

## **The exploration of the doubleness of belonging in Naim Kattan's *Farewell Babylon***

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### **Abstract**

This paper studies the origin of Jewish existence in Iraq by examining *Farewell Babylon*, written by Naim Kattan, a Jewish Iraqi writer who lives in Canada. In past decades, Jewish communities moved from one location to another as a result of displacement and emigration, thus the Jewish diasporic movements created new territories. This paper explores the sense of doubleness of belonging by investigating a Jewish diaspora. The investigation studies the relationship between home and neighbours in Kattan's text which focuses on the concepts of belonging, the 'Self' and the 'Other.' The study of the relationship between Jewish identity and Arab identity in Iraq permits us a wide knowledge of the concept of belonging.

### **Keywords**

Baghdad, belonging, Iraq, Jewish identity, Naim Kattan

## **Badanie dwoistej przynależności w *Farewell Babylon* Naima Kattana**

### **Abstrakt**

Artykuł bada pochodzenie żydowskiej obecności w Iraku na podstawie *Farewell Babylon*, autorstwa Naima Kattana, żydowskiego pisarza irackiego, który mieszka w Kanadzie. W ostatnich dziesięcioleciach społeczności żydowskie przenosiły się z jednego miejsca do drugiego w wyniku przesiedleń i emigracji, w ten sposób żydowskie ruchy diasporyczne tworzyły nowe terytoria. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje poczucie dwoistości przynależności poprzez badanie żydowskiej diaspory. Badane są relacje między domem a sąsiadami w tekście Kattana, który koncentruje się na koncepcjach przynależności, „jaźni” i „Innego”. Badanie relacji między tożsamością żydowską a tożsamością arabską w Iraku pozwala nam na uzyskanie szerokiej wiedzy na temat pojęcia przynależności.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

Bagdad, przynależność, Irak, tożsamość żydowska, Naim Kattan

### **1. Introduction**

In *Farewell Babylon*, Kattan depends on two main elements (home and neighbours) in the construction of his text. This paper is going to explore the relationship between these elements and how the writer uses them in his text, as both terms represent the space that refers to the doubleness of belonging. The concept of 'home' is a unique challenge for Iraqi Jews because it represents a nation that extends beyond the map's boundaries. They desire to look for a space that connects them to their original roots in order to conserve the relationship between the 'Self' and the land because space is important to affirm their presence. The process of the exploration of the 'Self' for Iraqi Jews is an attempt to distinguish the imaginary boundary which is created between 'them' and the 'Muslims' in Baghdad.

## **2. The doubleness of belonging to Iraqi identity**

Kattan's text draws an imaginary line that extends between the 'Self' and the 'Muslims', 'here' (the Jewish district) and 'there' (Muslim's district). These boundaries control the behaviour of individuals both inside and outside of their locations as their behaviour is influenced by identity, belonging and culture. Thus, these boundaries are one of the elements which create differences between communities. According to Gregory:

this space of potential is always conditional, always precarious, but every repertory performance of the colonial present carries within it the twin possibilities of either reaffirming and even radicalizing the hold of the colonial part on the present or undoing its enclosures and approaching closer to the horizon of the postcolonial (2004: 19).

The interrelation between spaces and places becomes a symbol to create a form of belonging for individuals inside and outside the boundaries; therefore, this action produces a conceptual change in the community. In Baghdad, the relationship between the identity of Arab Muslims and the identity of Arab Jews, between 'us' and 'them', is established sometimes in the space of dialogue and other times through conflicts. The language of dialogue and its meaning are expressed through the ambiguity and ambivalence in the space where the 'Self' and the 'Muslims' meet together at the 'cutting edge'. As Homi Bhabha points out:

The act of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation (2004: 156).

Through indirect communication, language involves the ambivalence to the act in the third space. Therefore, the function of language does not always convey the intention of the speaker and thus negatively affects the reader's understanding (Bauman 1991: 1) as any understanding is prospective at this moment due to creating a space of transforming thoughts. Soja clarifies that the 'third space' is a "radical challenge to think differently, to expand your geographical imagination beyond its current limits" (1996: 2); therefore, the third space is a free zone which is in between two locations, with each one of them trying to control the other.

