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## The Phenomenon of “Race” and the Ku Klux Klan

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By Prof. Charlles Ponnuthurai Sarvan

I now very seldom go to the cinema but, encouraged by my wife’s willingness to accompany me, saw ‘Black Klansman’ directed by African-American Spike Lee (2018). In turn, this led me to Ron Stallworth’s memoir, *Black Klansman*. Reading is a horizon that forever recedes because one book leads to another, and that to yet another. So it is that I found myself reading a 1905 novel, *The Clansman*, by Thomas Frederick Dixon and watching D W Griffith’s 1915 film version of it, ‘*The Birth of a Nation*’. The attempt here is to draw attention to certain aspects of the KKK and the phenomenon of ‘race’ in general; to show that the past is not past but persists into, and affects, the present; and that, if not in detail, something of the essence of America’s KKK is found in other countries as well. Since both the novel and the film are fictional, I conclude with a note on the power of the imagination. My subject having been Literature, I refer to certain (literary) writers and texts.

As I have written elsewhere, African slavery, given (a) its appallingly cruel nature; (b) its duration of several hundred years, and (c) the victims numbering in the millions, is the worst blot on human History. The American Civil War ended in 1865 with the defeat of the South which had fought for the freedom to continue enslaving others. The KKK was formed the next year by former Confederate soldiers: an example of cause and effect. (During the Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King, the always smouldering KKK flared up again.) Grotesquely, one of the stated aims of the KKK was to protect the weak, the innocent and the defenceless. The name Ku Klux Klan is thought to be derived from a Greek word meaning circle. (For the addition of the Scottish word “Clan”, see below.) A circle excludes but more importantly, and as relevant to the KKK, it protects. Extreme right-wingers, both here and elsewhere in the world, Sri Lanka included, see themselves and theirs as a group in danger of subordination. Fear, whether imagined or real, can breed cruelty and the KKK went on to earn a reputation for extreme violence, becoming a sheer terror to non-whites, particularly to those of African descent. Often, their acts of violence ended with lynching.

Lynching in America was most frequent from 1890 to the 1920s, with a peak in 1892. As with anti-Tamil riots and the appallingly savage

pogrom of 1983, these were not clandestine actions carried out furtively by a few. No, they were mob actions, attended by hundreds or thousands of men, women and children who cheered and encouraged. Victims were seized and subjected to every imaginable kind of physical torment. It ended with them being hung from a tree and set on fire. More often than not, victims would be dismembered; sometimes mob members took pieces of their flesh and bone as souvenirs. A song made famous by singers such as Billie Holiday and Nina Simone includes the following stanza:

“Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

In many cases, lynch-mobs were aided and abetted by law enforcement personnel. Officers would leave the cells of black prisoners unlocked to enable the mob to drag them out for torture and grisly murder, thus obviating any trial: see Sri Lanka, ‘Black July’ 1983 and Welikkada Prison.

In 1955 when a fourteen-year old black youth was murdered and mutilated for allegedly whistling at a white woman, William Faulkner publicly asked whether such a country deserved to survive. See also Faulkner’s fictional works, such as ‘Dry September’ (1931) which includes a lynching. As Faulkner shows, even the ignorant and brutal can take pride, not through personal effort and individual achievement but simply through the accident of birth; in being a member of a group, be the group one based on skin-colour or, as in Sri Lanka, on ‘race’. To digress briefly: a June 1927 edition of the New York Times reports that among those arrested for KKK-related violence was Fred Trump, father of the current President of the USA. And there’s a picture on the Internet of Donald Trump, then a presidential candidate, kissing a cloaked KKK member.

The Clansman (1905) by Thomas Dixon is a crudely 'racist' novel, lacking any literary merit yet merits reading for what it unintentionally reveals: after all, it's not only what we read but what we ourselves make of what we read. As it has been pointed out, we are not born as 'racists'. (Though 'race' has no scientific foundation, 'racists' proudly exist and 'racism' in various forms continues to flourish. See: 'The term "racism" and discourse' in my Sri Lanka: Literary Essays & Sketches.) Flannery O'Connor's collection of short stories, 'A Good Man is Hard to Find', includes 'The Artificial Nigger'. The word "Artificial" indicates that "Niggers" are not a natural phenomenon but a cultural construct created by a denigrating 'Other'. In a train, a man walks past and the grandfather of the story asks his ten-year old grandson what that was. Note: not "who" but "that". The boy offers various classifications such as: a man, an old man, a fat man but all these adjectival modifiers are rejected. Grandfather then takes the boy's education in hand and explains: "That was a nigger". (The boy had never seen an African American because, as the grandfather proudly explains, they had all been chased out years earlier.) To the grandfather, what matters above all else is 'racial' identity, and not a common humanity. Ironically, the grandfather considers himself to be a religious and moral man: a point I come to further on.

