

## 49. Racial awareness and resistance in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The origin of the racist approaches towards black people living in America dates back to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A small number of Africans brought to the Virginia colony by ships in that period were considered captives, but were not slaves in the current sense because they could have freedom and some land after working for a certain period of time. It was a form of indentured slavery. However, wealthy landowners soon concluded that this was a problem, and there followed a rapid transition from indentured slavery to slavery. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, indentured slavery was almost nonexistent. With the American Revolution in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the idea that slavery was a social problem predominated and many states, mostly in the north, began to enact freedom laws. But unfortunately, none of the laws enacted have been sincere or comprehensive enough to give black people a voice or freedom in its fullest sense. With the Great Migration that started in the 1910s, millions of black citizens immigrated to the Northern regions, especially New York, with the dream of equality and freedom. This was the event triggering the Harlem Renaissance, which began in the 1920s. With the Renaissance, black people had the opportunity to express their identity and art with their own style for the first time in their history. The writers of the period not only raised awareness about the racism they were exposed to, but also reflected the idea of resistance and being proud of their own identity. Jessie Redmon Fauset occupies a prominent place among these writers and successfully addresses the themes mentioned. This study examines racial awareness and resistance in Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Racism, Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*

### Jessie Redmon Fauset'in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* adlı eserinde ırksal farkındalık ve direniş

#### Öz

Amerika'da yaşayan siyahilerin maruz kaldıkları ırkçı yaklaşımların kökeni 17. yüzyılın başlarına dayanmaktadır. O dönemde gemilerle Virginia kolonisine getirilen az sayıda Afrikalı, esir olarak görülmekle beraber bugünkü anlamıyla köle değillerdi çünkü belli bir süre çalıştıktan sonra özgürlük ve bir miktar toprak sahibi olabiliyorlardı. Bu, bir nevi sözleşmeli kölelik sayılırdı. Ancak kısa süre içerisinde zengin arazi sahipleri bu durumun bir problem olduğu sonucuna vardı ve sözleşmeli

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kölelikten köleliğe hızlı bir geçiř süreci yařandı. 18. yüzyılın ortalarına gelindiğinde, sözleşmeli kölelik artık yok denecek kadar azdı. 18. yüzyılın ikinci yarısındaki Amerikan Devrimi ile birlikte köleliğin toplumsal bir problem olduđu düşüncesi ağır basmış ve çoğunlukla kuzeyde olmak üzere pek çok eyalet, özgürlük yasaları çıkarmaya başlamıştır. Fakat ne yazık ki çıkarılan hiçbir yasa, siyahilere tam anlamıyla bir ses veya özgürlük verecek kadar samimi veya kapsamlı olamamıştır. 1910'larda başlayan Büyük Göç ile birlikte milyonlarca siyahi vatandaş eşitlik ve özgürlük hayaliyle Kuzey bölgelere, özellikle New York'a göç etmiştir. Bu olay 1920'lerde başlayan Harlem Rönesansı'nı tetikleyen olgudur. Rönesans ile birlikte siyahiler tarihlerinde ilk defa kendi kimlik ve sanatlarını kendi tarzlarıyla anlatma imkânı bulmuşlardır. Dönemin yazarları, maruz kaldıkları ırkçılık ile ilgili farkındalık yaratmayla yetinmeyip, bir direniř ortaya koyma ve kendi kimliklerinden gurur duyma düşüncesini de yansıtmışlardır. Jessie Redmon Fauset, bu yazarlar arasında önemli bir yere sahiptir ve bahsedilen konuları başarılı bir biçimde ele almaktadır. Bu çalışma, Fauset'in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* adlı eserindeki ırksal farkındalık ve direniř temasını incelenmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Kölelik, Irkçılık, Harlem Rönesansı, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral

## Introduction

The history of racism in America coincides with the first appearance of the black community in Virginia colony in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Undoubtedly, these people were captives, yet they were not slaves in the real sense. Their masters regarded them as 'indentured servants,' that is, they worked for their masters for a while and then they were freed and given land. Nevertheless, this meant the possibility of losing workforce when it was needed most. For the very reason, the wealthy planters began to transform the status of Africans from indentured servitude to slavery so that they could not leave anymore. In this direction, Massachusetts became the first colony to legalize slavery in 1641, and John Casor was recognized as the first legal slave in 1654. By 1700, the number of slaves corresponded to nearly 10% of the population of the American colonies. The Virginia Slave Codes of 1705 identified not only those coming from non-Christian nations but also Native Americans sold to colonists by other Native Americans as slaves. Indentured servitude, which had been a prominent component of colonial labor economy from the 1620s, was nearly abolished until the 1750s.

During the American Revolution, which came about in the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, there started a widespread sentiment that slavery itself was a social problem to be eradicated. The Northwest Ordinance, approved by the Congress in 1787, prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory. In 1790, the United States had around 60,000 free blacks. The majority of these were in the North, yet slaveholders in the South were also inspired by revolutionary ideals. After 1830, William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), a renowned American abolitionist and social reformer, adopted a primarily theological viewpoint that considered slavery to be a personal evil. He asked that the slave owners renounce immediately and begin the emancipation process. The movement was an important factor in the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861-1865). The Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, was ratified, and all remaining slaves were freed in 1865. The Fourteenth Agreement gave African Americans full citizenship in the United States in 1868. The Fifteenth Amendment, which was enacted in 1870, granted African males the right to vote.

Following the Union triumph over the Confederacy in the Civil War, the South experienced a brief period of black advancement known as the Reconstruction (1865-1877). The blacks founded their own

churches, villages, and enterprises during this time. However, the pace of recovery began to decrease within a short time, and society rapidly reverted to its old biases and discriminations. As a consequence, the United States had its biggest internal population change during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the Great Migration (1910-1930), nearly five million African Americans migrated from the South to the North in the hopes of avoiding political prejudice and hostility as well as having increased equity and education for their future generations. This was not only a simple migration from the rural to the urban but also a transition from simplicity to complexity. The movement also shifted the African American community's image from farmer to cultured. This new identity prompted a shift in social awareness. Harlem turned into the political and cultural center and this triggered the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, which was an African American intellectual and artistic movement that would affect the African American communities all across the country (Wintz, 2003: 1). The Renaissance was a process that began after the Great War and lasted until the Great Depression of the 1930s, yet its underlying causes were felt decades before.

In the broadest sense, a renaissance can be defined as the rebirth or renewal of literary and artistic ideas, and the same approach may well apply to the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, was more comprehensive than the general scope of a renaissance since it was also the revival of a community as a whole, from politics to social life. Although it began as a domestic movement, it soon developed into a global phenomenon, and its impacts lasted for years and served as a model for repressed people of color across the world. The Renaissance had the capacity to attract the attention of the whole nation to African American art more intensively than ever: It gave voice to the call for justice and equality.

It can be argued that most of the Harlem Renaissance writers produced art with social and political concerns. Their sense of art was closely linked to racial issues and they mainly wrote to improve their race's sociopolitical and economic standing. In fact, their objective was making up for centuries of injustice and persecution against their race. They struggled to prove that black people can create art, and that they have a broad and rich history and culture to work with, as well as the skills to do so. They made a commitment to portraying the African American experience in all of its depth and richness as faithfully as possible. Instead of looking to Europe and colonial America for inspiration, these writers focused on themes and concerns related to Africa and Southern life. The development of art and literature centered on the African American experience would contribute to the overall betterment of the race.

