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# "BY THEIR FRUITS YE SHALL KNOW THEM": CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN JESSIE REDMON FAUSET'S *THERE IS CONFUSION*

"Onları Verdikleri Meyvelerden Tanırsınız": Jessie Redmon Fauset'in *There Is Confusion* Adlı Romanında Sınıf Bilinci

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore class consciousness related to social milieu in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924). The concept of class consciousness is among the most popular themes for writers dealing with the oppressed groups seen as the other in the society they live; thus many African American writers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century approach it not only as a phenomenon between the white and black sides of the country but also as one among the members of the black community. Fauset, with mostly middle class and also working class representations of urban black life, studies the urban blacks' place in the class/society composition in that period. She delineates concepts of science, religion and economics of marriage related to tensions of class consciousness.

In the study, while the traces of class consciousness and the effects of it on human relations are followed, the pursuit of class ascent is also purported.

Key Words: Jessie Redmon Fauset, There is Confusion, class consciousness, capitalism, urban.

### ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Jessie Redmon Fauset'in *There is Confusion* (1924) adlı romanındaki toplumsal çevreyle ilgili olarak sınıf bilincini keşfetmektir. Sınıf bilinci kavramı, yaşadıkları toplumda öteki olarak görülen baskılanmış gruplar ile ilgilenen yazarlar için en popular konular arasında yer alır; bu nedenle 20. yüzyılın başlarında yaşayan pek çok Afro-Amerikan yazar bu konuya yalnızca ülkenin beyaz ve zenci tarafları arasında değil, aynı zamanda zenci toplumun üyeleri arasındaki bir olgu olarak da yaklaşırlar. Fauset, kentli zenci yaşamının çoğunlukla orta sınıf, ayrıca işçi sınıfı betimlemeleri ile kentli zencilerin o dönemde sınıf/toplum yapısındaki yerini inceler. Yazar, sınıf bilinci gerilimleriyle ilintili olarak bilim, din ve evliliğin ekonomik boyutu kavramlarını resmeder.

Çalışmada, bir yandan sınıf bilincinin izleri ve insan ilişkileri üzerindeki etkileri izlenirken, sınıfsal yükselme arayışı da gösterilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jessie Redmon Fauset, There is Confusion, smif bilinci, kapitalizm, kentli.

Jessie Redmon Fauset (1882-1961), one of the most powerful voices of the black literary world and an important figure in *The Harlem Renaissance* (1920-1930), wrote mainly at a time when African Americans were subject to the harsh prejudices of the white society -even after the Emancipation and Reconstruction- and when the feeling of 'otherness' in every field of their life was felt. Although the white Americans enjoyed the affluence of the 20s, the blacks did not. They had to face several narrowing practices against them; to remember, Jim Crow Laws and denial of qualified education, profession and life, in the larger sense. As a direct result of this social system, these exclusions and rising capitalism, an increasing economic gap between the black and the white

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communities came into existence increasing class consciousness in both societies; white community in general saw blacks inferior regardless of their income and the black community also adopted this consciousness within itself. Cast aside and left with no other choice, the black community tried to construct its own identity against this racial capitalism and values together with a desire for social equality based on the idea of Black Nationalism, which encourages blacks to be proud of their race at heart. It was also a time when the "New Negro" phenomenon made itself felt. The New Negroes were urban products of socio-political powers, searching for new images subverting established stereotypes but they faced social barriers. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., emphasizes this new self-esteem: "[t]hey regained a public voice, louder and more strident than it had been even during slavery" (Gates, 2013: 4). New Negroes were coming from middle-class and they had enough job opportunities and financial security. However, they also wished for equality in every aspect of their lives and for self-dignity and aimed at a new consensual relation to American society. Anthony Dawahare states black people's view of integration with the white American society: "[f]or most black writers in the interwar period, the desire to establish a black national identity and culture that coexists, however tenuously, with an American identity and culture, is of crucial importance" (Dawahare, 2003: xv).

Most of the black writers and the black people were eager to be united with the American society at that time but were seen as the racial outsider in their own country. Race determined automatically one's class. Whatever a black person's job or virtues are, s/he was regarded lower in terms of class. This made it difficult for blacks to find an upper place in the society. On the other hand, put aside integration with the white society, even their new community came out to be a microcosm of the wider society with rigid lines between the classes and with a class consciousness instilled in every single member of it including the children. Ironically, the class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie intrinsic to capitalist society was here in the middle of this new black community, too. As W.E.B. Du Bois confirms, "Between these two classes, there can be no peace ... the occupational differences of American Negroes show at least the beginnings of differentiation into capitalists and laborers" (Du Bois, 2005: 255).

