Between the Tower of Babel and the Eiffel Tower: Fantasy and Trauma in Naïm Kattan's *Farewell, Babylon*

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Abstract

Naim Kattan wrote Farewell, Babylon *in 1976 in French, and it was published and translated first into English in 2005. This Novel is a memoir by Naim Kattan that recounts his experiences as a Jewish teenager in 1940s Baghdad, just before his departure to France. The book explores Iraq's multicultural society and the political and social tensions that led to the decline of the Jewish community's status. Kattan wrote his memories of Baghdad about twenty-five years after he left it, after establishing himself in his new home in Montreal, Canada, where he became a respected French-Canadian author. To a large extent, his identity as a French-Canadian infiltrates the Jewish-Iraqi-Arab story and reshapes Baghdad. this article traces the mental map at the core of Kattan's work: how Kattan shapes his memories of Baghdad 30 years later. The article argues that the depiction of Jewish existence in Baghdad and Kattan's experience of adolescence emerges between the lines of the Tower of Babylon as represented by the Eiffel Tower—as fantasy, desire, and potential redemption. The Baghdad space, in a certain sense, exists as a mirror image to the space of Paris in the tension between fantasy and trauma.*

Introduction

The Wish for Jewish Life in Baghdad

The Desire for a Jewish-Arab Culture in Iraq

Between the Tower of Babylon and the Eiffel Tower

The Zionist Movement and the Establishment of the State of Israel as a Subterranean Space

Baudelaire of Baghdad

Introduction

At the opening of Naïm Kattan's book *Farewell, Babylon* there is a picture of Kattan against the backdrop of Baghdad's landscape. Kattan, dressed in a European suit and tie, sits on the ground next to a palm tree whose crown is not visible in the picture. He holds a book in his hands and smiles at the camera. In the background, palm trees and a river can be seen from afar. It seems that this picture captures something of the essence of Kattan's work: the cut-off palm tree, of which only the trunk is visible and not the top, is metonymic of Kattan's childhood in Baghdad. His roots and childhood (signified in the picture by his sitting next to the tree) are planted in Baghdad, but his adulthood, the top of the tree, was cut off in prematurely. Kattan left Baghdad during his adolescence. The palm tree does not cast shade upon Kattan; it does not protect him from the sun; rather the European suit protects him from the scorching rays. The suit, the book, and Kattan's direct gaze at the camera signify the gaze from Baghdad to the West. The gaze reflects a longing for another space.

Naïm Kattan (1928-2021) wrote *Adieu, Babylone. Mémoires d'un juif d'Irak* (Farewell, Babylon. Memories of a Jew from Iraq) in 1975 in French, and it was published and translated first into English in 2005.[1] This memoir novel is a memoir by Naïm Kattan that recounts his experiences as a Jewish teenager in 1940s Baghdad, just before his departure to France. The book explores Iraq's multicultural society and the political and social tensions that led to the decline of the Jewish community's status. The narrator, a reflection of Kattan himself, portrays Baghdad as a vibrant yet deeply conflicted city—one that embodies both a rich, complex identity and an increasing sense of alienation. He is drawn to modernity and French culture while simultaneously facing the growing exclusion and oppression of Jews. Through his memories, he captures the tension between his longing to belong and the inevitability of departure. Kattan reconstructs the

[1] Naïm Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Bagdad* (Boston: David and Godine Publisher, 2007). There is an Italian translation as well: Naïm Kattan, *Addio Babilonia* (Lecce: Manni Editore, 2010).

Baghdad of his youth as a lost world—one that exists only in memory yet continues to shape his identity long after his move to Paris.

The book has never been translated into Hebrew, nor have any of his other works. Kattan's place is almost absent from Hebrew literature. It seems that even in his complex, multi-faceted identity as a Jewish-Iraqi-French-Canadian, Kattan managed to bypass Israel entirely, and perhaps it is no coincidence that he has never been recognized in Israel, by researchers specializing in Mizrahi literature and history.

Kattan was born in 1928 in Iraq, and in 1947 he received a French government scholarship to study at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1954, Kattan emigrated to Canada and became an important writer in the Canadian national context. He published 27 books of prose, plays, and poetry. In 1990, he was awarded the title of Knight in the National Order of Quebec, and in 2002, he received the title of Knight in the Legion of Honor.[2] Kattan wrote his memories of Baghdad about 25 years after leaving Iraq, and establishing himself in his new home in Montreal, Canada, where he became a respected French-Canadian author. To a large extent, his identity as a French-Canadian, Permeates the Jewish-Iraqi-Arab story and reshapes Baghdad.

The memoir *Farewell, Babylon* is one of Naïm Kattan's most significant works and has received considerable attention in literary research. To date, no literary studies in Hebrew have been dedicated to Kattan, and only a few have examined his work in general. Most articles that focus on his writings explore the complexities of identity in his work. Stephanie Tara Schwartz argues that Kattan does not portray his Arab-Jewish identity as a binary system but rather as a multi-layered hybrid identity. In this sense, he is similar to Shimon Ballas, who maintained his Arab-Jewish identity within the Israeli context.[3] Schwartz compares Kattan's migration experience to that of other Iraqi-Jewish writers, such as Ballas and Sami Michael. According to her, while other writers chose to address

[2] Nasrin Rahimieh, "Naïm Kattan, 'Le Discours Arabe,' and his place in the Canadian literary discourse," *Background, Foreground* Spec. issue of *Canadian Literature* 127 (1990): 32-38. Mary Soderstrom, "A review of *Farewell, Babylon: Coming Of Age In Jewish Baghdad*," by Naïm Kattan, *Montreal Review of Books*, October 1, 2005, accessed June 25, 2025, https://mtlreviewofbooks.ca/reviews/farewell-babylon-coming-of-age-in-jewish-baghdad/.