### **'New Negro' as the alternative black identity**

The Renaissance writers saw it essential to address the identity problem because the black people had never had a distinct identity other than that of a slave or servant. For this reason, the purpose of black authors was to create a respectable and proper image for the black person. This new identity was to be self-reliant and proud of her/his race. Significantly, the ideal black person would not seek vengeance for the past but instead look forward to the future. Although these authors concurred on the necessity of imbuing their people with a sense of dignity and intellect in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of white Americans, it was not easy to agree on how to do it (Keller, 1968: 32-33). This is why Renaissance writers emphasized distinct, and at times conflicting, demands and ideals. Nevertheless, they all converged in upon one issue: double consciousness. Introduced by Du Bois, the notion of double consciousness, a divided awareness of one's identity, was one of the most prominent themes of the Renaissance: "One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two

warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, 2008: 6). His argument was that the black person had always been looking at herself/himself through the eyes of white people, attempting to be what they believed she/he was, or what they desired her/him to be, rather than developing an own individuality. Parallel to the black person's identity crisis, the notion of twoness played a significant role during the Renaissance. Examining individuals of mixed racial descent who struggle to identify their racial identity in a world of prejudice and racism became one of the era's most popular topics.

Where there is injustice, there will be resistance. The advent of 'New Negro' was the result of the longstanding physical and psychological resistance. The emergence of this notion was both a product of the ongoing oppression and of an awareness of the beauty and power of the people of color. The mission of the New Negro, then, was to uncover and identify her/his culture, as well as her/his contribution to what was previously conceived of as white American civilisation:

The 'new Negro' should not be buried under faddish concepts of sociology, philanthropy, or politics; neither should he or she be confined to images that existed through history ("old Negro" concepts of servility, or rebellion). What would characterize the new Negro would be the spirit of discovery, of pride, of the search of origins . . . (Wagner-Martin, 1990: 80)

Most of the pioneers of the Renaissance, such as Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, tried to promote the concept of the New Negro. In this regard, freedom from prejudices against African Americans was critical. The white society anticipated a work by a black person to represent the white male patriarchy's supremacy, but the new generation of black intellectuals would resist this stereotype. One of the main features of the Harlem Renaissance was the resolve of black authors to follow their own aesthetic vision. These writers recognized the value of their color and chose to live and write as self-sufficient people. They were well aware of the implications and objectives of their art, which focused on issues of freedom and equality that African Americans had long been refused in the United States. Furthermore, they explored many other subjects including African American culture, bigotry, and double consciousness.

### **An embodiment of the New Negro: Jessie Redmon Fauset**

Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961) was the first black woman to attend to Cornell University and to be accepted to Phi Beta Kappa, an intellectual honor society established in 1776. She served as the literary editor of *The Crisis* from 1919 until 1926. The magazine became the center of her career path for these years. In fact, working with Du Bois, who might be defined as a turning point in her life, was what distinguished this experience from the rest of her career because he definitely "provided a model of fused political and artistic energy and of the artist as aesthetic pioneer" (Ammons, 1987: 210). She submitted a number of essays to the magazine. In these pieces, she mainly focused on biographical studies of prominent black figures most likely to keep up with the journal's Pan African agenda. She also produced poetry and short stories where she tried out ideas and characters that would eventually appear in her novels. She was particularly concerned about the issue of 'passing,' which refers to a black person's attempt to renounce her/his black lineage to become accepted in the white community by using the advantage of her/his light skin. She wrote about individuals living on the edge of two races and toyed with the possibility of passing (Johnson, 1978: 149).

Fauset can be argued to have employed the customs of the sentimental novel to examine the impact of racism and sexism on black Americans' lives and to show the ways by which black Americans could

overcome these oppressions (Wall, 1995: 66). In this direction, her works studied the belief that if African Americans were granted the chance to educate themselves without bigotry, they could succeed just as well as everyone else. In other words, there are no innate features that otherise and separate African Americans from the whites; rather, the definition of African American race depends on the social and political bounds.

Fauset was happy with her ethnicity, and she was even proud of it. She frequently wrote about people who found themselves caught between two races, and she knew people who had passed. From her personal and professional perspective, such act was wrong and dangerous. She was aware of the value of African history and believed that black children needed to understand and embrace their roots because racial pride was necessary for the continuation of the black community. Accordingly, she strove to display her trust in people of color in her writings and encouraged other blacks to write.

