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**SUBVERSION OF NORTHERN RACIST IDEOLOGY IN HARRIET  
E. WILSON'S *OUR NIG: SKETCHES FROM THE LIFE OF A FREE  
BLACK***

HARRIET E. WILSON'IN *OUR NIG: SKETCHES FROM THE LIFE OF A FREE  
BLACK* ADLI ROMANINDA KUZHEY'İN İRKÇİ İDEOLOJİSİNİN YIKILMASI

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**Abstract**

This paper tries to explore the racial ideologies in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). The novel is significant in that it is considered the first one published by a black woman in the United States. That it delineates "slavery's shadow" in the antebellum North, which is known to be abolitionist, makes it more significant. It criticizes the racial ideology embodied by such disturbing components as the blurring of black/mulatto lines, the exploitation of Christianity and the unreliability of black people towards one another. The fact that racist white woman exerts power over the black one and the sympathetic attitudes of white men towards the subject prove to be insufficient are also shocking realities within that society known to be patriarchal and supports the racial ideology; that is when race is in question, patriarchy keeps silent.

The novel begins with a six-year-old mulatto protagonist (Al) Frado, an intelligent and pretty girl, abandoned by her white mother to the Bellmont's house, where she is cruelly labored, beaten and berated by Mrs. Bellmont, who is a pious

Christian. She endures until her majority and obtains her freedom in a weak condition. She marries a fugitive slave, has a son and then is abandoned. She writes an autobiographical novel for supporting herself but it becomes a criticism on the hypocrisy of the abolitionist movement and on the Northern racism. Wilson exhibits an image of the North that can be identified with the South and hints that the Northerners are not innocent in blacks' ongoing persecution, because of their indifference and lack of prudence.

While illustrating the injustice of indentured servitude, Wilson puts forward the idea that the abolitionist discourse must be understood on the individual and social levels first. She dreams of a society of equality where blacks and mulattos have economic freedom and loved, too.

**Key Words:** *Our Nig*, Harriet E. Wilson, race, ideology, Northern racism.

### Öz

Bu makalede Harriet E. Wilson'ın *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) adlı romanında ırksal ideolojiler incelenmeye çalışılmaktadır. Roman, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde zenci bir kadın yazar tarafından yayınlandığı düşünülen ilk roman olması açısından önemlidir. Kölelik karşıtı olarak bilinen İç Savaş'tan önceki Kuzey'de "köleliğin karartısı"nı betimlemesi romanı daha da önemli kılmaktadır. Roman, ırksal ideolojiyi zenci/melez sınırlarının bulanıklaştırılması, Hıristiyanlığın istismarı ve zencilerin birbirlerine karşı güvenilmez oluşları gibi rahatsız edici öğelerle eleştirmektedir. Irkçı beyaz kadının zenci olan üzerinde güç kullanması ve beyaz erkeklerin hür olmayana karşı olumlu ama yetersiz kalan tutumları da ataerkil bilinen toplumun şaşırtıcı gerçekleridir ve ırksal ideolojiyi desteklemektedir; yani, ırk söz konusu olunca ataerkil düzen susmaktadır.

Roman, altı yaşında zeki ve şirin melez bir kız olan (Al)Frado'nun beyaz annesi tarafından Belmont'ların evine terk edilmesiyle başlar. Dindar bir Hıristiyan olan Bayan Belmont onu zalimce çalıştırır, döver ve azarlar. Rüştüne kadar bunlara sabreder ama hastalıklı olarak özgürlüğüne kavuşur. Kaçak bir köleyle evlenir, oğlu olur ve terk edilir. Para kazanmak için otobiyografik bir roman yazar ama bu, kölelik karşıtı hareketin ikiyüzlülüğü ve Kuzey'in ırkçılığı üzerine bir eleştiri niteliği kazanır. Wilson, Güney ile özdeşleştirilebilen bir Kuzey imajı çizer ve zencilerin süregelen zulme maruz kalmalarında kayıtsızlık ve sağduyusuzluklarından dolayı Kuzeyliler'in masum olmadığını ima eder.

Sözleşmeli kölelik sisteminin adaletsizliğini gösterirken, Wilson kölelik karşıtı söylemin önce bireysel ve toplumsal temelde anlaşılması gerektiği fikrini ileri sürer. Zencilerin ve melezlerin de ekonomik özgürlüğe sahip olduğu ve sevildiği, eşitliğe dayalı bir toplum düşler.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Our Nig*, Harriet E. Wilson, ırk, ideoloji, Kuzey'in ırkçılığı.

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Dominant culture in a society 'produces' and defines subordinate one(s) to dominate in economic, cultural, political and legal terms for its basic assumptions and for the sustenance and maintenance of its interests. It extends its authority over the suppressed ones through creating agents like institutions, values, codes and practices, even religious and scientific discourses to justify its 'rights' that are not articulated and recognized easily. The aegis of a culture, ideology, too formulates the means "by which a culture-any culture-seeks to justify and perpetuate itself." (Bercovitch 635) Ideology is a concept that equips the dominant culture with power, and provides the working of societies in the way that it desires even if it is based on fake rationality and generates contradictions. It persuades people through strategies to make them adopt the culture's values and notions. Showing the less powerful as threats, marginalizing and silencing them and through social exclusion and denying rights, dominant culture proves its power and so, it is exposed as the available social, cultural and national identity.

