

(UN) Fitting: Revisiting Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

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ABSTRACT: The lives and literary productions of women of the Harlem Renaissance have been given attention through the works of Cheryl A Wall, Brent Hayes Edwards, T.Denean Sharpley-Whiting highlighting some key questions such as identity, sexuality and mobility of black women artists and writers of the movement. When analyzing the works of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, scholars tend to focus on passing, sexuality and mobility of the main characters. In this paper, I focus on Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun A Novel without a Moral* (1928) showing how they demonstrate the intersectionality (Crenshaw) of race, gender, and class. Larsen and Fauset present light skinned female characters whose skin tone provide an opportunity to get access to white privileges (life style, fashion, love stories...) and who are constantly looking to fit in but they end up getting caught by their pasts, their black heritage. In the search for happiness, a fulfilling life in the midst of racial inequalities, Helga Crane in *Quicksand* and Angela in *Plum Bun* end up in a vicious circle of feeling lonely, disconnected and depressed by the inequalities they face caused by the complexity of racial barriers. In doing so, Fauset and Larsen demonstrate the inner struggles that black women go through as they navigate racial inequalities.

Keywords: identity, intersectionality, passing, Harlem Renaissance

I. BACKGROUND

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Renaissance was a cultural, philosophical, and intellectual movement that gathered black artists and writers in Harlem between the end of World War I and the late 1930s. During those years, there was an artistic explosion with the publication of beautiful and daring photographs, books, essays, poems, drawings, music from many black artists. Ranging from already established artists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, to young new artists such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Bennett, Jessie Redmond Fauset, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay among others, the Harlem Renaissance focused on a development of topics related to the black experience. Black writers and artists created journals and magazines, including *Opportunity, A Journal of Negro Life*, first issued in 1923 by the National Urban League, with Charles S. Johnson as its editor, to fight against segregation. With the creation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) *The Crisis* magazine, Du Bois, the editor, and his team were writing about issues that black people experienced in America including exclusion, segregation, the need for a black elite to show the black community that it was possible to define themselves in a positive way with education, and self-determination. With the publications, performances that celebrate Blackness, some of the major questions that black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance were trying to answer include the following. How to render the complexities of social and racial norms as they navigate the inter war period? Why the choices of female characters and how to represent the struggles of being a woman of mixed race?

II. WOMEN OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Black women of the Harlem Renaissance have always been agents of change through their writings and narratives that challenge racism and sexism and the paradigms and discourses put in place to discriminate against them. Many scholars have written about the masculinist trajectory of the Harlem Renaissance and have put forward black women who contributed to the movement through publications, performances, and

storytelling (Edwards, Sharpley-Whiting, and Lewis). They demonstrated that Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Bennett, Jessie Redmond Fauset among other women of the Harlem Renaissance understood early on that the necessity to see and identify issues related to black experiences could help solve the problem of the twentieth century, which was racism and segregation. It is towards that goal that Jessie Fauset, as the literary editor of *The Crisis*, played a major role in supporting younger writers and artists. It can also be traced in the literary production of Fauset and Larsen as they wrote about issues regarding the experiences of black women and traveled internationally. They described black women who suffered from sexism and racism because white America has discriminated against them and has limited their freedom of movement, expressions and other forms of liberation. As they navigate a society painted in black and white and does not offer other possibilities, the main characters of Larsen and Fauset “pass” as white in order to access the society’s privileges exclusively reserved for white people. By doing so, they showcase two problems. Firstly, there is a lack of acceptance of their identities and secondly, they end up unfulfilled no matter their new status, privileges, and access.

III. JESSIE FAUCET AND NELLA LARSEN TRAJECTORIES

Jessie Redmond Fauset (1882-1961) was an American writer, editor and poet who grew up in poverty and many challenging experiences (the death of her father at a very young age) but successfully kept being a stellar student that excelled in her studies (Nava Atlas, 2018). Fauset has been given the title of “midwife of the Harlem Renaissance” by many critics and scholars such as Sheryl A. Wall and David Levering Lewis. She navigated the racial system in the US as a black woman and experienced the intersectionality of race and gender which Kimberlé Crenshaw defines as “a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects). This intersectionality makes it hard for women to carry the same fight as their male counterparts because black women suffer multiple layers of discrimination. First because they are black, then they are women and most of the time their class determines another layer of discrimination. When writing about black women’s journeys, Fauset “brings a folding chair” as Shirley Chisholm advises it to black women for their voices of to be heard. This is visible in her role as the literary editor of the magazine *Crisis* between 1919 to 1926, Fauset focused on celebrating and giving space and resources to young artists and writers, especially black women (Wall, 1995). In this position, Fauset reviewed many of their works and supported them for publications and the circulation of their writings.

Fauset published many books including *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (1928), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy, American Style* (1933). In her writings, Fauset thoroughly describes the life and experiences of black middle-class women which was not the status-quo during the Harlem Renaissance. In *Plum Bun* she tells the story of Angela through the lens of a light-skinned woman who navigate a racist society looking for acceptance and where she could fit in. Throughout the book, we witness Angela struggles with their identities due to social restrictions and racial borders. Angela is able to move on to a new life with more privileges as she passes for white but will be caught up by a cruel system that denies black women full liberation.

