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Ismith Khan (1925-2002)

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Khan, Ismith (1925–2002)

Trinidadian novelist who explored the conflicts experienced by East Indians in the Caribbean as well as the racial diversity that characterizes the region. A brilliant storyteller, he created memorable characters through whom the sights and cadences of Trinidad will forever live.

Ismith Khan was born in Trinidad on March 16, 1925, to Muslim parents who were Pathan Indians. After attending the prestigious Queen's Royal College in Port of Spain, Khan worked as a reporter for the *Trinidad Guardian*. He later moved to the United States and studied at Michigan State University. He then went on to earn a BA in social sciences from the New School for Social Research in New York and an MA in Writing at Johns Hopkins University. Between 1955 and 1970, he taught at the New School and Johns Hopkins. From 1970 to 1982 he taught at various universities in California, including Berkeley, the University of California–San Diego, the University of Southern California, and California State College–Long Beach. He moved back to New York in 1982, where he wrestled with depression following the end of his third marriage. Though he often thought of returning to Trinidad for good, he remained in New York, declaring to Sasenarine Persaud in the online journal *Indo Caribbean World*, "I am one of the homeless of the homeless. . . . I feel homeless in New York [but] I feel more comfortable in New York than I feel anywhere else in the world." There he continued to devote his time to his writing and served as an adjunct lecturer at Medgar Evers College.

Khan frequently spoke of writing something set in the United States, but his published work invariably treats the emptiness and violence of Trinidad, where his characters try to find some meaning in their lives, or as one puts it, "What de ass to do wid meself" in *Crucifixion* (17). Death is his constant and recurring subject; Christ imagery pervades his work; self-righteousness is the ultimate sin: "A man ain't have no right playin' God" (*Crucifixion*, 121).

His first novel, *The Jumbie Bird* (1961), treats the dilemma of three generations of East Indians in Trinidad, including those such as his grandfather Kale Khan, who still remembers India and who longs to return. Kale Khan, however, stands out as a leader among his people and a hero to his grandson Jamini because he did “not come here like the rest of these low-class coolies in bond” (3). The novelist told me that Kale Khan is the only character in this highly autobiographical work who is a direct portrait, “name and all.” In reading this novel or in talking to the author, it is clear that this complex, contradictory, and flawed grandfather had the greatest influence on his life.

His second novel, *The Obeah Man* (1964), moves away from the focus on the East Indian community to emphasize the racial mixtures that are Trinidad: Zampi, the Obeah man, had “the eyes of the East Indian, the build of the Negro, the skin of the Chinese, and some of the colour of all” (11); indeed all of the characters represent, like Massahood, the stickman, “the same question mark of lost races and cultures” (32). In this work, Khan creates in Zampi one of his most memorable and admirable characters. Though Zampi at first simply “played” the role of an Obeah man, he proceeds to seek to learn as much about himself and about Obeah as he can. His journey is one that results in greater knowledge, greater spiritual power, greater service to others, and even fulfillment in love. He achieves a kind of self-realization and wholeness that escapes Khan’s other frustrated heroes and in the process leaves the reader with unique visions of Carnival and a perceptive and realistic exploration of Obeah.

The Crucifixion, written as the author’s master’s thesis, was not published until 1987. Here the significantly named Manko is also on a quest for knowledge. As we are constantly reminded in the Creole voice of this novel that alternates between standard English and Creole: “*He want to learn some damn t’ing.*” However, Manko, certain that God has called him and that others must listen to him to be saved, constantly persecutes and destroys in his efforts to save and resurrect. His agony, fury, and frustrations in life are relieved only by his temporary refuge in a bar and his constant pilgrimages to the cross on Calvary Hill, where he finds the peace of seeing himself as a crucified Christ. In 1994, *A Day in the Country*, a collection of short stories, was published. *Day* brings together some of Khan’s previously anthologized stories and a few of those unpublished ones that he feared, when I interviewed him in 1981, “somebody will find . . . tucked away back there . . . when I am dead and gone.” Fortunately, he saw them published and witnessed the positive reception the collection received. *See also* Grandparents in Caribbean Literature.

Further Reading

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—*Daryl Cumber Dance*