Like 'any' culture, American national culture rests upon ideological realities. Although it has been founded on the grounds of freedom and equality, (the democratic ideology expressed in *The Declaration of Independence* and in Thomas Jefferson's antislavery speeches, for instance) the institution of slavery "was in many ways an atypical form which depended on a peculiar mixture of Western colonialist ideology, racism, and economic demands." (Winter 5) Legitimizing privilege to whites and strengthening white supremacy, race and racism as ideological and social constructs define blacks with their racial identity rather than their individual being and the ideology that blacks are always in need of whites prevails.

Against the racist attitudes of American society in general, W.E.B. Du Bois sees the necessity of blacks' self-expression and says in "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926) that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists." (Du Bois) Du Bois and the editors of *The Crisis* state that literature is a tool for the struggle of African American people's liberation. *Harriet E. Adams Wilson (1825-1900)'s Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* (1859) is an example for the propaganda and protest novel that Du Bois meant and is an exception to the mainstream African American slave narrative tradition produced till then. It achieves national attention when it is discovered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 1982. It is considered the first novel by an African-American woman published in the United States, but it is also first to delineate 'Northern racism', which is an astounding phrase, because Northerners are known to be abolitionists and the action takes place in New Hampshire, where in 1857 slavery was abolished officially. It is unconventional because of its treatment of racist ideology and its apparatuses like the issues of the fear of miscegenation, blurring of white/black/mulatto lines, the physical abuse of indentured black/mulatto

servants and the hypocrisy of black and white abolitionists for material incomes -all occurring in the antebellum Northern United States.

There are two ideologies in *Our Nig*: first is the hypocrite Northern racist ideology and the second, the protagonist's, (Al)Frado's ideology of equality and freedom, subverting it. Wilson conflates them implicitly first through the title; it becomes clear that the derogatory name of 'Our Nig' is a fabrication of the powerful, signifies racism and is not a term of affection, but of ownership. Henry Louis Gates Jr., describes this titling and irony like this:

That Wilson dared to name her text with the most feared and hated epithet under which the very humanity of black people had been demeaned both adds to the list of ironies in her endeavor and attests to an intelligence that turned racist epithet into irony, subverting a received definition by inverting its common usage. (Gates 128)

In the title and the descriptive subtitle, there are the dualities of Our Nig/Free Black, Free Black/White house and North/Slavery's Shadows. Wilson juxtaposes them to delineate the contradictions of Northern racist ideology and to excite people's curiosity about them. But, just the reverse, not only by its title but also by its generic subversion of the traditional slave narratives and rendering of the abolitionists, the novel does not get interest and is forgotten. Black abolitionists are dependent on the patronage of white allies and view the book as one that may handicap that support and white readers see its writer as ungrateful. *Our Nig* is not about slavery in the South but about the plight of a 'free black' child born in a free state and abused as a 'free black' in a 'white house, North'. "Through *Our Nig*, Wilson wanted to show that racial abuse was just as prominent in the North as it was in the South." (Stover 86) and that Southern cast of mind exists also in the North. Here, *Our Nig* plays right into this perverse ideology.

As Wilson/Frado prepares to publish it, she has to face a problem: although it is necessary to receive the support of some white sponsors to sell her narrative, there is the possibility that they do not sponsor it lest their shame is made public. How to tell the truth about the racism she has experienced in the North without harming the cause of slaves in the South, distresses her. Wilson is anxious about the situation, for in the Preface she writes:

I would not from these motives even palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North. My mistress was wholly imbued with SOUTHERN principles. I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home. (Wilson 11)

The ironic duality is clear; 'shame' and 'good anti-slavery friends at home'. Sensitive not to offend the sincere abolitionists, Wilson tells us that she has omitted the worst of her narrative, the real cruelty, but she is bold enough to portray a happy mixed-race marriage of Frado's parents; almost no one either in the North or South of the white supremacist American culture want to read about anything like that. She describes the plight of Frado's tender expression for her white mother, Mag Smith:

LONELY MAG SMITH! See her as she walks with downcast eyes and heavy heart. It was not always thus. She HAD a loving, trusting heart. Early deprived of parental guardianship, far removed from relatives, she was left to guide her tiny boat over life's surges alone and inexperienced. As she merged into womanhood, unprotected, uncherished, uncared for, there fell on her ear the music of love, awakening an intensity of emotion long dormant. (13)

Although Mag's aim is to elevate herself in class structure as a young and innocent woman, she becomes a victim of an upper-class man, is seduced, impregnated and abandoned. A 'fallen' woman, she has been excluded by her own white people because she has given birth to an illegitimate mulatto baby, who dies soon after birth. Mag's reaction is thankfulness instead of sorrow in that "no one can taunt HER" (13) with her ruin. Living in poverty, her prospects diminishes for she could not find employment. She crosses racial lines accepting the offer of marriage by Jim, "a kind-hearted African" (15), who pities and loves her. He proposes in a humiliating way: "You's had trial of white folks any how. They run off and left ye, and now none of 'em come near ye to see if you's dead or alive. I's black outside, I know, but I's got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?" (17) Wilson deliberately employs free blacks and white outcasts like Mag together; they are the same. She asks a question in parenthesis about the situation of free blacks, about how they will survive when the poor whites get their livelihood difficultly.

