
THE SHATTERED DREAMS OF REPATRIATION IN ISMITH KHAN'S THE JUMBIE BIRD

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Abstract: Indo-Trinidadians are descendants of Indian emigrants who came to work on the sugar-cane plantations of Trinidad. The literatures of their descendants are exceptional, both in language and subject. The literary connection of their country of origin, combined with the tales of survival, exile, resistance, endurance, and emigration helps in understanding the new world. Their diaspora, alienation and ultimately their assimilation to the Caribbean culture and life style finds expression in their writings. This paper attempts to bring out the shattered dreams of repatriates.

Keywords: Assimilation, Caribbean Literature, Ismith Khan, Repatriation.

Introduction: Caribbean literature is the term generally accepted for the literature of the various territories of the Caribbean region. Most of these territories have become independent nations since the 1960s, though some retain colonial ties to the United Kingdom. They all share, apart from the English language, a number of political, cultural, and social ties which make it useful to consider their literary output in a single category. The Caribbean region is a distinctive enclosed area where all the historical influences can be finely traced since the sinuous and colourful history left its imprints in literature, culture and politics.

Indo-Trinidadians are descendants of Indian emigrants who came to work on the sugar-cane plantations of Trinidad. After the slaves were freed, the plantation owners were desperate for new sources of labour. In 1839 the British government began a program of recruiting Indian labourers to be sent to Trinidad and Guyana. They bound themselves to work as indentured labourers for a set number of years on the plantations. The first Indians arrived in Trinidad on 30 May, 1845 which day is now celebrated as a commemorative holiday called Indian Arrival Day. The immigration of indentured Indians continued until 1917 when it was banned by the government of India. By that time 180,000 Indians had entered Trinidad. A majority of Indo-Trinidadians are Hindu and large minorities are Muslim or those belong to one of the several Christian denominations. The Indian community has steadily prospered and grown until now it makes up just over half the population of the nation. Indo-Trinidadians have retained their distinctive culture, yet function in a multi-racial milieu. The languages of their ancestors have largely been lost, although a number of these words have entered the Trinidadian vernacular. Indian film industry, Indian music and Indian cooking have entered the mainstream culture of Trinidad.

Ismith Khan was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad. "He

is a descendant of the Pathans of the Indian subcontinent through both his parents and of indentured immigrants on his mother's side" (Benson 768). Ismith Khan was strongly influenced by his grandfather, Kale Khan, a proud Pathan, one of the fiercely independent, mountain dwelling people whose ancestral homelands straddle what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Pathans are renowned for their courage and military prowess and they resisted British in India for generations and also fought another colonial war against the Russians in Afghanistan. Ismith Khan grew up under the influence of ardent nationalism and anti-colonialism of his grandfather, and he employs this background in his debut, the semi-autobiographical novel, *The Jumbie Bird* (1961). It was followed by "The Obeah Man" (1964) and "The Crucifixion" (1987). He also has a collection of his short stories, "A Day in the Country," to his credit.

Unlike Naipaul, who comes from an orthodox Brahman family, Khan, a third-generation Trinidadian, has a Muslim background. Though not as accomplished a craftsman as Naipaul, Khan presents a sympathetic and evocative portrait of the plight of his community. Khan's significance in Caribbean literary tradition lies in his literary explorations of issues of identity--"the double consciousness," to borrow W. E. B. Du Bois's phrase, of being a Pathan from India, in terms of his ethnic origins, and a Trinidadian, in thought and action. Ismith Khan lived in the USA, teaching creative writing and literature, until his death in April 2002.

Indentureship and migration were key factors in shaping Caribbean literature. *The Jumbie Bird* is one of several Caribbean novels which are set among the East Indian Community in Trinidad. It is the only one, however, to examine in any depth the issues of indenture and repatriation. These two terms, the fact of indenture and the dream of repatriation form the integral life of East Indians in Trinidad. As indenture labourers they were paid very less and were denied

the right to change employers, to live away from the plantation or to demand higher wages. After their stipulated period they were free to return to India but in 1890s even the possibility of repatriation was lost for the community. The death of the dream is perhaps marked by the moment when the second and third generation East Indian community began to regard itself as West Indian rather than as an embattled enclave of temporary migrants. Khale Khan's nationalistic urge to return to India and the desperation with which his less fortunate countrymen share that sentiment are understandable. In the end the frigid rationality of the Indian commissioner, this is in reality Mother India, slaughter Kale Khan and his dream of repatriation.