[3] It is interesting to note that, despite migrating to different countries, Ballas's biography closely resembles Kattan's. He also spent a significant part of his life in Paris and maintained a strong connection to the French language.

migration from a political perspective, Kattan focuses on personal experience, individual memory, and the process of coping with the trauma of separation from Iraq's geographical and cultural landscape.[4] Similarly, Nadia Malinovich's article examines the multi-layered Arab-Jewish identity in Kattan's work.[5] However, in contrast to these interpretations, Reuven Snir argues that Kattan's work does not preserve Arab-Jewish identity but rather serves as evidence of its collapse. According to Snir, this identity eroded due to political events, waves of persecution, and the sense of fear that accompanied Kattan from childhood to adulthood in Baghdad.[6] This article argues that Arab-Jewish identity inherently contains an aspiration for the West.

Kattan's work is unique compared to the literary narratives of his contemporaries. His distinctiveness lies in the way Western culture is reflected through Babylon, marking his path of escape and desire. This narrative differs from other literary narratives of Jewish writers of Iraqi origin. In his article, Itamar Drori argues that Iraq is depicted as a palimpsest in Eli Amir's work: beneath the Zionist layer, Iraq appears as a mythical, "paradisiacal" space from which migration is traumatic. According to Drori, Amir's representations differ from the literary narratives presented by Sami Michael in *A Handful of Fog* and by Shimon Ballas in his short stories—particularly in his novella *'Iya*, which reflects the decline and decadence of family and society in Iraq.[7] In contrast to these representations, Sasson Somekh's *Baghdad, Yesterday* preserves Baghdad, or its *cafés*, as a literary Arab-Jewish bubble. To some extent, Somekh continues this literary preservation in Israel through the Jewish-Palestinian connection.

The picture at the opening of Kattan's book marks the "mental map" in his book *Farewell, Babylon*. Mental mapping reveals how geography and space are not merely physical realities but are actively shaped by human perception, influencing

[4] Stephanie Tara Schwartz, "The Concept of Double Diaspora in Sami Michael's Refuge and Naïm Kattan's Farewell Babylon," *Comparative. Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 5 (2010): 92-100.

[5] Nadia Malinovich, "Growing Up in Interwar Iraq: The Memoirs of Naïm Kattan and Heskel Hadad," *Journal of Jewish Identity* 12, no. 1 (2019): 19-36.

[6] Reuven Snir, " 'My Iraq Was Lost Forever': Naïm Kattan and the Demise of Arab-Jewish Identity and Culture," *Canadian Jewish Studies* 36 (2023): 160-173.

[7] Itamar Drori, "Babylonia: Fantasy, Complex and Reality: On Eli Amir's Farewell, Baghdad," *Mikan* 17 (2017): 201-224 [in Hebrew].

the way people navigate, interpret, and experience their surroundings. In his book of *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch[8] introduces the central concept of *imageability* and explores how people perceive and comprehend urban space. He argues that the way we navigate a city and construct our experience of it is based on a mental image formed from its physical and symbolic features. Lynch emphasizes the importance of a city's *legibility*—that is, how easily its structure can be read and understood. He suggests that a well-structured and recognizable city allows people to orient themselves more easily and develop an emotional connection to their environment. His theory is based on studies conducted in cities such as Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles, where researchers examined how residents perceive their surroundings. Accordingly, Shaul Tzionit argues that geography synthesizes scientific knowledge within a concrete spatial context to higher order: in other words, geography is an autonomous discipline.[9]

Geographer Rehav (Buni) Rubin argues that the geographical map changes according to human perception of space. In his book, Rubin illustrates his argument about the changing landscape of the Jerusalem hills.[10] According to him, the cultural landscape of the Judean hills is the result of intensive human activity, presented to us as a combination of natural mountainous scenery imprinted with the marks of human presence and culture over centuries, from ancient times to the present.[11]

Drawing on Piera Rossetto's work, personal memories are examined in the context of space and place.[12] Rossetto argues that these memories reflect personal perceptions of space and place. From these, a deep mapping can be created: a broad view of individual memories that connects subject to space and offers a different perspective on the history of the place.[13]

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[8] Kevin Lynch, *Image of the City* (Cambridge-Massachusetts-London: M.I.T Press, 1960).

[9] Shaul Tzionit, "Homeland Studies or Science Fiction? Kantian Meditations on Description and Theory in Geography," *Horizons in Geography* 86 (2014): 109-134 [in Hebrew].

[10] Rubin Rehav (Buni), *Story Told by the Mountains; Cultural Landscape Through Time* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2018) [in Hebrew].

[11] Ibid., 15-31.

[12] Piera Rossetto, "Dwelling in Contradictions: Deep Maps and the Memories of Jews from Libya," *Ethnologies* 39, no. 2 (2017): 167-187.

[13] Ibid.