Although inter-racial marriage is not approved, Mag marries him in order to survive. Wilson inserts:

"You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher. Poor Mag. She has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy." (18)

They live comfortably and have three children. It is interesting that Mag calls them "black devils" (20) just like a racist - she is racist, indeed. After Jim's death, she once more finds it difficult to survive, for labor conditions for even the white but fallen like her are

severe, and marries another black man. Because of difficult times, the couple decides to abandon Frado to a family and leave the town. Here, Wilson demystifies the 19<sup>th</sup> century myth of white womanhood (Victorian womanhood) that is composed of such notions as chastity, preserving the purity of white race and true motherhood. Mag transgresses all of them; she is unchaste, does not feel sorry for her dead baby, marries black men and is unmotherly enough to abandon her daughter to Mrs. Bellmont, whom she herself describes as a "she-devil" (21). According to slave-owning ideology, it is black woman who is more lustful than white woman, and black woman feels no love for her children. Wilson inverts them all through Mag, a white woman, and confronts the myth of the pure and moral white woman.

"Frado, as they called one of Mag's children, was a beautiful mulatto, with long, curly black hair, and handsome, roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint." (21) On the other hand, her mother's tainted past and his black father, both of whom being social outcasts, gives her disadvantage. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, free black children used to be indentured frequently but she is not indentured legally; she is neither a bound worker nor a slave and her position is ambiguous as a female of mixed race. Despite being a mulatto, she is regarded and she herself regards herself as black throughout the text. After becoming Bellmonts's housemaid, Mary proclaims "I don't want a nigger 'round ME, do you, mother?" Her mother who cannot find one that will endure her over a week replies "I don't mind the nigger in the child. I should like a dozen better than one... If I could make her do my work in a few years, I would keep her." (26) Mrs. Bellmont believes that Frado's existence will be very useful for the white household and the house will be a privilege for Frado. She is greedy enough to consider financial issues very much, which reflects her ideology and culture, though she is a woman of a patriarchal society. Her ideology conceals the fact that her intention is to exploit Frado. Later, Mary and Jack discuss what to do with her:

"Keep her," said Jack. "She's real handsome and bright, and not very black, either."

"Yes," rejoined Mary; "that's just like you, Jack. She'll be of no use at all these three years, right under foot all the time."

"Poh! Miss Mary; if she should stay, it wouldn't be two days before you would be telling the girls about OUR nig, OUR nig!" retorted Jack (26).

The mention of "three years" alludes to the age of ten being the normal age for child indentured servants to begin work. It is interesting that Frado's protector, Jack is the first one to label her 'Our nig'. Frado does not object to her degrading nickname, which reduces her to an object of property. The use of 'nigger' sets the tone of the story and anticipates how she will be viewed and treated. As ideas generate practices,

Frado was called early in the morning by her new mistress. Her first work was to feed the hens. She was shown how it was ALWAYS to be done, and in no other way; any departure from this rule to be punished by a whipping. She was then accompanied by Jack to drive the cows to pasture, so she might learn the way. Upon her return she was allowed to eat her breakfast, consisting of a bowl of skimmed milk, with brown bread crusts, which she was told to eat, standing, by the kitchen table, and must not be over ten minutes about it. Meanwhile the family were taking their morning meal in the dining-room. This over, she was placed on a cricket to wash the common dishes; she was to be in waiting always to bring wood and chips, to run hither and thither from room to room. (Wilson 28)

Mrs. Belmont, as a pure racist, has prejudice about blacks only out of their skin color and believes there is a correlation between evil behavior and a non-white skin. Frado, too just like a 'pickaninny', will have severe amount of oppression, segregation and persecution simply because of her skin color. Her mistress puts her to work; feeding and caring for animals, cooking, and other chores both domestic and outside, unbecoming a six year old. She tells her from the start that if she does not do her chores correctly, she will be whipped and beaten. She believes that Frado needs no more nourishment than milk and bread, sometimes does not give her supper and denies shoes even in winter. She asserts discriminatory practices; Frado is placed in the L chamber, between the kitchen and an attic room above it, lest she should be seen in the parlor or other places in the house, providing her distance from the family, and her infliction of physical abuse is also performed in the kitchen. That the house is divided like this signifies her subordinate status as a 'slave', hierarchy of power, and "spatial imperatives of slavery." (Leveen 562) Frado's comfortless attic room will serve as a private space, though it limits her physical freedom and climbing the ladder to it is dangerous.

