

PASSING: A COMPUNCTION IN JESSIE FAUSET’S PLUM BUN

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ABSTRACT

One might expect African-Americans to write about the struggles and feeling of the contemptible days, and indeed, they have done so. One might also expect that there would have been for a considerable time, novels protesting against persecution in the South and discriminatory practices in the North. But apart from these, there is a greater subject for the novel which Charles W. Chestnut, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Ann Petry have taken up. That is the true subject of “The human heart in conflict with itself.”

Jessie Fauset, one of the prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance, “midwifed” the Harlem Renaissance, to which end she wrote articles covering a wide range of interests, from Pan Africanism to blacks in American theater. Fauset’s fiction is embedded within the black American experience and moves towards an existential enquiry into social identity. The “novel of passing” is a genre that has preoccupied Afro-American writers throughout their literary history. *Plum Bun* (1929) joins the roster that includes such Pre-Harlem Renaissance novels as William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), Charles Chestnut’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). Fauset returned to the genre again and again, beginning with her early short stories *Emmy* and *The Sleeper Wakes*, published in *The Crisis* and continuing in her last novel, *Comedy : American Style* (1933). “Passing” characterizes Fauset’s novels. In her much-acclaimed novel, *Plum Bun* (1929), Fauset uses figurations of the mulatto and passing to make her point more clear. Seeing Afro-Americans engaged in a long battle for racial justice, Fauset disapproved of “passing”. She tries to show that while it appears that blacks who “pass” are in effect colluding with hegemony, their very belief in the necessity of passing - of attempting to escape the racialized body is in effect, a legacy of slavery.

Key Words: Harlem Renaissance-New Negro-Racial Politics-Identity Crisis-Double consciousness-existential enquiry-passing-self-effacement-hegemonic constructs-celebration of color-returning to roots

In his study, Harlem renaissance, Nathan Huggins insists that “black and white American have been so long and so intimately a part of one another’s experience that, will it or not, they cannot be understood independently. Each has needed the other to help define himself” (11). It has been argued that the renaissance was short-lived and without much effect, but it has been much more convincingly demonstrated that what the major black thinkers and writers accomplished in the twenties was absorbed not only in America but in Africa also. There were more books published by blacks in the twenties than ever before. The collective literary artifact of the period extending approximately from 1920-60, is regarded today as the “Harlem Renaissance” or the “Negro Renaissance”.

The period was replete with black literary activity which for the most part highlighted two major trends. The first trend is defined by such black writing which, like much writing on the subject by white contemporaries, presents black life as exotic and pristine. Such works can be categorized as exploitative to the race in the long run and because of the ulterior desire of whites to capitalize on the “fad” and “fascination” of the African-American in “vogue.” One cogitates over novels like Arna Bontemps *God Sends Sunday* (1931), Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929) and poems such as Countee Cullen’s “*Heritage*” and Waring Cuney’s “*No Images*.” On the other hand, the products of the ‘New Negro’ spirit, like Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, W.E.B. Dubois, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston were there treading the second inclination which tried to show that black American was different from his white counterpart only in the shade of his skin. These writers presented the black-middle class characters and situations in their fictional works in order to dismantle the prevailing stereotype.

These hopes were given expression by Alain Locke, a professor of philosophy and an interpreter of black cultural achievements, in his introduction to *The New Negro* (1925), an anthology of poems and prose by contemporary black artists. He described the “*New Negro*” as the “advanced guard of the African people in contact with the Twentieth Century civilization” (14), who would be responsible for “rehabilitating the race in the world esteem” (Huggins 59). The emergence of the “New Negro” symbolized black liberation and the final shaking off of *the residuals of slavery in mind, spirit and character*. This “*New Negro*” shed the costume of the shuffling dandy, the subservient, the docile retainer and the clown. He was a man and a citizen of America in his own right: intelligent, articulate, self-assured and urban.

Assertive “New Negro” writers however, were determined to correct these images. These artists struggled to define the “New Negro” by examining the past. Identity was central to them. They were grappling with the questions such as, the meaning of Africa, the slave and peasant past and what color itself was? Blackness, clearly, was not only a color, rather it was a state of mind. So, the overwhelming question that arose was of “mulatto” and of “passing”. Most of the works of the Harlem Renaissance resonate these themes and questions. Among this group, was Jessie Fauset (1888-1961), who fought for a better representation of blacks in literature, though her efforts to do so were limited by the genteel tradition. Jessie Fauset was educated in France as well as in America, therefore her world was wider and she was better informed than her poorer brothers and sisters. As the literary editor of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Crisis* magazine, she gave Langston Hughes his first opportunity to publish, along with many other new young writers of the era.