This article charts the mental map at the core of Kattan's work. I wish to show the movement present in his work and how Kattan shapes his memories of Baghdad thirty years after leaving Baghdad. The article argues that the depiction of Jewish existence in Baghdad and Kattan's experience of adolescence emerges between the lines of the Tower of Babylon as represented by the Eiffel Tower—as fantasy, desire, and potential redemption. The Baghdad space, in a certain sense, exists as a mirror image to the space of Paris in the tension between fantasy and trauma. I argue that Baghdad and Paris reflect each other in Kattan's book. Alongside, I wish to argue that the Zionist movement and the establishment of the state of Israel simmer throughout the memoir as an undercurrent, altering the dynamics and power mechanism. At the same time, Montreal, as an external space from the reality in the book, penetrates the story, providing a perspective on the writing and portraying Kattan's mental map as one that encapsulates the tension between trauma and fantasy. Kattan's childhood story reveals that fantasy in his work has a dual face: the gaze of the Jewish-Iraqi child longing to be part of Western culture, and at the same time, the fantasy is also the adult Kattan's yearning for an old world that the narrator wishes to revisit. Writing about Baghdad thirty years after leaving Baghdad is a fictional look at the past; the return to Baghdad itself is a renewed fantasy wish that gradually takes shape between the pages of the book. But alongside this dual fantasy, his book also harbors a sense of decay and despair: it is the story of a glorious Jewish community that came to an end in Iraq, the last years of Iraqi Jewry before their departure during the great emigration in 1951. Kattan's depiction of Jewish life in Iraq later shifts to a view of the decline of Paris after World War II. Kattan emigrates to Paris but remains there for only a few years, as he realizes it is not a place for Jews. The collapse of fantasy creates disorientation in thinking about the Orient, disrupting the seemingly solid coordinates, creating a story of multiple layers between Baghdad and Paris that blend into each other.

Baghdad is not just a setting for the story of Arabs and Jews; it holds a hidden history of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel. This buried history simmers beneath the surface of words, fueling tensions in the public and political space between Jews and Muslims. Opposite the metaphorical basement, Kattan's immigration to Canada serves as a narrative that is not present in the story itself. The decapitated cut-off tree in the picture at the opening of the

book, marks Kattan's childhood in Baghdad, but it does not signify his adulthood and blossoming. Its crown is absent from the picture, and so in the book, Kattan blossoming in Canada is present-absent in the story itself, but it shapes his story and gaze.

Writing the act of memory itself is both imaginary and oblique. The notion that fantasies is opposed to reality; a completely illusory product of the imagination is inaccurate. Freud argues that reality is not perceived as a problem-free given but as rather is something that is constructed discursively: memory itself is already imaginary and discursive. Fantasy vacillates between reality and imagination, with memories of past events constantly being reshaped according to unconscious desires, to the point where the story is not built from any objective facts, but rather as a complex dialectic in which fantasy plays a central role.[14]

Along these lines, Lacan argues that fantasy has a protective role. In fantasy, the tension exists between the visual vitality of fantasy and the frozen motion (the traumatic halt, the black box) of the traumatic event exists. Fantasy protects and conceals the traumatic scene that lies at its core. Lacan claims that any attempt to reduce fantasy to the realm of imagination is a distorted perception that is beyond repair.[15]

It is impossible to read the narrator's memories solely through the lens of everyday life; these are repeatedly immersed in a longing for the West, for Europe, and for Paris. But the threatening situation for Jews in Iraq during the 1940s, after the *Farhud*[16] (see also Fattal-Kuperwasser in this issue) becomes increasingly difficult.

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[14] Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and Love* (Tel Aviv-Yafo: Am Oved, 2002) [in Hebrew].

[15] Lacan uses the term "phantasm" to denote an unconscious fantasy and likens the scene of the fantasy to a frozen image on a movie screen: "Just as one can pause the film at a certain point to avoid showing an impending traumatic scene, so too the scene presented in the fantasy serves as a defence that conceals castration, the lack." The phantasm is characterized by a quality of fixation and stillness, writes Evans, but it is important to emphasize that this fixation and stillness are surprising precisely because of the intense movement, which is also present in its full vitality. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005) [in Hebrew].

[16] The Farhud is a pogrom that took place against the Jews of Baghdad during the holiday of Shavuot, on 1-2 June 1941. During the riots, 180 Jews were murdered, 1,000 Jews were injured, women and girls were raped, and significant property was looted and destroyed. The event was a collective trauma for the Jewish community, and afterward, Jews felt much less secure in Baghdad. This event contributed, among other factors, to the decision of Iraqi Jews to emigrate to Israel during the large waves of immigration in 1951.

Fantasy repeatedly clashes with reality in Kattan's book. The stories and memories mentioned in the book almost always collapse into themselves or disappear as if they were irrelevant, slowly fading away into the horizon. As the external reality becomes harder, Kattan escapes into realms of fantasy. But even fantasy slowly collapses into itself and fails to fulfill its purpose as an escape route from traumatic reality. Fantasy is marked by "floating signs" that seek to replace it with the everyday reality of Baghdad, but the traumatic experience penetrates everything. The way in which fantasy collapses into trauma echoes the unraveling of meaning, the stories fading into nothingness as a kind of recognition of the reality of nothingness and absence. The book is Kattan's lullaby about Baghdad; it is "a great poem" of one who bids farewell to the place and will never return to it. At the same time, it is a story about the narrator's first steps into the literary world and European culture within the Jewish-Iraqi-Muslim way of life.

