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## **Naïm Kattan's Multiple Reality**

## Abstract

*The aim of the present study is as follows: The first part consists of a study of Kattan's transcontinental trilogy, highlighting its leitmotifs, narrative style, and especially the socio-historical conditions it reflects, with Adieu, Babylone (1975) receiving particular attention. I will then study one of Kattan's latest novels Le gardien de mon frère (2003), followed by two collections of short stories, an earlier one, La Reprise (1985), then a recent title, Je regarde les femmes (2005), none of which have been translated to date. Having done so, this article will move on to tie the themes of exile and expatriation as reflected in Naïm Kattan's fiction, notably in the trilogy, to the writer's own professed views pertaining to the passage of his multiple being across various nations.*

## Résumé

*Les objectifs de la présente étude sont les suivants : La première partie consiste en une étude de la trilogie transcontinentale de Kattan, mettant en exergue ses leitmotifs, son style narratif et surtout les conditions socio-historiques qu'elle reflète, avec une attention particulière pour Adieu, Babylone (1975). J'étudierai ensuite l'un des derniers romans de Kattan, Le gardien de mon frère (2003), suivi de deux recueils de nouvelles, l'un plus ancien, La reprise (1985), et l'autre plus récent, Je regarde les femmes (2005), dont aucun n'a été traduit à ce jour. Ceci fait, cet article s'attachera à relier les thèmes de l'exil et de l'expatriation tels qu'ils se reflètent dans la fiction de Naïm Kattan, notamment dans la trilogie, aux opinions professées par l'écrivain lui-même quant au passage de son être multiple à travers diverses nations.*

## Kattan and his Oeuvre

Naïm Kattan (1928–2021) grew up in Baghdad, where he was born to a middle-class Jewish household. In 1947, he went to Paris on a scholarship to study literature, and a few years later, in 1954, he moved to Canada. There, he became active in publishing and editing, founding the first Montreal Jewish newsletter in French, and contributing literary criticism in such newspapers as *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, *Critique*, and especially the daily *Le Devoir* (beginning in 1962).<sup>1</sup> He held a key position in the Canada Council for twenty-four years (1967–1991), promoting the development of Canadian literature and being dubbed “la fée des bourses à Ottawa (the grant fairy of Ottawa).”<sup>2</sup> In the thirty-six preceding his death, Kattan produced a total of thirty-four novels, essays (reflective rather than formal), and collections of short stories, a vast body of work for which he was awarded the Prix Athanase David (2004), considered one of the highest honors of the prestigious *Prix du Québec* series. Kattan was the first Arabic Canadian writer to receive an honour previously granted

to such famous Quebecois figures as Anne Hébert (1978), Jacques Godbout (1985), Michel Tremblay (1988), Nicole Brossard (1991), and the celebrated Quebecois critic, Pierre Nepveu (2005). Kattan was also the recipient of the Order of Canada (1983) and the French Legion of Honor (2002). Furthermore, in 2005, he received the annual prize of *francophonie* from the Centre international d'études francophones (CIEF). In 1990, he was made knight of the National Order of Quebec. He was associate professor in the Department of Literary Studies (Département d'études littéraires) at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM), and he was awarded three honorary doctorates, in Canada (Concordia University, Montreal, 2006), Serbia (University of Novi Sad University, Vojvodina, 2004), and in the United States (Middlebury College, Vermont, 2003), where a week-long conference was held on the writer's work. Moreover, in 2007, Kattan was the first writer to receive the newly founded *grand prix* Hervé Deluen Grand Prize awarded by the French Academy "to reward every year an individual or an institution efficiently contributing to the defense and the promotion of French as an international language."<sup>3</sup>

Naïm Kattan's very first book, an essay entitled *Le Réel et le théâtral*, was published in Montreal in 1970, then in Paris in 1971, and soon after in Toronto in a 1972 English translation. This work has the double merit of having been awarded the Prix France-Canada (1971). As a landmark of Arabic Canadian literature, it helped define the field in its own right. The was soon followed by the first two volumes of his transcontinental trilogy, namely *Adieu, Babylone* in 1975 and two years later, *Les Fruits arrachés* (with the third volume, *La Fiancée promise*, appearing in 1983); four collections of short stories, *Dans le désert* (1974), *La Traversée* (1976), *Le Rivage* (1979), and *Le Sable de l'île* (1979), and an essay, *La Mémoire et la promesse* (1978), making of Kattan one of the most prolific writers of Arabic origin in Quebec at the time. Kattan's output steadily continued in all three genres—essay, short-story, novel—throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with titles such as *La Réconciliation* (1993) and *La Célébration* (1997), and up to the twenty-first century, with his latest novel, *Le Gardien de mon frère*, appearing in Montreal in 2003 and in France shortly after (2005). Both this novel and its predecessor, *L'Anniversaire* (2000), which was hailed in 2007 as one of the finest novels in *francophonie*, employ a new structural form, one that is unique to Kattan's work, as will be shown below.<sup>4</sup> Kattan's latest collection of short stories, *Je regarde les femmes*, was published in 2005 in Montreal. It was followed in 2006 by another collection entitled *Châteaux en Espagne*. Kattan's style is typically very transparent, simple, with little imagery, and in general, it obeys what Barthes has called the zero degree of writing, *le degré zéro de l'écriture*, i.e., the neutral, blank, style that came to be associated with the writings of Camus.<sup>5</sup> It is a style that betrays and conveys a sense of absence, as will be discussed in this article.

In 1977, a Canadian book reviewer described Kattan's first novel, *Adieu, Babylone*, as "a portrait of the Artist as a Young Iraqi Jew Trying to be French."<sup>6</sup> The year before, another critic titled his review, "Why an Arabic-speaking, Baghdad born

Jew is a Perfect Guide to the Modern Canadian Experience.”<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding the potentially ironic tone inherent in such characterizations, they convey the multiplicity of Kattan’s cultural, linguistic, and ethnic make-up, a multiplicity that affixes its indelible stamp on the vast body of works he produced after 1971.

In an article on Kattan partially entitled “Iraquébec,” Michael Greenstein has aptly advanced that “in order to accommodate boundaries, borders, and the homelessness of Diaspora” it would be useful to borrow the notion of “trans-mimesis” or “the representation of more than one reality in transcultural societies” when studying Quebecois migrant literature in general and Kattan’s world of fiction in particular.<sup>8</sup> A recent study on “the obligatory passages of migrant literatures” (*Les Passages obligés de l’écriture migrante*) by a Quebecois critic, qualified Kattan’s abundant literary production as one of the most representative of “migrant literature” in contemporary Quebec.<sup>9</sup> Kattan’s lifelong production was celebrated in 2002 in a collection of essays and interviews edited by influential Quebecois critic Jacques Allard, under the title *L’Ecrivain du passage* (The Writer of the Crossing). In 2005, a further celebration of Kattan’s work was published recounting his intellectual trajectory in a collection of interviews by Sophie Jama, entitled, *Les Temps du nomade; Itinéraire d’un écrivain* (The Times of the Nomad; Itinerary of a Writer).