The story of *The Jumbie Bird* is about three generations of East Indians in Trinidad, represented by Kale Khan, his son Rahim and his grandson Jamini. This underlying trichotomy is important for the novel's theme of death and renewal. The story of the novel takes place in the capital of Trinidad, Port of Spain. The action dangles around one family which consists of a husband and wife, Rahim and Meena, their young son Jamini and also Rahim's old father Kale Khan, who is a representative of the last generation of East Indians who still remember their homeland India. Kale Khan's death is like that of Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, an unyielding but vain attempt to epitomize in himself a way of life for which there was no longer a future. Rahim and Meena are born already in Trinidad. The main character of the novel is the young boy Jamini, whose growing up is traced in the novel. His character represents the turning age the novel is set in. It is the age of Indian cotemporaries and Trinidad born descendants of Indians living together. Jamini's search for identity is split in between his distant homeland India as he knows it from his grandfather's storytelling and the world of Trinidad he inhabits then. After his grandfather dies, Jamini is overbalanced by the actual world he is living in and he gradually identifies himself with Trinidad of that day. All the characters in the novel- Rahim, Meena, old Kale Khan, Jamini's schoolmates, and Kale Khan's friends, are seen through Jamini's eyes.

A gradual decline of sugar as a cash crop increased the exodus of 'worn out' or discontented Indian field hands to the city. Without family or friends, with no prospect of work and no hope of return to their ancestral Hindustan they were the most obvious victims of a labour policy designed solely to serve the interests of the planter class. "They had lost their trade, their ways of ploughing and sowing, they had come to the city to wander" (18). They never troubled anyone but their vacant faces disturbed the delicate

feelings of the passer by who made protests to banish them from the Town Hall Square. Their soiled shreds of clothing, their sad eyes filled with a strange yearning and discontent was "an eyesore to the tourists" (19). The local papers called them "A band of rogues and vagabonds ... a public nuisance" (19). Thus the indenture immigrants put up a miserable life. Despite their significant presence, the indentured population had no way of civil rights. The Hindu and Muslim marriages not recognized under the Trinidadian law and their children were deemed as illegitimate and the names were listed in red ink in the 'The Red House', for "they were bastards in the eyes of the law" (66). They had no inheritance of property rights in law and their right to vote was also limited.

The immigrants were nostalgic about their homeland, about "the smells of coriander, cumin, saffron and the magic of spices of Hindustan ... the ripening of mango" (68) and they longed to return. They felt uprooted and lost in this foreign land. The "one hundred and eighty thousand Indians with the resentment of one hundred years of deprivation and abuse simmering on the surface ... required only the faintest spark to explode into a horrible nightmare" (153). At that point during the Hussay festival, the Indian High Commissioner to the Caribbean arrived. They dreamt that, "this time they were going home... to build their own country" (109). But then the commissioner proclaimed that, "In Hindustan we have been so wrapped up in our own troubles, we know nothing of our people abroad" (178). Further he accused Kale Khan that he had incited people to rebellion and sown discontent among them by promising them that they would return home. He advised Kale Khan that "he should have tried to help them to make this place their home rather than set them against it" (170). This broke the heart of Kale Khan like the calabash that had shriveled in the sun and disheartened the people who were waiting for redemption, "for now they knew that their lives, too, had come to an end, that all they had done and hoped for had become meaningless" (177). Kale Khan felt betrayed by Hindustan and "He felt a horrifying loneliness seize him... there was no home, no land peopled by men among whom he could walk and feel that it was his world, his home, a world that did not leave him alien and a stranger in the streets" (169).

Rahim is the second generation of Khans in Trinidad and the first to be born there. The novelist portrays this generation as transitional. Rahim is weak, and as transplanted Indian he is also lost, who in a state of flux laments that, "we ain't belong to Hindustan, we ain't belong to England, we ain't belong to Trinidad" (68). Rahim tries to free himself from the futile imprisonment about his motherland and also tries to

develop the resourcefulness to cope with the new circumstances. The emptiness of colonial life is brought out through Rahim's eventless life. Rahim, who now assimilates the new life, is now able to give his son a new sense of direction. Binti, Meena and the rejuvenated Rahim have East Indian consciousness of their origin and are nourished by those roots but oriented to the climate and demands of their new environment in Trinidad.

Jamini is the second natal generation in the new land, an integral part of the new society, who is liberated from the sentimental embrace of the past and adapts his cultural inheritance to the contemporary situation in Trinidad. If Khan represents the Indian past by his insistence on Pathan code then Rahim represents the wavering generation of assimilation and compromise and Jamini the symbol of future whose dream of repatriation dies with Kale Khan. Rahim advises his son to forget what Khan taught him for it is "all of that is old dream for old people" (182) and he should move forward. The uniform which his son wore gave Rahim a sense of pride and even a sudden sense of

strange dignity. Thus Rahim and Jaimin assimilated to the life in Trinidad and the thought to return to Hindustan becomes a distant dream.

Literature of Caribbean like that of most colonial societies passed through the usual stages moving from apparent silence to assimilation, imitation and apology and on to innovation, affirmation and transformation. These stages are clearly portrayed in the novels of Ismith Khan very realistically for he had gone through the process himself. Despite the emphasis on loneliness and death the novel is not finally pessimistic. The theme of regeneration, of death leading to rebirth and renewal is brought out beautifully. Kale Khan and all that he stands for has gone and with his death comes the possibility of growth. The pressure is taken off Rahim who has come to terms with the conflict he feels between his traditions and the values of the society that he must think of as his own. Jamini equips himself for self-reliance and independence, the essential Pathan qualities that Kale Khan held so dear.

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