In literature, the third space is the meeting point for a group of people when they cannot meet in their real locations. Additionally, the narration sometimes introduces real situations through the imagination in which texts can travel in locations where bodies cannot do so physically. The concepts of 'home' and 'neighbours' deconstruct the discourse in order to create interaction between them as Kattan's text presents one such strategy. Based on the definition of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari of 'concept' as "the inseparability of a finite number of heterogeneous components traversed by a point of absolute survey at infinite speed" (1994: 21), Kattan in his text uses the 'concept' to create a space of meanings that expresses the performance of a group of ideas in a heterogeneous environment. The content of space is related to a certain point which permits the movement of these ideas to infinity; therefore, the concept of the 'home' which the writer creates in his text from a certain point, draws the imaginary borderline in a certain space and time.

The concept of 'home' in Kattan's text can be connected with Benedict Anderson's definition of the concept of 'nation' (1983: 6). According to Anderson, the nation is an imagined political community that is conceived as inherently limited and sovereign. The nation fixes boundaries in which people imagine being connected to the land where they were born. Anderson claims that the modern nation can grow if citizens let go of some of the

cultural concepts related to history, religion and faith in sacred texts and belief that the ruler has a divine connection. However, the communities in the diaspora exceed the nation because their movements are outside of the borders of their native lands. Deleuze and Guattari mention the “need to see how everyone, at every age, in the smallest things as in the greatest challenges, seeks a territory, tolerates or carries out deterritorializations, and is reterritorialized on almost anything – memory, fetish, or dream” (1994: 67-68). The process of the territorialization of people’s thoughts does the same thing that it does with social fields. Therefore, the locations cannot be permanent because they continue to determine new locations to inhabit.

Based on Deleuze and Guattari’s view, one can conclude that nations grow by continuously moving people from one location to another. For instance, the diasporic movements create new territories and sometimes participate in a re-creation of other territories as Jewish diaspora communities; therefore, people cannot claim that they belong to a single location. Furthermore, the exiled people live in double locations, physically in the host country and imaginatively often in their country of origin; therefore, they have a duality of existence as Said points out “most people are principally aware of one culture, one home, or one setting” (2000: 186) while “exiles are aware of at least two, giving them a plurality of vision give[s] rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions” (2000: 186). This plurality generates an absence of uniform cultural identity because most of the exiled people mix their original culture with the acquired one and thus they create a hybrid identity, such as Kattan’s, with multiple cultures (French and Canadian) in addition to his original culture (Iraqi).

Erich Gruen challenges the perspective that claims that there is a positive conception of the Jewish diaspora concerning modernity and Jewish emancipation, thus he sees that a darker picture of the Jewish diaspora is more common. Jews believe that the deliverance is in the homecoming and its restoration but Gruen sees that they are “the people of the Book” (2002:

232) and the text represents “the portable temple” (2002: 232), thus, there is no need to restore the homeland. Therefore, he claims that both images are:

the whole idea of privileging homeland over diaspora, or diaspora over homeland, derives from a modern, rather than an ancient, obsession. The issue is too readily conceived in terms of mutually exclusive alternatives: either the Jews regarded their identity as unrealizable in exile and the achievement of their destiny as dependent upon reentry into Judaea or they clung to their heritage abroad, shifting attention to local and regional loyalties, and cultivating a permanent attachment to the diaspora (Gruen 2002: 234–235).

Gruen asserts that the Jewish diaspora began a long time before the destruction of the Temple, which happened in 70 CE and that this diaspora continued because there were large waves of voluntary migrations where five million ancient Jews lived in the diaspora far from their original home. Some thinkers solidify the concept of the ‘diaspora’ as a social process that features like a closed concept while James Clifford elaborates that the concept of ‘diaspora’ is a dynamic concept that includes overlapping features of politics, society, and culture. Thus, the concept of ‘diaspora’ is flexible and covers the chaotic tangents which increase the imaginative prospects as Clifford explains the conceptual borders of Jewish diaspora:

The history of Jewish diaspora communities shows selective accommodation with the political, cultural, commercial, and everyday life forms of “host” societies. And the black diaspora culture currently being articulated in postcolonial Britain is concerned to struggle for different ways to be “British” – ways to stay and be different, to be British and something else complexly related to Africa and the Americas, to shared histories of enslavement, racist subordination, cultural survival, hybridization, resistance, and political rebellion. Thus the term diaspora is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to

define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement (1994: 308).

