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OPPRESSION, LITERATURE AND DIFFERING POINTS OF VIEW

Why did the Black-American writers and the Dalit writers in India feel the need to establish their own literatures – Black American Literature and Dalit Literature – thereby destroying the myth of the universality of literature? Their answer would, perhaps, be that they find the dominant literary tradition alien to their experience of life. They find it alien because the imagery and symbolism created and used by the oppressive community cannot be totally unbiased. In fact, the Black Aestheticians feel that these created images indirectly shape the reality for the Blacks. Carolyn F. Gerald raises this issue in the essay, "The Black Writer and His Roles:"

Why is image so central to a man's self-definition? Because all images, and especially created images represent a certain way of focussing on the world outside and therefore they represent a certain point of view. Now if we hold a certain point of view, we have automatically emphasized some aspects of reality, blocked out others, and glossed over the rest, and the image which we project or which we perceive is not objective reality but our own – or someone else's – reshaping of reality.¹

Thus, while rejecting the images created by the community of the White writers, the Blacks are actually rejecting the point of view of the White society. An extension of the above statement will be that a White writer, however sympathetic she/he may be, cannot give a true representation of the experience of the Black community. Similarly, a non-Dalit writer in India, however sincere in her/his attempts, cannot do justice to her/his representation of the life of the Dalits. In this context, it would be interesting to put together four novels which deal with individual communities that are undergoing oppression in society because of their

1: Carolyn F. Gerald, "The Black Writer and His Roles." *Black Aesthetics*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), p.371.

race/caste. I would like to discuss Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* along with Shivaram Karanth's Kannada novel, *Chomana Dudi*. In both, the writers are outside the community about which they write. Harriet Beecher Stowe is a White woman writing about a Black slave, Tom, and Shivaram Karanth is a Brahmin writing about an outcaste, Choma. In a similar fashion, there will be a discussion of Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, and Devanoor Mahadeva's short novel *Odalala*. Ellison is a contemporary Black-American writer and critic while Devanoor Mahadeva is a well-known Kannada Dalit writer.

Although, historically, a Stowe writing during the pre-Civil War days is similar to a Karanth writing during the pre-Independence days, they adopt different techniques of narration. Both the novels arouse our sympathy, or rather, pity, for the exploited community. Stowe intentionally uses such strategies as melodrama and sensationalism in order to whip up our emotions. It is a direct appeal to the ladies and gentlemen of her country, especially of the Southern States, to destroy the institution of slavery which had legal, social and religious consent. The logic and rationale for the novelist's arguments are derived from a moral and highly "Christian" sensibility. The law which has allowed the tradition of slavery to continue and which has made the life of a slave uncertain is attacked by her:

So long as the law considers all these human beings with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many things belonging to the master . . . so long as the failure or misfortune, or imprudence or death of the kindest owner may cause them any day to exchange a life of kind protection and indulgence for one of hopeless misery and toil . . . so long it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best regulated administration of slavery.²

However sincere her wish to consider slaves as human beings, these remarks raise certain awkward questions. While she is concerned about the possibility of an uncertain life for the slave under a cruel master, "kind protection and indulgence" of a good master cannot be equated with freedom. It looks as though Stowe would not have minded a system where the slaves were well-fed and well taken care of. The

2. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (Orig. 1852, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1981), p. 8.

readers are not asked to sympathize with Tom and the other slaves when they are in the house of the good Master Shelby. They are only asked to think kindly about the slave who has been sold to a ruthless master. Even the revolutionary George does not think of protest or escape until he is faced with violent objections from his master's side; nor does his wife Eliza make an attempt to flee from the bonds of slavery until she learns about the sale of her son. The point here is not whether there would have been any probability of their doing so; it is that Stowe does not think of such a possibility anywhere.