A. Sivanandan (1923-2018) was director of the UK's Institute of Race Relations for forty years; was editor of Race & Class but is perhaps best known to Sri Lankan readers as the author of that remarkable novel, When Memory Dies. He was married to a Sinhalese lady and spoke Sinhala fluently. During an interview in the UK ('An Island Tragedy: Buddhist ethnic cleansing in Sri Lanka', New Left Review, London, Nov-Dec 2009 issue, pages 79-98) Sivanandan relates that once at a social gathering in what was then 'Ceylon', he had asked his daughter, aged about five, who that "Uncle" was. She had replied: "That's not an uncle, that's a Tamil". The child had internalised that the honorific "Uncle" is not extended to Tamils, not realizing that her own father was one. The inculcation of 'racial' thinking and feelings is more often not overt and deliberate as in 'The Artificial Nigger' but casual and indirect; unconscious, even unintended and unrealized.

To return to The Clansman, Thomas Dixon's 'racism' was such that he seems to have had a physical revulsion towards African Americans. One example should suffice: "He had the short, heavy-set neck of the lower order of animals. His skin was coal black, his lips so thick they curled both ways up and down... His nose was flat, and its enormous nostrils seemed in perpetual dilation. The sinister bead eyes, with brown splotches in their whites, were set wide apart and gleamed ape-like under his scant brows. His enormous cheekbones and jaws seemed to protrude beyond the ears and almost hide them." (Book 3, Chapter 3). Elsewhere we are told that one Southerner is worth more than all the "negroes" put together because the "heritage of centuries of heroic blood from the martyrs of old Scotland" flows in her or his veins (Book 2, Chapter 2). This sentence is significant for its use of the word "martyr" and for the claim that Southerners are descended from the Scots. Other groups too have claimed and clothed themselves in descent from some distant admired group, for example, the belief in an Aryan ancestry (though Aryan is a language-family, and not a 'racial' one). Such beliefs and claims would be laughable were they not so passionately believed, and help lead to tragic consequences for others.

Moving on to the silent film, 'Birth of a Nation', it must be admitted that in purely cinematographic terms some of the shots and scenes are very impressive. One recalls that Leni Riefenstahl produced brilliant films such as 'Triumph of the Will' and 'Olympia' but in the cause of supporting and serving Der Führer and Nazism. It has been observed that a film can teach the "truth" (sic) of history in one evening more

than months of reading and study: Griffith claims that he produced his film in order “to tell the truth about the South”. The film was far more a popular success than the book which inspired it, helping to strengthen and prolong ‘racial’ hatred. Book and film were a success because, as with the Mahavamsa, they narrated what people wanted and wished to believe was the truth: few of us read books or see films which challenge or disturb our opinions and beliefs. (The film was more successful because, while reading is an activity, watching a film can be but “passive consumption”.) In the film version, the birth of the American nation is not dated from Washington and the defeat of the English but with the end of the American Civil War. Former enemies quickly became brothers and sisters at the expense of the African American who was once again “sold down the river”. Lincoln who had been demonized in the South as a black Republican (Republicans then formed a socially liberal party, while the Democrats were conservatives on social issues) was now turned into “the Great Heart”; the personification of kindness and compassion. (But something of the old hatred is seen in the assassination of Lincoln with his murderer, John Wilkes Booth, triumphantly shouting: Sic semper tyrannis.)

Paradoxical though it may seem, religion and violence often go together. Those capable of injustice, violence and cruelty (be they, in alphabetical order, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews or Muslims) transform these evils not only into the necessary and the noble but, most importantly, into the holy: holy, therefore, obligatory. The white cloaks of the hooded riders of the KKK displayed an embossed cross, and their terrifying visiting-card was a burning cross. The Christian cross came to signal not “Gentle Jesus” but hatred and violence, burning and death. ‘The Birth of a Nation’ ends with the Ku Klux Klan triumphant, a vision of Jesus and, in the background, the Promised Kingdom. Thomas Dixon, the author of the crude and cruel novel, *The Clansman*, was a Christian priest. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks have incited horrific violence against Tamils and Muslims, while Muslim clerics, including some living in the West, have been accused of preaching hatred and of recruiting men and women to carry out terrorist attacks. The Catholic Cardinal of Sri Lanka, Malcolm Ranjith, supports dubious political leaders, and stoutly opposes any independent investigation of alleged crimes against humanity. “His eminence has airbrushed Sri Lankan history of brutal racism against minorities, and the killing of thousands of innocent civilians” (message from Fr. Pan Jordan; cited with his consent). The Cardinal is first and foremost a Sinhalese; his God and Christianity; morality and justice come a very poor second. With the exception of a few like Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a genuine martyr, killed in a Nazi concentration a few months before World War 11 ended) many priests and nuns admired Hitler even to the point of adulation. This brings me to group identity.