In light of the aforementioned comments, the aim of the present study is as follows: The first part consists of a study of Kattan’s transcontinental trilogy, highlighting its leitmotifs, narrative style, and especially the socio-historical conditions it reflects, with *La fiancée promise* (1983), *Les fruits arrachés* (1977), and *Adieu, Babylone* (1975), undoubtedly the richest of the trilogy, receiving particular attention. I will then study Kattan’s *Le Gardien de mon frère* (2003) followed by two collections of short stories, an earlier one, *La Reprise* (1985), then a recent title, *Je regarde les femmes* (2005), none of which have been translated to date. Having done so, this chapter will move on to tie the themes of exile and expatriation as reflected in Naïm Kattan’s fiction, notably in the trilogy, to the writer’s own professed views pertaining to the passage of his multiple being across various nations, as transpired in interviews he gave, as well as in his very first essay, *Le Réel et le théâtral*, (recipient of Prix France-Canada in 1971), itself a landmark in Arabic Canadian literature.<sup>10</sup>

### **Trilogy: *Adieu, Babylone* (1975), *Les Fruits arrachés* (1977), *La Fiancée promise* (1983)**

Given the vast scope of Kattan’s work, it is noteworthy that of the handful of works that have been translated, two belong to this semi-autobiographical, transcultural, transnational trilogy. *Adieu, Babylone*, first published in French in 1975, appeared in 1976 in an English translation that went out of print soon after, whereas its French counterpart remained available.<sup>11</sup> In 2005, a new English edition was published in the Canadian West, this time with the added subtitle, *Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad*

(translated by Sheila Fischman). In November 2007, a small publisher in Boston reissued the book, with a new preface by the author.<sup>12</sup> The second volume of the trilogy, *Les Fruits arrachés*, was translated in 1979 under the title *Paris Interlude*, while the third volume, *La Fiancée promise* (The Promised Bride), has yet to be translated into English.<sup>13</sup>

The trilogy as a whole mirrors the author's personal trajectory: The first volume is an account of a 12-year-old boy growing up in Baghdad between 1940 and 1947 as part of the Jewish community that constituted roughly 30 percent of the total population (approximately 700,000 in 1947). The second volume of the trilogy sees the protagonist-narrator, Meir—who is never named in the first volume—in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne and undergoing his sentimental education, while the third volume is about Meir's 1954 immigration to Canada, where he settles and works in Ottawa and in Montreal.

Since *Adieu, Babylone* is not only the first volume of the trilogy but also the author's very first novel written after a fifteen-year hiatus, it constitutes a landmark that inscribes the beginnings, intentions, method, and life-long project of Kattan as a novelist. An eminent Quebecois critic has qualified it as "one of the most beautiful autobiographical works of contemporary Quebecois literature."<sup>14</sup> A 2005 Montreal reviewer, alluding to current events at the time, wrote that "if anything, the book is more important now than it was then."<sup>15</sup> A Canadian critic, echoing the new subtitle added to the 2005 edition (*Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad*), asserted in *Quill & Quire*, that in this novel "Baghdad is realized as a whole world, not the simplistic, military theater it has become."<sup>16</sup>

### ***Adieu, Babylone* (1975): *Farewell, Babylon* (2005)**

Throughout this first volume of the trilogy, narration abounds and dialogue is relatively scarce, a fact the author himself recognizes.<sup>17</sup> The reader encounters an array of scenes that make up the fabric of the narrator's adolescence: domestic life, friendships, discussions on art and the future of the nation, menial bureaucratic jobs, school excursions to Babylon, swimming in the Tigris, night picnics of grilled fish on an island, and other "fleeting, isolated pleasures that did not make up for our painful need for woman."<sup>18</sup> In fact, the torturous pangs of desire and the dictates of a conservative society where women are either veiled or altogether invisible constitute a major theme in this first volume of the trilogy. There are descriptions of the protagonist's first sexual experiences in the brothels of the redlight district of Baghdad where dwelled the antithetical, bold woman: "Nous passions de la femme voilée à la femme nue, sans transition" (we went from the veiled woman to the naked woman without transition), says the narrator.<sup>19</sup>

The reader also witnesses the protagonist's pride in his Judeo-Islamic heritage, his conviction of his predestination as a writer, and his literary debut. There are statements revealing his ardent love of Arabic literature and language, which he mastered better than most of his Muslim peers, a love that did not abate despite his impending departure for France: "My passion for our own literature, rather than being weakened at the prospect of leaving, was rekindled."<sup>20</sup> There are pages disclosing his strong *francophilie* and his discovery of French literature through his French teachers at the Alliance Israélite school; his enthusiasm for Péguy, Rolland, Aragon, and Gide—with Gide's epiphanic injunction, 'Pars! Quitte ta famille. Va ailleurs. Sois libre. Ta vie t'appartient' (Travel! Leave your family. Go elsewhere. Be free. Your life belongs to you)—and his strong desire to go to France—"My chosen country, which would satisfy all my desires, quench my insatiable thirst," where everything good seemed to be happening. "We lived in the unformed, in the pain of gestation and the delight promised by life," the narrator asserts about himself and his close friends.<sup>21</sup>

Why not *Farewell, Baghdad* instead of *Farewell, Babylon* as a title for the first volume of the trilogy? When asked about this in a 1985 interview with Allard, Kattan was very clear: "Ce n'était pas *Adieu, Bagdad* parce que Bagdad continue, l'Irak continue. Mais Babylone [...] est terminé" (It was not *Farewell, Baghdad* because Baghdad continues, Irak continues. But Babylon has ended.)<sup>22</sup>

The novel also tells the story of the end of a Jewish community in Baghdad, a community that began some 2,500 years ago when Nebuchadnezzar brought Jewish prisoners from Jerusalem. When given the choice of return a few generations later, their descendants opted instead to stay in Babylon. They came to be known as the Babylonian Jews, contributing to world Judaism by writing the Talmud and enduring the test of time all the way up to post-war Iraq, where they were active and well-integrated citizens living alongside other ethnic and religious communities, such as Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, as well as Shia and Sunni Muslims.

The opening scene of *Farewell, Babylon* takes place during the Second World War, in a Baghdad café, where the protagonist and his Jewish friend Nessim are discussing the future of Iraqi literature with a group of mostly Muslim friends:

Dans notre groupe, nous n'étions ni Juifs, ni Musulmans. Nous étions Irakiens, soucieux de l'avenir de notre pays, par conséquent de notre avenir à chacun de nous. Sauf que les Musulmans se sentaient plus Irakiens que les autres.<sup>23</sup>

In our group we were neither Jew nor Muslim. We were Iraqis, concerned about the future of our country and consequently the future of each one of us. Except that the Muslims felt more Iraqis than the others.<sup>24</sup>

Everybody spoke Arabic with varying accents and vocabulary. Nessim made a statement that night by insisting on using the Jewish dialect (full of Hebraic and Persian words), commonly a source of mirth and mockery in the ambient Muslim community. The narrator challenged his friend's audacity by speaking literary (Koranic) Arabic (used in books, in formal occasions, and in news reports). The Muslim friends who spoke the Iraqi Arabic dialect ended up paying attention to Nessim and even emulating his language, with not a trace of derision, and the narrator triumphantly comments:

A la fin de la soirée, la partie était gagnée. Pour la première fois, des Musulmans nous écoutaient avec respect [...]. Nous sommes là dans notre lumineuse et fragile différence. Et ce n'était ni signe d'humiliation ni symbole de ridicule.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of the evening, we had won the game. For the first time the Muslims were listening to us with respect [...]. We stood there in our luminous and fragile difference. And it was neither a sign of humiliation nor a symbol of ridicule.<sup>26</sup>

The “luminous and fragile difference” speaks of the internal exile the narrator and his Jewish friends were born to, under the mark of which the book unfolds. Schooled mainly in Hebrew and Arabic at the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* School in Baghdad (tied to France), the adolescent protagonist who, unlike his Jewish peers who went to the Shamach school (tied to Britain), later on opted for a Muslim highschool. He insisted on using Arabic as the language of study and literary expression, one he had a passion for and in which he excelled, but one he had to speak differently in order to be accepted, an endeavor he did not always achieve. In the words of Rahimieh, “For the protagonist as for the young Kattan, the most conventional form of speech becomes a mark of internal exile,” a fact further emphasized, as the critic points out, by mastering *Suki*, Arabic written with the Hebrew alphabet, a transposition in which the protagonist excelled.<sup>27</sup> The protagonist's skill was applied in the job he held while still under age, one that consisted of deciphering *Suki* documents for Muslim officials granting commercial permits to Jewish merchants. Thus *Suki* becomes the emptied-shell-language and the symbol of absence par excellence.