Mrs. Belmont sees Frado's beauty as a threat and always represents her ugly; she dresses her in motley made up of old clothes, cuts her ringlets and forbids her any protection from the sun while laboring outside so that her complexion will darken. All of these particular persecutions are to masculinize her lest her sons see her beauty. Frado is not an object of white men's lust unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives about female mulattos. Wilson here deconstructs the attractive female mulatto stereotype, being a temptress. By removing the danger of rape, she concentrates on the racial oppressions and the social evil. "It is ideological context that tells people which details to notice, which to ignore, and which to take for granted in translating the world around them into ideas about that world." (Fields 147) Frado is denied her own identity and judged as an object. Her mistress treats her just the same as Southern slaveholders. She thinks that Frado's all being belongs to her and seeks every pretext real or fancied to beat her:

It is impossible to give an impression of the manifest enjoyment of Mrs. B. in these kitchen scenes. It was her favorite exercise to enter the apartment noisily, vociferate orders, give a few sudden blows to quicken Nig's pace, then return to the sitting room with SUCH a satisfied expression, congratulating herself upon her thorough house-keeping qualities. (51)

From time to time, Frado is rescued from the maltreatment by the kindly and compassionate sons Jack and James, Mr. Bellmont, his sister Abby, but the mistress claims her power more efficiently than their good will. For she has resolved everything beforehand, she legitimates the relations of power in the house and shows that there is no problem. Frado, despite being a child, feels that no one can ensure her safety in the house, escapes for several hours, but Jack and James finally discover her. They persuade her to go home with them and give her supper. The next day, Jack buys a dog - Fido - as a companion to her which their mother sells but Mr. Bellmont obtains it later again.

Mary and her mother beat Frado but cannot tolerate any complaint or the spectacle of pain; "Mrs. Bellmont found her weeping on his [James's] account, shut her up, and whipped her with the raw-hide, adding an injunction never to be seen snivelling again..." (58) Weeping aloud is considered an act of disobedience from the point of view of racists. Frado is obliged to repress her agony, in front of the white family to evade further violence. Here,

"...Wilson brilliantly deconstructs the libel of black insensateness, showing it to be neither a symptom of black inferiority (as per proslavery writers) nor a pathological response to violence (as per Stowe), but rather a black performance that white people coerce out of their own pathological desires simultaneously to cause pain and to deny that they are doing so." (Bernstein 57)

Wilson depicts white master as insensate, unable to control anger and unjust, unlike her predecessors. Mrs. Bellmont wants her harsh and arbitrary demands to be realized without any excuse. They ruin Frado's health so that she has trouble supporting herself. She is so cruel a woman that she does not feel any pity even when Frado is overworked and ill:

Her mistress entered one day, and finding her seated, commanded her to go to work. "I am sick," replied Frado, rising and walking slowly to her unfinished task, "and cannot stand long, I feel so bad."

Angry that she should venture a reply to her command, she suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor. Excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, she seemed left to unrestrained

malice; and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly.

Frado hoped she would end her misery by whipping her to death. She bore it with the hope of a martyr, that her misery would soon close. (61-2)

Propping the mouth open with a towel or a piece of wood is a common way to prevent screams from being heard when slaves are whipped and this scene is often enacted in the abolitionists' house, in the North! Here, Wilson attacks the image of white woman as angel in the house; "Mrs. Belmont dramatizes the corruption of cultural discourse, its deliberate misuse..." (Ernest 432) She cannot construct a different understanding of race and her actions and way of speech undermine the notions of 'True Womanhood' and disrupt the images of Northern restraint.

When Frado contemplates fleeing on a later occasion, it is hampered as she ponders where she might go and who might take her in: perhaps everyone will tell her she is black and no one will love her. She will have to return, and then will be beaten more. Moreover, she maps the dangers of her escape and stays within the authoritarian rule. Even her sympathizers tacitly accept that Frado must be contented with her status as servant in the house and they offer her little protection from the physical attacks or verbal abuse that is normalized within that space, participating in Frado's subordination.

Being strong-willed and patient, even at such a young age, Frado endures her situation as well as she can, mostly because she knows nothing else she can do. Her mind is unable to find any reason that she should be treated this way. She is cheerful and has a sense of humor and although she cannot be a wife to the Belmont sons, she plays the clown, endangers her life to amuse them and receives encouragement for it. On one instance, she is forced to eat from a plate Mrs. Belmont has used. Annoyed at being ordered to do a disagreeable thing, Frado has Fido lick the plate clean, and she eats from it afterward. What makes this image significant is that Frado gains a symbolic victory over her and receives a silver half-dollar from Jack, who is pleased at seeing his mother defeated. Although Frado relishes the silver dollar, it is dehumanizing. James explains to his mother, "You have not treated her, mother, so as to gain her love; she is only exhibiting your remissness in this matter." (55); but she never learns the lesson and the permanency of Frado's subjugation is stable, apart from these rare instances.

Mr. Belmont, in fact, makes the big decisions, as when he declared that Frado should attend school. When it is time for Frado to go to school, he insists that she will and his word becomes rule, (29) despite his wife's objection. "Mrs. Belmont was in doubt about the utility of attempting to educate people of color, who were incapable of elevation." (29) She believes that they are lazy and stupid, not worthy of education, confining all of them into a stereotype. After all, Frado begins school happily and has to go

with Mary, who refuses to be seen with the 'nig'. At the school, Frado is faced with racist obstacles again; she is disappointed with the children's reaction at seeing her bared feet. They call her 'nigger' and say they will not play with her. When she decides to return home, the teacher takes her by the hand to the school-room. She explains to the children - the children of racist Northerners - that it is their duty to love and help the poor, and that they should give up prejudice about appearances. The children enjoy her jokes and with time, find her a good play-mate.

