Emasculation of Minority Communities in *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and *Nav Naslela Ganva*

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Though India and America are situated on diametrically opposite sides of the globe, the traumatic horror of Negro life in America and the atrocities inflicted on the untouchables in India have remarkable similarities. Blacks were brought to America from Africa, and the gulf between them and whites is wide. But the Dalits are racially indistinguishable from the rest of Indians. Their social ostracism, economic exploitation, traditional condemnation to low work are no less tormenting than those undergone by their 'black' counterparts in America.

Violence against black Americans is a recurring phenomenon to which every generation of black American writers is drawn. Some of the scenes of lynching portrayed by them are so specific that exact historical parallels can be found for them. In works with pre-emancipation settings, blacks are forced to watch the spectacle; in works with post-slavery settings, the black community slinks into various shanties as preparations are made for their inevitable death. Prior to 1860, blacks were not lynched so regularly in the ritualistic manner. And black American literature, in its early stage of development, focused more on slavery – the larger issue at that time – than on lynching. It is in the works of post-slavery settings that such treatments reach the level of a full-blown ritual. The freed blacks posed a greater threat to traditional white values than did slaves, thus forcing whites to go to greater lengths in reaffirming those values. Lynching decreased in a general way in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Now the consequences of interaction between black males and white females are sometimes hated by whites. In recent works black writers have been presenting lynching and burning scenes in symbolic language and multiple levels of interpretation.

Lynchings were frequently designed on 4 July to convey to blacks that they had no power, that their lives were their own only as long as whites were not in a whimsical mood to take them. Lynching became the final part of an emasculation that was carried out everyday in word or deed. If blacks dared to claim any privileges of manhood, whether sexual, economic, or political, they risked execution. This was true especially if a black man dared to show the ugliest – from the white male's point of view – part of his manhood by accosting a white woman. Blacks were lynched in a ritual manner for their offences such as daring to look at or speak to a white person, wearing fancy clothes, having too much education, slapping a white person, or killing a

white person. Accusation was equated with guilt – the law was irrelevant – and punishment ensued to restore the 'threatened' white society to its status of superiority. In this ritual of lynching and exorcising of blacks the crowd of whites became savages in their pursuit of a presumed black criminal. They usually exhibited a festive atmosphere by singing, donning their Sunday finery, and bringing food to the place of death. Women and children joined the men – women performing the duties of a white man's wife and children becoming initiated into the roles they would play in adulthood. Castration or mutilation of body parts usually accompanied the killing in addition to a gathering of trophies from the charred body. Sometimes the crowd lingered on to have its picture taken with the victim. Values, the status quo, and perpetuity were identified with whites, while insignificance and expendability were identified with blacks.

Untouchability in India is comparable in many respects to the discrimination against blacks in the USA. Contemporary Dalit plays are mostly written by socially, economically, politically and culturally deprived and disadvantaged people. Dalit theatre has been portraying the struggles, the daily problems, the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses. It is a demand for socio-economic justice. It arises out of the cry of protest from the insulted and the injured. Mulk Raj Anand observes:

> The outcastes are crying against deaf gods, questioning God Brahma Himself. And their despair asserts itself in ringing triumphs of throwing off the yoke.[1]

For centuries the untouchables and the shudras suffered from many kinds of religious, economic and social discrimination. They were neither allowed to study the sacred scriptures nor permitted to worship in the temples of caste Hindus. Even their touch was considered defiling. Hence, they were not allowed to draw water from tanks and wells of caste Hindus. They were forbidden to build houses of bricks, to use an umbrella or footwear. Their women were not allowed to cover their breasts. The punishment for any violation of the customary norms of behaviour used to be severe – from ostracism to decapitation. Manu says:

> [51] But the dwellings of 'Fierce' Untouchables and 'Dog-cookers' should be outside the village; they must use discarded bowls, and dogs and donkeys should be their wealth. [52] Their clothing should be in the clothes of the dead, and their food should be in broken dishes; their ornaments should be made of black iron, and they should wander constantly. [53] A man who carries out his duties should not seek contact with them; they should do business with one another and marry with those who are like them. [54] Their food, dependent upon others, should be given to them in a broken dish, and they should not walk about in villages and cities at night. [55] They may move about by day to

