GENDERED TROPES: OPTIMISM AND NATIONALISM IN CLR JAMES' "TRIUMPH" AND ISMITH KHAN'S THE JUMBIE BIRD

Kerry-Ann Abdool

Department of Literary, Cultural and Communication Studies, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

ABSTRACT

In a pre-independent Trinidad, C.L.R James published his widely acclaimed story, "Triumph" which features Mamitz as the protagonist. Some years later, with Trinidad on the ripe cusp of independence, Ismith Khan published his first novel, The Jumbie Bird which features Binti as the main female subject. What knits these works together is an acute sense of optimism towards the nation space and national identity. This paper takes a comparative approach, reading James' Mamitz and Khan's Binti as nation tropes, uniquely positioned within the city space of Port of Spain and more specifically, the barrack yard. It engages issues relating to race and gender and how these inform the creation of these female subjects as metaphors by these two writers. The paper engages the discourses of other critical thinkers who have written extensively on the subject matter. However, it simultaneously treats the texts themselves as theoretical commentary on the nation space. The conclusion is that this commentary is exceptionally optimistic.

KEYWORDS

Indo-Caribbean Literature, West Indian Literature, Nationalism, Ismith Khan, C.L.R James

1. INTRODUCTION

Ismith Khan's corpus of work is strikingly masculine. His first novel is the 1961 publication, *The Jumbie Bird* which situates a subject by the name of Kale Khan, the Pathan migrant, and his epic declension as a tragic figure displaced from his homeland, India, and forced to navigate a space and identity for himself and his family in Trinidad's urban epicenter; Port of Spain. In this melee of paternalism, patriarchy and machismo, emerges one clear subjugated female presence (and absence), Kale Khan's estranged wife, Binti who hails from Quarry Street. Some years prior, in 1929, on the cusp of a worldwide economic depression, Trinidadian visionary, C.L.R James, published his short story, "Triumph". The piece stands today as an extraordinary account of ordinary women, such as the protagonist, Mamitz, in the throes of economic deprivation and the survival measures they employ to cope with the demands of everyday life. In this sense, the title of the story, "Triumph" is riddled with irony as the reader is presented with circumstances that are so oppressive, it seems impossible for the characters to escape. My thesis is that both stories present sensitive accounts of the barrack-yard space in the capital city of Port of Spain, a space that becomes a metaphor for the nation and these two subjects, Binti and Mamitz, are elaborate gendered tropes advancing optimistic ideals of nationalism.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAME WORK

Ismith Khan's work aligns with Patricia Mohammed's ideas of a gender consciousness, "as the self-awareness and confidence of one's rights and privileges as a 'female' or 'male' in society as well as the limits or oppressiveness which being male or female still imposes on the individual to realize their potential" (Mohammed 6). As this exssay will explore, there is an undeniable awareness of gendering which pervades Khan's corpus; one which positions the Indo-Caribbean woman at "the margins of a male-centered narrative in her role as a secondary or minor character" (Mahabir and Pirbhai 4). Khan is propelled towards tokenism in his construct of gendered and optimistic nation tropes because these constructs are "a non-threatening, less radical feminist theoretical stance" (Mohammed 31). What is needed more than a gender consciousness is a feminist consciousness which moves beyond "the clichéd ideas of supporting gender equity and equality" (Mohammed 23). A feminist consciousness makes possible a woman centered "lens of understanding Indo-Caribbean history and identity as well as the materialization of theoretical notions [such as] dougla poetics" which were unavailable in decades prior (Surajbali 39).