After three summers, a period that is thought enough for her education, she is confined to the household duties, not even being allowed to go to church. Although Mrs. Bellmont is a religious woman, she opposes allowing her religious as well as formal education which shows how racial oppression functions in these areas at the same degree. She tells her that it will prove futile to pray, because prayer is for whites, not for blacks and that only white people are admitted to heaven. She bars Frado's religious proclivities because she thinks they might encourage her to flee and that means the ceasing of profit. She interprets religion according to her interests; she persuades Frado that if she does what she commands, it will be enough in terms of religion. Ministers are also indifferent to the situation: the local minister learns from Frado that she is whipped, but despite being a religious authority, he does not warn Mrs. Bellmont. When a neighbor, another racist, who attends the religious meetings tells her that the girl has rendered her whipping experience there, her reaction is indifference, like the minister, not embarrassment nor anxiety to be made public. She says to Frado that "if she did not stop trying to be religious, she would whip her to death." (75) Frado ponders that if she might go to heaven she does not want to share it with her and ultimately gives up the thought of the future world. It is clear that Mrs. Bellmont is not a sincere Christian, uses religion for her personal aims and these only serve for distancing Frado from religion instead of getting her closer to it. Wilson draws attention to the point that Christianity is implicated in the minds of the defenders of slavery - here Mrs. Bellmont's mind - in a distorted way. Nothing is perceived sacred in the struggle for power, as the discourses of morality and religion become apparatuses of domination. Her repressiveness stems not only from her vicious character but from financial interests, too. The interests of power distort her rationality and piety; she renders her deeds reasonable in that they are natural and suitable to morality.

As an intelligent child, Frado questions her being and God throughout the text. She cannot find consolation to her difficult situation springing from her race in religion. She struggles to understand and then accept Christianity. When she looks for answers she only draws farther away from it, because of lack of knowledge and distinction between theory and practice of Christianity in the North. Early in the novel, becoming conscious of her difference, she questions her existence, saying,

“Oh, I wish I had my mother back; then I should not be kicked and whipped so. Who made me so?”

‘God’ answered James ...

‘Did the same God that made her make me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then, I don’t like him.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he made her white, and made me black. Why didn’t he make us BOTH white?’” (42)

James instructs her that racial difference is divinely inscribed rather than the result of biological factors and she should consent to it. According to Roland Barthes, the primary function of ideology is mystification. (Barthes 121) Here, concealing that the imbalanced power hierarchy is oppressive, the racist ideology represents it as ordained by God. Even the compassionate James believes this and thinks that he is consoling her. Wilson is critical of the Christianity practiced by the white abolitionists. Later James eavesdrops on Frado, who is lamenting her condition: “Work as long as I can stand, and then fall down and lay there till I can get up. No mother, father, brother or sister to care for me, and then it is, You lazy nigger, lazy nigger - all because I am black! Oh, if I could die!” (57) She accepts that she is black (although she is mulatto), but cannot understand why she should be judged or treated cruelly only because she is black. On another instance, as James’s body is lowered in the grave, she realizes that “[s]he did not love God; she did not serve him or know how to.” (72) All her queries prove that it is impossible to establish a link between Christianity and normal humane morality. On the other hand, Aunt Abby calms her down and persuades that she can enter heaven, too.

Mrs. Belmont justifies her cruel actions by marginalizing black race subhuman. She scoffs, “...you know, these niggers are just like black snakes; you CAN’T kill them.” (65) Even in the North, they are believed to be incapable of human characteristics and thought bestial. She believes black inferiority and finds it normal and reasonable to beat Frado. According to this pernicious logic, they are lazy, insensate, docile, childlike and primitive. It also leads to the idea that the best system for the blacks is to live in slavery because they are in need of whites. Mary says “saucy, impudent nigger, you!” (50), minimizing words to classify her/blacks/mulattos all.

Wilson destroys the myth of white women as the symbols of Christian and egalitarian principles through the mother and her daughter, but shows Aunt Abby as an exception. Feeling deeply sorry about Frado and seeing grace, ability and hunger for

learning in her, she takes her to religious evening meetings for her understanding the tenets of Christianity. She reads the Bible until Mrs. Belmont forbids. Watching Frado leaving the yard, Abby considers taking her into her own apartment but hesitates because it will cause Mrs. Belmont's violence upon her. In fact, Aunt Abby also has a tenuous position within the household; her daughter-in-law enacts spatial restrictions on her too. He, when asked by her sister why he does not assert himself on Frado's behalf, replies with an evasion, "How am I to help it? Women rule the earth, and all in it." (38), indicating his constant refusal to intervene to protect Frado and helplessness in the face of his wife's anger. Mrs. Belmont accepts her husband's authority as the head of the household but she does what she likes to Frado as long as he is unaware. Unfortunately, he is usually mute, leaves the house not to hear screams or sheds silent tears and thus gives his wife silent permission for beating. This represents his hypocrisy and indifference to her plight. He conceals the system and the operations of the Northern racial/cultural life. He is/must be Frado's main protector but his complicity in Frado's oppression is simultaneously clear in the book.