In her earnest desire to prove to the readers that the slaves are not things but "human beings with beating hearts and living affections," the novelist forgets that slaves are neither saints and godly people, nor docile and humble human beings. Tom is portrayed as a "Christ-like" figure who bears the burden of others on his shoulders. In the name of selflessness and Christianity, Tom is made to accept suffering unnecessarily. The author seems to have a limited understanding of the Christ-like qualities. She does not wish to think of the angry Christ in the temple at Jerusalem. She cannot conceive of the fact that anger, protest and disappointment are genuine feelings under the circumstances wherein we find Tom. There is a desire within Tom to be free; but when he realizes that it is difficult to attain freedom he consoles himself with the thought of the Eternal freedom. The policy of Stowe, seems to be that the Negroes should "bear with" the unbearable reality till they reach that other world where every soul would be happy and comfortable.

However, an alternative to the "confiding and humble simplicity"³ of Tom is suggested in the character of George Harris, a mulatto. George is educated, intelligent and more important, can pass for a White man. He is blessed with an adventurous spirit which brings him to Canada, the land of freedom. While Tom goes deep into the South, George moves in the other direction. Thus freedom, as opposed to a life of misery, is unattainable to Tom. Or is Stowe suggesting that unless the heritage of the Black is bettered by miscegenation, they cannot aspire for a free life?

Stowe's Tom is, thus, more of an illustration of her point of view than a genuine human figure. She has simplified some aspects of the

3. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 21.

life of a slave, while grossly exaggerating some others. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a propaganda, a vehement argument against the cruelty involved in the institution of slavery. Unlike Stowe, Karanth has not taken upon himself the task of arguing out a case for the Mari Holeyas, one sect of the outcastes, in his novel in Kannada, *Chomana Dudi*. There is only a note of introduction in his Preface to the novel:

The Mari Holeyas have to live by eating the left-over food, by eating the carcasses of cattle or by some other humiliating means. There are people who say even their shadows should not be touched . . . Choma belongs to such a community. The rest is described in the novel itself.⁴

By creating a human Choma, by making us experience the hopes, ambitions, disillusion and misery of this Choma, Karanth makes us get glimpses of the society to which Choma belongs. Unlike the narrator of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there are very few occasions here where the narrator overtly asks us to sympathize with Choma.

In the beginning of the novel we see a relatively happy Choma who is quite pleased with his family. But very soon we realise that it is Choma's life ambition to possess a piece of land which he can call his own. It is in his desire to be "free" in this manner that Choma differs drastically from Stowe's Tome. Choma is not typical of his community: he is an individual who has been given thoughts and ideas which are considered unusual for people of his community. Choma is caught in a vicious circle where both economic and social factors are unfavourable to him. However, Choma is capable of jealousy, anger and hatred. He dares to feel resentment when he is not given a piece of the arid land which his master Sankappayya possesses:

In front of Sankappayya, he wore a smiling face. But within, he is bitterly jealous – jealous of the entire community of farmers in the village. There can only be one reason for his jealousy. He is jealous of them for making him a bonded labourer, while

4. Shivaram Karanth, "Preface," *Chomana Dudi* (1933; Bangalore: Rajalakshmi Prakashana, 1982), p. 3.

This passage from *Chomana Dudi* and the subsequent Kannada passages referred to in this essay are my own translations from the original novel/critical works as the case may be. The page numbers refer to the original Kannada editions.

they own their own fields. He does not know what heavenly pleasures the fields hold for others. Heaven or hell, why shouldn't he get a piece of land?⁵

The tragic events which occur in Choma's life – there are too many of them – are all connected with this desire of Choma. Choma could have cleared his debts by selling his oxen and thereby he could have saved his sons and daughters. In this regard, one could argue that Choma's miseries are self-created. But Choma is denied a piece of land by Sankappayya because he is a Holeya. Tradition considers it "presumptuous"⁶ of a Holeya to have this kind of a desire. Instead of accepting his lot, Choma refuses to sell the oxen and makes them useless for life by breaking their legs. Sankappayya is a sympathetic master who does not have the courage to break the barriers present in the traditional society. In an interview, the novelist Karanth makes some interesting observations regarding the nature of Sankappayya:

... there is one person responsible for Choma's desire not being fulfilled. But that does not make him a villain. All of us are children of tradition. Choma's wish to own a piece of land is something which defies tradition. This is a revolutionary wish. It is natural for the landlord to get the feeling that he cannot do what others before him have not attempted to do, notwithstanding a sympathetic feeling towards Choma. We too would have been the same if we had been brought up that way. It is a different matter to talk about revolution separately and to realise how we would think were we to be bound by a particular kind of traditional setup.⁷

There is an element of commonsensical truth in what Karanth says. There is also an element of helpless resignation which almost verges on indifference. Having created a sensitive Choma who asks questions about his rights, Karanth seems to have come to a dead-end. A disillusioned Choma finds respite in the company of his drum and in his

5. Karanth, *Chomana Dudi*, p. 46.

6. Karanth, *Chomana Dudi*, p. 27.

When Sankappayya's mother overhears Choma requesting a piece of land, she mutters, "How presumptuous have these Holiyas become!" For Sankappayya, his mother is the embodiment of tradition which he dare not overlook.

7. Karanth, "Karanth: Interview," by U.R. Ananthamurthy, *Samakshama*, ed. U.R. Ananthamurthy (Mysore : Ananya Prakashana, 1980), p. 60.

glass of arrack. The monotonous notes of the "dudi" or the drum perform an almost choric function. The image has been very sensitively used to denote the various phases of Choma's anguish. Karanth seems to have a glimpse of that aspect of the life of an exploited community – an aspect which draws strength from the creativity hidden in its folk tradition.

Even though Karanth has not openly asked his readers to be sympathetic towards Choma, the omniscient narrator peeps in here and there and subtly asks us to look at Choma sympathetically. This narrator also suggests that drinking arrack is an accepted habit for Choma and for his community. It only helps in reducing the extent of miseries they face in their lives:

The sleeping Sankappayya was aroused from his sleep because of the sound of the drum. He had already heard about the death of Chaniya. He was surprised to hear the sound of the drum that same day. "My goodness, what a monster he is! The 'dudi' has no sense of time or occasion. His son died today. Even then he has to beat his 'dudi'. He must have had arrack upto his nose," the master said. Yes, that night Choma had more than that. Where else can he drown his suffering?⁸

Is Karanth romanticising the issue by asking such a question? Has Karanth's status of being an outsider made him wary of criticising the evils of this society? Our doubts regarding the novelist's ability to portray the life of a Dalit "authentically" are further strengthened when we realize that Karanth's Choma speaks chaste Kannada.

Moreover, Karanth makes quite a number of tragic events occur in the life of Choma in order to stress his point that he is in a very unfortunate situation. He has had to resort to the use of stereotypes in order to make Choma's life very tragic. Throughout the novel Choma has refused the temptation to accept an alien religion – Christianity – which would willingly fulfil his heart's desire. His distrust of Christianity has worsened because his son is "lost" to Christianity, and his daughter Belli's moral degradation is caused by the lecherous Manuel and Mingel. It is true that Karanth has avoided creating a sentimental melodrama while writing the story of Choma. Yet, by romanticising Choma, by

8. Karanth, *Chomana Dudi*, p. 71.

presenting a "too tragic" story, by making use of cliches and stereotypes, Karanth has gone out of his way in showing his sympathy for this oppressed community.