In the diasporic communities, the emphasis is on belonging to the original home and at the same time, the negotiation is with transnational belonging; therefore, the concept of the doubleness of belonging is present here. Based on the clarification of Linda Hutcheon:

doubleness is what characterizes not just the complicitous critique of the postmodern, but, by definition, the twofold vision of the postcolonial – not just because of the obvious dual history [...] but because a sense of duality was the mark of the colonial as well. Doubleness and difference are established by colonialism by its paradoxical move to enforce cultural sameness [...] while, at the same time, producing differentiations and discriminations [...] (1989: 161–162 ).

As a result of the problems that are produced by colonialism, such as discrimination, differentiation and racism, the double sense of belonging appears through the consciousness of diasporic communities. Therefore, double consciousness creates a recognition of the 'Self' and a simultaneous sense of belonging to the national culture. Although it is hard for the individual in the diaspora to fully integrate into the host country, it is also impossible to fully return to the original home. Therefore, the doubleness of belonging affects both identities. Theorists of the diaspora introduce important arguments related to the Jewish diaspora studies since the Jewish diaspora is often seen as a model (Safran 2003: 437- 41) of studying the doubleness of belonging.

When the concept of 'doubleness' deconstructs, it leads to a stabilization of the concept of 'diaspora.' The individuals in the diaspora are often located between two paradoxical relations of belonging because the double sense of belonging embodies the contradiction between belonging to the homeland or to the host country. Some individuals in the diaspora experience deter-

ritorialization but cannot achieve reterritorialization as they are displaced from two homes and live in a third one, as in the case of Naim Kattan who currently lives in Canada after his exile from Iraq and his emigration from France. Therefore, these three homes create an unsettling sense of belonging for him. Clifford, in his definition of diaspora, tries to narrow this tension because the double experiences, sometimes, can push the individual to a feeling of isolation. Clifford presents several possibilities to the concept of 'diaspora' in order to preserve the concept of 'double-ness' and also emphasize the political conflicts which override borders.

Moreover, the establishment of Israel creates a new concept of 'diaspora' for Oriental Jews, especially for those identifying as Iraqi Jews. Because Israel succeeded in detaching them from their original home and at the same time, it deals with them as second-class citizens, they find themselves strangers in Israel as Shohat claims that

the Israeli establishment regards Arab Jews as irremediably Arab – indeed, that Iraqi Jews were allegedly used to determine a certain toxin's effect on Arabs suggests that for genetic/biological purposes, at least, Iraqi Jews are Arabs. On the other hand, official Israeli/Zionist policy urges Arab Jews (or, more generally, Oriental Jews, also known as Sephardim or Mizrahim) to see their only real identity as Jewish (1999: 5).

The division of Jewish identity in Israel, the concept that you are Jewish but still Arab, creates a sense of duality. It is evident that Israel was founded by the displaced and exiled Eastern Jews but some of them left Israel and chose to live in another country because they felt that they were marginalized in their imaginary homeland. Furthermore, several Arab Jews have a sense of belonging and connection to their places of birth more than a sense of belonging to the imaginary homeland (Israel). The concept of the doubleness of belonging shows the difficulty of the case of Arab Jews as they never belong to a single nation. Therefore, the third home for these kinds of individuals can be



the solution after the impossibility to be in one of the first two homes as both of the first two homes reject each other.

Kattan, in his texts, expresses the Jewish consciousness of the doubleness of belonging in which he presents the Jewish identity by concentrating on the experiences of Jews in the diaspora, which appear clearly in his texts. Therefore, this phenomenon must be investigated by exploring the double sense of belonging and studying the movement between locations in the text of Kattan's *Farewell Babylon*. The double sense of belonging means the desire for movement as this movement enables the writer to move between locations, thus it helps him to present a better understanding of Jewish identity. In one scene of *Farewell Babylon*, the narrator shows the sense of belonging to Babylon when he describes the students' journey to Babylon and what their teacher tells them about the history of Jews there:

Only the Jews can feel the upheaval of a living past under these piles of stones [...] we came here as captives, the slaves of Nebuchadnezzar. But we triumphed over defeat. On this ground, we wrote the Talmud. The descendants of captives, the sons of slaves were great scholars, great philosophers. Are we worthy of our ancestors? (2005: 79).