Despite occasional inter-ethnic conflicts, unlike Western Jews (inhabitants of *shtetels*) Baghdad Jews had always been well integrated and constituted “the backbone and sinews of the Iraqi state.”<sup>28</sup> In a country where illiteracy rates were very high, the Jewish community was literate, versed in foreign languages, especially English (best taught in Jewish schools). They were respected by Muslims who, considering Jews “people of the book,” never tried to convert them.<sup>29</sup> When the British marched on Baghdad in 1917 to break down the Ottoman stronghold, Jews were called upon as interpreters, and following the establishment of the Iraqi state, they held jobs in public (railways, post office, etc.) as well as private sectors, though they were not permitted to become army officers or diplomats.

The narrator describes how throughout Baghdad, districts were reserved to various ethnic groups. People usually respected these “invisible boundaries” that “isolated each group within its neighborhood.”<sup>30</sup> In a vivid passage of *Farewell, Babylon*, we are told how, having sprained his elbow as a young boy of eight, the narrator’s parents decided to take their child to a well-known Muslim healer who owned a coffee shop after the rabbi had nursed it and prayed over it in vain. After taking “every precaution to disguise [his] Jewish origin” when dressing him for the occasion, the father and his very nervous son prepared “to cross the frontiers of [their] own country.”<sup>31</sup> They walked through the Muslim neighborhoods uneventfully:

Quelle ne fut ma surprise en faisant mon entrée dans ces ruelles étrangères, d’apercevoir des portes semblables aux nôtres, des fenêtres identiques à celles de nos maisons.<sup>32</sup>

How surprised I was when I entered these foreign alleys to see doors that looked like ours, windows that were identical to those of our own houses.<sup>33</sup>

The kindly *Haj* who exercised his art *pro bono*, fixed the damaged elbow; father and son went their way unnoticed, much to the increased astonishment of the young child, “so we were not so different from the others after all,” the narrator exclaims.<sup>34</sup>

Despite this experience, the harmony failed to last. There had been a rising anti-Jewish sentiment in the thirties fueled by the pro-Nazi propaganda of Radio Berlin which reached Baghdad through Bari, Italy. This sentiment culminated in early May of 1941 in an unfortunate incident, the *Farhoud*, when “thirteen centuries of shared life and neighborliness” with Muslims “crumbled like a structure of mud and sand,” leaving the Jews of Baghdad traumatized thereafter.<sup>35</sup> At the time, a pro-Nazi nationalist government headed by Rachid Ali El Gaylani had taken over the country. That Iraqi government was allied with the Germans against the British who still held Iraq under mandate (Iraq had gained its independence in 1922). The struggle lasted over a month with the British army finally prevailing against Rachid Ali and his pro-Nazi insurgents; the ousted young king who had taken refuge in Iran was on his way back home to form a new government. Between the departure of one government and the return of another, however, there was a gap of two or three days during which the country was on its own. During this lapse of time, Bedouins marched on the city, armed with picks and daggers, to attack, kill, and steal. Their target was only Jews and the Jewish districts of town. The young protagonist describes in vivid terms his anguish and his fear of death: “I had barely glimpsed the richness of life and now it was going to be snatched away from me, forever.”<sup>36</sup> As the noise of shotguns was getting closer to his house throughout the night, suddenly stopping at dawn. His family made a narrow escape. Eventually the Iraqi army returned, repelling the attackers and protecting the Jewish population. Kattan writes that during the *Farhoud*, Muslim neighbors



defended, hid and protected their Jewish countrymen against the attacks, often at great risk to themselves.

Even though order was restored and many belongings recovered, fear left an indelible mark on the hearts and minds of Jewish families, who began applying for passports amidst thoughts of leaving the country. The situation steadily escalated in the following years, culminating in crisis. Jews were often detained under charges of communism or Zionism. Import permits became very difficult for them to obtain, and leaving the country grew harder. Hundreds fled illegally to Tehran then to Israel. Some remained in Iran. Dreams of life in post-war Iraq crumbled, as did the hopes for a world where, in the words of the young narrator: “Juifs, Musulmans, et Chrétiens vivront dans une éternelle euphorie, découvrant les joies d’une entente sans tache et d’une harmonie retrouvée” (“Jews, Muslims, Christians would live in an eternal euphoria, discovering the joys of a spotless rapport and of a new found harmony”).<sup>37</sup>

In 1947, the narrator of *Farewell, Babylon* received a long-awaited scholarship to study at the Sorbonne, weeks before exit visas for Jews became hard to obtain. The last scene of the novel is a farewell scene, with his family (whom he would not meet again till 1952, in Israel) at a bus station, heading to Beirut by bus, then to Marseille by boat, never to return to Babylon:

Ces visages qui me regardent, qui s'éloignent, que je regarde à travers la fenêtre de l'autobus, ce sera l'Irak. Tout ce qui me restera. Pourvu que je puisse en emporter à jamais, en moi le dernier reflet. Il le fallait. Ainsi mon enfance sera préservée, je ferai mon entrée dans le monde nouveau sans m'amputer d'une part privilégiée, sans disperser en pure perte ce monceau de rêves et de souvenirs.<sup>38</sup>

These faces looking at me, moving away from me, which I saw through the window of the bus—they were Iraq. All that remained of it for me. And I hoped I would be able to take away forever, within myself, its last reflection. It had to be so. In that way my childhood would be preserved. I would enter the new world without cutting off a privileged part of it, dispersing my dreams and memories.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Les Fruits arrachés (1977): Paris Interlude (1979)***

The opening scene of *Paris Interlude* is a telephone conversation where the priest who shared the protagonist's cabin on the trip to France tells him of the United Nations' creation of the state of Israel. The news does not cause the narrator any joy, for that meant the imminent compulsory departure of his family. In contradistinction to the first volume of the trilogy, this second volume has a great deal of dialogue and few

narrative descriptions, a fact recognized by Kattan himself. He explains that feature by pointing out that when he wrote this Parisian interlude, it was not Paris he wanted to describe, for that can be found in many books, but his first social encounters in the Western world, hence the importance of dialogical exchange in the structure of this novel.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout this second volume, we witness Meir, the now-named protagonist of *Farewell, Babylon*, in his daily Parisian life, frequenting French literary circles, which include Gide, Breton and the surrealists. Meir has a string of girlfriends from various European countries through whom he undergoes his apprenticeship as a newcomer to the idealized West, and he writes for Arabic Iraqi newspapers under a French pseudonym. He also travels to Germany to purge the memory of the genocide, an attempt to *understand* he is unable to achieve.

