

# GENDER DISCOURSE IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *LINDEN HILLS*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Black women's literature continues to voice the peculiar predicament that black women face in America. With the painful history of slavery, the black people have to face the burden of sexual discrimination. The fictional universe of black men and women are represented by Naylor to give a brief socio-historical panoramic framework for the construction of Afro American male and female identities in the America. Black men are oppressed by the white world while the black women have been oppressed by own people. In the patriarchal canon, the black women live with their heritage of slavery, black skin color and social position in the society. The present paper throws light on the condition of black women in the patriarchal domain in the novel of Gloria Naylor.*

## **I. GENDER DISCOURSE IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *LINDEN HILLS***

Gender is a social construct. In every society men and women both construct their social identities according to their power and authorities. Gender discourse is always the issue of concern in the literary works. In black literature especially in the works of black women writers, there is always a close concern of the condition of black folk specifically the black women and their struggle for survival and existence. Naomi Schor states- "Gender is a social construct pinned to a sexed body is fundamental to feminist criticism, and it logically implies that both masculinity and femininity are cultural formations designed to secure the social organization known as patriarchy" (271) [1].

In her novels, Naylor has presented black community with its black folk and their struggle against either of white community or with odd circumstances in their lives. Since times immemorial almost every society has patriarchal domain where being marginalized within their own society, women's experiences are threatened into silence or absolute devaluation. The lives of women in all cultures and ages have been organized and manipulated by the patriarchal domain. They have very limited freedom and even less control over the constituents of the self. They face challenges in their search for self, in their search for positive relationships and in the desire to come to terms with their lives, their families and their environment.

Poverty and racial discrimination have geographically and materially marginalized the black people but along with these, the sexual and gender difference have marginalized the black women in their own society. Black men are oppressed by the white world while the black women have been oppressed by own people. In the gender domain, male subjectivity has a privileged position and the female subjectivity has been turned into objectivity and is always suppressed and oppressed. The fictional universe of black men and women are

represented by Naylor to give a brief socio-historical panoramic framework for the construction of Afro American male and female identities in the America. In the white patriarchal canon, the black women live with their heritage of slavery, black skin color and social position in the society. They are doubly oppressed under the system of race and gender. This double burden leaves them at the mercy of complex mechanisms of racism and sexism.

In *Linden Hills* Naylor has depicted an affluent upper middle class society that is under the utmost influence of patriarchy. The novel has the family of Luther Nedeed since the last five generations. In each generation the successor has the same name Luther Nedeed. In the novel each woman character depicts a different approach to the black female body and its domination by the patriarchal society. Through the female characters Naylor goes beyond the typical portrayal of the black women as a victim or sufferer.

The most denounced character is the present generation Luther Nedeed who is only concerned about the development of a community which preserves the image of prosperity and success to outsiders as they look into Linden Hills. The Linden Hills community more relentlessly destroys the women than the men. The subjugation of women especially the wives of Linden Hills is the foundation on which the affluent society is built. The history of subjugation is a long process since the time of the foundation of the society: "Past and Present reveal a trail of human destruction tied to the Nedeed ambition, passed from generation to generation and from designer house to designer house, to 'get over'" (Toombs 90) [2].

The first Luther Nedeed buys his enslaved wife from her white owner but never sets her free. In each generation, the successive Luther Nedeed gets married a wife whom he can easily oppress and ignore. The wife is treated as a necessary entity for the reproduction of a son who would inherit and continue to oversee Linden Hills. The oppression is right from the first Mrs. Luther Nedeed and still continues to the present Mrs. Nedeed. The present generation Luther's wife, Willa Prescott Nedeed's married life was started like the other Mrs. Nedeed's. She, being unaware of the realities of Nedeeds, married Luther Nedeed to become a wife of a reputed and respected man. But giving birth to a white son in the black family of Luther proved a turning point in Willa's life. The son didn't resemble to his father, Luther which made Luther angry and proved the patriarchal myth where the son must duplicate his father. Luther found own self unable to look at the white son, locked Willa with the son in a cellar in the basement of his mansion. During her stay in the basement, she loses her son, Sinclair because of fever and no cure for it.

The imprisonment of Willa and the death of her son suggest a continuity of the practice of slavery under patriarchal domain. Willa was not the only one at Luther's family who has suffered oppression from her husband, but the previous Mrs. Nedeeds had the same condition. In the basement, Willa studied the notes, recipes and the photo albums of the other Nedeed wives. Willa moved back over 150 years of history and reviewed the life of each of her motherly ancestors from 1830s slavery to 1980s contemporary condition.

