

# NAÏM KATTAN, "LE DISCOURS ARABE," AND HIS PLACE IN THE CANADIAN LITERARY DISCOURSE

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IN THE COURSE OF HIS CAREER in Canada Naïm Kattan has become known for his role both in the Canada Council and as a creative writer. Appellations such as those chosen for him by Jacques Godbout, "le fée des bourses [à Ottawa]" (12), and the anonymous author of a *Saturday Night* review, "Our only Arab-Jewish-French-Canadian Writer" (9), reflect a duality essential to Kattan. Those who believe the life of an artist incompatible with that of a bureaucrat have criticized his position in the Canadian literary institution — a charge which has not hindered Kattan from pursuing his two seemingly disparate realms of endeavour.

Whatever view Canadians might take of Kattan's "double existence," they have unanimously adopted him as the very model of cross-culturalism. They recognize him as a man who has gone beyond the fear of assimilation by refusing to cling onto a single identity. In Jacques Allard's words, he is "un voyageur du transculturel, soucieux de comprendre les rapports de l'Orient et de l'Occident et tout aussi bien ceux des groupes ethniques canadiens. Juif d'Arabie, Arabe de la judéité, oriental d'Occident, occidental d'Orient . . . ce francophone québécois est toujours ailleurs que là où on le fixe" (7). It is this willingness to exist on the borders of many nations and languages which makes Kattan an enviable character in a polarized Canadian society. Kattan's very presence in Canada is a stern reminder of the need for a Canadian cultural plurality. This perception is often articulated by Kattan's critics, for instance in the title of I. M. Owen's review: "Why an Arabic-speaking, Baghdad-born Jew is a perfect guide to the modern Canadian experience" (5) or in Alexandre Amprimoz's assessment: "Naïm Kattan is an international writer. Social integration into the Canadian society is a very difficult thing. But paradoxically, the loneliness and the isolation of Kattan's characters [sic] make them rather similar to the other heroes of contemporary Quebec literature" (82).

That Kattan fits within the Canadian literary mosaic is self-evident (the 1976 edition of the *Dictionnaire des auteurs québécois* lists him, albeit as a “critique littéraire,” and *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* presents a comprehensive survey of his literary production). What is less frequently discussed is the manner in which Kattan finds his voice within the various Canadian patterns. Is he a Canadian writer or an immigrant writer whom a historical accident has brought to Canada? It is the extensions of Kattan’s transcultural spirit in his literary works which I wish to examine in the following argument. My contention is that while the ease with which Kattan moves in and out of languages and cultures affords him a high degree of artistic sensitivity, it also poses a constant threat to his literary voice. By refusing total integration, Kattan risks becoming “marginal.” Yet, he has manipulated this same marginality into an art.

Let us begin with Kattan’s choice of literary languages in Canada and elsewhere. Although fluent in English,<sup>1</sup> and in spite of the fact that English Canadians have found an affinity with his work, he insists on writing in French. For Kattan, English appears to be associated with the British occupation of Iraq, while French created a link, however illusory, with freedom and “authentic” self-expression. That is perhaps why to this day, his choice of literary language remains firm: “It was so painful for me to change from writing in Arabic to writing in French — and it cost me 15 years of silence — that I don’t think I will ever be able to make a change again. I am satisfied writing in French, since there’s a public for what I say in that language. I can write in French without feeling that I am exiled” (Simpson 36). What goes unnoticed by Kattan’s interviewer, who is intent upon fitting him into a “Canadian” pattern, is the allusion to his mother tongue, Arabic. This closing statement of the interview reveals, if only indirectly, the essential in understanding Kattan — what I will call the need to exist on the margins.

