

Up the Stairs: A Psycho Socio Matrix of Willa in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

S. Mohanasundari*

Department of English (SF), Vellalar College for Women, Erode, India;
mohanalitt2009@gmail.com

Abstract

Gloria Naylor, an accomplished writer of African American literature has created a furor in the literary domain through her candid mirroring of African American experience specifically black women in her novels. She, through her spate of characters, unveils the simmering psychological pressures of multiple Black women as they remain the center of her fictional matrix. With unfaltering vision, she is on a mission to shun away and erase the convolutions involved in the life of Black women. This paper is an attempt to disclose how in her second novel *Linden Hills*, the protagonist Willa's excavation of the hidden history of Nedeed women, propels her to move in the path to self-assertion and evolution thereby undergoing emotional and psychological reformation.

Keywords: Ascension, Positivism, Subjugation, Psycho Socio Matrix

1. Introduction

The limitation and suppression of women is a global phenomenon. Women's universal invisibility in male dominated society and discriminatory practices remains the challenging terrain irrespective of period, race and country. The patriarchal oppression, devaluing femininity, insensitivity towards feminine sensibility and chauvinism strangle women community. The writings of all women authors across the globe take the strenuous social life of women as the centre of their fictional matrix. Gloria Naylor's series of novels portrays not only the terrains of multitudinous variety of African American experience but also explores the psychic depths of women. The multifarious life-experience of her characters and the triumph of her characters battered against the suppression of the Whites and their male counterparts make her novels unique. She holds a high place in depicting various silenced and expropriated group of people as a prototype for women community to surge forward with a new wave of freedom from submissiveness to self-actualization, from repression to assertion, from diffidence to confidence.

2. Willa's Marginalization and Victimization

A close study of Naylor's novels establishes her subtle psychology as she pictures her characters on psychological plane. Her feminine instinct makes her probe the psyche of men and women and excavates the terrain of their inner mind. A psychological evaluation of Naylor's characters hits the strange tremors of feelings that brings forth the heart wrenching anguish and unbearable pain undergone by the Black women and it reflects the prevailing conditions and their quandary. The inter-textuality of her novels endows a link to all her novels which is created through a character or a situation or a place mentioned in the preceding or succeeding novel. *The Women of Brewster Place*, her first novel, details the affluent Black land of Linden Hills. The second novel *Linden Hills* introduces Mama Day of Willow Springs through Willa. *Mama Day*, her third novel brings out George's references of his birth at Bailey's Café.

Linden Hills, Naylor's second novel, unfolds the story of five generations of Luther Nedeed family and the passive sufferings of Mr. Nedeeds' wives. All the Nedeeds'

*Author for correspondence

wives, for generations, build a wall to evade their emotional longings and record them. The records left by the three Mrs. Nedeeds in the form of letters, cookbooks, and photographs aid Willa, the present Mrs. Nedeed, in transcending her personnel losses and evoke her in sketching her female consciousness and fillip her spirits to confront the reality.

The Nedeed women, for generations, are the victims of subjugation and are allowed to play only a peripheral role. What sounds imperative is they are discarded once they replicate the Nedeed men. "Once this son is born, the wives are no longer necessary and are therefore erased from both the father's and the son's lives [1]. They are not spared unless they bear a male son for the family replicating the father Luther Nedeed along with identical physical features. "As per the tradition, all the Nedeed men except the last one have married octoroon women, whose paleness of skin matched the paleness of their spirits" [2]. Unlike the ancestors, Willa, the wife of present Nedeed, "a dull, brown shadow" [3], begets him a White son.

The same squat bowlegs, the same protruding eyes and puffed lips, but a ghostly presence that mocked everything his fathers had built. How could Luther die and leave this with the future of Linden Hills? He looked at this Whiteness and saw the destruction of five generations [3].

The present Nedeed's mental eccentricity and vicious distrust prevent him from realizing that he could bear a White son as the women of early generations were octoroon women with pale skin. Luther Nedeed sees that his dreams are smashed and shattered. He feels that his years of loyalty to his ancestors are marred by a single action of his wife which is something beyond tolerance. The aberrations and dictatorship one notices in Luther Nedeed have their roots right from his ancestors. In a bid to reprimand her for infidelity and to turn her as an absolute submissive person, Luther confines her sphere by imprisoning her in the basement along with her son.