This social situation led black people to feel 'otherness' within their own communities, being divided into classes. Unsurprisingly, this feeling went hand in hand with a general search for a new identity among the African American writers, Fauset being not an exception. In such an atmosphere, it is not surprising that she puts stress on the issue of class in her *There is Confusion* (1924), in which she traces the lives of characters who must face with an inheritance of racial prejudice and due to it class discrimination as they struggle for legitimacy and respect. She deals with class consciousness in her novels to such a degree that she might be thought as a conservative and even as a class snob. However, evaluating her as a classist by looking at the class system in her works may be deceptive, because the participants in *The New Negro Movement* cultivated a space which was manipulated by Black Nationalism and Marxism, and Fauset was in that vein (Onishi, 2007: 192). It can be argued that the idea behind her emphasis on class and pursuit of social status and professional life in her works is to provide some sort of encouragement for her folk, which is clearly supported by the fact that she was among the black intelligentsia who fought for the uplift and advancement of her race for most of her life.

The concepts of 'class' and 'class division' can be studied not only related to birth, but also in terms of economics. "the notion of race, in its popular manifestation, is an ideological construct and thus, above all, a historical product... At its core, class refers to a material circumstance: the inequality of human beings from the standpoint of social power" (Fields, 2013:150). So, for the black people at that time experiencing both of these social handicaps, struggle for class ascent seemed a lifesaver. The study of economics is indispensable in this context, because it is primarily based on the "superstructure" which includes any social institution from religion to science, and all together, these institutions have one common goal of supporting and keeping the dominant ideology, capitalism. In this respect, when the writers of the *Harlem Renaissance* during the Roaring 20s and their unceasing search for freedom, identity and a place within the white society is

taken into consideration, Fauset's emphasis on class issues, related not only to racial but also to economic terms in her works becomes more understandable.

The dangerous dimensions of the desire for power, the possibility of class advancement and class consciousness, which comes to scene in several different shapes like money, social status or sometimes even marriage, are among the topics handled meticulously all through the novel. It is significant that the setting is New York mostly before, partially during and after the World War I, a period in which capitalism made its peak and social construction of class became apparent in relation to capitalism. In addition, the relationship between the 'super-structure' and 'base-structure'; science, religion and marriage on the top, and economy under them made itself felt.

For a striking example on the importance of power, Fauset evaluates the relations between class and science. In a society where science and scientific materials are used to indicate one's level of cultivation and status, the distorted relationship between power and science comes into prominence. In a passage on Peter, the male protagonist of the novel, and his father Meriwether Bye, a man who sees the white community as enemy and believes that there is no need to work in a white-oriented society, she gives an example: "The books on medicine and anatomy had been well thumbed by Peter, too. Meriwether had received them from old Isaiah, his father, and had carried them around on his runs to impress his co-workers in the Pullman service" (Fauset: 1989, 35). Science here is perceived not an instrument for the advancement of humanity, but for social prestige and flaunting. For them the usage of scientific materials means belonging to upper classes. Far from using it for the good of humanity, Meriwether's purpose of carrying these books with him is nothing but show off.

Fauset does not content herself with the damaged relations between science and one's class; she goes on with the unnatural relationship between power and religion via Joel, who is a locally famous and successful caterer and the patriarch of the Marshall family: "[h]is material success, his position in the church, in the community at large and in the colored business world, - all these meant *power*" (11). Within these words, she easily clarifies that not only the material possession but also the social position are the determinants of power. At this point, Joel seems a direct product of the class-oriented society he lives in, which teaches one to sacrifice even religious values for the sake of power. Undoubtedly, the institution of church as an element of power contributes to the dominant ideology from the point of view of the people. In terms of power relations, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) 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, 2013).

Fauset in this way shows the function of institutions and the role of people, intentionally or unintentionally, in *sustaining* these institutions in a class-focused society. As a direct result of the American dream of success, this understanding of power influences all human relations with society to a great extent. This situation uncovers the reality that relations of power shape the ways in which people perceive themselves, others and their relations to them. Closely related to power, class lies at the center of the formation of black identity, too. This identity is far from a collective one that is proposed by the *Renaissance*. This is not surprising because the dominant ideology oppresses and silences people mentally and they unconsciously accept and maintain its values. By this way, Joel Marshall becomes one of the servants of class interests and he helps to hold, promote and continue wrong points of view.