It is exactly this kind of sympathy that the Black-American writers and the Dalit writers are rejecting today. They do not need any one taking up their cause. According to them, asking for sympathy and protesting to a body of readers is tantamount to an acceptance of the belief that they are inferior to the exploiting community. They have passed the stage where they needed to express their protest, anger, frustration and hatred through literature. It has not been easy for the Black American writers and the Dalit writers to refuse to write what they are "supposed to" write:

... I found the greatest difficulty for a Negro writer was the problem of revealing what he truly felt, rather than serving up what Negroes were supposed to feel and were encouraged to feel. And linked to this was the difficulty based on our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which give Negro American life its sense of wholeness and which render it bearable and human, and when measured by our own terms desirable.⁹

If one were to search for overt protest as in the case of many Black American writers and militant Dalit writers, there is not much of it in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Mahadeva's *Odalala*. There is an affirmation of faith, though, an affirmation which makes them trust their heritage. They have faith in the "attitudes" and "values" which have given their writings a "sense of wholeness." These "attitudes and values" are recorded in the folklore, folk tales and other forms of the oral traditions of these exploited communities. In fact, *Invisible Man* is the story of a Black Man who goes through a series of reformatory experiences which ultimately bring about in him self-realization.

The novel deals with the nightmarish experiences of an individual who is an anonymous protagonist. The novelist has made use of the

9. Ralph Ellison. "Introduction," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1964), p. xxi.

technique of first-person narration which is actually in the form of a flashback. The constant aimless running of the protagonist, thwarted at moments by different incidents, finally comes to an end with his falling into a pit. This last incident marks the beginning of his role as the narrator of the story. In fact, this act of narration makes him a different human being. However personal the tone of narration may be, our attention is caught by the anonymity of this human being who is a non-entity in the world – "people refuse to see him."¹⁰ The reader is prepared for this encounter by the title which lacks the definite article. However, towards the end – when he asks, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"¹¹ – there is a clear leaning towards universality rather than anonymity. "He is an Everyman without a name."¹² From the state of invisibility conferred upon him by people, by situation, he attains a stage of affirmation of his Blackness, of his invisibility and transcends it by becoming an Everyman.

This realization of what it means to be a Blackman is dramatized through the person of invisible man. He is said to be representing "in symbolic form, the overall historical experience of the most politically active element of the American Negro people."¹³ In addition to this historical perspective, the novelist also suggests that the concept of the ideal Black man differs from person to person. Bledsoe, the Black educationist wants him to be a liar in the white world; Norton the White Philanthropist views him as a member of a race which stands for instincts and primeval desires – he takes vicarious pleasure in those instincts and desires; Ras, the militant Black leader considers him as impotent if he cannot support Black nationalism; Jack the propogator of Brotherhood principles identifies his political potential and wants to exploit this for the furtherance of his theories; many mistake him to be Rinehart the "protean" who evades being identified. As long as he agrees to live his life within these limiting dimensions, he is assured of help and sympathy.

10. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1947; (New York: Random House, Inc., 1962), p. 7.

11. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 503.

12. Jerry Bryant, "Wright, Ellison, Baldwin: Exorcising the Demon," *Phylon* (June 1976), p. 180; Excerpt published by U.S. International Communication Agency, American Centre, New Delhi.

13. Richard Kostelanetz, "The Politics of Ellison's Booker: *Invisible Man* as Symbolic History," *A Case Book on Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (New York: Crowell, 1972), p. 281.

The protagonist does not really make any conscious effort to realize what it means to be a Blackman. Yet, each of the shocking incidents that he encounters in life leaves him a wiser human being. The first part of the novel shows the student who cannot accept the life-sustaining elements in the folk-tradition of his community. The "blues" of Jim Trueblood, whose unintentional incestuous relationship has brought vicarious pleasure to Norton, the White philanthropist, bring to his mind only those memories associated with humiliation, indignation and a sense of resentment for being born in that community. The question which shakes his apathy—"Why you trying to deny me?"¹⁴—comes from a cranky man, who sings the blues. It is only when he realizes the treachery of Bledsoe after his expulsion from the school that he tries to find the meaning of the jingle with which he was familiar:

What was the who-what-when-why-where of poor old Robin?
What had he done and who had tied him and why had they
plucked him and why had we sung of his fate?¹⁵