Having a complicated tone, her works are frequently structured in two distinct directions. What looks to be a traditional romance gradually transforms into a story of unfulfilled hope, near-tragedy, or cynical satire. Her seemingly pleasant representations of the privileged middle class disguise a realm of suffering and prejudice (Feeney, 1983: 20-22). The novels she penned, the most renowned of which are *There Is Confusion* (1924) and *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929), are all societal criticisms of African American middle class life and denouncements of racial and sexual discrimination that strictly limit African Americans. Undoubtedly, Fauset was one of the intellectuals who helped to establish the New Negro literature.

### **Racial awareness and resistance in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral***

Even though slavery as an institution had been abolished in America by then, biases and discrimination against black people were still widespread in 1920s. Unsurprisingly, such problems were among the most urgent issues to be addressed and the intellectuals of the time had to fight against this segregationist understanding which defined almost everything by the color of one's skin. Fauset studied similar issues in her 1929 novel *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. In the novel, she tries to raise awareness of the ongoing oppression and supports her arguments by showing the artificiality of the racist policies. For her, this awareness is the first step of a real resistance because only if the people of color realize the hollowness of the longstanding racism, can they form an overall solidarity against it. By realistically displaying the problems relating being a black person in the white-oriented American society of the time, the author frequently emphasizes that the color of the skin sets a network of boundaries which seem impossible to transgress:

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; physicians conquered weakness; but color, the mere possession of a black or white skin, that was clearly one of those fortuitous endowments of the gods. (Fauset, 1990: 13)

As the example about Angela shows, color is the will of God, and so it is unchangeable. In this sense, it is exactly what stands between freedom and oppression. Later on, in a scene involving Angela's mother, Mrs. Murray, the author mentions the concept of passing. Because she has light complexion and can 'pass' white, she may enjoy the blessings of life: "Much of this pleasure, harmless and charming though it was, would have been impossible with a dark skin" (1990: 16). Indeed, whatever Mrs. Murray and Angela can enjoy in the society is a blessing of their light skin. The fact that this pleasure is 'harmless' is noteworthy, yet people of color are denied such opportunities because the color problem is based on

artificiality and absurdity. To highlight this, Fauset makes it obvious that despite being from the same family, Mr. Murray and Virginia are unable to partake in this pleasure due to their dark skin. The ostensibly complicated issue is actually the embodiment of a basic reality. The white society's flawed approach to blacks has no foundation because members of the same family may receive quite different treatments. Because of their skin color, Mr. Murray and Virginia are deprived of their inherent rights. As a consequence, Mr. Murray is unable to enjoy the rights of her wife, and Virginia is unable to have the freedoms of her sister. The writer clearly wants to raise awareness within her community about the arbitrary restrictions that apply to black people: "All the good things were theirs. Not, some coldly reasoning instinct within was saying, because they were white. But because for the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness . . ." (1990: 73). By presenting whiteness as a source of power, it is underscored that this system has no fundamental rationale.

The traces of this exclusionary understanding can be seen at any moment and place: "Well, you won't sit in there to-night; the management's changed hands since then, and we're not selling tickets to colored people" (1990: 75). The person in charge refuses Angela and Matthew since Matthew has dark skin. Because of her fair skin, Angela would most likely have no trouble getting into the theatre if she went alone. This attitude has no base and is nothing but an established absurdity. Indeed, Philadelphia as a city is biased against the black community since in this city, "deliberate insult could be offered to colored people without causing the smallest ripple of condemnation or even consternation in the complacent commonwealth" (1990: 261). The scope of the color issue appears to have gotten out of hand. Not just white people, but also white-owned businesses have internalized and even rationalized discrimination against black people. The most problematic part of the case is definitely the institutionalization of the color problem.