> do their work, recognizable by distinctive marks in accordance with the king's decrees; and they should carry out the corpses of people who have no relatives; this is a fixed rule. [56] By the king's command they should execute those condemned to death, always in accordance with the teachings, and they should take for themselves the clothing, beds, and ornaments of those condemned to death.[2]

James Baldwin's two plays, *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964) and *The Amen Corner* (1968), have their detractors as well as admirers. Significantly Baldwin is one of the few black playwrights to have had more than one production on Broadway. He was the recipient in 1964 of the Foreign Drama Critics Award. The title of the play *Blues for Mr. Charlie* is ironical, as Medrian the priest says, "You're Mister Charlie. All white men are Mister Charlie."[3] In this play Baldwin shows the consequences of being a black in America, consequences like alienation, despair, and rage.

Blues for Mr. Charlie is based on the case of Emmet Till, a black teenage youth from Chicago who was murdered in 1955 in Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman. The fifteen-year-old youth was not accused of attacking her physically but of whistling at or flirting with a white woman. His two white murderers were acquitted of the crime by an all-white jury, though one of the killers subsequently bragged about the act and recounted the details.

The play tells the story of Richard Henry, a black youth, who temporarily found success in the entertainment world in the North before drug addiction ended his career. When he returns home in the South, he is unwilling to relapse into the subordinate position required for blacks in his community. The play begins with Lyle picking up Richard's dead body and dropping him on the stage as though it were a sack. There is a rhythmic and ritualistic pattern in Lyle's opening speech:

> And may every nigger like this nigger end like this nigger – face down in the weeds! (p. 2)

In Act II when the two friends, Parnell and Lyle, are drinking in the store, Lyle repeats exactly the same words as quoted above on hearing the funeral song. The play begins and ends with Richard's murder presented on the stage in Act I and Act III. The representations of Richard's death on the stage and Lyle's utterances to end "every nigger" remind us of the rites of lynching in which white Americans seemed determined to eradicate the black 'beast' from their midst, except when he existed in the most servile, accommodationist, and helpful positions. In the ritualistic lynchings, blacks who could not be subsumed within the category of 'good niggers' were eliminated by lynching, burning, or other modes of killing. The atrocities inflicted by whites on blacks have been trenchantly put forth by Lorenzo in Act I:

> . . . that white man's God is white. It's that damn white God that's been lynching us and burning us and castrating us and raping our women and robbing us of everything that makes a man a man for all these hundreds of years. (p. 4)

Later Richard says to Mother Henry:

> I didn't want to come back here like a whipped dog. One whipped dog running to another whipped dog.

Richard says to Pete:

> They can rape and kill our women and we can't do nothing. But if we touch one of their dried-up, pale-assed women, we get our nuts cut off. (p. 25)

The above remarks of Lorenzo and Richard refer to the tradition of castration which suggests white men's efforts to wrest from blacks that symbol of manhood. Calvin Hernton offers an insight on the need among the whites to appropriate black male sexuality to themselves by castrating black men:

> Castration represents not only the destruction of the mythical monster, but also the partaking of that monster. It is a disguised form of worship, a primitive pornographic divination rite – and a kind of homosexualism in reverse. In taking the black man's genitals, the hooded men in white are amputating that portion of themselves which they secretly consider vile, filthy, and most of all, inadequate. At the same time castration is the acting out of the white man's guilt for not having sex with Negro women, and of the white man's hatred and envy of the Negro male's supposed relations with and appeal to white women. And finally, through the castration rite, white men hope to acquire grotesque powers they have assigned to the Negro phallus, which they symbolically extol by the act of destroying.[4]

The play *The Village Without a Face (Nav Nasalela Ganva)* by Avinash Dolus, published in *Nikaya* in 1977 and staged by Dalit Theatre, Aurangabad, represents the social injustice and atrocities inflicted on the Dalits in the post-independence period. Dolus's play portrays emasculation of Dalits and tells the story of a Dalit youth who perishes because he refuses to remain contented in the subordinate position required for the Dalit. He dares to claim his economic, social, and political rights and privileges. Like *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, *The Village Without a Face* also opens with a symbolic representation of the tragic theme. When the curtain rises, there is no one on the stage. Suddenly a few persons from among the audience rush onto the stage.

