
“The cultures of Orient and Occident must be together in the character, imagination, and ideas of the writer”: A Conversation with Naim Kattan

Ahmed Joudar

Naim Kattan was born in Baghdad in 1928, and descends from a longstanding Iraqi Jewish community. He began his education at the University of Baghdad in 1945 before being awarded a scholarship to study French literature at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1947. In addition to his interest in French literature, Kattan also was drawn to Arabic literature. In 1951, when he was in Paris, the Iraqi embassy rejected his passport renewal because of his religion, forcing him into exile. In 1954, Kattan decided to immigrate to Canada and has since spent much of his life contributing to the development of Canadian culture and literature, particularly in Quebec. Kattan has written more than fifty books and articles in French. His literary works deal with physical, emotional, and linguistic estrangement, displacement, and struggle. His narratives resonate with tensions especially recognizable to displaced people as they draw on the diversity of his life experiences, often located between different cultural trajectories and connecting the persistence of the past and the hegemonies of the present.

Kattan has received several important honours and awards, including being made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1983, a Knight of the National Order of Quebec in 1990, and a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur in 2002 for his lifelong contribution to international francophone culture. In 2004, he also received the Prix Athanase-David, and in 2006, he received an honorary degree from Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec.

What follows is a record of an oral conversation that took place on May 10, 2018, in Paris, France, between Kattan and Ahmed Joudar, an Iraqi PhD student at the University of Szeged. The conversation was originally in Arabic¹ and the patterns of spoken language have been maintained in this version. The speakers discuss a range of topics including Kattan's early writing experiences, the reasons he was exiled, the Jewish community in Iraq, Kattan's views about cultural differences between East and West, cultural diversity in Canada, and characteristics of his first novel, *Farewell Babylon* (published originally in French as *Adieu, Babylone* in 1975).

Ahmed Joudar (AJ): Through your activities and contributions in literature and culture, it is clear that you started writing at an early age. Can you tell us about the beginning of your first writing experience? And how did it evolve?

Naim Kattan (NK): In fact, I wrote my first article at the age of fourteen, which was published in *Al Majalla* journal with the help of editor Thu Nun Ayoub. Between 1944 and 1947, I participated with the Iraqi poet Bland Al-Haidari in the publication of the *The Lost Time* journal [*Al-Waqt al-Dha'i*] to which I contributed for three issues. At the same time, a group of young people (Jamil Hamoudi, Nizar Saleem, Khaled Al-Rahal, Samir Al-Sheikhli, and Adnan Raouf) were meeting in one of Baghdad's cafés, where we discussed how to create a new Iraqi culture and how to develop Iraqi literature because we believe[d] Iraqi culture [was] great and important; therefore, it must be spread worldwide. Our group was composed of different religions and nationalities (Muslims, Jews, Christians, Kurds, and Arabs). We did not think about differences; we had a common goal to develop Iraqi culture. We believed in the development of culture through the establishment of an Iraqi

magazine on a global level or at least in Arab countries because all the journals and magazines that were coming to Iraq were issued in Egypt and Lebanon. There was no Iraqi journal or magazine known at least in the Arab countries. At the time, we had prominent poets such as Al-Rasafi and Al-Zahawi in Iraq, but they were not known in Beirut or Cairo and their works were not read or criticized by Arab critics. After several meetings, we decided to establish an Iraqi magazine called *Modern Thought* [*Al-Fikr al-Hadith*]. These are my contributions when I was in Iraq.

AJ: Did you continue to write in Arabic magazines after you left Iraq?

NK: When I was in Paris, I continued to write in Iraqi and for Arab magazines. I wrote weekly articles in the *Al Shaa'b* newspaper that was published in Baghdad, and I was also writing in the magazine *Al-Al Adib* which was published monthly in Beirut.

AJ: In 1947, you left Baghdad for Paris to complete your studies, but after you had completed your study, you did not return to Iraq [but] immigrated to Canada. Can you tell us why you did not return to your homeland? Was it because you did not want to go back or were forced?

NK: In 1951, I was in the late days of my studies. I went to the Iraqi Embassy in Paris to renew my passport, but I was surprised that the embassy took my passport and rejected [my request] to renew. I felt I had lost my identity so I had only to find a new home. After I completed my studies, I decided to immigrate to Canada where I live with my family now.