The accident in the paint factory makes him pass through a death and rebirth experience. It is during this crisis created by a loss of memory that he tries to retrieve his identity through Buckeye the Rabbit, a familiar figure in the oral tradition of the community. He gradually takes cognizance of the bond that exists between the community and its folk tradition. In the eviction scene, where the old couple is thrown out of the house, their "free papers" and the junk act as cognitive elements which force him to identify himself with the community:

I turned and stared again at the jumble, no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly around a corner into the dark, far away-and-long-ago, *not so much of my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home.*¹⁶
(emphasis mine)

This realization of his shared ancestry is a further step towards the acceptance of his Blackness; and the immediate result of this awareness is a speech which is not really free of rhetoric. This weakness is seized

14. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 153.

15. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 170.

16. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 237.

by Brother Jack of the Brotherhood Organization who traps him through his so-called scientific principles "for a better world for all people."¹⁷ The Brotherhood momentarily makes him forget that there can be no denial of history. The fact that they were once slaves, cannot be overlooked. It is finally at Tod Clifton's funeral that a 'spiritual' touches a chord in the narrator's heart which vibrates in resonance with the spiritual:

It was not the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it was as though he'd changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above, now deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name.¹⁸

Finally, in the last part of the novel, many options are thrown open for the protagonist; he can choose to be a Tod Clifton who has the courage to plunge outside history or to be a Rinehart—an imposter of sorts. He can follow the advice of Bledsoe and his grandfather and "yes"¹⁹ the Whiteman to death, and also be a Ras with extreme nationalism. Staying hidden inside the coal pit is also a part of Rhinehartism, but the act of narration releases him from the clutches of this feeling. Beginning with Louis Armstrong's "What did I do / To be so black / And blue?"²⁰ in a self-pitying manner, the realization of his invisibility gets modified when he ultimately sings, "Open the window and let the foul air out" and "It was good green corn before the harvest."²¹

Invisible Man's narration comes to an end on a positive note, with an affirmation. As an individual, he seems to have resolved the problem of his invisibility by recognizing the life-giving forces of the community. In this regard, one can draw a parallel between Ellison's novel and his explanation of the 'Blues-phenomenon.'

17. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 264.

18. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 392.

19. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, pp. 19-20.

This is the advice given by his grandfather just before he dies:

"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight . . . I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."

20. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 15.

21. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 502.

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic near-comic lyricism.²²

For Ellison, the creativity involved in writing the novel itself is a 'blues-phenomenon.' People who are strangers to this experience—the experience which is kept alive in the aching consciousness—cannot squeeze a 'near-tragic near-comic lyricism' out of such an experience. But a Devanoor Mahadeva, being a Dalit, can do that.

If *Invisible Man* is a metaphorical search for the identity of a Black-man, Devanoor Mahadeva's short novel *Odalala* is a literal search for a lost rooster and for a sackful of stolen groundnuts. Instead of presenting his readers with a philosophy regarding oppression, Mahadeva is seriously involved in depicting the apparently 'frivolous' elements that make up the life of a Dalit community:

Devanoor Mahadeva employs an utterly dispassionate mode of narration in his short novel *Odalala*. The novel succeeds in portraying the creativity and love for life even as it pictures the apparently void but charged aspects of the quotidian existence of its characters. The novel certainly is not a glorification of either the poverty or oppression which the characters in it suffer from.²³

As in the case of *Chomana Dudi*, here also the economic factor is shown to be inextricably linked with the social. In fact, there are only suggestions here and there that the family of Sakavva belongs to the untouchable community. Sakavva, the head of the family is an old woman, with three sons and two daughters—all living under the same roof with their families:

Sakavva's four-cornered shanty, considered to be a 'hut', was rooted in the soil with its roof covered by tiles, hay and the dry leaves of palm. In this hut the head of the house,

22. Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *Shadow and Act*, p. 78.

