufferings. He is the first to hear and react to Willa's wail. He is inquisitive about Mrs. Nedeed's absence and suspects Nedeed guilty of something foul. It is Willie who accidentally unbolts the basement door and helps Willa out of the basement. His impressions of Ruth Anderson are
exemplary. He is positive and sympathetic towards Mrs. Tilson. He is worried about the misery that awaits Cassandra in marrying a homosexual like Winston Alcott. He is troubled at the insolent attitude of Maxwell Smyth and Xavier Donnell when they consider featuring a nude African woman in the print as a social achievement of the community. Maxwell and Xavier are perfect aspirants of the corporate structure. Their view of ideal progress is to get accepted in the 'white' society. They want to allow the system of assimilating the whites' life style to be continued. They proudly declare to Willie and Lester, "Today Penthouse, my friends, and tomorrow the world." (LN, 116) But for Willie, it is obnoxious. It is nothing but commoditization of black women in the mass media.

Willie is not convinced by Daniel Braithwaite's explanation for Laurel's suicide. Braithwaite who is also a witness to her death takes it as a common incident with the black community and more particularly with black women. Contrary to him Willie is deeply moved and develops revulsion at her suicide. Furthermore, during the four day journey in Linden Hills he is haunted by nightmares of women.

Some reviewers like Larry R. Andrews criticize Willie and Lester for their inactions:

----- 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, much as Mattie imagines the women of Brewster Place attacking the wall at the end of their cul-de-sac.

Christopher N. Okonkwo quotes Jewelle Gomez who alludes Willie and Lester as the novel's weakest characters who lack wisdom and naïveté. Okonkwo also attests them as:

[they]--- are not exactly revolutionaries, although they do exhibit radical, bi-gender, and anti-materialistic sensitivities. In this roles as poets, guides, commentators, and carriers of an authorial moral pulse, twenty-year-old Lester and even more so his friend Willie are really functional outsiders who can only reveal and criticize character action and narrative development; they are not equipped practically to alter the configurations of Linden Hills evil.

On the other side, reviewers like Teresa Goddu make a bon mot about the ending of the novel. She is curious to know why Naylor has ended the novel
'without a viable model of female history'. By doing so, Naylor seems have recreated black male history:

"The troubling question that the novel leaves unanswered is why it ends without a viable model of female history? To put it another way, why must two Adams go forth from the ruins of this inverted paradise and no Eve? By focusing on Willie's journey toward a "middle ground" at the end of the book, Naylor would seem to write an optimistic and perhaps even radical ending. Yet why does the ending posit the possibility for a reconstructed black male history but not a female one? Why must Willa serve only as a conduit for the real reconstructor, Willie? Since women end up with so little in a book that seems to promise them so much, Naylor's own dreamlike ending remains haunted by what is still denied the woman's story."

As such, Naylor seems to deny the woman's story in *Linden Hills*. She might seem to suggest an alternative to black feminism in visionary feminism which argues for the urgent need of the society to establish male, female relations with honour and dignity.

In *Linden Hills*, Willa is successful in death because she ends the Nedeed dynasty. Ruth Anderson represents female power and wisdom. The other women despite their college education, and in some cases decent professional careers, are
unprotected, and attacked. They are absolutely and desperately isolated. For instance, Roxanna Tilson wants to marry Xavier Donnell who is rich. He too loves her, but is fearful of the commitment and anxious because the upward career he aims for as a General Manager makes his marriage with her imprudent. Marie Hollis finds herself incompatible to her preacher husband Michael T. Hollis and eventually leaves him when he begins philandering. In the case of Cassandra, the new bride of Winston Alcott, only misery awaits her in marriage. She is made the victim of another status marriage with the gay husband, who betrays himself and his lover David for respectability as an attorney. Of all the female characters Laurel Dumont’s story is awful. Christopher N. Okonkwo points to her death as an instance of suicide. He further distinguishes her death from that of Willa’s, while trying to highlight Willa’s death as messianic self – sacrifice for the redemption of patriarchal domination. Okonkwo considers the Laurel as “successful”, “the biggest woman at IBM” and “an Amazon”, besides:

(But) Laurel is also a sad Black Woman, one battling a deepening crisis borne of mauntal unfulfillment, familial emptiness, cultural alienation, and spiritual fragality. She has a house but no home in Linden Hills. Worse yet, Luther diabolically aggravates Laurel’s present malaise by intimating her virtual non existence in Linden Hills outside of a male/man – her husband, Howard 24.
It is also noted that before taking the drastic decision of suicide, Laurel desperately yearns for friendship and consolation of the other women of the novel.