The first period was of the ante-bellum decades of the 1830s and 1840s during which she read the history of Mrs. Luwana Packerville. Luwana Packerville was bought and married but not manumitted. Luther had bought her not to bestow freedom but as a piece of property to produce an heir. She was coded as a property to her manumitted son. Luther maintained her in the status of a slave. He did not regard her as a person having value and therefore, Luwana was non-existent as a human being treated only as a property for her husband. Naylor said about the Nedeed women: "...the treatment of the Nedeed Women symbolizes the way that men have

regarded women throughout history- as means of generation that have no value in themselves. As far as men are concerned, women have no history because they do not really exist” (Ward 79) [3].

In Afro American culture, the slave women are double exploited as a slave. She performed the “productive labour” (Shaw 237) [4] for her masters to perform the household works and secondly as the “reproductive labour” (Shaw 237) [4] to give her master a successor to maintain his generation. Luther bought Luwana not to give her the status of a wife but for a son who would maintain his patriarchal dynasty at Linden Hills. After the birth of a son, Luwana’s life was not better than earlier. She led to the gradual destruction with the hands of her husband. Her dream of marriage was shattered when she came to know by the papers shown by Luther himself that her sale was not a formality. She lamented “O Blessed Savior, can it be that I have only exchanged one master for another?” (LH 117) [5] Moreover Luther told her “that I have no rights to my son. He owns the child as he owns me” (LH 117) [5]. Luther took him to the solicitor to maintain his will and other documents for his son’s manumission. It was a great humiliation in Luwana’s life that “I am now to be owned by my own son” (LH 119) [5]. At this stage, Luwana was alienated from her family and found herself alone in the absence of friend and relative to share her feelings and trauma. She realized that she had no one else but herself. So, she wrote letters to herself by the name of “Sister Luwana.” Her letters reflected her dilemma, helplessness and gradual loss of sanity. These letters proved that oppression is not only physical or verbal violence but also silent isolation and elimination. “I thus live with two Luthers in truth, and so I live alone” (LH 121) [5].

The story of Luwana Packerville clearly focused on the condition of a slave woman in her family who was always treated as an object and brought at home by her master only to have a child from her to maintain his patriarchal family. This oppression was still continued with the wives of next generation Luther Nedeeds. The next generation wife of Luther Nedeed was Evelyn Creton. In reading the story of Mrs. Evelyn Creton is the post-bellum decades around the 1890s. Evelyn Creton tried to forget her mistreat condition and sought herself through her recipes.

During her third journey, she moved back to the 1930s, the era of the Great Depression and looked at the collection of family photographs of Mrs. Priscilla McGuire. The story of the fourth generation wife, Priscilla McGuire was not better than the other two Mrs. Nedeeds. Priscilla’s condition and treatment by her husband, Luther, was reflected in her photo album where she was gradually disappeared from the photos with her husband and her growing son. Slowly and gradually, year by year with the growth of her son in the photos, Priscilla “was no longer recording the growth of a child; the only thing growing in these pictures was her absence” (LH 209) [5]. Priscilla was removed from the family photos and in there was only an empty space with a word “me” (LH 209) [5] at the place of her position.

The diaries of Luwana Packerville, the recipes of Evelyn Creton and the photo album of Priscilla McGuire made a realization to Willa Prescott Nedeed, the last generation Mrs. Nedeed about the positions of women in Luther Nedeed’s patriarchal dynasty. Through the Nedeed’s lives and the death of Willa’s son, Naylor describes the Nedeed version of patriarchy as a persistently continuing slavery in the post-slavery era. The stories of each Mrs. Nedeed present the way where women are treated and seen only as bodies to serve the purpose of this patriarchal society to reproduce children specially a male heir. For the Nedeeds, women were merely reproductive vehicles to give birth to their heir to continue their dynasty and then should vanish again into shadow outside the realm of man-making history. A feminist Shulamith Firestone argues that the biological

division that gives women the function of reproduction is the cause of women's oppression and the very root of men's domination of women. Women's reproductive capacity and their weakened physical condition are being reinforced by men's development of social structures that keep women tied to their reproductive role. Women's liberation is therefore "a struggle to break free from oppressive power structures set up by nature and reinforced by man" (Freedman 69) [6].

The story of Willa Nedeed and her foremothers reflected the subordination of women within the African American community and reflected women's history as the repressed part of Linden Hills. Barbara Christian argues that Naylor criticizes the Nedeed men's idea that women's subordination to men is essential for male power. She comments: "By emphasizing the Nedeed women's ignorance of their own herstory, Naylor shows how the repression of women's herstory is necessary to the maintenance of patriarchy and why it is that history is so exclusively male" (361) [7].

In such gender discourse, Naylor along with the oppression and suppression of black women brings forth the culture of sisterhood and female friendship among black women community to protest against gender discriminations. Through the female friendship, Naylor calls on women to unite with respect and love for each other so as to strengthen and lead themselves on the path of attaining self-identity. It's a medium to make realize the wholeness and their existence in the society.

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