The Wish for Jewish Life in Baghdad

Indeed, the writing about Baghdad in 1975, where Jews were no longer a part, is an act of fantasy from the onset. The Jewish quarter and its synagogues are an imagined place; it is a fantasy about a space that no longer exists. This is Baghdad from which the majority of Jews had left in the early 1950s and nearly all the rest by the 1970s,[17] after Saddam Hussein's rise to power. Two events are narrated close to each other at the beginning of Kattan's book: the literary dialogue that took place in the Jewish-Muslim space and the Farhud. These events reveal the

[17] In 1951, 120,000 Iraqi Jews emigrated within a year and a half. The Iraqi government allowed Jews to leave Iraq on the condition that they renounce their Iraqi citizenship. That year, ninety percent of all Iraqi Jews chose to leave Iraq. This wave of emigration ended a community that had existed in Iraq for 2,600 years. This was a community involved in Iraq's economy, society, and culture. After the large emigration, around 10,000 people remained in Iraq, and the number gradually decreased over the years as Jews were later given the option to obtain a passport. In 1969, several Jews were hanged in the town square on charges of espionage against the backdrop of celebrations by Muslims. The small Jewish community lived in fear and a sense of danger, and as a result, in the 1970s, the remaining Jews fled Ira. See: Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, "From Babylon and Eastward: The Jews of Iraq in the Twentieth Century," *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 71 (1996): 25-53; Dafna Zimhoni, "The Iraqi Government and the Large-Scale Emigration of Jews to Israel," P*e'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 39 (1989): 64-102 [in Hebrew].

foreignness of Jews in Baghdad. Together, they call attention to the way Kattan is writing about an imagined space, one in which Jews are no longer a part:

> Our relationships with the group were steeped in quietude. We were dealing with emancipated liberals and revolutionaries who were working to demolish the walls put up by prejudice and misunderstanding. *A few darts fluttered across this limpid horizon now and then, bringing us back to order. We rejected their stigmata and soon ignore our wounds.* They were merely scratches on our self-respect.[18] [my highlighting]

> Two weeks after the events, the fever of war had passed. I explored the city again, saw that it was marked by its wounds. At the start of the war of liberation, the signs on the stores had been hastily whitewashed. All those who had displayed their modernism with Latin characters printed above their Arabic names had erased with a brush stroke the mark of colonization. No businessman wanted to leave any doubt about how he felt towards the language of the imperialist enemy.[19]

Kattan writes about Bagdad that no longer exists; he realizes that this world is gradually vanishing: "A few darts fluttered across this limpid horizon now and then, bringing us back to order. We rejected their stigmata and soon ignore our wounds."[20] Baghdad after the Farhud (1941), is a space where Jews reduce their presence in the face of rising Arab nationalism. A sense of terror, alienation, and fear pervades the public sphere. Even in the liberal space, cracks appear: Jews must return to the prevalent order and erase the wounds from their bodies. In both spaces, there is no recognition of Jewish existence; instead, there is a long process of reducing the Jewish space within Muslim life in Baghdad. These descriptions at the beginning of the book reveal the alienation felt by the narrator as he brings Jewish life in Baghdad back to life. They touch upon the later knowledge that the reader has—that Jewish existence in Baghdad was completely eradicated.

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[18] Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon*, 13
[19] Ibid., 25
[20] Ibid., 13.

The Desire for a Jewish-Arab Culture in Iraq

The book opens with the narrator's and his friend's desire to be an integral part of Iraqi Muslim literature and culture. In a joint literary meeting between Jews and Muslims in Baghdad, Kattan describes the breakthrough into Muslim culture:

> We got together at the Yassin café every evening making plans for the future based on our day's reading. [...] That evening was marked by unusual note. Nessim spoke in the Jewish dialect. We were the only Jews in the group. All the others, except for Chaldean and an Armenian, were Muslims and this dialect serves as our common language. In Iraq the presence of a single in a group was enough for his dialect to be imposed. [...] Semi-literate Jews always stunted their phrases with one or two Muslim terms when they spoke to other Jews. Borrowing a few words from the Muslims proved that one had dealing with them; that one associated with them and one was not content with the poor company of other Jews. [...] It was unusual then for Nessim to speak in his own accent among so many Muslims [...]. He was speaking to Nazar, Said and others. [...] Nessim persisted, straight-faced. It was as though he were taking special care to choose all the Jewish words that usually got a laugh from Muslims. Imperturbably, he pleaded Balzac's case and talked of his enthusiasm for Stendhal, whom he had just discovered. Like a coward, I chose silence. Still displaying all his enthusiasm for the French novel, Nessim called on me to participate. Finally, he asked me a question directly. It was useless for me to escape. He would persist. I chose a middle course. My words were neither those of the Jews nor the Muslims. I spoke in literary Arabic, the Arabic of the Koran. Then, in a supercilious tone and with contained anger, Nessim corrected me: "You mean" and he translated into perfect Jewish dialect. He compressed his lips in a gesture of hatred. He exaggerated our accent. I could see in his look a mixture of sorrow and commiseration. I was betraying him. I was ashamed to utter in the presence of others the words of intimacy, of home, of friendship. Nessim was forcing me to take a stand against the solidarity of the group.

> I could not reject our common language without humiliating myself. It was no longer the language of friendship, but that of the clan. I listened to myself and the Jewish words stood out in all their strangeness, coldly naked. My sentences were frozen. Before I uttered them, I heard them echo in my ears. I was reciting a lesson I had learned. I slipped in a French word. Nessim, pitiless censor, immediately translated into the Jewish dialect.[21]