The main interest of this transitional volume—which has not fared as well as its predecessor—lies in its reflections and commentary on the situation of post-war Iraqi Jews. Those Jews are indeed “the uprooted fruits,” or *les fruits arrachés* the French title strongly evokes and the English one fails to transmit. The reader is informed that the news from home is bad. Meir’s best friend Nessim has escaped from Iraq via Iran to Israel. His brother was arrested, and upon release from prison, he too went to Israel where he shared the fate of Sephardic Jews, who were looked down upon by the Ashkenazi Jews. The Ashkenazi Jews referred to their less fortunate counterparts, somewhat derisively, as “Babylonian Jews,” as witnessed in the following letter addressed to Meir by his friend:

En Irak, on ne voulait pas de nous. Nous étions juifs. Ici, on nous reproche d'être irakiens, arabes. Partout, on nous rejette. Personne ne veut de nous. Il ne nous reste que le fonds de l'océan. Même l'Hébreu [...] il faut le prononcer comme les Juifs de Pologne. Ils méprisent nos traditions, notre nourriture. Ils veulent nous civiliser, nous placer sur la voie du progrès.<sup>41</sup>

In Iraq we were not wanted. We were Jews. Here, we are blamed for being Iraqis. We are rejected everywhere. Nobody wants us. The bottom of the oceans is our last refuge. Even Hebrew [...] we have to pronounce like the Jews of Poland. They despise our traditions, our food. They want to civilize us and to put us on the road to progress.<sup>42</sup>

As for Meir himself, he realizes that he cannot remain in Paris and that he has no future there. The Promised Land, once more, fails to prove to be the last landing place. He consequently decides to leave to the United States. His friend Nessim has sent him a ticket and some money from Iran. The last scene of the novel, as in *Farewell, Babylon*, is a departure scene. This time, however, no family or friends are bidding

Meir farewell. He is alone at the harbor and no one, except Anne, his last Parisian girlfriend, knew about his sailing from Rotterdam to New York. Meir arrives on a hot summer evening in 1949, with a stateless identity card, the renewal of his Iraqi passport having been denied.

This second volume of the trilogy, nested between life in Iraq in the 1930s and 1940s and life in Canada in the 1950s and thereafter, functions as a bridge, and the axis upon which the protagonist-narrator's transcontinental trip towards the construction of a new national, literary, and personal identity will be played.

### ***La Fiancée promise* (The Promised Bride) (1983)**

The third volume of the trilogy, *La Fiancée promise*, opens on a scene where Meir is on a train from Halifax to Montreal in the winter of 1954, with the total sum of one hundred dollars to begin his new life.<sup>43</sup> His obnoxious compartment companion is a Jew from Poland who promises to find him a fiancée, a relative of his in Toronto, hence the title of the book, *The Promised Bride*.<sup>44</sup> As plotless as *Paris Interlude*, this last volume of the trilogy portrays the protagonist's efforts to secure proper lodging and to find his place in a new society. More importantly, the narrative illustrates Meir's difficulties in finding employment. From wades from interview to interview, facing numerous disappointments, for his is a most unusual profile. He does not fit into any of the ambient ethnic and cultural molds, and he finds himself once more out of place, an oddity even within the local Iraqi community. For a time, he works for an Iraqi businessman (who does not sympathize with his intellectual and literary ambitions), selling wholesale, imported cloth. Adding to Meir's alienation, Montreal Jews at the time were Anglophone Ashkenazi who spoke Yiddish, while he was a Sephardic Francophone Jew, who spoke Hebrew. His background, which he is called upon to explain and justify time and again, disconcerts and intrigues prospective employers, including officers at the Jewish Employment Office, some of whom insist he should belong to a Christian parish since he spoke French!<sup>45</sup>

In a first move towards the construction of an ethnic-religious identity, like Kattan himself, Meir ends up founding the first Jewish newsletter in French, *Le Bulletin du cercle juif*, a successful endeavor and a door opener. As in his Paris interlude, he has a number of amorous relationships that ease his initiation to the new country, with the last woman, Claudia, herself an immigrant, becoming the "fiancée promise," the promised bride. Like a musical leitmotif, a major theme resurfaces in this last volume of the trilogy where, as in the previous volume, dialogue abounds, and the recurring theme of the multiple identities the protagonist must renegotiate and repackage in order to succeed and assimilate emerges in yet another context. Thus at the end of *Paris Interlude*, before leaving Europe for America to immigrate and to become uprooted once more, Meir exclaims: "J'avais déjà une double peau. Elle sera triple,

infranchissable carapace."<sup>46</sup> [I already had a double skin. It will soon become triple, impervious shell].<sup>47</sup>

Meir's existential multiplicity is unfortunately accompanied by the perpetual need to justify his difference and explain his trajectory (the plight of every literate immigrant in search of a career). He is constantly plagued by the necessity to account for his multiple personae in order to avoid suspicion and mistrust. This is what he writes after a brief encounter with a priest, the brother of a girlfriend, who questions him about his background:

Encore des explications. Il fallait toujours que je me justifie. Pourquoi le Canada? Pourquoi pas la France? Pourquoi pas l'Irak? Je tramai une biographie comme un vieux disque, j'étais un marchand ambulante et j'offrais à la criée mon passé.

[More explanations. I always had to justify myself. Why Canada? Why not France? Why not Iraq? I constructed and played my biography like an old record; I was like a street vendor crying out his past on the marketplace].<sup>48</sup>

In a touching passage at the closing of the novel, Meir tells Claudia of his intention to seek another job altogether, where his ethnic and religious affiliations would not be involved: "Je suis malheureux de faire de mes origines et de mes convictions une profession, une carrière" (I am tired of making of my origins and my convictions a profession and a career).<sup>49</sup> Significant reflection on the part of the perpetual wanderer! The closing of this last volume of the trilogy epitomizes the figure of the promised bride—Claudia—and sets it as the symbol for the new, last landing place both Meir and Kattan found in Canada where they were able to negotiate an identity that positively absorbs migrancy and nomadism.

### ***Le Gardien de mon frère* (My Brother's Keeper) (2003)**

*Le Gardien de mon frère* (My Brother's Keeper) consists of a series of thirteen diary entries, each forming a chapter featuring, alternately, the voice of two brothers whose names provide the titles of the respective chapter-entries.

The title of the book is obviously of biblical inspiration. It evokes Cain's statement, when in his rebellion and his jealousy of Abel, he exclaims rhetorically: "Am I my brother's keeper," and, indeed *Le Gardien de mon frère* is a tale of sibling rivalry transcended and conquered at the very end, at the father's deathbed.

Seven of the letters are from Gabriel, whose entries begin and end this chronicle, which features reflections on the brother's mutual rivalry in relation to parental love and attention, careers, girlfriends, and, as the first entry tells us, a fight over

inheritance. From the standpoints of each of the two siblings who respond to each other through the reader, we learn that “[their] parents did everything in their can to separate [them], to distance [them] from each other,” that Gabriel was his mother’s favorite and Raphaël his father’s, and that each of the two brothers incarnated a side of their parents’ character that was never fully developed: the father loved music but was a failed businessman instead; the mother loved social action and was only a cold, frustrated housewife.<sup>50</sup> The brothers themselves are of divergent dispositions: Gabriel is practical, strong, assertive and loud; Raphaël contemplative, soft, timid, and weak. Gabriel is a gifted businessman and womanizer, and Raphaël is an ardent musician and composer.

