

**A Journey of Transformation: A Study of Jessie Redmon Fauset's
*Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral***

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Abstract

Jessie Redmon Fauset, one of the distinguished writers of the Harlem Renaissance, explores the miserable plight of the African-Americans owing to racial injustice, in her literary creations. Being a multi-faceted personality, she adorns the literary arena with her literary acumen. She has employed classic literary styles in her works that make her works more impressive and unique. Angela Murray, the protagonist of Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* is a coloured woman who desires for comfort, security, prestige, and sophistication in her life. She undergoes a series of transformations in her life to acquire the status of a "white." During the initial phase of her transformation, she desires to pass as white temporarily for she believes that her new, acquired identity would bestow upon her the privileges enjoyed by the whites. In the next phase, she permanently passes as a white woman, readily disowns her racial identity, and accordingly distances herself from her brown skinned sister and her black community. It is in the final phase she acknowledges her racial origin and cherishes her inherited cultural values. This paper highlights the psychic trauma undergone by Angela Murray in *Plum Bun* while undergoing a journey of transformation from disowning her inherited black identity to acquiring a new identity as a white.

Key words: Race, Passing, Identity, Colored woman, and Racist attitude

Jessie Redmon Fauset, one of the renowned writers of the Harlem Renaissance, is not only a novelist but also a journalist, poet, and editor. She was the only colored child in her class. She has written four novels namely, *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (1928), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy: American Style* (1933). In her literary works, she has used the classic literary styles. Angela, the protagonist of the novel, is a pretty coloured woman. She is an art student who lives with her parents and her younger sister Virginia in a tiny house in the suburb of Philadelphia. Her parents, Mattie and Junius are respectful members of the black society and they are very pious too. They often narrate moral stories to their daughters -- Angela and Virginia, and thereby inculcate cultural values in them. Born to a mulatto mother and a black father, the sisters differ in their skin color –Angela is fair-skinned whereas Virginia is brown-skinned. Angela has “received not only her mother’s creamy complexion and her soft cloudy, chestnut hair” (14), but also possessed her father’s “aquiline nose” (14) which is considered “the gift of some remote Indian ancestor” (14). Virginia “might so easily have been, like her father, black, or have received the melange which had resulted in Virginia’s rosy bronzeness and her deeply waving black hair”(14). Mattie makes Angela understand the possibilities of joy and freedom in her life for she is fair coloured.

In 1930s, skin colour played a significant role in carving the destiny of the colored people in America. Mingling and merging with the white society remained a dream for the coloured people, especially for women. Hence they attempted to cross the color line to enjoy the privileges benefited by the whites. Angela, who inherits the fair skin from her mulatto

mother, decides to traverse the color line for she nourishes the thought: “First, that the great rewards of life – riches, glamour, pleasure, -- are for white-skinned people only. Secondly, that Junius and Virginia were denied these privileges because they were dark” (17). Being a coloured woman, she perceives that her passing as white would facilitate her process of transformation and help her lead a life of sophistication, security, prestige, freedom, and bliss like the whites. She feels that Junius and Virginia are denied of these privileges for the reason that they are brown skinned. She wholeheartedly believes that her fair skin is a blessing in disguise that would fetch her societal advantages in her life and hopes that someday she will become a member of the white society.

In the article entitled “Twentieth-Century Mulatto Image: Novels of Passing, Protest, and The Black Bourgeoisie,” Reginald Wade Watson asserts that the colored people intentionally engage in temporary or permanent passing for societal advantages: “In Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* both permanent and temporary ‘passing’ are seen. Angela Murray is the major character that decides to permanently pass, while her mother temporarily passes to enjoy the benefits of shopping and other pleasures” (5). Seeking various advantages, Angela undergoes a series of transformation in her life in relation to her skin colour. Initially she passes for white temporarily in order to create a new identity in the white society. Then she passes as white permanently and thereafter leaves her brown skinned sister and her black community. Finally, realizing the significance of her racial heritage, she acknowledges her racial origin and eventually returns to Harlem.

Angela and Virginia differ not only in their skin color but also in their attitude towards life, perception of cultural ethos, and racial affinity. Virginia enjoys the joys of a domestic servitor, who “prepared the Sunday breakfast which was always the same,- bacon

and eggs, strong coffee with good cream for Junius, chocolate for the other three and muffins” (20). She loves doing domestic chores, wishes to be amidst the company of her family members, enjoys her daily routine of going to church, and cherishes values related to her inherited culture. In contrast to Virginia, Angela enjoys shopping with her mother and craves to know more about fair, enjoyment, fun, and freedom. Though Angela is colored, she is quite aware of the existential reality that she cannot become a “white”--in its truest sense. However, she wants to implement her mother’s idea of using her fair skin as a token to seek societal advantages and enjoy the privileges that are generally denied to the blacks. For black people this might be “a mischievous determination to flout a silly and unjust law” (15).