Holding their prey in their hands they indulge in an increasingly wild dance. After having attained a trance-like state, they exeunt carrying their prey. The Sutradhar comments that this wasn't merely a wild dance, that it was rather the play being played by human beings ever since the ancient days.

The characters in Dolus's play are types; they belong to the village Eran. The Sutradhar addresses some of these characters who are sitting in the midst of the audience, and he calls upon them to come to the stage and introduce themselves. they are the Mukhia (the village headman), the Patel, and the Mahars (the untouchables) of the village. The Sutradhar says that the untouchables have been slaves for many centuries and their mere touch defiles the earth. They are inauspicious and are ordained to be born as *chandals*, untouchables, because of the sins of their past lives. The Chorus sings:

> Deadly sin, deadly sin,
> We are the untouchables of the village,
> Our touch defiles,
> We are the Untouchables of Eran,
> We personify defilement![5]

The Village Without a Face tells the story of the untouchable Mahars who have shaken the age-old yoke of servitude. It is about their struggles for equal rights, including the right to education and the right to worship in the temple, and their struggle against scavenging and hauling dead animals. The protagonist of the play, Ramdas Nannavare, is an educated Dalit youth. He is the leader of the Dalits and won't say "Ram Ram," the salutation, because the legendary king Ram beheaded Shambhūk and banished Sita. The Dalits have assembled at the place where Ramdas is going to deliver a speech. In his impassioned speech Ramdas exhorts the Dalits to unite and to oppose untouchability. The Dalits should give up scavenging and shouldn't go around collecting the left-overs from the upper-caste people of the village. They have to struggle for their rights and fight social injustice, though this might mean poverty and hunger for them. He asks them not to cast their votes in favour of the upper-caste candidate in the forthcoming Gram Panchayat election. The meeting ends with the consensus that the Dalits will not cast their votes in favour of the upper-caste candidate. The Chorus sings:

> The village is terror-stricken,
> The people are trembling and hesitating.
> Incredible things are happening,
> The village is drowned in anxiety. (p. 158)

Richard, the black protagonist of *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, despises whites. He recalls the mysterious circumstances in which his mother died, and he believes that she did not die due to falling down the wet and slippery stairs of

the hotel as stated by Mother Henry. He believes that some white man pushed her down those steps:

> My mother fell down the steps of that damn White hotel? My mother was pushed – you remember yourself how them white bastards was always sniffing around my mother, always around her – because she was pretty and black! (pp. 20-21)

The day when his mother died he wished he had gone "through that damn white man's hotel and shot every son of a bitch in the place" (p. 20). He feels anguished at his utter helplessness and holds the view that "the only way the black man's going to get any power is to drive all the white men into the sea" (p. 21). He is filled with bitterness when he remembers his Mama's tragic death and the bygone days of his life that he spent in the jails:

> I'm going to remember everything – the jails I been in and the cops that beat me and how long a time I spent screaming and stinking in my own dirt, trying to break my habit. (p. 21)

However, we do not know the alleged crime of Richard for which he was prosecuted and sent to jail.

Richard boasts of white women whom he has known in New York. He says that he "got a whole gang of white chicks" (p. 25). He has been seducing white women and also taking money from them; because, as he states, "I want them to be sad" (p. 26). This reveals Richard's hatred and vengeful attitude towards whites. But the system in which he lives is programmed to destroy him for his manhood and for having sexual relations with white women.