Throughout the novel, the leitmotif is apparent: “you are my brother,” “we are brothers,” “take care of your brother.”<sup>51</sup> These are statements that come back with slight variations on the theme, and the very first sentence of the novel, “A brother remains a brother,” points in this direction.<sup>52</sup> Interestingly enough, the title of the book, *My Brother’s Keeper*, is itself an elliptic affirmation of Cain’s rhetorical question. Raphaël does prove to be his brother’s keeper at the end and Kattan himself stated in a 2005 interview that, despite the brothers’ fights and disagreements, “there is the affirmation, according to which, despite the difficulties and the contradictions, there is a path one can follow.”<sup>53</sup> Does this affirmation reflect the notion of the totality and unity of Being that Kattan asserts to have acquired from his Judeo–Islamic heritage?<sup>54</sup>

In reference to Kattan’s novel, *L’Anniversaire*, Jacques Allard pointed out shortly after its publication in the year 2000, that the theme of exchange is best accommodated in that novel through the epistolary form. This mode, also displayed in *Le Gardien de mon frère*, celebrates this time too, albeit in relation to a different rapport—the indissoluble tie of fraternity rather than social interaction—the theme of exchange, intercommunication, a theme the Quebecois critic rightly considers a cornerstone in the work of Kattan.<sup>55</sup> But is this theme always portrayed in a successful light when it comes to family relations? A study of some of Kattan’s collections of short stories is enlightening in this regard.

### ***La Reprise* (1985), *Je regarde les femmes* (The Rebound, I Look at Women) (2005)<sup>56</sup>**

In 1984, Michael Greenstein wrote the following regarding Kattan’s first four collections of short stories (1974–1979): “The stories encompass a variety of cultural situations—Arabic, Jewish, European, North and South American—each characterized by a sense of absence—whether spatial, temporal, or existential.”<sup>57</sup> This is still roughly the case with the two collections produced decades later (1985 and 2005), *La Reprise* and *Je regarde les femmes*. Kattan’s world of short stories is one of wasted lives. Couples, mostly living in Montreal are often breaking up, children are moving out

and living in distant countries with little contact with their estranged parents, lonely widows endure the misery of solitude, and old couples reflect on their empty, loveless, and pathetic lives. Kattan points out in an interview that readers have mentioned to him his pessimism and the fact that “there isn’t a single love story that ends well, nothing works, and everything is bad.”<sup>58</sup> To this the author replies that the world around him compels him to write the way he does, but that after all, the title *La Reprise* (The Rebound) has a positive note to it, since it suggests the triumph of “[...] life, fragile and weak, but persistent and real.”<sup>59</sup>

In “La Reprise,” the story that gives its title to the entire collection, an old widow, Julie, who worked as a secretary for twenty years, is given a retirement party. She tells her co-workers during the speech she is asked to make: “Désormais je vais me consacrer entièrement à mes plantes, à mes perruches et à mes poissons”<sup>60</sup> (“I will from now on devote myself to my plants, my birds, and my fish”). She looks forward to her new status, but her life which had so far been dictated by work falls apart when she finds herself in charge of her own time. Her pets die, wither, or escape. When one of her two children (Marie and Thérèse) phones her at the end of the story and questions her about her ailing voice, she replies: “Je trouve mon appartement un peu exigü. Peut-être faudrait-il que je déménage” (“I find the apartment a bit small. Maybe I should move out”).<sup>61</sup> The ending thus marks a glimmer of hope towards a new beginning, or is this yet another illusion?

In a similar vein, “La Conquête” (“The Conquest”) features Habiba, a Montreal widow and Jewish immigrant from Baghdad. Her daughter, Linda, is married in Israel. Her recently deceased husband, Mourad, was in the real estate business. Following his death Habiba takes over the business and prospers. She discovers herself, her body, her skills, and her freedom: “à peine se souvenait-elle de son veuvage sinon pour soupirer d’aise” (“barely did she have any time to remember her widowhood and then, what a feeling of relief”).<sup>62</sup> She begins going out, traveling, and undergoes cosmetic surgery that leaves her looking younger. At the end of the story, however, she suddenly realizes that her time is coming to an end, and she resigns herself to visiting her grandchildren in Israel.

“Les Mémoires” (“The Memoirs”) features a kindred protagonist, Esther, whose daughter Caroline lives in Greece and whose husband, Jacob, an important public figure, has just died, leaving her to face her long-awaited freedom: “Et maintenant elle était libre. Libre et seule” [And now she was free, free and alone].<sup>63</sup> But again she finds an empty, aimless freedom. In “Se retrouver” (To find oneself), Sarah, an older woman, faces old age and sadness. She has spent her life sacrificing all notions of pleasure and self-fulfillment for the sake of the education and well-being of her two adult children, Bruno and Tina, who live far away. When finally she and her husband begin going on leisure trips, she is unable to enjoy their travels—“elle passait d’une

diarrhée à une constipation et n'arrivait pas à dormir" ("she would go from diarrhea to constipation and could not sleep")—and she exclaims to her ailing husband in a moment of epiphany: "Nous avons trop attendu, Raphaël. Il est trop tard" ("we have waited too long, Raphaël. It is too late").<sup>64</sup>

Even when they have no one to blame and when there are no longer any hindrances to their freedom the protagonists still cannot find happiness. Kattan seems to suggest that perhaps nobody is to blame but the emptiness of life itself.

With titles such as "Deux amis dans le métro," "Une femme riche," "L'enterrement," "La Mort du voisin," "Derniers jeux de patience," "Tous des obsédés" ("A Rich Woman," "The Burial," "The Neighbor's Death," "Last Games of Patience," "All Obsessed"), *Je regarde les femmes* (2005) (*I Look at Women*) harbors largely the same themes of departure, broken love affairs, and divorce, as did *La Reprise* twenty years earlier, with an emphasis on the vagaries of old age, chance meetings between ex-lovers or friends after a great number of years, sudden deaths, funerals, encounters accompanied with lies and hypocrisy. The volume is divided into three sections (with roughly the same number of stories in each) titled, respectively, "Je regarde les femmes," "Théâtre des veuves," and "Il n'y a pas d'âge" ("I Look at Women," "Theatre of Widows," "There is No Age"), and features stories—often set in Montreal—populated by characters who have failed to live up to their emotional or intellectual potential.

"Le Trio" features an elderly man, Aurèle, a widower who finds himself under the harsh authority of Irène, his married, middle-aged, and domineering daughter. In a reversal of roles, whenever he introduces his potential girlfriends to her, she unfailingly applies severe judgments on them. "Jamais il ne l'avait entendue faire l'éloge d'une femme de moins de soixante-dix ans" (He had never heard her praise a woman under seventy years of age).<sup>65</sup> At the end of the story, there is a psychological break-up between daughter and father. Aurèle shuns his daughter, and declares his love to Diane, his latest encounter, despite his daughter's usual animosity. "David était mon ami" is a story of a businessman and an engineer, two friends from the "native country" (we are not told which) whose relationship had long consisted of measuring up to one other for validation. "Je n'étais que le témoin de ses victoires, j'en étais la mesure" (I had been merely the witness of his victories, and the measure of them)—<sup>66</sup> When David dies, his friend does not go to his funeral and hence feels liberated from the "last witness" of his childhood.<sup>67</sup>

Sometimes the protagonists are losers who extract some personal glory from the city they live in. In "Deux amis dans le métro" ("Two Friends in the Subway") for instance, Xavier, a cook stationed in Austin, Texas, goes to Montreal to meet his childhood friend Sebastien, a supermarket employee. The two had grown up together as *pièdes noirs* in Tunisia and, meeting after twenty years of separation, they try to

impress each other despite their miserable jobs, failed marriages, and disappointing offspring. They resort to lies and half-truths to conceal their respective failures. When Sebastien takes his friend around Montreal, he is very proud of his city: "elle lui appartenait. Il en faisait l'éloge comme pour substituer sa renommée à son propre échec" ("It belonged to him. He praised it as if to substitute his own failure with the fame of the city").<sup>68</sup>