Jack and James are also humane and care for Frado but as time progresses they become less sensitive and passive to her suffering. On one visit home, Jack remarks "Where are your curls, Fra? ... 'Your mother cut them off.' 'Thought you were getting handsome, did she? Same old story, is it; knocks and bumps? Better times coming; never fear, Nig.'" (54) The dialogue shows the characterization of those who claim to feel sympathy but take no concrete action. Although Frado wants both Jack and James to take her to their new homes, neither does, because it involves defying their mother and accepting responsibility. In addition, it will require courage and making a moral decision to grant Frado freedom. The insincere sons, while opposing to slavery, observe their social status. It seems difficult for them to relinquish their prejudices; because all their house services are performed free and they benefit from the slavery system. As Michel Foucault specifies:

Relations of power are not in themselves forms of repression. But what happens is that, in society, in most societies, organizations are created to freeze the relations of power, hold those relations in a state of asymmetry, so that a certain number of persons get an advantage, socially, economically, politically, institutionally, etc. And this totally freezes the situation. That's what one calls power in the strict sense of the term: it's a specific type of power relation that has been institutionalized, frozen, immobilized, to the profit of some and to the detriment of others. (Foucault 2008)

The sons subconsciously contribute to the available system and perpetuate it because they cannot imagine or do not know about the social situation if slavery is abolished. Wilson underlines the fact that the concept of freedom should be internalized

first on the individual level both for the blacks and for the whites against material exploitation and racism. It should not be an empty discourse because, the questions about what will be done after it or its social dimension are not yet answered clearly neither by the state nor by individuals. Abolition of slavery does not mean abolition of power. From the text, we learn that they are abolitionists, but cannot internalize the basic principles of abolitionism. We also learn that they are doing nothing for even mulatto servants at their home. Only caring is manifested as a failure to protect Frado. So, they 'freeze the relations of power' as they are and again they know subconsciously that the system is to the economic profit of them; they give labor to a helpless girl only for shelter, scanty food and cloth. She is enslaved in domestic and social sphere subjected to racism and economic exploitation. "Just think how much profit she was to us last summer. We had no work hired out; she did the work of two girls -...I'll beat the money out of her if I can't get her worthy any other way," (Wilson 66) Mrs. Belmont remarks. Here, in terms of economic interests, they are not different from the Southerners; they are only hypocritical, whereas the Southerners are honest enough to declare their intentions. Wilson satirizes the males without any interpretation because they do not act against the oppression but feel compassion for the Southern slaves. She claims that free Northern servants can be as much enslaved as those who are legally chattel in the South. Apart from the traditional slave-narrative writers, "...African-American women writers implicitly and explicitly confront the dominant white traditions - male and female - with their hypocrisy and bad faith." (Fox-Genovese 16) Here, the text can be thought as a political document; the house as a microcosm signifies the whites' blatant hypocrisy and their unwillingness to ensure their black/mulatto servants' safety. Although the Southerners defend the idea that in the North the slaves that are given their freedom will be open to every kind of danger and are also dangerous for the health of the society and thus the best system for them is slavery, the Northerners do not say this explicitly. Here, Wilson maintains implicitly that the Southerners are more honest, though they are not right.

The male members of the family address to Frado rather than to the mistress. James advises Frado not to make his mother angry for it means the increase of her responsibilities. He solaces her that the number of abolitionists increases and he hopes that he will take her with his family, when he recovers and that she must be patient. Such friendly attitudes help her endure her situation but do not lead a solution. After his death, Frado feels lonelier; the absence of James and Jack leaves Frado with no hope of being saved. On the other hand, she becomes aware that she is the only person to help herself. She begins enhancing her self-esteem, remembering that she has had very difficult times and now despite everything, she finds herself hopeful. She is aware of her abilities, needs and desires to assert her humanity. In addition to these, Mr. Belmont is concerned for her ill health and he tells her that she does as much work as a woman and is verbally abused.

"[H]e had seen her many times punished undeservedly; ... when she was SURE she did not deserve a whipping, [she should] avoid it if she could. 'You are looking sick, ... you cannot endure beating as you once could.'" (75) So, he purports his belief that sometimes she deserves to be whipped. This advice opens a way for Frado to defy his wife. She finds courage to resist, when James, who suggests nonresistance, dies. Significantly after that, Frado talks back to Mrs. Bellmont: she is sent for wood and does not return at the exact time and Mrs. Bellmont snatches a stick, raising it to her. Frado, self-defensively resists: "'Stop!' shouted Frado, 'strike me, and I'll never work a mite more for you'; and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts." (75) She backs down upon this act confused, which is against beating, her mechanism to maintain power. At the end, it lessens Frado's beatings although she is subject to the same amount of work and scolding. Here, speaking functions as the recognition of Frado's own power against Mrs. Bellmont's. When she gains her voice, she realizes that she must not look to higher powers for aid but must speak for herself.

When Mary dies unexpectedly, she puts her feelings of anger and revenge into words: "S'posen she goes to hell, she'll be as black as I am. Wouldn't mistress be mad to see her a nigger!" (77) It is a tragi-comic questioning, because according to Mrs. Bellmont and Mary, heaven, even religion is only for whites. Frado's idea here signifies that she perceives herself as a thinking and feeling subject. Although Aunt Abby corrects the girl's catechism as much as she finds occasion, religious dictum is insufficient for her. Although she finds solace in religious discourse, her main support comes from her own resources.