Servitude for class advancement and sacrifice of any sacred value for it is not limited to him, though. His wife also employs religious activities as a show-off of power. In this context, even the

quality of what one wears becomes important and in some situations, the desire of being differentiated from other classes can come before one's religion. Fauset emphasizes this hypocrisy in a church scene: while talking about Mrs. Marshall on their Sunday visit to church, she clarifies that the aim of Mrs. Marshall has nothing to do with a religious act; it is rather a show off stage for her: "His wife found Sunday a rather distracting day. It was eminently satisfying, doubtless, to be able to show off such a number of stylish costumes" (71). The abuse of religion for the show of class and power is once more exhibited in this way. In fact, she is not a pious woman, and for her, religious activities are nothing but an excellent chance for proving her status.

Fauset employs the socioeconomic realities within the black community at that time as the determinants of concept of love and the institution of marriage. She shows that class consciousness and the desire to reach power may sometimes precede love when a person decides to marry. She explains that the reason why Maggie wants to come close with Philip Marshall, Joel's son who is a university student and has intellectual pursuits, is to obtain opportunity of a privileged class and power. The pleasure of being seen with him precedes pure love, as initially "[s]he had only yearned for respectability and comfort, and Philip represented such a convenient short cut to her heart's desire" (69). Maggie is not honest in her love, and her aim is to elevate herself in class stratification. Her flirtation with Neal is also not out of emotions, but because he has a nice car to give her an enjoyable driving. Later on, Maggie's intimacy with Peter will be of similar kind: this time the issue is not money, but Peter's physical appearance and name: "She was proud to have him there, he was so handsome and charming, but much more than that, so clearly a personage. She enjoyed being seen with him" (142). When Peter comes to her house and suggests helping her in cooking, she does not accept it saying "it is no man's job" just like a traditional woman, unconscious of her rights and the ideas of equality between the two genders. Her defective approaches toward men display how she is obsessed with class advancement and how she judges them, which is based on their social and physical outlook. She can relinquish from her gender rights and ideas of equality among genders imprudently for the sake of a marriage that will help her climb the social ladder.

The motto written on the Bible which was given to Joshua Bye and Belle Potter by their white owners Aaron and Dinah Bye on the occasion of their marriage has a quality of summarizing the whole thinking on class relations within the work: "By their fruits ye shall know them" (24). The statement expresses the opinion that a person is what s/he produces and what s/he has. Not only greed but also the ideas of consumerism of the capitalist ideology step in at this point. Classifying people according to their material possession and disregarding their inner qualities is what lies behind this motto, and under these circumstances it becomes the perfect microcosm of the class ideology in the text. First, Mrs. Marshall's aim of wearing nice clothes, then Meriwether's purpose in carrying the books on medicine with him and finally Maggie's underlying ideas on marriage are the sheer exemplifications of the soul of the motto: the possession of materials not for their 'use value' but for their 'sign-exchange value'. In this context, the commoditization of anything including religion, science and even people comes as a perfect theme in terms of class consciousness and power desire.

Fauset, by clarifying the relationship between the 'super' and 'base' structure, also tries to reflect the highly sharpened class consciousness within that society, that is based on class discrimination and where one's class and class consciousness becomes the first criteria in determining her/his relationship with other people around. Fauset gives the first example through the occasion when black Joshua, great-great father of Peter, unconsciously writes his name *under* the name of white landlord Aaron Bye which shows his awareness of inferiority. Joshua defines his position with comparison to the white owner: he accepts his inferiority as a black employee under the rule of a white employer. This acceptance can be handled from two different aspects: first, Joshua's color comes to front. As a black in a white society, he seems to be used to racial discrimination and class diversity just because of his color and he seems to take the situation as

something natural and normal. In understanding Fauset's point in this bitter concretion of 'internalized racism', Donna Bivens's following definition is of importance:

Internalized racism is the situation that occurs in a racist system when a racial group oppressed by racism supports the supremacy and dominance of the dominating group by maintaining or participating in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and ideologies that undergird the dominating group's power (Bivens: 2012).

Race automatically makes people feel their class at the same time, so as a black, poor and dependent employee under the control of a rich and independent employer, Joshua has learnt very well where to stand and he accepts that he is in lower position just because he owns less material success. This exemplification of class consciousness is of grand significance in understanding the soul of human relations all through the work. As the event tells, Joshua's class, as well as his color is determinant in his relation with others.