In front of a liberal audience composed of Muslims, Armenians, and Jews, Nessim (Kattan's friend) chooses for the first time to deliver his speech in the Jewish-Iraqi dialect, carefully selecting his words. It seems that Nessim's attempt to speak Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic in front of a Muslim audience is an effort that embodies courage, anger, and fear simultaneously. The Jewish-Iraqi language spoken in the presence of Muslims reflects Nessim's desire and fear of establishing a space for a more shared and equal existence between Jews and Muslims in Iraq. Nessim's desire to engage in a Jewish-Muslim dialogue in the public sphere is not only a future aspiration; I argue that his speech also echoes the long history of Jews in Iraq alongside Muslims for 2,000 years. Jewish culture is part of Baghdad, part of the vast Arab culture, from Saadia Gaon, the Babylonian Talmud, to Baghdad at the beginning of the 20th century. Nessim's speech seeks to take the Jewish-Arabic dialect from the limited Jewish space into the public language, thus creating legitimacy for the Jewish existence in Baghdad. Kattan opens his story with this scene, marking the Jews' past wish in Baghdad and his personal childhood wish: to be an equal part of Iraqi culture and Baghdad.[22]

But even during the grand moments of the speech, cracks emerge that undermine the great celebration taking place at the literary event. When Nessim asks Kattan to come to the stage and say a few words, Kattan cannot speak Jewish-Arabic in front of Muslims and instead speaks Muslim-Arabic, occasionally slipping into

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[21] Ibid., 8-10.

[22] In his article, Reuven Snir argues that the national flourishing in Baghdad under British rule and thereafter led to a Jewish-Muslim partnership in liberal and communist circles. Muslim writers frequently met with Jewish writers and engaged in a fruitful creative dialogue. Reuven Snir, "*Jewish-Muslim Relations in the Press of Iraqi Jews," Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 63 (2005): 5-40 [in Hebrew]; Sasson Somekh, *Bagdad Yesterday*, (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2004) [in Hebrew].

French. Interestingly, the Jewish-Muslim literary evening revolves specifically around European literature and Balzac's work. The Jewish-Arab partnership here, paradoxically in Iraq, exists only through the gaze towards the West and not through Arabic or Jewish writing in Iraq. What is Balzac's literary role in the scene before us? It seems that Balzac and many other European writers mentioned throughout the work function as a code name, as a wish, as a double fantasy: it is a fantasy of a young boy longing to be part of Iraqi culture, and at the same time, it is a fantasy of a boy who wishes to discover the world and learn about European culture and literature. But this double system also marks the spatial coordinates of Canada: it is also the fantasy of an adult narrator who wishes to return to Baghdad and trace the marks and signs that made him a respected writer in Canada.[23] Just as Hansel and Gretel left breadcrumbs to mark their way back home, so too does the narrator leave the names of European writers between the pages of the book as traces and signs as he returns to sail through the memories of the past. They serve as a protective guardrail that guides the narrator back home to Canada.

Naïm Kattan's story is unique in the Canadian context: he immigrated from Baghdad, which was under British rule for some years and was primarily an Anglophile, yet he chose French. He emigrated to Canada, settled in Montreal, and continued to write in French and to preserve the French language. This occurred against a backdrop of cultural struggles between the dominant English culture and French-speaking groups: French-speaking Canadians and Jews who emigrated from Morocco and chose to preserve French culture. The struggle of the French-speaking, Sephardic Jewish community in Canada was not only against English Canadians but also against Ashkenazi Jews, most of whom sought to maintain the English language.

Thus, the French words to which the narrator escapes are like "small black holes" in the language that reveal the gap between Jews and Arabs. At first, they seem harmless, but gradually the black holes expand and turn into sinkholes that

[23] Roy Orel Shukrun and Aviad Moreno, "Rethinking Moroccan Transnationalism: Sephardism, Decolonization, and Activism between Israel and Montreal," *American Jewish History* 107 no. 2-3 (2023): 659-688; Gerald Tulchinsky, *Canada's Jews: A People Journey* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 427-459. Notably, Kattan received numerous awards and recognitions for his preservation of the French language: in 1984, he was awarded the title of Officer of the Order of Canada; in 1990, he received the title of "Knight" in the National Order of Quebec; and in 2002, he was named a Knight of the Legion of Honor (a significant honor in France).

threaten to swallow the Arabic language into them. The sentences themselves indicate the height to which the story soars, but also its collapse: just like the gap between the high and the low in the picture at the beginning of the book—it seems that even in this rich diglossia, the narrator does not find his voice.

The gap between the reality and the narrator's wish to be part of Arab-Iraqi culture and to integrate into the "new Iraq" after the end of the British mandate, gradually widens throughout the novel. Reuven Snir has shown that Kattan published poems and articles in Iraqi journals in Baghdad.[24] Additionally, Kattan and Nessim chose not to enroll in the Jewish Shamash School, where most Jewish students enrolled (the scholar Sasson Somekh studied at there), but instead, they chose to stay in their day jobs and study at the Muslim school. Their desire to be part of Muslim culture, to know the Quran, to be familiar with the central writers of Iraq, and thus be part of Iraqi culture, is what was within their realm of visibility. Despite the fear that was burrowed in them when studying with Muslims, the two friends chose the school out of a desire to integrate into their Muslim environment.

Two factors, however, change the narrator's worldview and lead him to consider emigration to other places. The first was the aforementioned Farhud; the second was the treatment they received in school: despite Nessim's and the narrator's attempts to be part of Muslim society, they are harassed by students and teachers alike. For example, Kattan describes how they raised their hands when they knew the answers to the teacher's questions, but even though no Muslim student raised their hand, the teacher did not give them permission to speak.[25] Kattan also describes the harassment and violence from the Muslim children towards both of them and the fear of going to school. Kattan and Nessim increasingly feel like outsiders in Baghdad, as if they are not welcomed. The experience of alienation abruptly halts the wish to be part of Arab Muslim society.