23. K. V. Narayana, "The New Novel and the Living Tradition," an article publ. in *Sunday Herald* (the weekly magazine of *Deccan Herald*, dated Nov. 11, 1990), p. 2.

Sakavva, was squatting and blowing over the cinders. Her bony hands were placed on the floor supporting her body even though she had sat on the floor. The bones and the skin of her body had lost contact with each other and were moving independent of one another.²⁴

These words, which introduce us to Sakavva and her world, also introduce us to the technique of the writer. He is projecting an image and through the highly connotative image he is trying to 'narrate' a story. The trivial signifies the serious. Such minutiae as are given here picturize Sakavva's life to the readers.

It would be foolish to expect Sakavva to question untouchability or to seek equality. Her life is restricted to her "Keri" (lane), the secluded area where only those belonging to her caste live. For the time being her only grouse is that her rooster, kept aside for God, has not returned home; and despite her futile search nobody even bothers to ask what she is looking for. It is ironical that despite her poverty, she has kept aside a valuable thing for God and it is even more ironical that she never gets to see that fowl again. Sakavva cares for it not because it is sacred, nor because it fetches money but because it belongs to her. It is this sense that makes her take God to task! "O God, have you kept your eyes open or have you shut them blind?"²⁵ The benevolence which she expects of her anthropomorphic God is finally manifested in a human God, the Inspector of Police, who is responsible for the loss of her second fowl.

Unlike in the works of Stowe, Karanth and Ellison, where the omniscient author makes her/his presence felt here and there, Devanoor Mahadeva only allows the readers to perceive more than what his characters themselves do. There is ample evidence that the family is very poor – the insufficient food supply, the inadequate shelter and such other details stress this point again and again. Yet, Mahadeva neither allows himself to wallow in self-pity, nor does he romanticize the issue. Sakavva's grouse against her children is not so much that they do not bother about her as that they do not do anything:

24. Devanoor Mahadeva, *Odalala*, rpt., (Bangalore: Directorate of Kannada and Culture, 1985), p. 1.

25. Devanoor Mahadeva, *Odalala*, p. 22.

... her son, irritated as he was aroused from sleep because of his mother's mutterings, said, "Avva, sleep now. Let the sun rise." Sakavva's placid veins fluttered and she started slapping herself on the forehead: "Did you say we should wait for the sun to rise? It is because you don't get up from your sleep two hours after the sunrise that my hut is broken into three."²⁶

The strong-bodied Kalanna who steals the sack of groundnuts is shown as either eating or sleeping and the women folk of the house seem to take the initiative with regard to work. Again, there is only a subtle suggestion that they are not given any work in the "upper keri" because they belong to the lower caste.

Moreover, it is a long time since the village received good rains and there seems to be no chance of these people getting agricultural jobs. In a situation where apparently the ravages of drought are being felt, where human beings do not have food and shelter, the stable built for the cows of Yethappa, the landlord, is a wonder for the children of Sakavva, while his "elephant-sized" cattle, make them wish for their death. This is again another reference to the custom of the lowest of the low - they eat the flesh of the dead animal. Where human beings are treated worse than animals, it is not abnormal for them to wish for the death of the domestic animals as this would result in a feast for them.

At the same time, there is a desire in Sakavva and her tribe to be like Yethappa. Sakavva has the courage to hope that if her sons decide to do so, they can build a house as big as the stable of Yethappa, and her eldest daughter dares to suggest that Puttagowri's wedding be celebrated with as much pomp as that of Yethappa's daughter. To have the ability to dream amidst acute poverty and absolute uncertainty of the future, to laugh at this life without losing hope in it, is a great human quality. These are the "blues" of the Dalits, these are the sustaining forces which make life possible in an apparently hopeless situation.