Maggie too, experiences division by class from an early age. For she also comes from working-class, being a laundress' daughter, she feels despised and all her efforts are directed to leading a comfortable life free from economic anxieties. She is greedy enough to sacrifice and disregard her true feelings and inner integrity in order not to live her mother's life. Her self-interested relationship with other people is based on nothing but class consciousness and this kind of relationship is unquestionably an unhealthy and harmful one for others. On the other hand, her sordid point of view to other people affects her relationship with herself, as well. As Pietro Chiodi argues, one cannot enter into an authentic relationship with herself/himself without having a real relationship with others (Chiodi, 1976: 128). They are only based on benefits, so it is unsurprising that she is not a balanced person psychologically and often makes wrong decisions, which is proved with the fact that she finally marries her first boyfriend, Philip, and her relationships with Neal and Peter are displayed as her defects based on her inexperience and her ambitious character.

In terms of individuals, there is evident class awareness within the black society, too. The class relations are made prominent through Philip's words to his sisters: "You might just as well hear this, too, Jan. I won't have you and Sylvia going about with a man like Henderson Neal. Maggie can go with men that my sisters can't afford to associate with" (70). As Fauset emphasizes through Philip's speech, the reason why Maggie can but Philip's sisters cannot go with a man like Henderson Neal is only the class difference between Maggie and them.

Later on, Joanna's protest of the probable relationship between Maggie and Philip is another striking example of this class consciousness. During a conversation with Brian Spencer, one of their friends, Joanna talks in the following way when Brian implies a relationship between Maggie and Philip: "She wouldn't dare, Why, Philip-he's going to be somebody great, wonderful, a Garibaldi, a Toussaint! And Maggie, Maggie's just a nobody, Brian..." (77-78) Joanna's point of view is humiliating and biased and does not tolerate any transference among classes. Here Joanna tries to make the relations of power unchangeable and keep them as they are, by which internalized class consciousness can be attributed to Joanna's personality. Nevertheless, Joanna does not content herself with these cruel words. The letter she writes to Maggie to make her give Philip up is one of the harshest manifestations of the class relations in the work:

I've often heard my mother say that only people of like position should marry each other, and I hardly think that would be true in the case of you and Philip...You can see that a girl of your lowly aims would only be a hindrance to him. Philip Marshall cannot marry a hair-dresser! (86-87)

Once again, the issue mentioned in the letter is unquestionably the reality that class consciousness is handed down from generation to generation, which confirms the claim that the family is the microcosm of the dominant system going on and serves that dominant ideology like any other institution of the community. To establish a new family will only be possible when it is founded on the premises of class structure, never to transgress its borders.

Class consciousness determines the characters' own choices for marriage, too. Maggie dreams of marriage first with Philip and then, having lost him, with Peter. In both cases, however, not love but her desire for class advancement is the basic motive. She can realize her inner power and real self only when she leaves her former selfishness and decides to have truthful relationships. It is crucial for Maggie to marry Philip, but she is able to achieve this only after awakening to her real identity and starting to have honest intentions towards people. Fauset underlines the reality that "She would stand on her two feet, Maggie Ellersley, serene, independent, self-reliant" (261). Maybe more cruel than the use of the materials, the abuse of the people are presented as the realities of the life that black people carry out without hesitation. They behave according to the necessities of the motto "By their fruits ye shall know them", having internalized it perfectly; for example with the character of Maggie and her relationships with first Philip and then Peter.

Though with different reasons, Joanna behaves in this parallel. Unlike Maggie, she is a beautiful, independent and self-determinant girl and pursues self-actualization through becoming a famous singer and dancer. She aims at transcending the obstacles against her race by working hard and following the successful black women before her. As a child she says to her father: "I will be great" (14). Determined from the time of her childhood, she is self-confident enough to believe that she can overcome her limitations of race, gender and class. She does not regard beauty important and is against the female black stereotypes. She seeks to be judged only in terms of her personality, her talents and what she achieves. Even when she was a young girl, Joanna completes her chores, but knows that she is capable of more in life: "Joanna never complained, either, yet she made up her mind early that as a woman she would never do this kind of work. Not that she despised it, she simply considered it labor lost for a person who like herself might be spending her time in more beautiful and more graceful activities" (17). Unlike her mother and Maggie, who can be regarded as traditional women stereotypes, she aims at economic freedom and autonomy. Although she is in love with Peter, she does not want to marry him till both of them finish their studies and gain financial security; until Peter, who has no ambition and desire for advancement, studies medicine and becomes a doctor and she achieves her goal of being a singer and dancer. In one of the occasions. Joanna's letter to Peter displays to what extent her class awareness interrupts her ideas on marriage: "What I think about this," [wrote Joanna, infuriated] "is that I don't want and won't have a husband who is just an ordinary strumming accompanist, playing one, two, three, one, two, three. Sometimes, Peter, I think you must be crazy" (145). Again, Joanna's following letter is in the same vein:

#### **"DEAR PETER:**

"No, I don't love you as you are. The man I marry must be a man worth while like my father or Philip. I couldn't stand the thought of spending my life with some one ordinary.