As Fauset clarifies, the opposition between white-moral and black-immoral has been naturalized and internalized in the society. As Mrs. Murray recollects during a flashback, Madame, her employer and an actress, feels "dimly that all colored people are thickly streaked with immorality" (1990: 29). The white community associates the people of color with negative aspects and it classifies people by looking at the color of a person alone. This incident of judging a person's virtue or lack of it based on their skin color stands out as one of the most obvious examples of discrimination in the work. It is important that just before this occasion, the author presents the actress as a woman who "[k]new that in spite of Mattie's white skin there was black blood in her veins; in fact, she would not have taken the girl on had she not been colored; all her servants must be colored . . ." (1990: 29). With this understanding, the actress does not employ white people as servants as she ascribes it to the people of color. In another occasion, Madame sends Mrs. Murray as a messenger to a household:

When the girl had come to her with tears in her eyes and begged her not to send her as messenger to the house of a certain Haynes Brokinaw, politician and well-known man about town, Madame had laughed out loud. 'How ridiculous! He'll treat you all right. I should like to know what a girl like you expects.' (1990: 29)

Color has a role in determining one's personality once more. Madame discredits Mrs. Murray and all the ideals associated with her since she is aware of her black heritage. What is more remarkable is that Haynes Brokinaw has a relationship with Madame and the actress even does not take the pain of being jealous of Mrs. Murray. Afterwards, Atwood portrays the education system as an apparatus of the general policy. During an election for the representatives for the editorial staff of the school magazine, Mary Hastings, one of the students in the class, wins the election and she has the right to choose her an assistant, who she announces as Angela Murray. However, another student, Esther Bayliss knows

Angela from the former school years and so knows she is in fact a black person: “I don’t know how it is with the rest of you, but I should have to think twice before I’d trust my subscription money to a colored girl” (1990: 43). Angela should not be relied on because of her black lineage. The author’s choosing the classroom for such an occasion shows that the institutions of the state, which are expected to be neutral, have turned into places where the foundation of discriminations and prejudices are laid.

The line between respect and contempt lies under the reality of color, and there is nothing else in question. The reason why the members of the same family face different attitudes within the society can only be explained with this reality: “No one could tell, no one would have thought for a moment that she and her mother had come from tiny Opal Street; no one could have dreamed of their racial connections” (1990: 58). Although the ones with lighter skins seem to enjoy a more comfortable life, Fauset intends to specify that they do not go through less confusion. The experiences of Angela display the dilemma of passing. As a person who has been discriminated against by white people because of her racial origins, she herself feels obliged to apply the same social codes to find a place within the white community. For the very reason, she shrugs off Miss Powell’s hand so that Roger, her white lover, will not see her on friendly terms with a colored girl (1990: 148). This is a direct consequence of the complexity of the situation. It is practically impossible for a black person to experience the joys of life. On the other hand, as a white, it is not easy to forget all her connections and emotions relating her ancestry. This aspect of the case can sometimes have severely negative consequences, and the matter of race may have a significant influence on family connections. This is clarified by the author when she refers to weekend activities in the Murray household. While Mattie and Angela can go to the city thanks to their light skin, Junius and Virginia are to stay home and explore the local places: “The family’s color-specific weekend activities disclose the means by which America’s race obsession disrupts familial bonds” (Czarnecki, 2004: 120).