It would have been a highly pessimistic view of the life of the Dalits had Mahadeva stopped here. Even among Sakavva's children there is one who has tried to break the enslaving system - Gurusiddu,

26. Devanoor Mahadeva, *Odalala*, p. 26.

the owner of the third segment of Sakavva's hut. His works and pre-occupations—doing masonry work, selling silk cocoons and more important, acting in the local plays—imply that he is no more dependent on the undependable agricultural jobs. The man who owns a wristwatch, who once possessed a bicycle, and who is capable of making the highcaste Shivabasappa serve him 'Dose' and tea in his hotel, reaches heroic heights in the eyes of the other members of the family. But sadly enough, such heroism has estranged him from the life of his own community: he has no liking for tea made at home with jaggery; he prefers the tea of a hotel. However, in the life characterised by laziness, poverty, ignorance, helplessness and humility, the signs of positive attitude towards life are discernible not only in Gurusiddu, but also in Sakavva, who creates a story, in Puttagowri, who draws a peacock; and in Shivu, who has the imaginative ability to make that peacock dance.

Even though Mahadeva does not criticize the section of the society which oppresses Sakavva and her like, there is an inherent irony present when he juxtaposes Sakavva's search for her lost rooster with Yethappa's attempts to search for the thief who has been stealing the groundnuts. The irony of the situation is that when Sakavva, for whom a lost chicken means much more than food, goes searching for it, she is not helped by anyone except her young grandson, whereas when Yethappa, for whom even the loss of a buffalo amounts to an insignificant loss from the mountain of wealth he has amassed by lending money on interest,²⁷ commands help, there is a whole section of policemen ready to help him. The two contrasting situations make a mockery of the social system which promises to render justice to everyone. Ultimately, the arrogant attitude that because these people are ignorant, poor and belong to an oppressed community, one could make them endure anything, reaches its limit when the one who has come to find the thief metamorphoses into a thief. The triumphant laughter raised because Sakavva has been duped is a tragic laughter—tragic, not because Sakavva has been duped; tragic, because people consider such an incident comic.

The loss of one more fowl does not make Sakavva poorer—these are the people who have the ability to live when all means of subsistence have been removed from them. The author is not interested in 'proving' anything except the "humanness" of this life. Sakavva is no 'invisible

27. Devanoor Mahadeva, *Odalala*, p. 26.

man'; she lacks the ability to draw 'meanings' from situations; she is not contemplative; nor is she an expert in self-analysis. Yet she has the ability to raise a family amidst practically nothing.

In such poverty, even eating becomes a ritual,²⁸ theft ceases to be a crime and the novel only "affirms the co-existence of both the fire that consumes and the love for life that nourishes in the innards of the members of Sakavva's family . . ."²⁹ The comic strain which pervades the novel suggests that ability of the novelist to transcend the situation and uphold the positive elements of the life of Sakavva. The inferiority complex created because of years of subjugation has been dissolved in creativity. Viewed in this light, Ellison and Mahadeva are writers who have come a long way from Stowe and Karanth. Pity and sympathy have actually given way to a "celebration of life"³⁰ in Ellison and Mahadeva. Our reaction to Ellison and Mahadeva is not tainted with pity, nor is it one of condescension. We are filled with a sense of wonder, a wonder which can only be expressed through the words used by Norton in 'Invisible Man':

"You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed."³¹

28. See U.R. Ananthamurthy, "Devanoora Mahadevara *Odalala*," *Rujuvathu*, 12 (Oct.-Dec. 1983), p. 110.

29. K.V. Narayana, *Sunday Herald*, p. 2.

30. Ellison, "That same Pain, that Same Pleasure," *Shadow and Act*, "I think that art is a celebration of life even when life extends into death and that the sociological conditions which have made for so much misery in Negro life are not necessarily the only factors which make for the values which I feel should endure and shall endure."

31. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 51.

It must be remembered here that Norton, the White Philanthropist, makes this observation in a totally different context. He is talking about Jim Trueblood's incestuous relationship.