Although born into the Jewish community of Baghdad and educated both in Hebrew and Arabic, he consciously opted for Arabic and its literary heritage. His first short stories and critical pieces were published in Arabic: “. . . je me suis rendu compte que pour moi ce qui comptait c’était écrire en arabe. C’était de ma langue maternelle que j’étais fier” (Allard 12). This duality of vision is even reflected in his name, which is at once Arabic and Hebrew: “En hébreu, le nom *Kattan* veut dire *petit*. C’est une description, comme dans toutes les langues il y a des noms des gens petits. Mais *Naïm* veut dire charmant, agréable. Alors il y avait cette double signification. Du côté arabe le mot *Naïm* est encore plus élogieux. C’est paradisiaque. C’est la grande fortune d’être dans un climat de paradis. Et *Kattan* veut dire cotonnier” (Allard 11). However, the balance between Arabic and Hebrew is not as undisturbed as it first appears: “Enfant, parlant avec les musulmans de ma propre ville, dans leur dialecte plutôt que dans le mien, j’ai pressenti la condition minoritaire et je ne l’ai pas acceptée” (*Le Réel* 182). In the opening chapter of *Adieu Babylone*, Kattan’s semi-autobiographical novel, the reader glimpses this

same clash of identities. The protagonist's Jewish friend, Nessim, insists on communicating with Muslims in his own dialect of Arabic. In contrast, the protagonist chooses silence, before arriving at another solution: "Je choisis un moyen terme. Mes mots n'étaient ni ceux des juifs ni ceux des Musulmans. Je m'exprimais en arabe littéraire, coranique" (*Adieu* 12). The compromise reached by the protagonist and, by extension, Kattan is one which avoids simple polarities and insists upon complex inter-relationships. Recalling an incident in his earlier years, Kattan points to what has become a conviction throughout his life:

Il y avait quelqu'un qui m'a dit... De quelle nationalité vous êtes? Je lui dis irakienne. Alors il me dit: oui, mais c'est quoi ça Irakien, vous êtes Musulman? je dis: non, alors il me dit: vous êtes de nationalité juive? je dis: Ce n'est pas une nationalité, il me répond: Il fallait le dire, pourquoi vous n'allez pas chez vous? Il fallait, et c'était un choix à l'époque, me dire que j'étais refusé par tout le monde ou me dire c'était ma chance d'appartenir à personne. (Allard 24)

The only mould into which Kattan's affinities can be fit is that of a cross-cultural man. The title of his recently published novel, *La Fortune du passager*, aptly emphasizes his vagabond spirit. The historical necessity of wandering across cultural barriers becomes clear in the light of Kattan's biography.<sup>2</sup> But its implications for his literary endeavours still remain obscure.

WHILE WRITING IN FRENCH and identifying with its literary traditions, Kattan refuses to suppress a past closely linked with Arabic and Hebrew. He claims that his style of writing, which leaves much to the imagination of the reader, is derived from Arabic narrative techniques. Quite often, essential details remain unsaid. In *Adieu Babylone*, for instance, the protagonist is never named and although we recognize an autobiographical speaker in the text, he remains a shadowy figure throughout. This creates a sense of distance not usually associated with biographical narratives.

Kattan attributes this style of composition to what he calls *le discours arabe*; in the interview with Allard, in answer to a question regarding the prudish air of his texts, Kattan explains:

Je ne peux plus dire à cet égard que je suis tout à fait Arabe. Il y a deux aspects de ce discours arabe qui expliquent un peu peut-être mes écrits. D'abord on parle beaucoup mais l'essentiel, ce qui est le plus fragile, quand il est encore fragile en nous, on ne le dévoile pas parce qu'on a honte de cette fragilité... Dans le discours arabe, il y a beaucoup de mots, les gens parlent beaucoup mais l'essentiel est très peu dit... le deuxième élément dans le discours qui vient de mon enfance et qui est de ma culture, c'est de dire aux autres ce qui leur fait plaisir, même si c'est pas tout à fait vrai. (15)

The crucial elements in this description, at least in so far as it applies to Kattan's texts, are the cryptic and highly codified nature of language. There is a strong sense of the alien and the unutterable in *Adieu Babylone*, very little dialogue, and the characters are barely outlined and are not introspective. To borrow Kattan's own words, the essential is never said. Some of this effect can be attributed to cultural differences. Kattan himself encourages this type of interpretation through the notion of *le discours arabe*. Some critics have taken the same route. For instance, Spettigue speaks of "cultural differences difficult for Westerners to understand," which then develop into communication barriers between author and reader:

One does not question the authenticity of the representation; but the result is to deepen the shadow-effect. All seems disembodied, unreal, except in moments of sordid and commonplace reality. . . . Socially and politically we are filled in on the current movements, journalistically, and this helps, but at the same time it reinforces the feeling that with the protagonist we inhabit a world of shadows. . . . It is not that *Farewell, Babylon* is unconvincing at all, but that it is exile literature, essentially colonial, recording marginal people for whom everything important happens somewhere else. (510)

What creates the "shadow-effect" in *Adieu Babylone* and Kattan's other works of fiction is not merely a function of his exile. In fact, his thematic preoccupation seems to be immigration rather than exile. I would suggest that the roots of what some critics have regarded as narrative unease are in Kattan's medium of expression. This is not to say that by choosing French he has denied himself and his creative works accessibility to Western audiences, but rather that the constant juxtaposition of languages in which Kattan has been immersed has created a narrative style devoid of "signifying" stability.

For an understanding of Kattan's notion of languages, we must turn to his essay *Le Réel et le théâtral* in which he outlines the differences between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of their relationship to "reality." He argues that for the Semites there exists no mediation between man and reality. In the West, on the contrary, man achieves the same relationship through the theatrical and the illusory. In a passage reminiscent of early German Romantic thought, he explains his understanding of the East-West dichotomy in the following manner:

. . . C'est l'homme qui établit une alliance avec Dieu pour sinon contrôler la nature, du moins prévenir sa menace. Cette forme de rapport se manifeste dans la langue elle-même. Dans la langue hébraïque et dans la langue arabe, il n'y a pas de séparation entre les mots et les choses. L'objet vit parce qu'il est nommé. (16)

On the level of linguistic and poetic expression, Kattan implies that semitic languages have an immediate power of evocation which the West cannot grasp or recreate because of its own preoccupation with modes of mediation. Clearly, Kattan's notion of *le discours arabe* is based on the same theory: what appears as unspoken and implicit to the Western readers of his novels would have much

clearer and more concrete significance for an Arab reader. This perspective allows us a partial understanding of the writer's own linguistic vision, but we must recognize the extent to which Kattan's own Judeo-Islamic heritage is fragmented from within.

THROUGHOUT *Adieu Babylone*, the protagonist speaks of linguistic exile in his homeland. To belong, he must imitate the accent of his Muslim compatriots. That is to say, for the protagonist, as for the young Kattan, the most conventional form of speech becomes a mark of internal exile. When Kattan assures us that he considers Arabic his mother tongue, we must understand the statement in its proper context. Not only did he learn Hebrew and Arabic simultaneously, but also he mastered the transposition of the two. In this process, both languages are forced to undergo such transformations that ultimately they exist in complete neutrality. In fact, they create a new linguistic system.

In a chapter of *Adieu Babylone*, the narrator describes the use of Hebrew alphabet for writing Arabic. This cryptic language, *Souki*, creates a bridge between the two languages. At the same time, however, it empties both of their internal logic of significance. For the Jewish teenagers who are employed by Muslim officials to decipher documents written in *Souki*, the language offers a glimpse of power: "Les Musulmans exprimaient ouvertement leur envie à l'égard des Juifs qui disposaient de cette écriture secrète" (129). The narrator does not further explore the implications of the simultaneous process of mutilation and conflation of languages, but Kattan's own sensitivity to the emptied-out medium surfaces in one of his short stories, "Le Gardien de l'alphabet."

The protagonist of this story, Ali Souleyman, leaves his homeland, Turkey, at the time of Atatürk's reforms, to find support for the preservation of the sacred alphabet of his language. He believes that the Latin script which has been chosen to replace Arabic threatens the very identity of his nation. Ironically, his convictions take him increasingly further away from his own land. He reaches total exile in Edmonton where he diligently rewrites new texts in the old alphabet. His zeal gradually obscures his goal; he copies and catalogues texts without ever reading them. Like the protagonist of *Adieu Babylone*, Ali Souleyman is estranged from the language he desperately wants to preserve: "Souvent, Ali était pris de vertige. Allait-il s'arrêter? Quand et où?" (119). Both protagonists suffer from a cultural alienation which is rooted in their medium of communication. The mother tongue itself is a vehicle for fragmentation of the self. In "Le Gardien de l'alphabet," this linguistic disorientation is accompanied with physical exile. The more fervent Ali Souleyman becomes in the preservation of his alphabet, the further he is removed from his own language and culture.