This essay re-reads Khan's female subjects beyond gender consciousness and adopts a feminist consciousness while being sensitive to gender perceptions in different historical periods. A key concern is Khan's treatment of essentializing categories of identity. While it is not possible to categorize his works as feminist, it is important to consider how he employs literary tropes to inject gendered concerns into a largely masculine discursive mode. Drawing on a wide spectrum of Indo-Caribbean feminist scholarship, I examine how Binti represents what Anita Baksh calls "early models of Indo-Caribbean feminist thought rooted in indentureship heritage and in socialist political activism" (Baksh 74). The analysis that follows is informed by my own embodied identity as an Indo-Caribbean woman and researcher whose experiences are differently nuanced than Khan's considering his positionality as an Indo-Caribbean male writer of the immediate post-independence period; "the era of blatant patriarchy" as Tyrone Ali puts it (115).

Patricia Saunders' reading of C.L.R James' Mamitz in *Alienation and Repatriation* (2007) is helpful in understanding Khan's Binti, particularly through the perspective of the barrack yard woman as a trope for the nation and a counter discourse of national identity. For Saunders, the yard space features the politics of hierarchy, race and poverty, sex and alternative systems of order. It is deeply performative and invented, in the same way that nationalisms are. This essay considers the wider Port of Spain arena in the way Saunders considers the yard primarily because Ismith Khan does not restrict his subjects to the yard setting, although he does indeed narrate the yard space with some finesse.

Specifically, the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity is important to consider. Binti is Indian and C.L.R James' "Triumph" features predominantly Afro-Trinidadian subjects within the yard space. What remains consistent with both writers is the deployment of female subjects as elaborate metaphors for 'home.' "Since 'home' has historically been gendered feminine, the place of the woman has been crucial to the project of securing this 'true' nationalist culture. The figure of the woman, then, bears an immense ideological load in nationalist discourse" (Puri 120). Khan's work can be read through this idea of feminizing 'home.'

3. TRIUMPH

In 1929, on the cusp of a worldwide economic depression, Trinidadian visionary, CLR James, published his short story, "Triumph." The piece stands today as an extraordinary account of ordinary women in the throes of economic deprivation and the survival measures they employ to

cope with the demands of everyday life. The title of the story is riddled with irony as we are presented with circumstances that are so oppressive, it seems impossible for the characters to escape. Simultaneously, this story is a sensitive account of the barrack-yard space in the capital city, Port of Spain and the politics of space and identity which underscore one's positioning within it. It does not take long for the reader to realize that despite its apparent waywardness, the yard is a space of hierarchy and strict, socially constructed parameters of behaviour governed by kindred feminist logistics.

At the peak of this hierarchy stands the protagonist, Mamitz, a voluptuous woman who was "too black to be pure negro" (James 30). Her friend, Celestine, is her confidant, accomplice and defender in the sexual and romantic exploits which keep her at the top. The antagonist, Irene, is alienated, bitter, jealous and adversarial. Here James is invoking a kind of Afro-Caribbean feminism which would function as an important prequel to the eventual emergence of Indo-Caribbean feminist thought. The women are 'kept' by men, and this is their primary means of survival. They are given money and gifts from their 'keepers' in return for sexual and domestic services and when they are unable to perform these services satisfactorily, they are beaten, "To [Mamitz] and her type those [beatings] were minor incidents of existence from their knowledge of life and men, the kept woman's inevitable fate" (James 30). This is the overarching social code of the yard.

The notion of 'keeping' and its entailment of sex and domestic relations focalizes the intimate sphere as a space that is, according to Donette Francis, intensely political "as a cornerstone of imperialists' and nationalistic' projects" and "the understandings of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity and citizenship" (1-2). The sexed bodies of Mamitz and her cohort of women are central to a postcolonial articulation of citizenship. Donette Francis ties the idea of sexual citizenship to the mode of the "antiromance." Where Francis offers antiromance as a template for reading the novels of contemporary Caribbean women writers, I wish to provoke the extent to which the template works for James' "Triumph" as well. Thematically, the story aligns with the mode of antiromance as it is concerned with rewriting the heterosexual love plot and "rethinking alternative ways of belonging to the nation by shifting the focus to the sexual complexities of dwelling at home and abroad" (Francis 6). "Triumph" offers an alternative sense of belonging to the land and nation. The barrack space is rough, and it centralizes the violence inflicted upon women, both privately and publicly. Yet the story remains 'romantic' in another sense. Antiromance ought to defy reconciliation and catharsis. It ought to expose "the folly of believing that somehow the national, the diasporic, or the intimate sphere are privileged spaces for the reconciliation of otherwise impossible differences" (Francis 8). Ironically, reconciliation is precisely the conclusion of "Triumph."