Nella Larsen (1891-1964) was an American novelist engaged in denouncing racism and gender discrimination in the American society by depicting the life and experiences of black women and women with multiple heritages as they navigate the intersectionality of gender and race in the US. She published two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). In *Quicksand* and how Larsen exposes the life and struggle of light skinned women who constantly struggle to fit in a racist society. We see how Helga moves from the South to Chicago to New York, to Denmark and to America again with a plan to return to Denmark later on. She is in constant movement in a world that does not create a just society in which she feels welcomed. Similar to Fauset, the sense of belonging, identity struggles and interracial themes are critical in Larsen’s work as she engages in the deconstruction of racism and racial inequalities implemented by a capitalist society and white supremacy.

Works of scholars like Barbara Christian on Larsen and Fauset have been crucial in understanding the racial dynamics in which they evolved. How their main characters, who are mainly of mixed race, struggle to get accepted or pass as white within their society and deny or hide their black heritage. Black women including Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen experienced and focused on both race relations and gender issues in their writings and lived experiences because in order to navigate the world, one needs to be rooted in their history and identity.

IV. IDENTITY STRUGGLES

In Fauset's *Plum Bun*, Angela Murray passes for white because of her light-skinned complexion while her sister, Virginia, who has a darker skin color accepts her black identity. Angela is aware of racial inequalities and finds that passing for white will get her access to privileges. Jessie Fauset, in the early pages of the book, focuses on Angela's awareness of inequalities due to race because "at a very early age she had observed that the good things of life are unevenly distributed; merit is not always rewarded; hard labor does not necessarily entail adequate recompense. (Fauset, 13). In the search for a better life and recognition, after the death of her parents, Angela moves to New York City where she makes white friends and becomes part of the elite. Fauset's representation of a female character that travels in search of acceptance is powerful in two ways. First, it raises the question of racism and sexism through Angela's experience and second it traces the impossibility for her to find peace and recognition. We can note that Fauset depicts women protagonists who evolve in a discriminatory environment that only celebrates those who look white. Whiteness is the door to success whereas a black heritage endangers one's socio-economic and political future. Through Angela's story, Fauset highlights the complex and precarious future for people of mixed race as they were so close to privilege depending on their skin color, but in many ways, so far away because their African ancestry complicates their lives and experiences.

Similarly, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) portrays the life of Helga Crane who tries to find freedom, equality and tranquility that seem impossible to obtain because of her race and gender. The first page of *Quicksand* opens with Helga sitting alone in her room to emphasize the loneliness of Helga, a mixed-raced woman growing up in a white step family. Larsen focuses on the struggle and anxiety that goes through the head of Helga Crane when she recalls what the preacher said about the Naxos Negroes having "good sense" and "good taste" because they knew what was expected of them and that if all the Negroes did the same then "there would be no race problem" (Larsen, 5). The reader gets the sense of how aware and engaging Helga is on the themes and experiences of black people. Unlike Angela, Helga has been more invested in understanding female sexuality and the seductive role that a woman can play in a society as discussed in Lynn Domina's *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Exploration of Literature 2015* when she writes "*Quicksand* critiques gender roles more overtly than it does racial identity" (Domina, 125). It is also important to note that the early pages set up the personality of Helga as being a smart and strong girl in the quest of tranquility, freedom and happiness. Tranquility, freedom, belonging that she cannot find anywhere (Chicago, Harlem, Denmark,) constantly questioning and feeling unsatisfied with her companionship with whites or blacks or her role as a wife and a mother. Similar to Fauset's protagonist, traveling, the quest for tranquility, transcending race, gender and sexuality, have failed for Helga; she suffers from depression, loneliness, and deception.

V. TO WHAT END?

Both Angela Murray and Helga Crane, have taken advantage of their physical appearance, light skin, to pass as white, navigate the society and transcend binaries. In doing so, they demonstrate a lot of independence and autonomy. However, the mobility they were able to have comes with a lack of acceptance and integration. For Angela, the awakening moment happened when she failed to achieve full acceptance and happiness and realized that her sister, who accepted her heritage and identity, seems to have a happier and more settled life. Similarly, Helga Crane struggles to fit in in all the places she finds herself, there seems to be something missing. Both authors demonstrate that in the search of tranquility, freedom and happiness, both Angela Murray in *Plum Bun* and Helga Crane in *Quicksand* find loneliness, depression and deception; they can't fit in and they develop a feeling of unrest in the society. Fauset and Larsen have both demonstrated that the discourses and paradigms in America have excluded black women and women with multiple heritages and this creates for them constant struggles to fit in and have a fulfilling life.

Notes:

1. Cheryl A Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* extensively discusses Jessie Fauset's trajectory from being young to going to school, traveling and getting degrees, her role in the *Crisis*, *the Brownies Book*, her novels and essays, her feminist endeavors in the *crisis* and *the brownies book*. Wall's goals are: 1) "to chart the journeys of the women of the Harlem Renaissance, those who succeeded in their artistic quests and some of those who did not. 2) To examine both the journeys they traveled to create their literary texts and the journeys those texts depict" because "the subjects of this study are women of words and music" (xv). She notes that when Larsen turned into fiction "expectations of what she as a black woman would write were rigidly defined (Wall, 94).

2. Elizabeth Way has discussed passing and fashion in the works of Larsen and Fauset in her article "Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance: Fashion in the Novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen."

3. Not finding fulfillment as she moves to places, and transcends hierarchies but still cannot obtain full acceptance, full recognition of her identity and integration. It feels like she is torn between two worlds; a world that has put in place a violent separation between races, it is either black or white...and nothing in between. Suzanne Césaire has also discussed this in her essays in *les Tropiques*. See Sall, Korika. [negritude feminisms](#)

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