Roydon Salick


Ismith Khan remains a much neglected figure in Caribbean literary criticism, a point that Roydon Salick clearly strives to remedy in his latest critical work, the first full-length study of the author. The book brings together a methodical and detailed analysis of Khan's three novels, The Jumbie Bird, The Obeah Man, and The Crucifixion, and his short story collection, A Day in the Country and Other Stories. In the introduction Salick mentions his original intention to write a biography of Khan, a plan cut short by Khan's death some months later. Although we will never know what form this biography would have taken, one gets a flavor of what it might have been like in Salick's introduction, which offers a rather impressionistic sketch of Khan's life.

Salick details Khan's early life on Frederick Street, Port of Spain, in a house divided between his parents and sisters who occupied the first floor, and his paternal grandfather, Kale Khan (a jeweler and a leader of the 1884 Hosay riots), who was a major influence on his grandson's life and writing. While Kale Khan figures in thinly-veiled fictional form in The Jumbie Bird as the identically named grandfather of Jamini, Salick is keen to disentangle the fictional figure from the real one. Drawing attention to the different timelines, Salick highlights the way the real Kale Khan, who died in 1931, could not have met India's first Commissioner to Trinidad, who arrived in 1948, as his fictional counterpart does. Salick also alerts readers more generally to the semiautobiographical elements of Ismith Khan's fiction. Like Khan, the adolescent Jamini of his debut novel, The Jumbie Bird, feels out of place attending Queen's Royal College, while the eponymous protagonist of "Pooran, Pooran" struggles to adapt to life in an urban college.

Salick's analysis is clearly aided by his personal acquaintance and interviews with Khan, giving additional insight into the intersection between the writer's world and his fiction. However, the occasional omission of a biographical reference may frustrate some, giving the impression that certain information is either so well known that it need not be repeated, or that readers, having come to the party late, are missing some of the elementary facts. Yet, as Salick makes clear throughout, Khan is anything but an established name in Anglophone Caribbean literature, let alone in international circles, and any clues concerning the origins of such material—whether published or not—would be of critical value to current and future scholars. As a corrective, Salick might make his discussions with Khan more publically available to scholars in the future.

Nevertheless, Salick may be Khan's most comprehensive and supportive...
critic to date, though he never descends to the level of bland plaudits. In fact, Salick is at his most refreshing and original in his counter reading of Khan's major novels, *The Jumbie Bird* and *The Obeah Man*. Refuting critics' assessments of Khan's endings as weak, he seeks to place these novels' endings in the context of their narrative architecture and characterization. In his view, Binti (Jamini's grandmother) is the real heroine of *The Jumbie Bird*, and it is this critical oversight that has led to an overemphasis on Kale Khan's demise at the novel's close. In the case of *The Obeah Man*, Salick disagrees with Kenneth Ramchand's view of its “confusing” ending, arguing instead that the close, in which Zampi, the obeah man, and Zolda are united, is satisfying precisely on account of its ambiguity.

Salick underscores the importance of Khan's geographic grasp of Trinidad, writing that “no other writer has written so extensively, cogently and lovingly of the urban experience” (p. 116). This intimate knowledge of Port of Spain and its environs—Woodbrook Square, La Basse, and Calvary Hill—is deeply woven into the fabric of Khan's narration. Salick draws out the resonance of Khan's fictional geography in narratives like *The Obeah Man*, where Zampi must descend from his high mountainous perch in the Blue Basin to the squalor of the city dump in La Basse before reuniting with Zolda.

Salick also does well to unpack the sexual or gender politics at stake in Khan's writing, pointing to his depiction of strong women such as Binti, who acts as a positive foil to Kale Khan, or Zolda, who acquires a number of dangerous suitors. He may overstate the case in comparing Zolda, a sexually liberated rather than a calculating woman, to Cleopatra, but he captures the essential dynamism of sexual exchange in *The Obeah Man*.

Salick's predilection to view the majority of Khan's characters through the lens of national—or at times regional—allegory may be strained in places. The protagonist of *The Obeah Man*, for example, is read as the national antidote to colonialism. In an even grander analogy, Zolda appears representative of “a progressive phase of Caribbean evolution” (p. 57). While both perspectives may have their place, they seem to draw readers into a world in which heroism and perfidy are always associated with the national stage in some way and, ultimately, a teleology of Caribbean progress. In this respect, Salick seems to pull away from the specificity of Khan's fiction and his characters, which he does so well to dissect. As Salick states, his work is intended to encourage further critical discourse on Khan, a goal that we can only hope will indeed be fulfilled.

*Jak Peake*

Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, U.K.

jrpeak@essex.ac.uk