Between the Tower of Babylon and the Eiffel Tower

[24] Reuven Snir, " 'My Iraq was lost Forever:' Naïm Kattan and the demise of Arab-Jewish identity and Culture," *Canadian Jewish studies* 36 (2023): 160-173.

[25] Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon*, 114.

In contrast to Kattan's rising sense of alienation in Baghdad, the desire for French culture grows. The French words, spoken at the beginning of the memoir, serve as an escape for the narrator from the complexity of the situation between Jews and Arabs and gain more and more prominence in the story. Thus, French gains more and more power against the backdrop of life in Baghdad.

> Our energy was boundless. We were being crushed by a society that seemed increasingly oppressive, insensitive to our exaltations, to the driving power of our progress. We followed the exploits of the Chinese revolutionaries who were setting an example for us, accomplishing the action we only dreamed of. I had read Aragon's *Le Crève-coeur*, published in Lebanon by the Free French. I translated parts of it into Arabic. His love of France matched my own, echoed it. My chosen country, which would satisfy all my desires, quenched my insatiable thirst. France, wounded and besieged by barbarians, responded to my impatience to sing my own praises of that legendary land, free at last, opening its gates and its arms to those whose lips had tasted the wine of the West and now were waiting for the intoxication it would bring. Lebanon and Syria had just escaped the authority of Vichy, and General de Gaulle's representatives were already in place.
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> Free-French emissaries had come to supervise our French examinations. [...] I looked avidly at my examiner. He was the first Frenchman I had ever seen. This man was of the race of Molière and Baudelaire. I endowed him with magical powers. Only later did I realize to what extent the oral examination had been one of the most decisive moments in my life. The French delegate, who seemed too young to be serious and who radiated a peculiarly occidental kind of good looks, asked me, without rolling his r's, to explain the Baudelaire poem to him. I could not do it. Patiently my examiner explained the meaning of the word "ostensoir" (monstrance). I discovered through his words that France concealed a thousand concrete details, that she had an everyday life and a religious tradition that escaped me completely, that no book had revealed yet to me. In Baghdad, where there was no one to contradict me, I had acquired an exclusive competence that no one questioned; and now in the presence of this Frenchman, I felt

> ignorant. He was showing me that it was not enough to know the names of a few French writers and to read some of their books. The examiner did not seem to have noticed Aragon's poem. And with reason. He surely was completely unaware of the existence of his great compatriot. Otherwise, he would have been struck by the homage I was paying to the singer of Free France, his own country. I turned the page of my notebook and stuck the page under his eyes, both hesitant and condescending. "Yes. I saw that. It's a nice poem," he said, without the slightest surprise. "You've heard of Aragon, have you?" I asked. "Yes, of course," he said. "He's a friend of mine. But I haven't seen him for years." What was he saying? "Do you mean you actually know Aragon?" "Yes, of course." he replied, laughing. I held out my notebook with a trembling hand. "Will you write your name here, please?" He did so, in all seriousness. I forgot the examination, the poems, even Aragon himself. I was in the presence of a living representative of the kingdom inhabited by people whose names appeared on the first pages of French books. I was no longer listening to distant voices.[26]

The entire passage is enveloped in magic: the French matriculation exam—although Kattan fails the first time—becomes his ticket to Paris and French literature. The joy of seeing a French person for the first time—"like Baudelaire"—is likened to an angel descending from heaven. Like in a dream, the whole reality blurs from the joy of the moment:

> Suddenly Baghdad seemed to burst with a thousand new lights. This deserter from a world that was buried in books had a magical appeal for me. I could not even look at him. He was surrounded by the shadow of my exaltation. I listened to him complain about the oppressive heat.[27]

The lights of the city of Paris are bright enough to illuminate Baghdad: they blend together like an illusion, joined by a kind of dance including both the French

[26] Ibid., 115-117.
[27] Ibid., 117.

person sitting across from him and the great poets of French culture on whom he is now being
tested. What we have here, therefore, is a reality in the status of fantasy, of desire, of wish. In Lacanian terms, this can be described as the tension between the visual-cinematic vitality of fantasy and the abrupt halt of movement, the freeze, just before the traumatic event occurs. In narrative terms, this is merely a possibility, but they succeed in halting the entire reality: this is the power of fantasy. It stops the occurrence, and we are drawn into it, escaping from reality. It is the great power of the pause just before the image continues into the traumatic event.[28]

The narrator's figure is excited, drifting into imagination, it is essentially the Tower of Babylon being written in French, through the works of the great poets of France, and perhaps this is already a Tower of Babylon echoing within it the Eiffel Tower proudly standing tall. But the Eiffel Tower, unlike the Tower of Babylon, does not collapse. It is a tower whose existence remains stable and secure to this day, offering a view of its beautiful and great power from which one feels safe. The French language and its literature are a safe ground to which the narrator can escape and soar high.

In contrast to the Eiffel Tower, the story tells of the collapse of the Biblical Tower of Babylon, gradually being destroyed in the reality of the 1940s in Baghdad. The title *Farewell, Babylon* echoes not only the end of history but the end of the myth of the Tower of Babylon. For example, unlike Sasson Somekh who chose a more realistic title *Baghdad Yesterday*, it seems that the gap between Baghdad and Babylon is the gap between reality and fantasy. The name Babylon echoes the glorious culture of Babylon: The Babylonian Talmud and the extensive Jewish-Babylonian writing. It is also the Biblical Babylon, marking from before both development of Christianity and the rise of Islam until the 1940s. But it is also a Tower of Babylon built from small moments, from Jewish life experiences, from family life events and the narrator's formative memories of Babylon: the book is made up of memories, sometimes unrelated, told but fading into the horizon as they came, with no introduction or continuation. These small memories from Baghdad are like bubbles that the narrator keeps within him, a way of life from childhood that will never return. But they rise higher in his book, becoming a

[28] Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 207 [in Hebrew].

coming-of-age story of the narrator from Babylon to Paris. So, from the Tower of Babylon, the Eiffel Tower emerges, looking at us through the words.