Ethnicity is a far stronger emotion (and therefore force) than religion. Indeed, religion is made use of in ‘racial’ conflict to justify, if not to sanctify, violence. (The film, ‘The Trump Prophecy’ which premiered on 2 October 2018 in the USA portrays Donald Trump as God’s own “chosen one”.) Those of the far right are not restrained by the fact that African Americans are also Christian. In September 1963, the ostentatiously Christian KKK planted a bomb in an African American Christian church in Alabama. Dudley Randall in his poem, ‘Ballad of Birmingham’, imagines a distraught mother searching for her little daughter: “O, here’s the shoe my baby wore / But, baby, where are you?” In Sri Lanka, Sinhalese Christians have stood with Sinhalese Buddhists, and not with Christian Tamils, except on a private, personal basis. Regarding the last, Professor Sarah Churchwell comments (*New Statesman*, 21 – 27 August 2015, pp. 34 – 37) that “benign” private actions of a few individuals redeem “collectively” neither a people nor History: they redeem the individual, and not the group. See also, ‘Racism and exceptionalism’ in Sarvan, *Public Writings on Sri Lanka*, Volume 2. During the American Civil War, with many able-bodied men being away

at the battle front, African Americans protected white women and children. The “good Negro” was one who was willing to die for master and family, and many indeed put themselves in danger, exciting the opprobrium of their own. However, they were seen as exceptional and not as typical. It’s a “no win” situation, and one reason why it’s hard to extirpate ‘racism’. The booklet which accompanies the DVD of ‘The Birth of a Nation’ contains an article by Francis Hackett which reports that medical doctors apparently can perform an operation on a dog so that it starts and keeps on running. Nothing can stop it. The ‘racist’, the article says, is rather like that dog: very difficult to cure.

If ethnicity is more potent than religious affiliation, it is also much stronger than class feeling and solidarity. This is evident from the fact that some from the upper and middle classes (even professionals and academics, Sri Lanka not excepted) are ‘racists’. It explains why Left movements in Sri Lanka struggle unavailingly against the ‘racist’ Right. (On the other hand, the KKK was supported by the ‘aristocrats’ of the South who felt their position and prestige were being threatened. Not all Donald Trump’s supporters are poor and excluded; on the contrary, many are rich and privileged.) As with religion and class, ‘racism’ is also stronger than gender: women cheered on the KKK as it attacked African women. Today, Donald Trump who has been accused of sexual molestation; Trump who is on film admitting that he brazenly and crudely reached out for the private parts of women, has many women who wholeheartedly support him with the slogan: “Women for Trump”. These women even join him in rejecting and ridiculing women who make allegations of sexual violence. The basis of life is material: food and water, shelter and clothing. (A labourer once taught me: “Yes, work is hard but no work is much harder”.)

But ‘racial’, tribal or group feeling can be stronger than the desire for economic welfare and progress, and there are many examples from history where a people, fully aware of the material consequence, have voluntarily incurred economic damage driven by group impulses. In short, group identity and feelings are stronger than religion and morality; stronger than class and sex, sometimes overriding (group) material self-interest. This fact should not lead to a mood of pessimistic acceptance but rather to a spirit of challenge. After all, one feature of culture is the combating of our ‘natural’ and negative impulses.

A people unhappy with their present can either work intelligently and hard for a better future or, much easier, look back nostalgically to a past that never existed in reality: see Dixon in the next paragraph. Thus some Sri Lankans believe that in ancient times, say under King Duttugemunu, the island was what is now claimed in tourist advertisements: “the Paradise Isle”. Given human nature, there never was a paradise on Planet Earth, nor can one be unless we, human beings, undergo a radical moral and ethical transformation. I cite from the film, ‘Gone with the Wind’: There was a land of Cavaliers and cotton fields. Here in this pretty world, gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of knights and ladies fair, of master and slave. Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. Mark Twain in his *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) lays much of the blame for this romantic falsification on Walter Scott’s novel, *Ivanhoe* (1820). Mark Twain alleges that Scott checked and even turned back the “wave of progress”. He made people fall in love with dreams and phantoms, “with decayed and swinish forms of religion” and with “sham chivalries”.