"But I want to love you, Peter. Write me soon and say you are going to get to work in earnest. Happy New Year. Sincerely" (165).

Her class perception dominates her emotions and her marriage will be based not upon pure love, but class and power. Unquestionably she is the heroine of the novel, yet as Wall states she is flawed by class snobbery (Wall, 1995: 67). Through the characters of Maggie and Joanna, the concept of marriage and relationship between a male and female become a matter of economics rather than a matter of mutual love, and this institution, too, is commodified. Fauset proves that in the urban black community at that time, economics and power are the bases and all other issues including human relations are seen unimportant and are regulated according to economic interests.

Fauset reflects the class consciousness also within the realm of children. In a conversation between white Meriwether, Aaron's son after whom Peter's father is named, and black Isaiah, on what they will become when they grow up, Meriwether's reaction is not only cruelty but also a reality of the system they live in: "Well, what could you be? Your father and your father's father were slaves. 'Course your father's free now but he's just a servant...So, I s'pose that's what you'll be, a good servant" (25-26). The family, by this way, is exhibited as the institution where the harsh

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rules of the society and the need of making class discriminations are instilled on the children, too. Fauset supports this idea more by showing that the basic reason why Miss Susan, Peter's aunt, urges little Peter to visit the Marshall household so often is their economic power; it is because they are "the sort of people her nephew ought to know" (51). Miss Susan wants Peter to aspire and be like Marshalls, and unfortunately the relationship among the small children, which is expected to be pure and childish, is also determined by the economics. Despite the change in time and generations, class diversity keeps its existence the same. Children, brought up according to the rules of dominant class understanding will in the future be classists, like Peter.

Class system survives even if time passes, and Fauset does not draw an optimistic picture for the black society then. On the other hand, she can be called an optimist about the future of the black society about change and betterment. She is an optimist in that she makes the marriages between Joanna and Peter, and Maggie and Philip possible. It is important that their marriages come true only when they leave their personal ambitions and illusions aside, and become selfintegrated people.

Near the end of the novel, Joanna Marshall gratefully accepts Peter Bye's offer of marriage, saying, "Why, nothing in the world is so hard to face as this problem of being colored in America. . . . But now that we have love, Peter, we have a pattern to guide us out of the confusion" (283). Here, the quotation shows that Joanna is now a mature, sensible and prudent woman. Peter echoes Joanna's thoughts when he says, "Yes, thank God, we've got Love. . . . But you're right, Joanna, it is frightful to see the havoc that this queer intangible bugaboo of color works among us" (284). Although they are of the same color, they allowed the class system to interfere with their personal relationship instead of supporting each other.

By this way, she emphasizes the fact that 'New Negroes' must overcome their personal prejudices and defects for gaining better conditions in their lives instead of ostracizing each other. Through the negative and positive features of her characters, Fauset draws an ideal picture of 'New Negro', who revises his values and questions herself/himself. In this context, Hazel Carby underlines the importance of solidarity within black community. She sees a clear necessity for white and black society to sink their differences and unite in a common society (Carby, 2000: 252). The period between 1920 and 1930 was seen as a chance by the black community in America for equality. Yet, their fight against racial issues alone would not be enough; they had to fight against 'class' and 'class consciousness' as well. Jessie Redmon Fauset, a mirror of the period, dealt with these issues extensively in her works, including There is Confusion. She satirizes class system, especially in the black society. She openly reflects how class consciousness and the desire for power may come before any value including religion, science and marriage and to what extent it can determine the human relations both within the realm of adults and children. Unfortunately, this class consciousness exists not only between the people from different colors but also between the ones belonging to the same race. She successfully shows how dangerous the situation can be when one's class consciousness and desire for power come before any humanistic value. For example, Maggie can at last become a self-sufficient character and marry Philip. In fact, it is Philip not Maggie who wants marriage in the end, which is a reversal of roles. Joanna is happy because she succeeds in subverting her class obsession by marrying Peter, and Philip is also satisfied because he is able to overcome his rigidity about classism and marry Maggie. Maggie is also capable of leaving her fixed beliefs behind and marries Philip. Fauset wants black people to change, and she shows that this change can only come with respect and understanding within the black society. Only when they are changed, they can make their own choices and be happy both individually and socially. A solid love can solve all the problems according to her, including race and status-quobased class. She, after all, is optimistic about black people's capability of transcending class confinement when they have permanent courage, desire and effort to actualize their dreams instead of being passive victims of the system.

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