James metaphorizes the barrack space and the women who occupy it. Saunders reads the story, "Triumph" in the following way: "The political economy of the barrack-yard reflects many of the power relationships, market demands, and economic systems at work in the relationship between Britain and Trinidad" (Saunders 34). In this metaphor, the women represent the colonies and the men, their patrons, represent the colonizers. With sex being the main currency, that relationship is an exploitative one and demands an important degree of creativity and alternative order for survival. This yard narrative makes it abundantly clear that there is more than one way of making a living within the nation in both the economic sense as well as the social. The *triumph* at the end of the story is therefore that very survival which is marked by the reinstatement of Mamitz at the top of the hierarchy of the yard and the women's overall ability and determination "to find their own source of fulfillment and even satisfaction, in spite of their exclusion from social and economic opportunities" (Saunders 36). The dollar bills which Mamitz and Celestine pin to Mamitz's front door at the end of the story and her meal of mutton and pork are prime symbols of the economic prowess of these women despite their oppressive circumstances. The triumph is a

communal one as the women share in Mamitz's newfound material wealth provided by her keeper. This is an important conclusion when we consider the Britain/Trinidad and colonizer/colonized metaphor at hand. The women only survive through communal sharing. In this way, "Triumph," too, is an optimistic nation trope like the ones Ismith Khan provides throughout his own corpus of work which romanticise ideas of belonging to the nation.

4. BINTI

Binti is the most critically acclaimed female subject amongst Khan's novels. She is old, poor and a first-generation Indian indentured immigrant. She is also one of the few Muslims, but as Aliyah Khan makes clear, "The most important historical Indo-Caribbean group identifier is not religion but race and the seeming purity thereof: "Indianness" posed in opposition to both "Africanness" and mixed-raced "Creoleness" (17). Although Binti is Muslim, she is defined first and foremost as Indo-Caribbean with all the Hindu assumptions such a categorization imposes onto a subject. Even her name, which etymologically means 'daughter of' in Arabic, is, to readers, more obviously an anagram of *bindi*; worn by Hindu women. Famously, Rosanne Kanhai uses the bindi symbolically for all that is visually Indian in the Caribbean regardless of religion: "a discursive space registering the multifaceted ways in which Indo-Caribbean women of different religious backgrounds have shaped their lives and come to understand themselves" (3). Khan symbolically employs *Binti* in precisely the same way.

The narrative perspective is dominated by Kale Khan, Binti's estranged husband. For most of the story, Kale is obsessed with the idea of repatriating to India and conditions their grandson, Jamini, to see India as home. When he eventually realizes the impossibility of leaving Trinidad, he gives his life in combat during a hosay celebration, leaving Binti to plot a course forward in the nation for their family. For Roydon Salick, she is unequivocally the "heroine" and "true matriarch" of Khan's first novel: "What Kale divides and kills, she reunites and resuscitates; what he rejects and denies, she embodies and endorses; where he fails in his grandiose scheme of repatriation, she succeeds in giving the family a new home, new life, and a new homeland" (Salick 29). Her narratological heroism cannot be disputed as she single handedly enacts generational triumphs. After Kale's death, it is indeed Binti who brings a harmonious conclusion to the plot by offering her family solutions to the conundrums which kept them in conflicting positions for most of the novel. On the way home from Kale's funeral, she channels her restorative action towards her family and in just under five hundred words, Binti is made to save them all in one fell swoop, creating employment opportunities for her son and educational opportunities for her grandson so as to achieve generational *triumph*.