The Zionist Movement and the Establishment of the State of Israel as a Subterranean Space

Beneath the Jewish-Muslim space in Baghdad, another space rumbles below the surface, altering the balance of power on the Iraqi street above. The events of the Farhud lead the Jewish community to establish shelters and basements where they store weapons for self-defense. In these basements, the ideology of the Zionist movement and the return to Israel after 2,000 years of exile also simmer as a possible solution to the situation of the Jews in Baghdad. The Zionist movement in Iraq was a minority movement among the Jews. Members of the movement met in the basements, where they engaged in activities, training, learning Hebrew, and publishing articles. The Zionist movement and the idea of establishing the State of Israel rumble below in the metaphorical basement in Kattan's mental map as well.

In *La Poétique de l'espace*, Gaston Bachelard argues that the basement is a place for subterranean schemes: it rumbles below and drives matters to the surface without us noticing.[29] The basement is the dark entity of the house where fear resides as do stories of both crime and heroism:

> The whole school was in a flurry when one of the final-year students vanished. His unexpected disappearance was distressing to his family and dozens of students. For the man who had taken flight was none other than the founder and high chief of the secret society. He had taken a small fortune with him. For weeks his teams had sacrificed candy and treats to acquire revolvers. But no weapons were seen in anyone's pockets. The leader took refuge in propitious clandestinely. Even if everyone knew and

[29] Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace* 3rd ed. (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1961), 58-59.

> discreetly paid him the honor due to his rank, no one had the right to reveal a secret which had ceased to be one.[30]

The disappearance of classmates not only affect the relationship between Jews and Arabs, but it also shapes the narrator's mental map. The Zionist movement, and its goal of migration to Israel, is not Naïm's only option. Against the backdrop of differing ideologies, a rupture also occurs in his relationship with his close friend Nessim when the latter joins the Zionist movement. Kattan's mental map positions Israel in the space of the basement, as a symbol of violence, crime, and fear. Not only does he refuse to be part of the movement, but he also believes migration to Israel is not realistic. Kattan repeatedly dreams of French culture and moving to Paris.

Baudelaire of Baghdad

The fantasy of Western culture and Paris does not protect the narrator from the harsh reality of life and the sense of alienation experienced by Jews in Baghdad at the end of the 1940s. The inability to realize the fantasy of Western culture is translated in Kattan's book into a space of duplications, spatial displacements, and sexual fantasies. Towards the end of the book, the narrator describes the filthy reality of prostitution and violence, eventually admitting that what remains from life in Baghdad for him and his friends is merely the desire for women. The sexual fantasy acts as a "floating signifier," a sign that replaces the main fantasy (to Western Culture) with an alternative fantastic system, in this case, a desire for women and sex. However, the very shift of the fantasy into a sexual fantasy signifies the traumatic pause and decay. For example, the narrator and his friends visit an "alternative" brothel located on Al-Rashid Street. At the brothel, they are greeted by three completely naked prostitutes, which seems like the fulfilment of a male fantasy, but it quickly becomes clear it is not; They are all elderly women: one is missing hands, the second is disabled, and the third has only one eye. The

[30] Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon*, 64

three approach the narrator and his friends, with the one-eyed woman touching the narrator's genitals and inviting him to her with seductive words. The language of fantasy shatters to pieces in the face of their dire condition:

> I gave it to him with a great feeling of relief. Someone was going to perform the magic act for us and we would not have come in vain. The only way to restore the image of femininity to these women who had been reduced to objects was to agree to intimacy with them, to share ourselves with them, even if only for a few minutes. Only the onset of desire could make us forget the mud that was spattering and choking us.[31]

What happens here is the monstrosity of fantasy, not its collapse—its distortion into a horror movie. The deformed bodies become a spectacle of horror that emasculates the narrator; little wonder that he walks away with his hands covering his genitals. Baghdad has become a destructive, degenerate, castrating, and traumatic place, leaving not a single good piece of it for the narrator. The situation almost flips on its head; the prostitutes, as objects, as described by the narrator, beg for a loving gaze as a return to humanity. Absurdly and destructively, what turned them into vessels is also what can seemingly momentarily restore their humanity: the response to an act of love with them, to the extent that the narrator himself becomes a vessel for them. In Lacanian terms, this is the act of castration of fantasy, the moment when the movement of memories seeks to rush forward, to repress the situation. It is no coincidence that the narrator moves throughout the scene without pausing for a moment, and moreover, he is pleased when his friend borrows money from him and asks him to take a walk. The scene is, in fact, the distortion of the fantasy itself; the trauma of his life in Baghdad turns into a fantasy of the inherent castration within it.