The emotional turbulence and torture caused due to the pull and push of external and internal factors make Willa to struggle both emotionally and psychologically. She finds herself in a mire of confusion interlocked with dismay and despair. Darkness in the basement symbolically represents her inner self, throwing light upon her repressed aspirations. Her poignant scream is reflective of her passionate urge to express her Self and makes her husband realize and recognize the inner aching of her mind. But he refuses to answer her screams. Having understood the voidness of scream, her mind gets filled with a deep sense of anguish.

Willa considers her child as the indispensable being to bridge the lacunae in her life. Her inability to save her son, who dies of incarceration, leaves her in a prostrate state. She is vacant both in her body and soul. An inward dread, an emptiness and indifference gradually spread in her soul. She believes that Nedeed would leash her from the basement. She likes to dissuade herself from the inner misery and the poignant world. Willa, having lost her son, perceives no future and has no dreams to be achieved. The memory of her son haunts and disturbs her conscience till it turns to be in the state of lassitude. She feels a sort of emptiness when she feels that her son is no more in her life. The sense of deep physical injustice committed to her son intensifies her pain. She yearns to escape from the stifling void world. She maps to find a way to break the loop of life as her soul is empty after her son's death.

3. Breaking the Shibboleth

Willa's utter despair makes her decide to end her life. Her escape from her offensive relationship is not only a dissent against her husband but also against the patriarchal code. Though aware of the doom, her fear no longer engulfs her. Her desire for death is a step against the patriarchal order as she tries to end her life against the will of her husband. Her rebellious nature starts to devise means to follow her own will, and not the one assigned by Nedeed, her husband. She gains the mental strength to prove her and decides not to move along the flow of life directed by Nedeed.

Willa remains enclosed within herself that the power of Nedeed's voice fails to create the result he desired. Even Luther's declaration of shutting off the water to the basement brings no change. "She listened numbly. There was no meaning to those patterns of empty noises. The words didn't connect inside of her to any history or emotion. She was past being moved to disbelief, frustration, or anger. The power of that voice was gone. It didn't demand that she fear or hope –or hate. No, she did not even hate now" [3]. Psychologically, she expounds her rebellious nature against the male-dominated society. She puts her first step in breaking the shackles by not paying heed to his voice and not going to be a victim of patriarchy.

Willa wants to give a burial to her son before her death, which is suggestive of her desire to rebel against Nedeed. She tries to acquire the meaning of her existence and to her son's death. The earnestness of Willa's self to give a burial to her son explicit her resistance to oppression. It marks the beginning of her transformation. She symbolically insists that women have the right of choice and to break down the

silence of her life. Willa evinces a certain measure of energy and metamorphosis which is evident when she broods:

Before she died, there must be something that she could do to let them know that she cared. She couldn't mourn her son, but she could bury him. Luther didn't have to know the truth. When he walked down those steps and found the body dressed for a burial he would think that in spite of what she had allowed him to do, she had at least found the courage to mourn. [3]

Willa's first consciousness to reality stems when she gets afflicted by the history of her predecessors. The clandestine records of the previous Nedeed women, Luwana Nedeed, Evelyn Nedeed and Priscilla McGuire Nedeed communicate their deprived passions and passive anger. She gradually scrutinizes and begins to learn that she too has been trapped in a similar situation. The history of her predecessors leads Willa to the realization of her personal life that how Nedeed wields control over her life. The records of her predecessors are an eye-opener for Willa as it unwraps the stories of "effacement and silencing" [4] of the three wives of Nedeed and instigates a positive frame of mind within Willa. The subterranean psyche of Mrs. Nedeed in all generations is laid bare. All the Nedeed women share the plight of barrenness, and they are forced to feel worthless and useless. They are the victims of Nedeed men who scar their subconscious minds. The history of her predecessors bolsters her confidence to assert her position in the Nedeed's household. The unfolding of the wounded psyche and tormented hearts of the Nedeed women strengthen her confidence and she undertakes a bold and daring venture to stamp a significant place in the history of the Nedeed women.