Specifically, she claims a place for her grandson, Jamini, in a prestigious Western, public space, the Queen's Royal College, because for Indian women like Binti, "Christianity did not represent an oppressive colonial ideology [...] These were the roots of early Indo-Caribbean-style feminist consciousness raising in every village and town" (Mohammed 30). To Binti, the headmaster is not an agent of colonization. Instead, he is a 'good, white' man because he facilitates a pragmatic means through which her generational triumph can be made material and real. There is clearly a sense of gender consciousness here, yet I insist that Binti remains a distinct case of narratological neglect on the part of Khan and an archetypal silencing of a strong feminist subject. As Salick puts it, "Whether it is intentional or not, Binti emerges as the true hero(ine) of *The Jumbie Bird*, embodying a pragmatic equilibrium that is nothing short of heroic" (38). If Salick's discourse is emblematic of the thrust of literary criticism of the immediate post-independence period, it seems the scholarship, not just the fiction, is complicit with the romanticizing of 'woman' as a nation trope; what Anita Baksh calls "the dominant trope of woman as land" (86). It is the idea that 'home' is gendered female, making the woman a critical component of establishing the nation as 'home'. This gendered trope is a primary technique in Khan's project of nation building. Through

Binti, he demonstrates the navigation of a new cultural and spatial identity for Indians in the wake of an emerging nationalism and the decentering of India as homeland. Kale Khan is an example of how to sabotage one's integration into a new space, while Binti is an example of how to integrate successfully.

The idea of Kale as hero and Binti rests on the premise that masculinity and femininity are constructed relationally. For Kenneth Ramchand, notions of masculinity in Trinidad are historically linked with the figure of the bad john. "The term itself has early and strong associations with the yard, the ghetto and lower-class Afro-Trinidadian life" (313). Kale Khan, a militant Pathan living in the barrack space, performs bad-johnism. Although Indian, he fits Ramchand's vision of the black urban warrior suggesting a commonality in the masculinity of subaltern men. Kale achieves visibility through valour and violence and having been betrayed by Hindustan and denied repatriation by the Indian Commissioner, he, despite his older, weaker state, reprises his role as stick fighter in the hosay performance and climatically gives himself over to a violent death in the stick combat: "The old man's turban had spun loose as his head struck the ground, his hair the selfsame silver of the moon. A thin stream of blood escaped from the corner of his mouth onto the saffron-yellow cloth of his turban" (*The Jumbie Bird* 170-171). For the bad-john, manhood is violence.

Tyrone Ali makes a convincing case that the gendered constructs of the period indicate a shrewd androgynous awareness in his essay, "To me, I no man yet". I argue that Khan's *The Jumbie Bird* is wholly indicative of this kind of androgyny: "[The] quests of the Indian men to achieve a seemingly elusive masculinity in these novels eventually and unintentionally facilitate an emergence of the blindingly clear heroism and pragmatism of their Indo-Trinidadian wives" (Ali 113-114). Like Selvon's Tiger and Urmilla, Kale and Binti "become intertwined in a sacred union in which each half feeds off the other, while simultaneously nourishing each other to reveal a complete androgynous being" (Ali 119). When Kale dies, his power transcends him and possesses Binti, and she is able to save them all. "What Kale divides and kills, she reunites and resuscitates; what he rejects and denies, she embodies and endorses; where he fails in his grandiose scheme of repatriation, she succeeds in giving the family a new home, new life, and a new homeland" (Salick 29). We ought to be reminded of her message to Jamini, "I want you to forget about your Dada now, boy, forget all the things you and he plan together. All of that is old dream" (*The Jumbie Bird* 182).

Binti as androgyne is the fulfillment of Kale's manhood. "After all, manhood is more than merely physical maturation; rather, it entails the more discerning attributes reflected in critical thought, practical resolutions and an appreciation for the notion of other than self" (Ali 119). If 'practical resolutions' constitute manhood, Binti is undeniably more 'man' than Kale and she is able to achieve this through an openness towards creolization and the decentering of India. Kale, attempting to defy creolization at all costs, must die so that Binti's pragmatism can flourish and so too the project of nation building. While this does not advance a feminist agenda, there is clear evidence here of a consciousness of gender with androgyny being an "indispensable attribute" of masculine identity (Ali 122).