These words elaborate that the sense of belonging of the Jews to Babylon exists not only physically but also in their souls and imaginations. Surely, the title of Kattan's novel, *Farewell Babylon*, involves evidence of the connection of Jews to the land of their ancestors. Kattan clarifies this idea, in his book *La Mémoire et la Promesse*, evoking his feelings when he says:

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<sup>1</sup> (1979: 14).

In another scene in *Farewell Babylon*, the narrator seeks a sense of belonging to the majority community in Baghdad by looking for sexual experience in their community:

We were all Jewish. But as soon as we crossed the threshold of the house, we changed our identities. In this exotic land, the Jewish accent would seem out of place. Speaking an adopted language, we would carry on only simple business negotiations and any embarrassment would be superfluous. With our new faces, we would become unknown (Kattan 2005: 153–154).

He tries to hide his original identity when he visits the “Maydane”,<sup>2</sup> the area which is known as the red-light district. In that area, identities, nationalisms, classes, and boundaries disappear while the control is for the power of masculinity, thus he gets a temporary sense of belonging to their community. Therefore, he and his friends try to speak with Arabic accents, but they fail because their Jewish accent is clear and thus, they are forced to remove the Arab mask: “‘Are you from Baghdad?’ I asked with a Jewish accent. ‘I come from Karbala. My father is a mullah,’ she said in the purest Muslim accent” (Kattan 2005: 158). Obviously, the mask of the majority can no longer work with him; therefore, he uses his real identity to continue his relationship with the girl:

I barely had time to look at them when I felt a hand pulling on my manhood. It was the one-eyed woman. I was dumbfounded to see a woman go so directly to an unknown man. I had to shed my old

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<sup>1</sup> English translation: ‘I left Baghdad, took away with me the dream of a fixed place, heir of twenty-five centuries of history at a given point. We were surrounded by nomads and empires which had been built up and then collapsed. We were the sons of prisoners of Nebuchadnezzar still there and yet we were also nomads. We have learned that all places are passageways and God dwells in all places.’

<sup>2</sup> *Maydane* is an Arabic term which means ‘the Square’ in English.

beliefs and accept this complete reversal of roles. Here the women were totally nude. According to the laws of the desert, this physical nudity was naturally accompanied by moral nudity. The boundaries between what was real and what was dreamed became evanescent. Obscenity had no meaning since everything was obscene (Kattan 2005: 192).

In the scene above, the narrator's description goes beyond religious or ethnic features to shift into gender; therefore, the shifting into sexual stimulation helps to reverse the roles and embodies a psychological role instead of classifying the world into the 'us' and the 'them.'

As Baghdad's community is multicultural and multi-religious, Kattan focuses on the relationship between his community and the Muslim community in Baghdad. The imaginary boundaries draw the map of the cultural and historical relations between these two communities. In the first decade of the 20th century, Jews integrated deeply into Iraqi society and Baghdad was particularly prosperous with their culture. Along with Muslims, the Jews contributed in developing the society and culture in Iraq as they had an intimate connection in the prominence of Arab poetry, novels, and magazines. But Iraqi Jews got more attention through Western connections, particularly the Alliance Israélite school in which Kattan completed his studies, which later was the road to continue studying in Paris. However, the attempts of Western Jewish leaders to change Iraqi Jews never reach their planned results because Iraqi Jews attempted to protect their ethnic and cultural identities even after political changes, so Kattan's experience represents a true example of preserving Iraqi Jewish identity. But the narrator realizes the difference between Jews and Muslims when he refers to a group of people who attract him, and they are known as 'Bedouins':

I would beg my mother to lift me above the enclosure. Speaking to the closest Bedouin, I would shout with the secret satisfaction of crossing boundaries that adults would not have the audacity to

transgress: ‘Ammi, Ammi. Uncle, Uncle.’ The respect I owed to every older man required me to use this familial term. In these circumstances, it tasted of the forbidden. In the Muslim dialect, I would address the stranger. The tall Bedouin would spin around his *akal* and turn his head. Trembling with fear and courage, I would toss off, in my best Muslim dialect, ‘May God help you.’ And the man, still talking to his camel, would answer, ‘May God keep you, my son.’ And so he became my uncle and I his son. In the world of childhood, I was neither Jew nor Muslim, and without running any risk I could speak directly to a Bedouin (Kattan 2005: 41–42).