At Papa D.'s juke joint when Richard is showing the photographs of white women to Negro students, Papa D. happens to come over. He, asking Richard to put the pictures away, goes back to the counter. The conversation which follows brings home to us that a black man runs the risk of being lynched if he keeps the photographs of white women:

> Richard: Ain't that a bitch. He's scared because I'm carrying around pictures of white girls. That's the trouble with niggers. They all scared of the man.
> Juanita: Well, I'm not scared of the man. But there's just no point in running around, asking –
> Pete: to be lynched. (p. 27)

But Richard is a rebel and would not accept the racial situation in American society in which Negroes are treated as worthless human beings and their position is like that of the servants of the whites. He has courage enough to enter into the store of Lyle, a white man, though Lorenzo warns him, "We don't trade in there. Come on –" But Richard replies spitefully:

> Oh! Is this the place? Hell, I'd like to get another look at the peckerwood, ain't going to give him but a dime. I want to get his face fixed in my mind, so there won't be no time wasted when the time comes, you dig? (p. 71)

He enters into the store, takes two Cokes, opens them, and subsequently picks a quarrel with Lyle and his wife Jo. When she tells him that the bill is twenty cents, Richard sharply retorts:

> *Twenty cents?* All right. Don't you know how to say please? All the women I know say please – of course, they ain't as pretty as you. I ain't got twenty cents, ma'am. All I got is – twenty dollars! (p. 72)

This leads to a struggle between the two men in which Richard knocks Lyle down. Lorenzo tells Lyle, "You just ain't no match for – a boy. Not without your gun you ain't" (p. 74). For days, Richard keeps laughing at Lyle wherever he goes. So that Lyle decides to kill him. Lyle is also against Richard for his never saying "sir to a white man" (p. 119). Though Richard is facing Lyle's gun, he refuses to apologise. Richard says that the "[o]nly person I ever said sir to was my Daddy" (p. 119). When shot by Lyle, Richard's last words are:

> Why have you spent so much time trying to kill me? Why are you always trying to cut off my cock? You worried about it? Why?
> *(Lyle shoots again)*
> Okay. Okay. Okay, keep your old lady home, you hear? Don't let her near no nigger. She might get to like it, too. Wow!
> *(Richard falls)*
> Juanita! Daddy! Mama! (p. 120)

Though Ramdas Nannavara is a social rebel, he rebels against the subservient position allotted to the Dalits in a peaceful manner. He is not revengeful like Richard. In the village the cow of Kulkarni has died and the Patel wants that it be hauled by the Mahars of the village. But the Dalits have abandoned the unclean profession. The dead cow has been decomposing and stinking obnoxiously for the last three days. This is considered a violation of the traditional norms and a challenge to the authority of the Patel by the Mahars. The dead cow gets hauled by the upper-caste people including the Patel and the Mukhia. They are contemplating that Ramdas, the leader of the Dalits and the prime force of the revolutionary spirit, should be eliminated. But the Mukhia and the Patel decide to wait until the Panchayat elections are over.

In the forthcoming elections Ramdas is a contestant and the rival of the Mukhia. The upper-caste people are filled with revenge, because the Dalits

are no longer humble or subservient. The Dalits know that Ramdas may not be elected but they support him to further the cause of democracy. The Mukhia and the Patel win the elections, yet they continue to despise Ramdas because he has instilled the love of democracy into the minds of the Dalits.

The upper-caste people of the village are now looking for an opportunity to get rid of Ramdas. An epidemic breaks out in the village, and the people are dying of cholera one after another. The Mukhia invites the priest of goddess Kali to banish the evil spirit from the village. Various items such as lemons and coconuts are placed before him for the performance of the ritual. The priest begins the ritual and he is possessed by the spirit of Kali. He enters into a state of trance and makes wild movements:

> The Mukhia: Mother! The people are dying in the village.
> The Priest: I know.
> The Mukhia: Help us, if we have sinned unknowingly.
> The Priest: The people of the village have become dishonest.
> The Mukhia: Pardon us now. In the next fare we will have twelve chariots, seated with your idols, pulled by the devotees.

The priest, in a state of trance, says that he has to clear the way and eradicate the root cause of the evil. He further says that someone has buried a lemon as a device of witchcraft somewhere in the eastern border of the village. Hence, the people are dying of the epidemic, and no one in the village would survive:

> The Priest: in the east of the village beyond the boundary of the village – barring the first four houses – the fifth one ....
> A Villager: Give us some clue.
> The Priest: He is an opponent of the Mukhia, Anna.
> (The villagers begin their whisper – they are communicating through gestures)
> The Patel: What is the solution?
> The Priest: Will you have twelve chariots pulled in the fair by the devotees?
> All: Yes, Mother.... We will pull the chariots.
> The Priest: You will have to sacrifice.
> The Mukhia: We will sacrifice. Shall we sacrifice the one having two legs or four legs?
> The Priest: Two legs.
> The Patel: A cock.
> The Priest: Not a cock. (pp. 170-1)