For a subject like Naipaul's Biswas, manhood entails a material, structural home, a *house* for Mr. Biswas. For Kale, manhood entails a return to a lost, ancestral home. As Aliyah Khan reminds us, "The Muslim mimic man appears in Caribbean literature in the form of a postcolonial person who looks to the Middle East, rather than to Britain or Europe, as his or her metropolitan cultural referent" (6). Regardless of whether it is material or psychic, home, or more specifically, the search for it, "somehow becomes indelible in Indo-Caribbean male identities [...] It comes to characterize the patriarchal dimension of men's role in gender relations to be a provider for their families" (Ali 123). When Kale dies and Binti receives the autonomy to redefine 'home' as

Trinidad and not India, the novel achieves its masculine self-actualization because creolization becomes the way for men to "finally forge their eventual sense of masculine identity" (Ali 124). The androgynous component of Binti and Kale's identities allows her to achieve this *for* him. It is hardly feminist, but it is certainly romantic.

I have stated that Binti's negotiations uncharacteristically take place in the urban space of Port of Spain where she would go "on foot, shrilly calling out her home-made product [coconut oil] in a tiny voice" (*The Jumbie Bird* 22). This space adds complexity to her peculiar intersectional positioning. I have also stated above the value of Patricia Saunders' work on the barrack-yard woman as a trope for the nation based on an analysis of James' "Triumph." Saunders outlines the political and economic nuances of hierarchy within the barrack-yard and reads it as a mirror of colonial struggle. In this system, sex is the primary commodity "used for their "productive" gain" (Saunders 34). This demonstrates the exploitation of labor in Trinidad, particularly among the working class. As Donette Francis argues through the notion of 'sexual citizenship,' "the sexual lives of Caribbean people have been matters of imperial and national state interests and central to the colonial and postcolonial articulations of citizenship" (2). How citizens use sex and their bodies in the private space weighs heavily on the politics of the public space, disrupting the borders between what is private and what is public. Mamitz and the women of the yard depend on being 'kept' or paid by men - publicly - to survive, and they provide sex and various domestic duties in return - privately.

Yet, what does this mean for Binti whose author removes the possibility that she can utilize sex as a commodity because of her own embodied identity as an older, seemingly physically undesirable sexual partner? At times, the image of the Indian throughout Caribbean fiction is one of asexuality and sterility. This is particularly true for the male subject who is often considered to be inadequate in the economy of sex. The married Indian woman is often presented as a religious devotee as well as faithful, doting wife and mother. As Aliyah Khan makes clear, "Indo-Caribbean women are subject to the Ramayanic Sita ideal of the faithful Indian wife and mother" (17). These ideas are echoed in the work of historian, Sherry-Ann Singh, who argues "the essentially patriarchal family system that developed during the early post-indenture period held Sita—chaste, submissive, faithful, and loyal to her husband—as the highest ideal of womanhood" (37). These are totalizing suggestions, and it is worth considering that perhaps the unmarried Indian woman possesses greater sexual economy as outlined in our exploration of Khan's other female subjects.

The spaces between Khan's and James' narratives in terms of ethnicity, age, culture, religion and past memory revoke sex as an economic option for Binti, advancing the deep prejudices that Indian women are not sexual or desirable, especially if they are old. Binti has no choice but to employ a more traditional form of labor. It is not a metaphor for her, it is far more literal. She scours the streets of Port of Spain selling coconut water. She runs the coal shop in front of her home. She trades in hogs despite Islamic taboos. Yet the result of her labour is largely the same as it is for James' subjects who "share in the "wealth" of various members of the community" (Saunders 37). For Binti, the community comprises her family and they share in her earnings. She fearfully struts into the headmaster's office and creates an educational opportunity for her grandson, Jamini. She even pays the tuition fee. She creates a literal space behind her coalshop for Rahim's trade and gives him the money to re-start that trade. She insists that they move into her home on Quarry Street and her enduring spirit refuses to take no for an answer. These are her tools in the absence of a commodifiable sexuality.