When Junius, Angela’s father, married Mattie, a colored woman, he knew exactly that passing has become a kind of fantasy world wherein colored people derive entertainment and immense fulfillment. Hence, he does not object Mattie’s temporary passing for white. He asserts that passing is a role-play “where no principle was involved, your passing means nothing to me. It’s just a little joke” (19). As for the colored wife, her “black” husband is her soul mate who always loves, trusts, and glorifies her. Though their skin colors are completely different, she is extremely contented and glad to lead her life with him: “I’d give my life for him!” (56). During Saturday excursions, Mattie and Angela garb themselves sophisticatedly like the whites, visit places forbidden to the blacks, and imitate the behaviors and the attitudes of the whites. They consider that revealing their true racial heritage would impede the process of their transformation and accordingly, they perfectly emulate the life-style of the white women and find immense pleasure in doing so: “A thin stream of people constantly passing threw an occasional glance at the quietly modish pair, the well-dressed, assured woman and the refined and no less assured daughter” (18).

The humiliating racial injustices encountered by Angela hasten the process of her assimilation with the white society. She reminisces the painful moment, how as a school student she witnessed the racist attitude and the color consciousness of her white friends who recognized her as a “colored” one: “ ‘Colored ! Angela, you never told me that you were colored!’ And then her own voice in tragic but proud bewilderment. ‘Tell you that I was colored! Why of course I never told you that I was colored. Why should I?’” (38). The harsh, degrading racial remarks of the haughty white society strengthen and nourish her dream of passing as white permanently.

She reveals her idea of leaving Philadelphia, first to her sister Virginia and later to her Music teacher: “I’m going to leave Philadelphia, give up school teaching, break away from our loving friends and acquaintances” (77). She deems that colored women can pass as whites deliberately with the purpose to gain freedom and to improve their life in the white circle. After the death of her parents, when Angela migrates to New York seeking “a freer, fuller life” (80), she finds no possibility for her to be recognized as a successful individual. She fails in her efforts to establish her identity in the white society. Nevertheless, she leads the sophisticated life of the whites. Finally she decides to pursue her ambition as a portrait painter by attending an art class.

In the process of becoming “white,” Angela changes her name as Angéle Mory. Her transformation as a white begins with her change of name. Her deliberate passing helps her hide her true racial identity. She desires to fulfill her dream of amalgamating with the white society through her marriage with Roger Fielding, an affluent white man, who is “so gay, so beautiful, like a blond, glorious god, so overwhelming, so persistent” (130). She believes that if she marries a white man, she will have all the comforts and security in her life. Despite of

the fact that Roger wishes to spend time with Angela and Angela genuinely loves Roger, Roger seems quite uninterested in marrying a “colored” woman. In addition, Roger’s father wishes that his son should marry a pure white woman. Roger himself being a racist treats black customers arrogantly in the restaurant: “Roger came back, his face flushed, triumphant, ‘Well I put a spoke in the wheel of those ‘coons’! They forget themselves so quickly, coming in here spoiling white people’s appetites. I told the manager if they brought one of their damned suits I’d be responsible” (134). Conversely, his “racial arrogance” as aptly termed by DiAngelo in “White Fragility,” does not restrain Angela from being away from him and hence insists him to offer her a secured life instead of a free life.

Towards the end of the novel, Roger’s racist attitude drives Angela to loneliness, emotional estrangement, and seclusion. Meanwhile, she happens to meet Virginia in a railway station who comes to attend an interview in New York. During their meeting, Roger enters and Angela is not able to meet him face to face for she is hurt and experiences the pangs of separation. Her chaotic mindset does not approve her to deliberately accept her racial identity and hence she fails to acknowledge Virginia as her sister. This instance could be perceived as the conscious refusal of “a white Negro” (1) as Kennedy rightly claims her, to acknowledge her black community and racial identity. Roger’s vindictive racist attitude coerces Angela to return to Harlem. Virginia makes Angela understand the significance of Harlem, aids her to return to black culture, and eventually helps her acquire a true identity. Moreover, the agonizing experiences she has with Miss Powell, a colored woman who also participates in the art class and is denied the opportunity of receiving the award in the Art competition for the reason that she is colored, facilitate her reaching the final phase of her journey of transformation.

Likewise, her meeting with Anthony Cross a black, handsome man, who is also an art student, initiates an important phase in her life. Angela compares Roger with Anthony. She finds Anthony a romantic and a true feeling guy who couldnot offer her a luxurious life but definitely a loyal life. Anthony claims: "I'm so content to be with you, Angel. I may call you Angel, mayn't I? You are that to me, you know. Oh if you only knew how happy it makes me to be content, to be satisfied like this" (141). Angela compares her lonely life with the happy life of Virginia. Though brown skinned, Virginia leads her life successfully, peacefully, and satisfactorily. Angela changes her perceptions related to skin color for sheis reminded of her mulatto mother's sensible comprehension of life: "Life is more important than color" (268). Angela admits her mistake of disowning her racial identity and attempting to acquire a new one. Finally, Angela decides to marry Anthony and strictly adheres to the socio-cultural ethos of a black woman.

To sum up, Jessie Redmon Fauset skilfully highlights the trauma that Angela Murray undergoes while undertaking a journey of transformation from disowning her inherited black identity to acquiring a new identity as a white. In fact, passing as white gives excruciating pain to the colored people for they are not easily accepted and admitted by the whites as their fellow beings. Angela, who initially regards her fair skin as a blessing in disguise that would fetch her a life of heavenly pleasures, later comprehends the existential reality that passing permanently as white will not offer her the privileged life of the whites. She realizes the significance of her racial heritage, disowns her acquired 'new' identity, and eventually returns to Harlem as a "black" woman. Thus, Angela's journey of transformation finally ends in her being transformed into a "black" woman with an indomitable will acknowledging her racial origin and identity.

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