Upon reaching the age of eighteen - her majority - she earns her freedom as if the process were legal. Mrs. Bellmont gives Frado a silver half dollar as a 'present' for her twelve years of service with the anticipation that she will wish herself back again to the house in which she is in comfort. She goes to work for one sympathetic white family and then another but she finds herself too feeble to work as a result of the years of deprivation and hard labor. She recuperates on elderly women's assistance for some years and becomes expert with sewing to be self-sufficient. She learns that in some towns in Massachusetts, girls make straw hats and she thinks the work will be easy for her. She is anxious about who can teach making it, "[b]ut God prepares the way, when human agencies see no path." (87) Again with the help of a charitable and religious woman who likes her, she learns the work and the importance of useful books about self-improvement. She satisfies her passion for learning, gains the confidence of neighbors, and becomes more religious and hopeful.

She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt, but could not express. Every leisure moment was carefully applied to self-improvement, and a devout and Christian exterior invited confidence from the villagers. Thus she

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passed months of quiet, growing in the confidence of her neighbors and new found friends. (87)

She regains her Christian sensibility and self-respect through reconstructing herself. Her doubts about religion seem gone away when she perceives it through objective sources. Now, she prefers entering manufacturing rather than domestic service and plans to lead a quiet life, but her decision of marriage changes everything. It can be thought as her need for love, support and sharing but proves a fatal one. Samuel is a pretended runaway slave, a freeborn man and is hired by abolitionists to go on lecturing tours to tell the agony of blacks in the South, because the testimony of fugitive slaves is one of the agents in the abolitionists' discourse. The blacks in the North are also content as if what he tells lessens the suffering of them and of the blacks in the South. In fact, his only aim is to procure money and clothing from sympathizers. Although he is formally unschooled, he is certainly a good speaker. Wilson presents Samuel as an impostor and Frado a very naïve girl:

A short acquaintance was indeed an objection, but she saw him often, and thought she knew him. He never spoke of his enslavement to her when alone, but she felt that, like her own oppression, it was painful to disturb oftener than was needful.

He was a fine, straight negro, whose back showed no marks of the lash, erect as if it never crouched beneath a burden. There was a silent sympathy which Frado felt attracted her, and she opened her heart to the presence of love - that arbitrary and inexorable tyrant. (Wilson 88)

Believing in him and the community of race she marries not knowing him well or the facts about fugitive slaves around. His not talking about his past and absence of the scars could give her clues about his character but she ignores them. Irresponsibly, he leaves her alone and without money when he goes to the tours. He embarks at sea leaving "her to her fate...with the disclosure that he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists." (Wilson 89); he has no trouble getting an audience, for they are 'hungry' for his lies. Eventually, he abandons her pregnant and thrown upon charity. After a long absence, Frado learns that he has died from yellow fever in New Orleans-South, a suitable place for his punishment. Thus, she becomes also the victim of her own race. It seems that marriage for her with a fragile health or to such a liar is a faulty decision; perhaps she would live on her own resources to some reasonable degree. Wilson satirizes the goals held by the antebellum free blacks and shows the damage they do to their race.

Like her mother, Frado is abandoned with a child and in poverty. She is again like her mother, forced to leave her son to a woman for working, gaining livelihood and a stable home.

She passed into the various towns of the State she lived in, then into Massachusetts. Strange were some of her adventures. Watched by kidnappers, maltreated by professed abolitionists, who didn't want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North. Faugh! to lodge one; to eat with one; to admit one through the front door; to sit next [to] one; awful! (89-90)

The 'kidnappers' are hunters snatching escaped slaves and bring them back to the South under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) which shows that free blacks cannot be at ease in the 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Although she does not internalize racism, unlike Samuel and desires to integrate, the racist society that does not know her hampers this integration. White abolitionists share the pain yet refuse to share life that shows their hypocrisy and vanity clearly. In the traditional slave narratives easy-going blacks live in the same society with the whites harmoniously and a bright future for them is delineated. Wilson refutes "[t]he New England ideal so frequently appearing in Afro-American narratives," that of "free, dignified, and individualistic labor" (Baker 49) with the corrupt ideological system and patterns of exploitation. There is no harmony between blacks and whites in terms of labor. She cannot feel safe despite public support. In discussing the status of emancipated Southern blacks during the Reconstruction, Hartman depicts "the double bind of freedom: being freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject." (Hartman 117) Despite the difference in place and time, the delineation is useful enough to understand Frado's situation after she leaves the Bellmont house. Free Northern blacks find scarce employment prospects, generally unskilled labor, and prejudice on the workers prevails. She is nominally 'free' to begin with, and 'slavery's shadows' in the North end up making her economically dependent and still oppressed. Although the dominant ideology defines the ideal white woman as chaste, and creates the mythic promiscuous black woman as her correlate, her characteristics negate it; Frado does not think about prostitution even when every door closes upon her face. It is her anguish and agony which depict her and she defines herself in terms of self-dependency. Through this twist, Wilson challenges the racist notion that black women are more lustful than the white women.