The placement of this scene is especially meaningful: it is, in fact, the last experience he describes of Baghdad, just before his emigration to Paris. The fact that he does not engage with the prostitute marks both his lack of belonging and his lack of desire to belong. His impotence in front of the prostitute also hints at castration. Kattan's impotence is, in fact, the cut-off palm tree, the severed phallic

[31] Ibid., 174.

symbol, the life that is cut short in a place with no future. It is no longer possible to stay in Baghdad. It is no wonder that the narrator escapes from the space of the prostitutes and seeks refuge from them. This scene best illustrates Kattan's feelings about Baghdad in its final days and the situation of the Jews at the end of the 1940s. The space of the prostitutes is a space of decay and is metonymic of the condition of the Jews. The prostitutes signify death, decay, the end of the community. The old and scarred prostitutes, with mortality and death hovering over them, are metonymic of the ancient Jewish community in Baghdad—a community that once had a glorious past in Iraq but has now become scarred and impotent, with a constant sense of temporality and death hovering over it. During that period, leading up to mass emigration, the arrests of Jews on charges of involvement in the Zionist movement and communism increased. The situation reached its peak when Shafiq Ades, one of the wealthy leaders of the community and well-connected to the Iraqi establishment, was arrested and hanged charged with Zionism. The Jewish community was in great fear and terror due to these events.[32] The Jews conducted themselves like that one-eyed prostitute: one eye open, seeking acceptance, and the other closed, hiding and repressing.

As I mentioned above, Freud notes that memory is always discursive and imaginary, and perhaps through the prostitutes of Babylon, we glimpse the prostitutes of Paris. Baghdad is a city that is sinking for the Jews, just as Paris is a city that is decaying for Baudelaire. Baudelaire, too, refers to the prostitute and death, and they intertwine in a third image of Paris. The Paris of his poems is a city that has sunk and disappeared. In *Les Fleurs du Mal*,[33] Baudelaire describes decadent Paris: sadomasochistic erotica, the great city with all its visions, the prostitutes, the beggars, the throngs of people, the crowded streets, the "artificial paradises" of wine, hashish, and opium—all stand at the center of his poetry. But this poetry of the modern city is also a tortured poetry, and in all the urban images with their depictions of depravity and horror, the tortured soul of the poet is reflected. Beautiful Babylon becomes filthy Baghdad, and perhaps it echoes within it the decadent Paris of Baudelaire. Baudelaire's despair echoes greatly the despair

[32] Nadia Malinovich, "Growing up in Interwar Iraq: The Memoirs of Naïm Kattan and Heskel Haddad," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 12, no. 1 (2019): 19-36.

[33] Charles Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil* (La Vergne: Double 9 Books, 2002).

of the narrator; there is not a single good piece left for him in Baghdad. The space becomes increasingly violent, narrowing the steps of the Jews. Even the last refuge left to Kattan, the brothel, turns into a spectacle of horror that emasculates the narrator and chokes him. And perhaps Kattan is hinting here that even the move to Paris is not the desired transition—that Paris, too, is a sinking city.
The narrator is left with nothing in Baghdad, and soon he receives a French government scholarship and travels to study at the Sorbonne:

> When the day came for me to leave, a *nairn* was waiting for us at the bus station. We would cross the desert and the next day I would be in Beirut, the first step on the road to the West. A few days more and I would be on board ship, sailing for Marseilles. My whole family was there. The pain of separation was mixed with relief at leaving these walls which were being covered with shadows. I was the first to leave. They were all thinking it without daring to say so. My grandmother was Generous with advice. I must not skip meals; pork would make me sick; fruits must be washed before they are eaten. My mother barely spoke. I recognized myself in her. We avoided looking at one another. Nessim was alone, a little embarrassed. He was not a member of the family but everyone knew that he was, to a great extent, my family. 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, without dispersing my dreams and memories. The bus was already moving along the dirt road. The sand was enclosing us, extending a curtain, cutting us off from the city which moved farther away in a fog that was ominous and dark. The road was strewn with stones which skipped into the air as the tires squealed over them. Through the tears that poured down my cheeks, I could glimpse the howling dogs that were pursuing us. Now I did not have to throw stones to get rid of them, to protect myself from them.[34]

[34] Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon*, 198.

The dust accompanying the narrator's bus journey is all that remains of Babylon's beauty, of its vast culture, and of the shared life of Jews and Muslims together. This is the thick dust following the collapse of the Tower of Babylon, the dust that remembers the once-beautiful bricks that are now only destruction and ruin. But the dust is also a veil that darkens the final scene, just before the act of magic; it is the veil that blurs the screen during the occurrence of the spell. This is the moment when the book ends, but its conclusion is known to us—Kattan moves to Paris and studies at the Sorbonne. The swan poem here transforms the swan into a beautiful figure, like in *Swan Lake*, where after the spell breaks, the true princess is revealed. The swan poem marks here the beautiful swan, the poet and scholar, who was born from the beauty of Baghdad but also from its dust, which has now dispersed and has revealed the narrator in all his glory. Kattan's childhood and adolescence experiences in Babylon include elements of the French culture and Paris, to which he immigrated from Iraq. The Baghdad space exists, to some extent, as a mirror image of Paris in the tension between fantasy and trauma. Kattan's return to a Baghdad devoid of Jews in 1975—in his memoirs—is itself a fantasy. At the same time, the author revisits his adolescence in Baghdad and his longing for French culture and Paris as a young man. His choice of Montreal as his final residence also marks his place in the Baghdad geography: He avoids choosing a space that is part of Iraq's power map: neither the enemy, the State of Israel nor Britain, the former ruling power (1917-1932). Kattan positions himself outside of Baghdad's power dynamics, thus he is able to remain loyal to the city. His choice of Montreal places him in a Distinctive niche as a Jewish-Iraqi-French-Canadian. This is the mental map of his life, a multifaceted identity with a unique voice in Arab-Jewish literature, as well as French literature.

Fig. 1. Illustration by Zohar Gannot, 2025.

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