As we have seen above, Montreal is the setting for much of Kattan's fiction and the site of his characters' familiar world. Shems, the protagonist of *L'Anniversaire*, speaks of Montreal as his beloved city, one he invented and loves, and where "the familiarity of the streets, stores, even the faces, spares [him] any effort of discovery or recognition" (see above).<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Gabriel, the protagonist of *Le Gardien de mon frère*, is comforted upon his return to Montreal "where everything seemed familiar," and Daniel, the protagonist of "Une ville à vendre" ("A City for Sale," endows Montreal with everything meaningful in his life: "For him, the streets of Montreal overflowed with life."<sup>70</sup> In a chapter entitled "Le Roman de la métropole" published in the vast study entitled *Le Roman du Québec* (2000), Jacques Allard mentions Naïm Kattan as part of a wave of writers who continue to partake in the modernity of the Quebecois urban novel where the protagonist emerges as an anti-clerical counterpart to a formerly rural society. In this context, along with names such as Yves Beauchemin, "the novelist par excellence of Montreal," Allard refers to Kattan as one of the neo-Quebecois writers who "give Montreal a new humanity."<sup>71</sup> Kattan himself spoke of his exposure to this city upon his arrival in 1954:

Quand je suis arrivé à Montreal, je me suis dit que cette ville ressemblait beaucoup à Bagdad parce qu'il y avait des quartiers. A Bagdad il y avait le quartier des Juifs, le quartier des Musulmans, des Arméniens, des Chrétiens, etc., et quand je suis arrivé à Montreal j'ai constaté qu'il y avait un quartier canadien-français, un quartier canadien-anglais, un quartier juif, un quartier italien, un quartier grec.<sup>72</sup>

When I arrived in Montreal, I told myself that this city resembles a lot Baghdad because there were districts. In Baghdad there were the Jewish, Muslim, Armenian, Christian neighborhoods, and when I arrived in Montreal, I noticed that there were French-Canadian, English-Canadian, Jewish, Italian, and Greek neighborhoods.

Montreal is thus for Kattan the physical and mental dwelling, the habitat, the *oikos*, to borrow the critic Simon Harel's apt word.<sup>73</sup> It is similar and yet so different from his native town, Baghdad, where cultures can peacefully cohabit in their plurality. French for Kattan-the-writer becomes the necessary yet chosen vehicle for this co-habitation, much like Arabic had once been, before his definitive departure



from Babylon for the West in 1947. As Greenstein writes in “IraQuebec: Naïm Kattan’s Trans-Mimetic Disapora”: “Kattan sees Montreal as an American city that is at once francophone, European, and international, and the centripetal and centrifugal forces acting upon Kattan’s imagination thus lead to his adoption of a trans-mimetic mode of writing.”<sup>74</sup> That mode of writing is, in my view, closely linked to Kattan’s resolution of the problem of identity for the transcultural writer, as will be further demonstrated below.

### From Fiction to Essay and Back to Kattan-the-Traveler

A 1977 reviewer of *Farewell, Babylon* uses terms such as “a world of shadows,” “disembodied,” and “unreal” in reference to this first volume of the trilogy.<sup>75</sup> The critic, Spettigue, attributes that impression partly to the Canadian readers’ unfamiliarity with a world “two or three times removed from [them].”<sup>76</sup> In an incisive 1989 study by Nasrin Rahimieh, the author refers to Spettigue’s comments, and asserts that the disembodiment effect produced by Kattan’s novel has to do with Kattan replicating the same linguistic alienation and conflict in Canada (by choosing to write in French) that he had experienced and knew so well growing up in Baghdad (writing in Arabic). This further corroborates Kattan’s desire to live on the margins. “[...] He is a man who has forever lost his orientation,” Rahimieh concludes, and she supports her assertion with statements made by Kattan himself, including the epigraph to this study taken from *The Real and the Theatrical*: “je n’accepte pas la fixité des lieux sûrs et le confort des certitudes.”<sup>77</sup>

Rahimieh and Spettigue’s comments may be partly due to the deterritorialization effect pointed out by Deleuze and Guattari on literature written by minority writers in a dominant language. Absence is itself a motif that, though latent, permeates the first volume of the trilogy. It leaves its mark in *Les Fruits arrachés* where Meir becomes stateless by virtue of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing exodus of Iraqi Jews: “comment expliquer que je n’appartiens plus à mon pays” (How to explain that I no longer belong to my country), he writes when reminded that his French scholarship is about to expire.<sup>78</sup> In *La Fiancée promise*—about an attractive girl (Rose) who courts him but whom he considers sexually off-limits because she is Iraqi—he evokes a day when he was unable to respond to her advances, writing: “Elle était là, toute l’Amérique, et son visage n’était qu’absence” (She was right here, America in its entirety, and her face was mere absence).<sup>79</sup>

While those insights are relevant, we should also turn to Kattan himself for guidance in this reading. In the preface to the 2005 English edition of *Farewell, Babylon*, Kattan writes the following in retrospect, three decades later: “*Farewell, Babylon* is not a work of nostalgia, nor is it one of resentment.”<sup>80</sup> Juxtaposed with an interview conducted by Jacques Allard some two decades earlier, this authorial statement is

enlightening, as Kattan himself explains that if his novels are autobiographical in nature, it is due to the fact that he strives to defy loss of memory (*l'oubli*, which he equates to absence and death) by salvaging memory, thus challenging death.<sup>81</sup> The author adds in this interview that what he fears most is absence: "J'ai beaucoup vécu dans l'absence" ("I have lived a lot in absence").<sup>82</sup> Quoting Chateaubriand, he adds: "Chacun de nous transporte en lui sa patrie" (We each carry in us our native land.)<sup>83</sup> The absence noted by aforementioned critics may be left by the underlying "réfèrent massif," the "massive referent," that of the lost homeland—should we recall Pierre Nepveu's well-documented studies on exilic literatures—and in the case of Kattan-the-writer, the thrice lost homeland: 2,500 years ago, in 1947 and again in 1954. Conquering that void is the mark of *Farewell, Babylon*, a novel written in the absence of the native country, Iraq, and in the new homeland, Canada.<sup>84</sup> The endeavor reflects, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, the collective value of utterances as another feature exhibited in minor literatures.<sup>85</sup>

In an enlightening 2002 interview entitled "*D'où je viens, où je vais*" (where I come from, where I am going), Kattan links his personal trajectory to that of his ancestors, the Jews of Babylon who wrote the Talmud. Babylon was crucial because it was there that, in Kattan's words: "*we got freed from a feeling of exile while remaining ourselves.*"<sup>86</sup> He goes on to assert that this achievement, namely, "how to remain oneself" across the ages and to assert one's presence while "totally participating in another culture" stayed with him all his life, *even in Canada.*<sup>87</sup>

Here we come to a fundamental world view of Kattan's, one that dictates his premises as both an essayist and a fiction writer: He refuses the condition of exile on the basis that "the Exile who lives in the current country while thinking of another country" is neither here nor there, neither in the initial vanished country nor in the new one.<sup>88</sup> Kattan lost his entitlement to an Iraqi passport in 1948 and could not go back home. In order to avoid living in the "unreal" country of the exilic individual, he chose instead to call his departure to Canada *immigration* or "chosen exile," possibly an oxymoron.<sup>89</sup> In his own words: "J'ai été plus ou moins renvoyé, on m'a enlevé mon passeport, mais finalement, cet exil-là j'en ai fait un choix" (I was more or less kicked out; my passport was taken away from me, but in the final analysis, I have chosen that exile).<sup>90</sup>

Why? Because, according to Kattan, in the exile's relationship to the new land, there exists a profound refusal of the crossing, "*un refus du passage.*"<sup>91</sup> Here, Kattan again links the biblical text with both his own personal history and that of his community. He reminds the reader of how Abraham became an *ivrit* (a passerby, in Hebrew) when he obeyed God's injunction to move on and to leave his native Chaldea, fifty kilometers from Baghdad, to go to another chosen land. This is a land he makes his own by choosing it, by accepting to cross over to it. Kattan reiterates this idea in a

magnificent passage of *La Mémoire et la promesse*, an essay where he explicitly links the biblical exile to the genealogy of his own family:

Je suis parti de Bagdad, emportant le rêve d'un lieu fixe, héritier de vingt-cinq siècles d'histoire en un point donné. Nous étions entourés de nomades, les empires s'étaient édifiés puis effondrés, et nous, les fils de prisonniers de Nabuchodonosor étions toujours là et pourtant nous étions nous aussi des nomades, nous avons appris qu'il n'y a de lieu que de passage et que Dieu habite tous les lieux.