At the end of the book, it is clear that Frado is in complete consensus with religion, unlike when she is in the Bellmont house; "Providence favored her with a friend who, pitying her cheerless lot, kindly provided her with a valuable recipe, from which she might herself manufacture a useful article for her maintenance." (90) While selling it, she meets mostly with frowns, but sometimes with kindness and understanding. When

Wilson/Frado turns to writing, which is a non-physical labor, she subverts again another feature of traditional slave-narratives and the buttress of the general prejudice about black inferiority and incapability in intellectual matters including writing: many slave narratives are prefaced by white patrons to testify the writer and the work which is another reflection of racism but without such a preface but an appendix, she differs from the precedent writers. Instead of the names of respectable and well-known whites, it is signed with four incomplete names appended to it verifying the events. Most of the white abolitionists are insidiously racist, they place restrictions on black autobiographers and they prefer ex-slaves to render the facts of slavery, rather than explore their self and society. (Andrews 63) They support the narratives on the condition that they are political propaganda for the abolition, portraying quest for freedom not their self. Wilson again contradicts her audience's expectation by presenting the protagonist's hard individual facts and her search for identity. During this process, Frado struggles again against degradation, exclusion and poverty, also trying not to be frustrated. In fact, all through her life she is cheated: her mother does not return, Belmont men do not treat her honestly and Samuel deceives her, which are all disappointments as a daughter, laborer and wife. "Nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself. Reposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely. Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy, gentle reader. Refuse not, because some part of her story is unknown, save by the Omniscient God." (Wilson 90) Reminding the words in the Preface that she has not told everything, Wilson in fact proclaims her freedom; she is free enough to claim that other black writers are not as frank as her in telling the real experiences and feelings or in implying that there are some blanks in their texts. Frado's passion for 'elevating herself' should also be evaluated as her ideology for freedom because she knows that after elevation freedom in the individual context is gained. She tries to be ready for writing her experiences and then reaching freedom. And becoming free like this, she gains her subjectivity:

...the production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could, or could not, establish and redefine their status within the human community. Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as "speaking subjects" before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture. (Gates 129)

Frado's change of position from commodity to subject, producing something, helps create her subversive ideology. As subject, Frado is aware that her writing will provide freedom, power and economic advancement and fortify her social relations of power for supporting herself and her son, who is in foster care. She manages to publish the book at her own expense and instead of requesting white patronage she requests patronage from her black people, who lack sufficient funds. She describes her own unbearable struggles

and isolation in order to reach out to the community both black and white. Wilson's story ends ambiguously, again unlike the traditional slave narrative novels. We are not sure if Frado is successful in selling the book and becomes happy or she is failed. Although many slave narratives begin with the author's thanks to his white benefactors, she, notably, does not thank anyone. She demands that they help her not through donations but through the purchase of her novel. She urges sharing pain and responding to her, doing something concrete. While her explicit aim is to survive, her implicit aims are different: Barbara A. White claims that "...if Wilson was really writing to earn money for her son, she risked alienating abolitionists...a critique of abolitionists' racism was more central to Wilson's story than..." (White 38) her individual aims. The most important aid will come from the abolitionists -she is aware of that- but the demand from the blacks is deliberate; she wants to see how much she can reach her target without the whites and how much she will be successful if she does not fulfill the conditions for the publication of black writing. To say it differently, her writing becomes the arena for testing freedom. In addition, her need of writing and being understood means freedom for her and it overweighs more than her explicit aim. Here she seems feeling as free as to risk her financial income. She is free indeed in terms of individual context and she has it from the beginning when she was a child; she is intelligent, willful and strong in character and knows what she wants. The reason why she is not able to express herself until now is the restrictive conditions that engulf her tightly.

With *Our Nig*, a disturbing and challenging cornerstone in the African-American literature, Wilson implicitly curses the degrading system and institutions, undermines the Northern racist ideology, alerts people to the plight of the lives of black people and urges honesty. She scathes the complacent abolitionists by portraying them adopting an attitude indifferent to the grisly buttresses of racist ideology; racial discrimination, beating, violence, denying of both formal and religious education, subjugating to hot and cold and starvation; to summarize, denying of all humanly rights. "As a satirist, Wilson is outraged that slavery, or its partner, indentured servitude, can exist among those who congratulate themselves on their moral superiority to Southern slaveholders." (Breau 456) Providing the political, socioeconomic and ethical perspectives and powers in 19<sup>th</sup> century free North America and introducing Frado's complex experience and quest for economic and spiritual freedom, she withholds her true aim and ideology related to racist practices. Slavery's shadows will continue, she suggests, in any post-slavery America but she also suggests that although false ideologies will exist, to change the world is possible through human sympathy and action. She leaves it to the audience to decide whether like her, they, too will speak and act or remain mute and impotent in the face of such manifest suffering. Here, she touches a universal issue; the sharing of pain but doing nothing. Real solution to problems comes first from one's speaking for oneself; Wilson/Frado survives mostly through speech, not through marriage, religion or charity. Wilson, as the first courageous

and heroic mulatto/black writer to find her own voice leads the way for other black writers to find their own voices. She demands them to tell the touching truths as much as reconciling and pleasing stories.

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