AJ: Why did you not choose France as a new home after you were forced to be in exile, where you spent part of your life in Paris and speak French very well?

NK: In fact, I consider Paris [to be my] second birth city after Baghdad, where I learned a lot and which embraced me in the most difficult circumstances. It was easy to get French citizenship but for youths who

got French citizenship, they went to Algeria to fight against Algerians. As I am an Arab, I did not want to participate in a war against the Arab countries so I decided to stay in France as a refugee for a temporary period and then decided to immigrate to Canada.

AJ: Have you continued to write in Arabic-language magazines after you migrated to Canada?

NK: Since I arrived in Canada, I no longer write in Arabic because I am a Canadian writer who writes in French language, and all my works after immigration to Canada were published in French first and then translated into other languages. Nevertheless, I still listen and read some Arabic books and journals as well as the Quran because the Quran is great and has great meanings as the Torah and the Bible do.

AJ: You mentioned in one of your previous interviews that your first literary book was issued fifteen years after you immigrated to Canada. Why did you wait so long?

NK: In fact, I was born in Iraq, so my mother tongue is Arabic and my original culture is Arab. I love Arabic and even when I was in school in Baghdad, I was the first among the pupils in the Arabic lesson, where I kept in mind many Arabic poems. Therefore, Arabic is my language and the language of my ancestors, which I consider as a part of me. It is not easy to leave the original language and write in a new language. Yes, I waited fifteen years to write my first literary book in the French language, although I speak French fluently and have written several articles in French.

In addition to French, I learned several other languages (English, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch, and Portuguese) and travelled to a large number of countries where I learned different cultures, but I retain Iraqi culture and still have relations with the Arab and Oriental society. Although all my articles and literary books are in French, I believe that the original culture should not be left.

The immigrant writer must integrate different cultures in his/ her work because each culture is complementary to the other. The writer must not be divided between East and West cultures. The cultures of Orient and Occident must be together in the character, imagination, and ideas of the writer.

I wrote a lot in French about works in America, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, as well as South America. When I was director of the Canada Council in Quebec, I always advocated the unification of both parts of Canada (French and English) because I thought they were supposed to be together and that Canada should unite. We must not reject any culture with preserving our original culture and identity. When I visit any country in the world, I say to them, "I am a Canadian born in Baghdad." I do not reject my original identity and my original culture despite my forced displacement from Iraq for more than seventy years.

AJ: Do you think that waiting for fifteen years is too long for a literary writer? Was it possible, after three, five, or even ten years, to write a literary book?

NK: In my book *Reality and Theatre*, I mentioned how an Iraqi Jewish writer moved from Orient to West (the distinction in the life between Orient and Occident), the different relations of life and culture between East and West. I think that life in the West is theatrical while in the Orient is real. For instance, Jews or Muslims do not show their plays in the temples or mosques, while Christians present their plays in the churches. Not only theatrical in religion, but also in politics. Stalin, for example, was born in Georgia but became leader of the Soviet Union and made theatrical in the Soviet Union. Hitler, too, was not from Germany. He was Austrian but he made from Nazis a play in Germany. In addition, for example, if we take Hungary when it was under the Austrian Empire, most Hungarian writers wrote in German despite

their Hungarian culture and language, so their relationship with the German language was not a real relationship but was theatrical because of the dominance of the Austrians over culture and language.

AJ: Does the novel *Farewell Babylon* represent the real image of Iraqis' community and culture at the time?

NK: Certainly, anyone who reads the novel *Farewell Babylon* will have a real picture of [the] Iraqi community, especially the Baghdadi community. It symbolizes the image of Iraqi mosaics in the twentieth century which had different cultures, religions, and nationalities. When I was in Iraq, we were a group of young people [who] met together in order to create a new literature.

AJ: Are the events and stories that you mentioned in *Farewell Babylon* considered true and especially what the Jews were subjected to, such as the Farhud?

NK: All the events that I mentioned in the novel are factual and represented the era of Iraq between 1935 and 1948, especially the Farhud incident in which a large number of Jews were killed [as well as] the theft of some Jewish families in Baghdad.