Okonkwo while discussing Willa's death as both real and speakerly, would not qualify, derogatorily, as 'suicide', Naylor's narrator makes it clear that the Willa seen marching back upstairs, after her bereavement, banishment, and epiphany, is a woman who has been severely tortured, is possibly demented, but is also alert and determined to live and, unlike Laurel, rebuilt her life. Willa's death is in the tradition of black women's activism and self-sacrifice:

Willa's death should be revisioned not in the pejorative sense of suicide and self distraction but as positive, as deliverance and self – sacrifice that open a new millennium with the possibility of multiple choices for the subdivisions residents, particularly its Black women.25

But initially she is presented as a victim of her husband Luther Nedeed. Only her encounter with the other Nedeed women in the basement through their documents helps her attain her identity. But that does not help her live any longer. But of course, she is the main woman character presented initially as a total victim of her husband and as totally isolated. In his rage at his son's light skin and his wife's supposed infidelity, Luther has locked her and her son in his basement morgue and has indirectly caused his son's death. Much of the book is the story of Willa's gradual
awakening to her position and to her power in a pattern reminiscent of slave narratives. The discovery comes about as Mrs. Nedeed, near from grief and starvation, finds stored documents from three previous generations of Nedeed wives. Her contact with these women through their documents is a genuine if indirect experience of black sisterhood. The 1837 Bible scribblings of the first Luwana Packerville Nedeed, reveal a young wife's discovery that her husband regards her as little more than chattel. Willa sees in this woman's usurpation by a housekeeper and total isolation from husband and son as a parallel to her own enslavement to a later, equally sexist, Luther Nedeed. In her growing insanity Luwana had created a correspondence with a fictitious sister of the same name, so desperate was her need to communicate with an understanding woman. Willa is stirred to remember particularly the way Luther has come to dominate her and separate her from her former girlfriends. At this point she can finally begin to express her mourning for her child.

The second encounter, with the recipes of Evelyn Creation Nedeed, leads to Willa's discovery that Luther, not she, had the sexual inadequacy that explains his physical coldness toward her. Evelyn's sexual frustration and self-hatred were expressed in an obsession with cooking, first crazily huge amounts, then small furtive doses of aphrodisiacs designed to make her husband attracted to her, then bulimic purgatives, and finally rat poison to kill herself with on Christmas Eve. The connections are again numerous. Willa, too, has been brainwashed into feeling sexually inadequate: "His coldness and distance, the feeling that things weren't the
way they should be must lie in something that she just wasn't doing right. If she hung in there long enough, he would change.” She, too, put on weight after their marriage, sought help from expensive perfumes, and is now starving. She, too, will die on Christmas Eve, but she will 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 recognizes Luther’s perverted potency: like his forebears, he exercise all his tenderness on making his dead women look alive, like satisfied lovers, yet he deadens his living wife. The ironic parallel between the two processes is all the more grim because they both concern his vaginal insertions. Willa’s response is rage as she rips up the cookbooks and recipe files and scatters them over the room; she is emerging from apathy and returning to life.

Willa’s third encounter, with Priscilla McGuire Nedeed’s photo album, leads to her reaffirmation of her own identity, her freedom, and her sense of responsibility for own life. The series of annual photographs demonstrates graphically how a previous Luther and his son gradually overshadowed his spirited woman’s selfhood until she began removing her face from all of the pictures. Willa’s recognition of shred experience is again immediate. Her journey back upstairs, however, runs a foul of Luther, who intercepts her as she tries to clean house with her dead child in her arms. Her act of revenge: she clasps Luther of to her in a feral death grip and the three burn in the Christmas tree fire.

The conclusion of Willa’s journey to self-discovery is a dead end, but she has brought to an end Nedeed dynasty. She has achieved selfhood and poetic justice
with a strength derived from recognizing the accumulated suffering of the Nedeed women.

Naylor writes her fifth novel *The Men of Brewster Place* from the male perspective which does not depict a female community. But much before that, in *Linden Hill*, she elevated the men over the women. Surprisingly, the most negative of the male characters like Luther Nedeed is also shown sympathetically, with a conscience of his misdeeds:

> From the recital of the women’s stories it should be clear again that the men often mistreat 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 Nedeed and his forebears reveal inner conflicts, disillusionment, and loneliness. In their desire for power, many of the men betray their race and their ability to love. But not all of them.²⁶

It may often be true that in women’s writings and stories men are viewed from a negative perspective. They are often misrepresented, as it is explained by Naylor several times, because such writings project women’s stories. In *Linden Hills*, Willie and Lester demonstrate male sensitivity to women’s sufferings. Naylor makes her sensible suggestion of transmigration of male, female to better the societies. Willa is Naylor’s mythical matriarchal figure who realizes her self-identity
from the study of history. "Willa might deconstruct the system, but it is Willie who offers a vision of a new order. As the efficacious historian Naylor can finally only imagine a black male poet."²⁷
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11. Okonkwo, Christopher N. “Suicide or Messianic Self-Sacrifice?: Exhuming Willa's Body in Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills.”


13. Ward, p 76.


15. Levy, P 274.


17. Naylor, Gloria and Morrison, Toni, p 197.


22. Okonkwo, p 124.


27. Goddu, p 226.