Positioned as an Indo-Trinidadian woman, Binti as a trope for national integration therefore functions in a markedly different way from Mamitz and the women in the CLR James' yard. Where James employs thematic tropes of "antiromance," rewriting heterosexual love and

rethinking ways of belonging to the nation, Khan employs romance. “At its core, the romance genre masks coercion as consent, since its very structure centers a heterosexual love plot and charts the heroine’s liberation from oppressive circumstances and the resolution of difference with a move into domesticity” (Francis 4-5). I have repeatedly referred to Khan’s presentation of Binti as ‘romantic,’ not as ‘feminist’ because to be ‘romantic’ is to advance heteronormative agendas and to silence the violence inflicted on women in public and private spaces. It is to idealize the future, through, for instance, optimistic nation tropes. It is to emphasize reconciliation and provide enlightenment, through, perhaps, a representation of ‘woman’ as the androgynous complement of manhood in its various forms. Thus, Khan’s writing is not feminist, it is entirely romantic.

REFERENCES

[1] Mohammed, P, (2003) “Like Sugar in Coffee: Third Wave Feminism and the Caribbean”, *Social and Economic Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2003, pp. 5–30.

[2] Mahabir, Joy, and Mariam Pirbhai, editors (2012) *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Women’s Literature*, Routledge.

[3] Surajbali, Preeia (2016) “Indo-Caribbean Feminist Epistemology: A Personal and Scholarly Journey”, In *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Theories, Enactments*, edited by Gabrielle Hosein and Lisa Outar, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 37-48.

[4] Baksh, Anita (2016) “Indentureship, Land, and Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought in the Literature of Rajkumari Singh and Mahadai Das”, In *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought: Genealogies, Theories, Enactments*, edited by Gabrielle Hosein and Lisa Outar, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 73-92.

[5] Saunders, Patricia (2007) *Alien-nation and Repatriation: Translating Identity in Caribbean Literature*, Lexington Books.

[6] Puri, Shalini (1997) “Race, Rape, and Representation: Indo-Caribbean Women and Cultural Nationalism”, *Cultural Critique*, no. 36, pp. 119-163.

[7] James, C.L.R *1992) “Triumph”, In *The C.L.R James Reader*, edited by Anna Grimshaw, Blackwell, pp. 29-40.

[8] Francis, Donette (2010) *Fictions of Feminist Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan.

[9] Khan, Ismith (1961) *The Jumbie Bird*, MacGibbon & Kee.

[10] Khan, Aliyah (2020) *Far From Mecca: Globalizing the Muslim Caribbean*, Rutgers University Press.

[11] Kanhai, Rosanne (2011) *Bindi: The Multi-Faceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women*, Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.

[12] Salick, Roydon (2012) *Ismith Khan: The Man & his Work*, Peepal Tree Press.

[13] Ramchand, Kenneth (2004) “Calling All Dragons: The Crumbling of Caribbean Masculinity”, In *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities: Theoretical and Empirical Analyses*, ed. Rhoda Reddock, pp. 309–325, Mona: University of the West Indies Press.

[14] Ali, Tyrone (2020) ““To me, I no man yet!”: Indo- Trinidadian Manhood in Samuel Selvon’s *A Brighter Sun* and V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas*”, *Journal of West Indian Literature*, vol. 28, no. 2, Nov, pp. 113-127.

[15] Singh, Sherry-Ann (2011) “Women in the Ramayana Tradition in Trinidad”, In *Bindi: The Multi-Faceted Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women*, edited by Rosanne Kanhai, University of the West Indies Press, pp. 21–52.