Dixon from an early age had been taught to regard his people as the chosen people of God. The Jews claim to be Jehovah’s “Chosen People”: some are chosen, and the others excluded. Sinhalese Buddhists believe that from all the countries in the wide world the Buddha,

for reasons known only to him, chose the Sinhalese 'race', and the Island as the place where his doctrine would be preserved in its purest form. To what extent this "purity" has been actually achieved, I do not presume to judge but, as Mahatma Gandhi said, the highest expression of religion lies in the practising of morality: the Buddha, the "Soul of the Greatest Compassion", surely would have agreed with the "great soul", the Mahatma. John Calvin, 1509-1564, preached that some (again for mysterious reasons) were predestined by God for salvation.

The early Dutch settlers in South Africa looked upon Africans as the descendants of Ham who were cursed by Noah to be slaves: a belief, and consequent attitude and treatment found in the slave-owning American South. White-skin signified purity and, therefore, superiority; brown and black complexions signalled degeneracy and inferiority. Those Sinhalese who believe in, and are proud of, an Aryan ancestry will be disappointed that for their "Aryan" brothers and sisters of the KKK, and for other similar extreme right-wing groups, "Aryan" means white. Of course, as it's observed in the novel, *A Passage to India*, literally there are no "white" people, but the term offers a contrast with "black" (and black includes brown). It's a dichotomy: white and non-white.

Though proud of the past, what Dixon saw of his "chosen" people was military defeat and economic decline. On the other hand, when Booker T. Washington was in President Roosevelt's office (1901), a waiter brought in a luncheon tray and Roosevelt invited his guest to share it with him. This caused outrage and the incident was exaggerated into a party where "Negroes" and whites danced together. The anger and alarm was that African Americans were on the verge of taking power, and Dixon (like Anagarika Dharmapala, 1864-1933), made it his mission to "save" his people. (Today, Donald Trump's rallying cry is: "Make America great again".) The African Americans were small in number and far from powerful but were projected as a grave threat. The whites were, and in some cases are, a majority with the cruelty that insecurity and fear breed. The whites were "a majority with a minority complex".

Grotesque exaggeration and distortion lead both *The Clansman* and 'The Birth of a Nation' to present fiction as reality: the blacks, fully armed, are in power; they run the legislature and dominate the judiciary. Debauched and lawless, they push whites off the streets, and white women are in danger of a fate "worse than death". It's a nightmarish scenario, calculated to stir white insecurity, anger and action. I digress to point out that the determination of Donald Trump and his followers to reverse every single measure brought in by Obama; in other words to wipe him out of History is because Obama is black. As elsewhere, this kind of group-hatred is visceral. (With his usual elegance of expression, Trump referred to African nations as "shithole" countries.) The Unite the Right 'racist' rally at Charlottesville, 11-12 August 2017, included KKK, Nazi and other so-called "hate groups", that is, groups whose main driving force is hatred, a hatred that expresses itself in violence, usually on those much weaker.

Returning to *The Clansman* and 'The Birth of a Nation', the impact of books, poems, plays, films and songs (see the words of 'Dixie', the unofficial anthem of the South) is not to be underestimated because they can take hold of the imagination so much so that the imagined can become more real than reality: Sri Lankans know the powerful and pervasive, the pernicious and persistent influence of the Mahavamsa. I cite one example to show how the imagination can take over. The novels of Charles Dickens were first published in instalments, and when

he was writing *The Old Curiosity Shop* readers pleaded with him to save Little Nell; not to let her die. Dickens himself wrote to a friend: “All night I have been pursued by the child; and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable”. In the midst of this, the three-year old daughter of his close friend, Macready, suddenly died. Unable to separate himself emotionally from his imaginary Little Nell, Dickens contented himself with sending Macready an affectionate note of sympathy, while other friends visited the bereaved, shared Macready’s grief and attended the funeral. Imaginary Little Nell was more real to Dickens than the child he had known personally. Imaginative identification helps to explain why people are distressed by the sorrow of strangers (royalty, well-known entertainers, sportsmen etc.) and not by those who suffer in real life - of which there are many. The impact of *The Clansman* and ‘*The Birth of a Nation*’, both fictional creations, on white Americans, particularly in the South was wide and deeper than consciously realized. It is one way in which ‘racist’ poison is concocted and the infection spread in the social fabric. These two imaginative works greatly strengthened and helped prolong the ‘racist’ Ku Klux Klan.

“O, let my land be a land where... Equality is in the air we breathe” ( Langston Hughes. African American.)

“Where the mind is without fear... Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way” (Rabindranath Tagore)

The faults and failure in the above are because I failed to heed all the strictures of my wife.

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