These examples show the confusion that a person of color might face in such a color-specific culture. The father and Virginia have black skins, and thus they cannot see themselves as a part of American society. However, they cannot live as Africans, either. As to the mother and Angela, they have light skins, but they cannot consider themselves as belonging to either side: They are neither black nor white. All this dilemma is the result of certain so-called rules “that are unnatural and unjust” (1990: 32). The discrimination of people is not based on any acceptable reason. It is totally artificial and determined by the members of the powerful group for their own interests with white-oriented motives. The author, in this context, attempts to display the arbitrariness of such social codes, and thus tries to raise awareness of the issue. On the other hand, she includes the idea of self-esteem and superiority. She portrays Angela as a person the warmth of whose appearance “overshadowed or rather over-shone everyone else in the room” (1990: 115). A ‘passing’ friend of Angela, Anthony Cross promotes the same idea: “I’m not ashamed of my blood. Sometimes I think it’s the leaven that will purify this Nordic people of their cruelty and their savage lust of power” (1990: 291). The notion of racial consciousness and pride is strengthened by Van Meier, a black litterateur: “We must still look back and render service to our less fortunate, weaker brethren. And the first step toward making this a workable attitude is the acquisition not so much of a racial love as a racial pride” (1990: 218). Van Meier is portrayed as the person needed for a racial awakening, and he is apparently the outcome of the writer’s admiration for Du Bois. His preference for a black lady over a white woman in a case is a manifestation of his racial pride which is also symbolized by Harlem itself: “Harlem intrigued her; it was a wonderful city; it represented, she felt, the last word in racial pride, integrity and even self-sacrifice” (1990: 326). Fauset’s faith in her race is the very reason behind her unconditional opposition against passing.

## Conclusion

The contempt against the black people in America has a long history. Although it is difficult to claim that racism is completely over today, great progress has been made. This progress is the product of a long and painful struggle for freedom and equality. Undoubtedly, the Harlem Renaissance provided the intellectual background for the advancement of the people of color. During this period, the blacks started to have a voice of their own. They saw the possibility of expressing themselves independent of the qualities having been attributed to them by the white community for centuries. In this context, identity crisis became one of the most frequently addressed issues. The black person demanded a new identity, and the pioneering figures of the time strove for promoting the image of a person with self-esteem and racial pride. These intellectuals were in the belief that art had to discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice had overlaid (Locke, 1992: 264). The new person would be aware of the ongoing injustices, but he would also resist such oppression. In this way, he could transgress the borders of the role and identity assigned to him. The embodiment of this argument was the New Negro who would possess a "spontaneously generated black and self-sufficient self" (Gates, 1988: 129). A racial uplift could happen only if the New Negro was created, and only this uplift could have the power to destroy the negative stereotypes.

Jessie Redmon Fauset, one of the Renaissance's most prominent figures, had a special concern with promoting the ideals of the New Negro. In this direction, she often stated the dangers of the idea of passing and portrayed black characters who were conscious of the unnaturalness of the dilemma of being a person of color in America. Her black characters embraced their ancestry and loved themselves. In several cases, they overweighed the white characters in terms of their spiritual and intellectual power. Her 1929 novel *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* is a successful representation of these ideas from the perspective of a black female writer living in the white-male-centered American society in the twenties.

In the novel, the author displays the disadvantages of being a person of color in America. She shows the ways American society applies personal and institutional discrimination against the black community and displays the difficulties of surviving under such circumstances. As she discloses, such rules have no basis as they are artificial codes created by the white community to otherize and oppress the people of color. In this sense, the concepts of solidarity and racial improvement appear as the main themes in the narrative. Significantly, the majority of her characters are conscious of the arbitrariness of the racist discourse and thus they have a demand for equality, and even superiority. By creating such characters, the author tries to raise awareness of the beauty and power of the black people. This awareness will lead to self-esteem and it is the first step for the possibility of having equal opportunities. Her underlying message is that the black community should create a culture of their own in the light of the guidance provided by the black intelligentsia: "Black liberation seeks the establishment of a lovingly free movement within and between Black males and Black females that creates both parties and establishes a tradition that is non-capitalist, non-sexist and draws from the cultural experience of free Black people" (Aldridge, 1990: 95).

If black people are to have freedom and equality, they must assemble under the same roof regardless of gender and class. They must gather around the same ideals and fight for getting back their stolen rights. In this context, racial awareness and resistance is indispensable, and the role of the black intellectuals in this programme is undeniable. By using the power of art, they are the ones to initiate the revolution, which Fauset does.

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