I left Baghdad and took with me the dream of a fixed place, heir of twenty-five centuries at a given point. We were surrounded by nomads, empires had risen and crumbled, and we, the sons of prisoners of Nebuchadnezzar were still there and yet we too were nomads. We have learned that all places are passageways and that God inhabits all places.<sup>92</sup>

“We have learned that all places are passageways and that God inhabits all places.” Is this to be taken as an exaltation of the nomadic state? It occurs in a chapter of *La Mémoire et la promesse* entitled “Les nomades et les errants” (“Nomads and Wanderers”) from which one of the epigraphs to the present study is borrowed.<sup>93</sup> In that chapter, Kattan makes the distinction between wanderers and nomads. The latter are at home in all places they cross because when they travel from oasis to oasis, they meet members of their tribe and they feel at home. “All of earth belongs to them.”<sup>94</sup> Their world is rich, richer than the world of Europeans who live under the illusion that they will appropriate and make ancestral property their own after three or four generations of fencing it off and living on it. “Les Nomades sont des pèlerins qui parcourent le désert, psalmodiant [...] la parole donnée et qui est leur seule demeure” (“Nomads are pilgrims who go through the desert chanting the given word that is their only home”).<sup>95</sup> Is that not the case also for the intellectual-writer, Kattan himself, or Shems, his counterpart in *L'Anniversaire*, who both inscribe their presence on their new country through their writing, much in the same fashion as the Jews of Babylon did in Iraq when they wrote the Talmud?

Refusing to succumb to the mentality of exile is a theme likewise present in Kattan's abovementioned essay, *Le Réel et le théâtral*. Since this is the writer's very first work it is worthwhile to note that it contains this theme, one of the most fundamental concepts to Kattan's entire body of work. As Douek has noted, this essay constitutes the “foundation of [Kattan's] thoughts,” which spill over onto his fictional work as well.<sup>96</sup> Hasn't Greenstein rightly asserted that “Kattan's cross-fertilization of genres forms an integral part of his migratory experience?”<sup>97</sup>

In *Le Réel et le théâtral*, Kattan puts forth the idea that three types of rapports dictate the march of civilizations: Man to Man, Man to God and Man to Nature. The latter forms the essence of one's concept of reality, exhibited in language itself. In Semitic languages there is an immediate coincidence between word and object, just as there is between man and nature, whereas in Hellenic civilization, the relationship between man and nature (and Man and God) is mediated by what he calls the theatrical, by meaning the carnivalesque, the figurative or the illusionary. In Arabic, a language whose genius is in the noun not in the adjective, he asserts, an object lives because it is named; a thing is not *qualified*, it is *said*.<sup>98</sup> On the contrary, Western thought is so heavily mediated that it cannot grasp the power of evocation Semitic languages enjoy, and Kattan concludes: "L'homme occidental est, par conséquent, un homme divisé, partagé" (Western man is consequently a divided, split man).<sup>99</sup>

In the very context of the notion of the totality of being—he also claims it comes to him from Judaism, and he elsewhere calls it desire—Kattan ascertains his refusal to live in-between two worlds, two cultures or two world views.<sup>100</sup> His answer to the existential dilemma of multiplicity, often the predicament of the migrant, and certainly his own, is *creation*, which he likens to "alternation within continuity."<sup>101</sup> Thus, he writes at the conclusion of *Le Réel et le théâtral*:

Mes deux univers ne se superposent pas. Ils se continuent, se prolongent dans le mouvement de la vie. J'ai opté pour une langue que j'invente à chaque moment. J'ai choisi un lieu que je dote de ma présence en y inscrivant mon invention.<sup>102</sup>

My two universes are not superimposed, they continue each other, prolong one another in the movement that is life [...]. I have opted for a language I invent at every moment. I chose a place I endow with my presence by inscribing my invention upon it.<sup>103</sup>

To learn how to "endow" a place with one's presence, thereby creating it anew and transforming it into a home and a refuge, means becoming a passerby who has *effected his crossing*, or translated into Canadian official parlance, to become a *landed immigrant*. This constitutes a notion present in some of Kattan's fiction as well, such as *L'Anniversaire*, where Shems, an exiled immigrant protagonist like Kattan himself, adopts his new country French-Canada so intimately and so well that he grafts his own history, and by extension, that of his Jewish community, upon the history of Quebec. Perhaps herein lies the quintessence of Kattan's writing:

Le grand mérite de l'oeuvre de Naïm Kattan est d'insister sur la plasticité de l'expérience culturelle. L'oeuvre de cet auteur n'oppose pas l'intégration à l'assimilation. Elle ne met pas en relief de façon rigide l'enracinement et la liberté de déplacement.

The great merit of Kattan's oeuvre is to insist on the plasticity of cultural experience. This writer's oeuvre does not oppose integration and assimilation. It does not contrast, in a rigid way, integration with freedom of movement.<sup>104</sup>

The above statement by the critic Harel sums up the achievement of Naïm Kattan and his transmimetic writing, for having been born, having lived, and having created his oeuvre under the sign of the multiple, Naïm Kattan evokes the very "plasticity of cultural experience" of which he is a proud specimen.

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**1**

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**2**

Nasrin Rahimieh, "Naïm Kattan, *le discours arabe*, and Empty Words," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 16, no. 3-4 (1989): 737.

**3**

"Pour récompenser tous les ans une personne ou une institution qui contribuent efficacement à la défense et à la promotion du français comme langue internationale," Pierre Nora, "Discours sur les prix littéraires" (November 29, 2007), [http://www.academie-francaise.fr/immortels/discours\\_SPA/nora\\_2007.html](http://www.academie-francaise.fr/immortels/discours_SPA/nora_2007.html).

**4**

Nora, "Discours."

**5**

Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*. (Paris: Editions du seuil, 1953).

**6**

D.O. Spettigue, "Farewell Babylon," *Queen's Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (1977): 510.

**7**

I.M. Owen, "Bridge of Tongues: Why an Arabic-speaking, Baghdad-born Jew is a Perfect Guide to the Modern Canadian Experience," *Books in Canada* 12, no. 5 (1976): 5.

**8**

Michael Greenstein, "Iraqébec: Naïm Kattan's Trans-Mimetic Diaspora," in *Textualizing the Immigrant Experience in Contemporary Quebec*, eds. Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 117-118.

**9**

Simon Harel, *Les Passages obligés de l'écriture migrante* (Montréal: XYZ éditeur, 2005), 128.

**10**

See F. Elizabeth Dahab, "Voices Of Exile: The Literary Odyssey of Canadian Writers of Arabic Origins," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue canadienne de littérature comparée*, 28, no. 1 (March/Mars 2001): 48–69.

**11**

The first French edition was published by La Presse (Montreal, 1975) and the second one by Leméac (Montreal, 1986). Quotations in French are from the 1986 edition.