The priest gets into a fit of rage; the villagers are shouting dreadfully. They rush towards the colony of the untouchables. Ramdas is brought forcibly in front of the temple for his trial by the village Panchayat. The Patel,

the Mukhia, and the Priest accuse him of practising witchcraft and sorcery for the annihilation of the village. The villagers beat him and the Priest threatens that the wrath of Mother Kali will fall on Ramdas if the lemon, which is used as a device of witchcraft, is not taken out. The villagers are shouting and laughing frantically. They blame Ramdas for the outbreak of the epidemic which has taken away the lives of many of their friends and relatives. The Patel orders the villagers to strip Ramdas of his clothes. The villagers get into an orgy and the whole sky reverberates with "Ma Bhavani ki Jai." Ramdas tries to run away, but the mob pulls him down and strips him of his clothes. The Patel orders to perform the rites of sacrifice. Loud cries of the youth rend the air. The mob holds him very tightly. The villagers burn incense to worship and perform the sacrificial rites. At the instance of the Patel and the Mukhia, someone from the mob pulls and severs the hands of Ramdas, one after another. Ramdas screams loudly but the people, in a frenzy, are chanting the name of Mother Kali. The Patel now instigates the mob to pull Ramdas's legs apart and sever them. The legs are plucked and his phallus is cut; he lies like a corpse. Ramdas's wife comes along with her children and beseeches the people to be merciful, but they kick her. She, bending over her husband, weeps bitterly. The mob, in an orgy, exeunts carrying Ramdas's corpse.

In *The Village Without a Face* the ritual of sacrifice followed by Ramdas's castration suggests the efforts of the upper-caste people to wrest the Dalit of the symbol of manhood. *In Blues for Mr. Charlie* Lyle Britten, the white antagonist, represents the white society to which he himself belongs. He is really hard on blacks. He kills Richard because according to him Richard is "too full of himself" and that he thinks of himself as though "he was white" (p. 118):

> I had to kill him then. I'm a white man! Can't nobody talk that way to me! I had to go and get my pick-up truck and load him in it –I had to carry him on my back – and carry him out to the high weeds. And I dumped him in the weeds, face down. And then I come on home, to my good Jo here. (p. 120)

Lyle Britten is acquitted, however, because Jo Britten states on oath in the court that Richard said all kinds of dirty things to her and tried to assault her:

> He acted like he was drunk or crazy or maybe he was under the influence of that dope. I never knew nobody to be drunk and act like him. His eyes was just glowing and he acted like he had a fire in his belly. (pp. 83-4)

She further states:

> I – I gave him two Cokes, and he – tried to grab my hands and pull me to

> him, and I – I – he pushed himself up against me, real close and hard – and, oh, he was just like an animal, I could – smell him! And he tried to kiss me, he kept whispering these awful, filthy things and I got scared, I yelled for Lyle! (p. 84)

Her lie works because of the myth of white female's innocence and goddess-like status violated by the black brute who pursues her with chimeric threats. Her connivance in the murder is symbolic of the duty of a white man's wife in the lynching and exorcising rituals. There is cheering in Whitetown and silence in Blacktown when Lyle, the defendant, is declared not guilty by the Court. "The stage is taken over by Reporters, Photographers, Witnesses, Townspeople" (p. 116).

Both *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and *The Village Without a Face* evoke a sense of helplessness, depression and gloom for the minority communities. But they end on a note of inextinguishable revolutionary spirit simmering within. In Baldwin's play, Medrian is of the view that blacks themselves must change and arm themselves against whites:

> You know for us, it all began with the Bible and the gun. Maybe it will end with the Bible and the gun. (p. 120)

In Dolus's play Ramdas's wife faints when the mob kills him and carries away the body. But Ramdas's younger child, who was earlier horror-stricken, is now filled with rage. The child's raising his fist in anger signifies that though Ramdas is dead, the invincible revolutionary spirit is still simmering.

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