This analysis can also be extended to Kattan's own situation of the permanent migrant. Like the characters of his fictional works, he too is distanced from his mother tongue. In his interview with Allard, Kattan narrates an episode which is symptomatic of his linguistic dilemma:

Il y a deux ans, il y a un Musulman, en Israël, qui a lu *Adieu Babylone* et a décidé d'en traduire un chapitre en arabe. Il l'a fait et me l'a envoyé après. Et j'ai lu *Adieu Babylone* qui se passe dans un pays arabe traduit en arabe. Ça été une expérience très dure et très étrange. Dure tout de même parce que je ne m'y suis pas reconnu, écrit dans ma langue maternelle. (Allard 16)

The inability to recognize himself in Arabic points back to his pluralist approach to all languages and cultures. In *La Mémoire et la promesse*, he writes: "... l'individu existe et son appartenance à une culture, à une langue doit être un choix libre et cette liberté comprend celle de changer de culture et de langue" (158-59). What he resists is the possibility of being firmly placed in one linguistic system: "J'ai opté pour une langue que j'invente à chaque moment. J'ai choisi un lieu que je dote de présence en y inscrivant mon invention" (*Le Réel* 188). When translated into the language of fiction, this linguistic plurality poses a number of difficulties to the readers. Hence, the narrative unease remarked upon by the critics and the reviewers. The linguistic realm created by Kattan is one which maintains a critical relationship with all languages which enter it. As explained by the Moroccan writer and critic Abdelkebir Khatibi, this relationship is essential to all bilingual or multilingual writing:

... la langue étrangère, dès lors qu'elle est intériorisée comme écriture effective, comme parole en acte, transforme la langue première, elle la structure et la déporte vers l'intraduisible ... la langue dite étrangère ne vient pas s'ajouter à l'autre, ni opérer avec elle une pure juxtaposition: chacune *fait signe* à l'autre, l'appelle à se maintenir comme dehors. (186)

Kattan consciously adopts such a model in his creative works. Because he insists that elements of Arabic, Hebrew, French, and English be preserved in his writing, he is never entirely within one given linguistic or even literary system. In this sense it is neither *le discours arabe* nor a particular "Canadian" discourse which gives him his unique style of composition, but rather a transcultural discourse "qui parle *en langues* se mettant à l'écoute de toute parole d'où qu'elle vienne" (Khatibi 63).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "J'avais le choix entre le français et l'anglais comme deuxième langue, c'était à parité. J'apprenais autant l'anglais que le français et j'ai choisi le français parce que pour moi l'Occident libérateur était francophone" (Allard 13).

<sup>2</sup> For a short biographical note, see Richard Hodgson, "Naïm Kattan," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 53: *Canadian Writers since 1960*, first series, ed. W. H. New (Detroit: Gale, 1986), 238-40.

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## PROTEXT

M. Travis Lane

Imagine a text that does not cling to any of those univalent nouns that zoo about in the pages of tidy-minded professors. A text that does not interpret, describe, express. A text for which reality is only the texts among which it takes its existence, striking off small flashes of delight at every touch — much like a firefly leaf to leaf. A text of partial similes, allusions, puns, and anagrams — fluid rather than rigid, a cross-word of cloud-shapes, inventive, casual. A text of texts.

Of old texts which, half-forgotten, floating in the skies, have figures we no longer see. Of fairy stories, of ballet, of opera and of cinema. Above all of the theatre with its artificialities so matter-of-factly impermanent, all paper, tinsel, masquerade —

and yet demanding an assent (our fingers crossed). The cardboard boat can float if we believe it floats.