**12**

David Godine is the publisher of the 2007 edition of *Farewell, Babylon*. Kattan was later invited to a number of university campuses to speak about this book. The publication of *Adieu, Babylone* in an Italian translation is forthcoming.

**13**

By the same translator as the first volume, Sheila Fischman.

**14**

Sylvain Simard, "Lettre à qui refuse le tragique," in *L'écrivain du passage, D'où je viens, où je vais, Saluts. hommages et lectures*, ed., Jacques Allard (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 2002), 84.

**15**

Mary Soderstrom, "Farewell Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad," *Montreal Review of Books* 9, no. 1 (2005), <http://aelaq.org/mrb/article.php?issue=15452&cat=4> (accessed February 13, 2006).

**16**

Andrew Kett, "Farewell Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad," *Quill and Quire* (May 2005): 33-34.

**17**

Jacques Allard, "Entrevue avec Naïm Kattan," *Voix et Images* 11, no. 1 (1985): 20.

**18**

Naïm Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon; Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2005):

139. Unless otherwise indicated, all English quotations of *Farewell, Babylon* are from the 2005 English edition. Throughout this chapter, whenever a text has not been translated into English, I give the French original followed by my own English translation.

**19**

Naïm Kattan, *Adieu, Babylone* (Montréal: Leméac, 1986): 169. This is my translation as the sentence is absent in the English edition.

**20**

*Farewell*, 176.

**21**

*L'Écrivain de passage*, 26; *Farewell*, 124. *Farewell*, 176.

**22**

Jacques Allard, "Entrevue avec Naïm Kattan," *Voix et Images* 11.1 (1985): 10-32, 16.

**23**

*Adieu, Babylone*, 12-13.

**24**

*Farewell*, 15.

**25**

*Adieu, Babylone*, 13.

**26**

*Farewell*, 15.

**27**

Rahimieh, "Naïm Kattan, *le discours arabe*, 741.

**28**

*Farewell*, 54.

**29**

Muslims consider Christians and Jews as "People of the Book" because of the Bible and the Gospels.

**30**

*Farewell*, 53.

**31**

*Ibid.*, 49.

**32**

*Adieu, Babylone*, 49-50.

**33**

*Farewell*, 49-50.

**34**

Ibid., 50.

**35**

Ibid., 20.

**36**

Ibid., 26.

**37**

Ibid., 170.

**38**Adieu, *Babylone*, 237.**39**

Farewell, 217.

**40**

Jacques Allard, "Entrevue avec Naïm Kattan," 20-21.

**41**Naïm Kattan, *Les fruits arrachés* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1977): 212.**42**

My own translation.

**43**A discrepancy of five years from the year of departure at the end of *Paris Interlude*.**44**

Kattan explains in an interview that the image of the promised bride symbolizes the promise Canada held in store for the immigrant. See Jacques Allard, "Entrevue avec Naïm Kattan," 27.

**45**Naïm Kattan, *La fiancée promise* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1983), 18-19.**46**

Ibid., 229.

**47**Translations of passages from *Paris Interlude* are mine.**48***La Fiancée*, 165.**49**

Ibid., 228

**50**Naïm Kattan, *Le gardien de mon frère* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 2003), 68.**51**

Ibid., 68, 36, 31.

**52**

Ibid., 9.

**53**"Il y a donc l'affirmation selon laquelle, malgré les difficultés, les contradictions, etc., il y a un chemin qu'on peut suivre." Sophie Jama, ed., *Les Temps du nomade. Itinéraire d'un écrivain* (Montréal: Liber, 2005), 152.**54**Naïm Kattan, *La Mémoire et la promesse* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1978), 37.**55**Jacques Allard, *Le Roman du Québec: Histoire. perspectives. Lectures* (Montréal: Québec-Amérique, 2000), 19.**56**Kattan's latest novels, *Le Veilleur* (2009) and *Le Long retour* (2011) are not analyzed here.**57**Michael Greenstein, "The Desert, The River and the Island: Naïm Kattan's Short Stories," *Canadian Literature* 103 (1984): 42.**58**

Allard, "Entrevue avec Naïm Kattan," 30-31.

**59**

Ibid.

**60**Naïm Kattan, *La reprise* (Montréal: L'Arbre HMH, 1985): 61.**61**

Ibid., 67.

**62**

Ibid., 115.

**63**

Ibid., 5.

**64**

Ibid., 14.

**65**

Naïm Kattan, *Je regarde les femmes* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 2005), 195.

**66**

Ibid., 61.

**67**

Ibid., 64.

**68**

Ibid., 143.

**69**

*L'Anniversaire*, 111, 131.

**70**

*Le gardien de mon frère*, 33; *Je regarde les femmes*, 268.

**71**

Allard, *Le roman du Québec*, 131.

**72**

Kattan, *L'Ecrivain du passage*, 44.

**73**

Simon Harel, *Les Passages obligés de l'écriture migrante* (Montréal: XYZ éditeur, 2005): 125.

**74**

Greenstein, "IraQuebec, 117-126, 119.

**75**

D.O. Spettigue, "Farewell, Babylon," *Queen's Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (1977): 510.

**76**

Ibid., 511.

**77**

Nasrin Rahimieh, "Naïm Kattan, *le discours arabe*, 737-744, 743.

**78**

Kattan, *Les Fruits arrachés*, 61.

**79**

Naïm Kattan, *La Fiancée promise* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1983): 175.

**80**

*Farewell*, 8.

**81**

Jacques Allard, "Entrevue avec Naïm Kattan," 27.

**82**

Ibid.

**83**

Ibid., " 14.

**84**

Robert Berrouët-Oriol and Robert Fournier, "L'Emergence des écritures migrantes et métisses au Québec". *Litte Réalité: Une revue d'écrits originaux: A Journal of Creative and original Writing* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 17; Pierre Nepveu, *L'Ecologie du réel: Mort et naissance de la littérature Québécoise contemporaine* (Montréal: Boréal, 1988).

**85**

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Les Editions de minuit, 1975).

**86**

Naïm Kattan, *L'Ecrivain du passage*, 22. Emphasis mine.

**87**

Naïm Kattan, *L'Ecrivain du passage*, 22

**88**

Ibid., 41.

**89**

Ibid.

**90**

Ibid.

**91**

Ibid.

**92**

Naïm Kattan, *La Mémoire et la promesse* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1978), 14.

**93**

"Nomade, toute la terre m'appartient" ("Nomad, the whole earth belongs to me"), Ibid., 15.

**94**

Ibid.

**95**

Ibid.



**96**

Simone Douek, "Naïm Kattan. *D'où je viens, où je vais*," in *L'Écrivain du passage. D'où je viens, où je vais. Saluts, hommages et lectures*, ed., Jacques. Allard (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 2002), 66.

**97**

Greenstein. "Naim Kattan's Trans-Mimetic Diaspora," 118.

**98**

Naïm Kattan, *Le réel et le théâtral*, 16.

**99**

Naïm Kattan, *Le réel et le théâtral*, 17.  
Translation mine.

**100**

Sophie Jama, ed., *Les temps du nomade. Itinéraire d'un écrivain* (Montréal: Liber, 2005), 219; Naïm Kattan, *Le Désir et le pouvoir* (Montréal: HMH), 1983.

**101**

Naïm Kattan, *Reality and Theater*, trans. Alan Brown (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), 142.

**102**

Naïm Kattan, *Le réel et le théâtral* (Montréal: Editions HMH, 1970), 188.

**103**

Naïm Kattan, *Reality and Theater*, 142.

**104**

Harel, *Les passages obligés*, 128.