Kattan uses the term ‘Bedouin’ to refer to a group of people who inhabit outside the cities, of the “vigorous men with chiseled faces who conversed with their camels with the familiarity reserved for humans” (Kattan 2005: 41). Kattan’s description is a reference to ‘Arab masculinity’ as Julie Peteet clarifies that:

Arab masculinity (*rujulah*) is acquired, verified, and played out in the brave deed, in risk-taking, and in expressions of fearlessness and assertiveness. It is attained by constant vigilance and willingness to defend honor (*sharaf*), face (*wajh*), kin, and community from external aggression and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific propriety (Peteet 1994: 34).

The sense of belonging to Iraqi identity allows the narrator to get into all districts of Baghdad and outside of Baghdad, though people in these districts have different religions, cultures, ethnicities and nationalisms. The political changes in Iraq and the urban sprawl in Baghdad help, in that the districts of the city are to open to all people regardless of their religion and nationalism; therefore, it becomes impossible to control the boundaries between these districts. This condition helps the Jews to integrate with the majority community. The optimism of youth encourages the narrator to cross boundaries physically, at a time when his family and parents are afraid of this crossing. Baghdad, like other multicultural cities, has large spaces that involve Muslims, Jews, Christians, Arabs, and Kurds. There-

fore, the diversity of society helps the narrator to create a wide space of dialogue in the text. He imagines borders that help him in the negotiation between popular and strange things as the boundaries which the narrator draws in the text embody the dual tension visible and invisible between neighbours. In each scene of his narration, he presents a new neighbourhood in which he deconstructs terms and vocabularies, thus deconstructing the foundations of the pure and bounded community. Moreover, the narrator is never limited to the mention of boundaries between districts in Baghdad but also mentions crossing boundaries when he decides to go to study in Paris. In this scene, he describes the real moment of crossing Iraqi boundaries:

My whole family was there. The pain of separation was mixed with relief at leaving these walls which were being covered with shadows [...]. 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 dream and memories ... We would cross the desert and the next day I would be in Beirut, the first step on the road to the West (Kattan 2005: 217–218).

Kattan's text involves all religions in Iraq and the different accents of the Arabic language in order to demonstrate the interference between cultures. Furthermore, the cultural identity constructs and reconstructs the third space from a chaotic territory; therefore, the construction of identity in this way enables Kattan to imagine the relationship between individuals and communities. This is what postcolonial and poststructuralist thinkers discuss in their theories. The writer in the double diasporic situation attempts to control the construction of identities and draw imaginary borders from infinite thoughts. Deleuze and Guattari claim that:

What matters is not, as in bad novels, the opinions held by characters in accordance with their social type and characteristics but rather the relations of counterpoint into which they enter and the compounds of sensations that these characters either themselves experience or make felt in their becoming and their visions. Counterpoint serves not to report real or fictional conversations but to bring out the madness of all conversation and of all dialogue, even interior dialogue (1994: 188).

### **3. Conclusion**

To conclude, I argue that Kattan uses the concept of neighbours to refer to the exchange of dialogue and the interaction between Muslims and Jews through crossing imaginary borders. But that kind of dialogue represents a chaotic conversation between them which sometimes leads to conflict, thus the concept of the doubleness of belonging reflects the critical prospects of the conflict between Muslims and Jews as a result of the cluttered relationship between them as nations and their locations. In *Farewell Babylon*, the writer focuses on the experience of Jews in Iraq as the text exemplifies the tension between Muslims and Jews, thus it is important to solve that conflict in order to break down imaginary boundaries between the land and identity.

Furthermore, the text shows us how the narrator moves across the imaginary boundaries instead of settling in a single place as a result of the sense of loneliness that forces the individual to be in a provisional location. Therefore, the realization of loneliness and unsettledness open up wide avenues of thinking beyond the boundaries for individuals regardless of their ethnicity or religion. In this paper, I affirm that the doubleness of belonging is one of the multiple relationships between Arabs and Jews as well as between Arab Jews and Kurdish Jews, thus that doubleness leads to a wide space of thoughts. As a result, I affirm that the doubleness of belonging is not only an ambivalent relationship of an individual between their homeland and host country, but also an ambivalent relationship between the Self and its location inside the homeland.

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