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covering a wide range of interests, from Pan-Africanism to blacks in American theater. Fauset played a role reserved for women, in particular, for those who failed to conform to their socially assigned roles as women. She was the first black woman to attend Cornell University. From 1919 to 1926, she worked with the prominent black sociologist and political theorist W.B. Du Bois as literary editor of his magazine *The Crisis*. Her energies were distributed polymathically across a range of activities; she was a poet, story-writer, essayist and author of four novels—*There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and *Comedy: American style* (1933).

Fauset's novels are written from within her own milieu. They also challenge precursory white writers, especially T.S. Stribling, whose *Birthright*, Fauset argued, depicted blacks who "just did not act and react in the way he described." Behind all Fauset's works both as editor and writer, is a sensibility, catholic and global in its reach that complicates simplistic orthodoxies. Fauset's fiction is embedded within the black American experience and moves towards an existential enquiry into social identity. For her "blackness" was not synonymous with Afro-American but included black people worldwide:

In '*Dark Algiers White*' (published in *The Crisis* in 1925) Fauset brought these two interests, in folklore and international varieties black culture, together to create an intriguingly prescient account of ethnographic tourism. A black American in Algiers, Fauset is here entranced by the exoticism of Africa; but she ironically notes the cultural distance between herself and a people of similar skin color who are far from her own Western identity. Fauset is nimbly alert to gaps of understanding between black America and Islamic Africa, as when she notes her 'tongue-tied Western fashion' in the face of the inexplicable. Fauset also anticipates the developing interest of black Americans in Islam, entering a mosque to hear the supplicant 'breathe a prayer to the God who watches alike over East and West'. (Reynolds, 107)

"*Passing*" characterizes Fauset's novels. She depicts some blacks who pass just for fun or convenience and others who make passing a lifetime commitment. Then there are those who do not pass physically but adopt the values and attitudes and mimic the mannerism associated with the white culture. Fauset's characters are usually only phenotypically mulattoes, having two "black" parents, because she wants to show, finally, that even the most assimilated blacks, no matter what their color, find that they still have to "be" white. To white America, African ancestry means inferiority.

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In her famous novel, *Plum Bun* (1929), Fauset uses figuration of the mulatto and passing to make her point more clear. She tries to show that while it appears that blacks who pass are in effect colluding with hegemony, their very belief in the necessity of passing-of attempting to escape the racialized body is in effect a legacy of slavery. Seeing Afro-Americans engaged in a long battle for racial justice, Fauset disapproved of "passing". Those who did so, failed in their obligation to the race, for if all people could see the full range of color of prejudice would be much more obvious.

Plum Bun records the picaresque movements of Angela Murray from Philadelphia to Harlem, seeking a clearer understanding of self and sustained happiness with the ultimate realization of the need of permanence in life. The quagmire of the game of passing grips her and she is confronted with many ups and downs. Each turning point is accompanied by a contemplation scene which rivals that of Isabel Archer in Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*. Angela is never able to identify herself. She is driven to self-effacement. For Angela, to accept ones Blackness and still be, still dream, still feel secure, still achieve- was the problem. This all-consuming dilemma is described in the novel as a problem of the color line, the problem of being black in a country that favored the White:

Freedom! That was the note which Angela heard oftenest in the melody of living which was to be hers. With a wildness that fell just sort of unreasonableness she hated restraint. ... Color or rather the lack of it seemed to the child the one absolute prerequisite to the life of which she was always dreaming. One might break loose from a too hampering sense of duty; poverty could be overcome; physician conquered weakness; but color, the mere possession of a black or a white skin that was clearly one of those fortuitous endowments of the gods. Gratitude was no strong ingredient in the girls nature, yet very often early she began thanking fate for the chance which bin that household of four had bestowed on her the heritage of her mother's fair skin. She might so easily have been, like her father, black or have received the mélange which had resulted in Virginia's rosy bronzeness and her deeply waving black hair. But Angela had received not only her mother's creamy complexion and her soft cloudy, chestnut hair, but she had taken from Junius the aquiline nose, the gift of some remote Indian ancestor which gave to his face and his eldest daughter's that of touch of chiseled immobility. (PB 14)

Right from the first section, the plot is based on a world of fairy tales and fantasy- a dream of ecstasy. In *Plum Bun*, Fauset tries to depict a fairy tale's ironic inversion. The metaphorical coding of the narrative, through use of the fairy tale motif and the nursery rhyme that structures the novel, is the means by which Fauset attempts to dismantle hegemonic constructs of color, race, class and gender. The sections of the book –“Home”, “Market”, “Plum Bun”, “Home Again” and “Market is Done” – corresponds to lines of a nursery rhyme which also serves as the epigraph to the book. As Caroline W. Sylvander argues:

At the market is the mistaken dream-wealth if one is poor; white if one is black. The Plum Bun is the center of irony and discovery. To a poor black woman, American culture says the Plum Bun is stale, Angela discovers; Roger's sexist and racist stereotypes fail to nourish love. The Plum is like a poison apple – eat it, fall asleep, lose your identity. (Sylvander 185)

With Angela as heroine, then, Fauset employs some of the most common trappings of the fairy tale: a journey; themes of entrapment, loss of identity, and good versus evil: and a moral or perhaps several other themes, since she gives Plum Bun, the subtitle, *A Novel Without a Moral*. The fact that Angela and her mother are light-skinned enough to pass and Junius and Jinny are dark has several implications. First, the color division in the Murray family is arbitrarily imposed by Fauset, who suggests that it is a division symptomatic of the parents' and society's attitudes about color. It is not color itself that is responsible for the division, but the “construction put on color”, to use Fauset's own words. Plum Bun with its attention to consumerism (one section of the novel is simply entitled ‘Market’), traces a selfhood where consumption and performance have become the constituents of identity. The social drive of Fauset's realism enables her to follow this process with particular closeness. We are ‘made’, in this world, by how others see us; and if they think that we are white, then this is indeed the case.

As Angela's mother Mattie says ; "I can't label myself" (*PB* 31). Since Mattie cannot pass when she is with dark-skinned Jinny, a pattern develops whereby Angela accompanies Mattie on her passing excursions and Jinny accompanies Junius, the Father. This freedom from color first expresses itself in the shopping trips undertaken by Angela and her similarly light-skinned mother (the darker father and sister are excluded), as they travel into white shop: And she began to wonder which was the more important, a patent insistence on the fact of color or an acceptance of the good things of life which could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known. (*PB* 46)

Fauset reveals the fallacy of such thinking through events that show the dishonest act of passing to be anything innocuous in its effect on their children, especially Angela. Angela often accompanies Mattie when she is passing and in consequence, on hand to witness the occasion when Mattie snubs her dark-skinned husband and their dark-skinned child so that she will not give herself away. This act, the text tells us, makes a "far-reaching impression" on the child, who says, "it's a good thing Papa didn't see us, you'd have had to speak to him wouldn't you?" But Mattie, "giving her a distracted glance," makes no reply (*PB* 19)

Angela is not aware of her mother's remorse and later promises to Junius never to repeat her actions. Later in the novel, when Angela snubs her sister Jinny to protect her own relationship with the white Roger Fielding, it is no surprise. She is simply mimicking the actions of her mother. Mattie's education of her daughter convinces Angela that, contrary to Mattie's own experiences, Prince Charming has a white skin. Hence, Angela's determination to marry a white man is clearly related to her mother's dishonest act.

Both 'marriage' and 'passing' serve as dual plots in a novel of female development and help to underline Fauset's prevailing theme: the unequal power relationships between a black and a white and between a man and a woman. These two plots however, cannot be separated. Angela's obsession with getting married is frustrated by the exigencies of sex-role stereotyping and the limitations of her own romantic assumptions. She is tossed up and down by circumstances when Roger returns and asks for marriage. To show how far Angela has been misled, Fauset stresses the elements of fantasy in the scenes with Roger:

They were dining in East Tenth Street in a small café...About them stretched the glitter and perfection of crystal and silver of marvelous napery and of obsequious service. Everything, Angela thought, looking about her was translated. The slight odour of food was, she told Fielding, really an aroma; the mineral water which he was drinking... was nectar; the bread the fish, the courses, were ambrosia. The food, too, again in general was to be spoken of as viands. (*PB* 132)

Angela's relationship with Roger exemplifies the critic Nancy Hartstock's characterization of the commodities bartered in the courtship market as sexual gratification and firm commitments' (presumably marriage). To gain his desired end i.e. sex, Roger uses his wealth. To his cheap proposal Angela reasons that men paid a big price for their desire. But she settles her price-'marriage' of course. But Angela soon discovers her powerlessness to command that price. The novelty of their passion worn off, Roger ends the relationship. The novel's central concern is also with the forms and sources of power, which are race and class-specific. While white men can become the presidents, wielding the power and authority that office affords, women must settle for a second-hand power – experienced vicariously through their husbands. After learning that life on the other side is not without its hardships, Angela Murray develops an appreciation for Black life and culture, and returns "Home" psychically if not physically, to the

Black community. In short, it is a journey of discovery and recovery. In a way from the theme of “passing” –the novel culminates with the declaration of “passing beyond”. Finally, Angela embraces her self, her existence as a realized soul.

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