The history of the exploitation of the Nedeed women stimulates Willa to give voice to all the Nedeed women. Silence is symbolized as a symbol of subjugation, while speech symbolizes self-expression and freedom. The silence and subjugation of the former Nedeed wives give a warning signal to Willa to wake up before she gets deteriorated. Willa's intense desire is to make sure of her presence and drives her to search for something with which she could get a reflection of her face. She finds an aluminum pot filled with water. Water is associated with mind, emotions and meditation. The appearance of water stimulates the psyche of Willa. The image of Willa in the water helps her to regain her consciousness. It induces her to create an order in her life. She evaluates and decides that she is responsible for her life. The blurred outline of her dirty face reveals her existence and evokes a realization that she really exists. She

gains potency as she sips water, and the glimpse of her face in water hustles her to rebuild her life. Naylor explains this moment to Morrison in *A Conversation*:

After she had dug up the remnants of the other Nedeed women, I created a way for her to see her own reflection in a pan of water because she had no self up until that moment. And when she realized that she had a face, then may be she had other things going for her as well, and she could take her destiny in her own hands. [5]

Willa turns optimistic and tracks her step forward to work for the "reconstruction of Nedeed female voices and the deconstruction of the Nedeed male voice to render Nedeed history truthful and entire" [6]. The disclosure of all the secrets makes Willa recognize her space with an assurance of better life. She becomes defiant and stubbornly sticks to her mind to gain the position that she has lost all these years.

Willa initially loses hope but her findings of other Mrs. Nedeeds remove her slackness and take her to battle against her losses. She feels that her husband should answer for the death of her child. She wants to create a space for herself in her house and to set her house in order. Her unexpected entry into the hall is looked upon by Nedeed as trespass and he tries to stop her. Willa discovers a potent method of resistance and she holds him tightly. She transforms from a passive to a dynamic emergent woman.

4. Willa's Ascension to a Higher Plane

Willa's rebellious journey for self-assertion takes her a step forward towards the twelve steps. The climbing of the steps from the basement symbolically represents her recuperated self. The steps and staircases are considered to be the passage that elevates one to a higher level of existence. Willa's ascension of steps is a symbolic act of her moving to a higher level of consciousness. It indicates her sense of hierarchy and her positive will to progress in life. Her inner urge to move beyond the oppressions instills in her boundless nerve to move up in the world and carve a distinct place for her own self. With a high mind nurturing a hopeful purpose to shatter the mental and physical constraints, she climbs up the steps. She is on the way into spiritual, emotional or physical journey. She analyses the setbacks that hinder her progression and as its outcome dawns on her a new awareness of understanding her state. The awakened consciousness drags her to climb the steps to accomplish her purpose with zeal. The stairs symbolize the ascension

of Willa into a new realm, indicating the strong hold on her life. It represents change and transformation signifying not the physical upliftment but psychological maturity.

5. Conclusion

The paper traces the growth of Willa who moves with a new vision of assertion against the maze of male oppression and subjugation in life. Willa's desire to restart her life passing over the sordid past is not a spectacular accomplishment of a single African American woman but a representation of the women community as a whole. In the post modern period, a gradual change in the outlook, attitude and demeanor of women towards life is sprouting out to make them play a substantial role in the family and society. Their positivism and search do not make them snap their traditional ties but strengthen them morally and spiritually. Every woman has to explore life as deeply as possible as it is beautiful, exciting and full of wonders.

A woman is a being. She is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the 'other'. She is not an addition to man. She

is an autonomous being, capable of through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation [7].

6. References

1. Costino, K.A. *Weapons against Women – Compulsory Heterosexuality and Capitalism in Linden Hills*, Kelley. pp. 39-55.
2. Ranveer, K. *Black Feminist Consciousness*. Jaipur: Printwell, 1995.
3. Naylor, G. *Linden Hills*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1985.
4. Homans, M. "The Women in the Cave: Recent Feminist Fictions and the Classical Underworld". *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 29(3), pp. 369-402, 1988.
5. Naylor, G., & Morrison, T. "A Conversation". *Southern Review*. vol. 213, pp. 567-593, 1985.
6. Sandiford, K.A. "Gothic and Intertextual Constructions in *Linden Hills*". *Arizona Quaterly*, vol. 47(3), pp. 117-139, 1991.
7. Ramamoorthy, P. "My Life is My Own: A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Women". *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. Sushila Singh (Ed.), New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.