AJ: The beautiful trilogy (*Farewell Babylon*, *Paris Interlude*, and *The Promised Bride*) represents a series of three different societies, each part completing the other parts. Why did you not mention the protagonist's name in the first part while you mentioned it in the second and third parts?

NK: Well, when I wrote the first part, it was a struggle with memory to codify the events that took place in Iraq at that time. The hero was the narrator himself. But the second and third parts shifted the style of the novel in writing the events and characters.

AJ: In the novel *Farewell Babylon*, you mention an important story where the hero's leg had broken, and his mother had to try to hide anything that symbolized Jewish[ness] before his father could take him to the Muslim district in Bab Al-Sheikh to treat

him. Does it mean that the Jews were living in isolation in Baghdad?

NK: No, the Jews did not live in isolation. When I was eleven years old, I always went to Muslim areas such as Haider Khana and met other friends in Muslim cafés. I also went with my grandmother to Adhamiya and Kadhimiyah to participate in Muslim celebrations. The Jews were working with their colleagues (Muslims, Christians, Arabs, and Kurds) in the same institutions and they usually met at celebrations or cafés.

AJ: The Jews obviously love their original homeland (Iraq). Why did they leave Iraq?

NK: The Jews did not leave Iraq but were forced to leave it and I was one of them. When I left Iraq to [go to] Paris to continue my study, I did not think I would not return to Iraq. In fact, the problems began after the chaos that followed the fall of the government of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, before the British forces could control the city. The Farhud happened and ended the next day after the British forces entered Baghdad. Therefore, the Jews were forced to leave Iraq and some of them were harassed and exiled from their government jobs. The situation may have changed somewhat when Saddam took power, since he was not against the Jews, but against anyone who never had loyalty to him, for example against the Shiites.

AJ: The term “Bedouin” is repeated in the novel *Farewell Babylon* more than once. One of the critics claimed that the writer of the novel insulted the Iraqi people by using this term. What do you mean by “Bedouins” in the novel?

NK: When I was fourteen years old, I had a passion to discover what Iraq was at that time. We (a group of friends) always went to rural areas near Baghdad and Babylon as an example of the Musayyib area. We usually met farmers there and [they] were very kind and generous people regardless of our religion or nationalism. But they were poor

and uneducated, therefore, I used the term to refer to the residents of rural areas in Iraq in that era.

AJ: In the incident of the Farhud that you mentioned in the novel *Farewell Babylon*, were the “Bedouins” the only ones who participated in that incident?

NK: No, the “Bedouins” were not the only participants in the Farhud but also other groups attacked the areas inhabited by Jews in Baghdad and tried to kill and steal from them.

AJ: We have talked a lot about the incident of the Farhud. What was the reason for the Farhud? Was it for political reasons or just a group of poor people who came to steal the Jewish district?

NK: When Rashid Ali al-Gaylani was the Prime Minister of Iraq in 1941, at that time the German Nazis were occupying Egypt. At the same time, military leaders and some Iraqi politicians collaborated with the Nazis against the British. The incident occurred during the period between the collapse of the government of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani and the British entering into Baghdad. The incident (Farhud) was almost three weeks when Jews were robbed because the Jews were rich and had important positions in the state.

AJ: In the second edition of *Farewell Babylon*, there is an addition to the title to become *Farewell Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad*. Why did you add “Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad” to the title?

NK: In the first part, I mentioned in the title “Babylon” because it represents the first place of the Jews after their exile to Iraq by Nebuchadnezzar. But in the second edition, Baghdad was added to the title because all events revolve around the character of a young Jew who grew up in Baghdad.

AJ: Has *Farewell Babylon* been produced as a film?

NK: So far *Farewell Babylon* has not been produced as a film; perhaps in the future it will be produced. But I wrote a script for

another story called “Karam,” discussing the relationship between Iraqi and French culture, and signed with a producer to produce a film.

AJ: The last question is about multiculturalism in Canada. What is Canada’s program to preserve cultural diversity?

NK: Canada is a federal parliamentary democracy that is officially bilingual at the federal level. Multiculturalism is one of Canada’s most important achievements and a key element of Canadian identity. It is a cultural mosaic that encompasses a mix of diverse cultures.

NOTE

- 1 The translation from Arabic to English was completed by Ahmed Joudar and approved by Naim Kattan.

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