

# *Tightrope Walkers: Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff and Naïm Kattan as “Translated Men”*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines essays and memoirs by two multilingual writers, Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff and Naïm Kattan, who relied on different forms of translation to build their literary careers during the second half of the twentieth century. It analyzes their biographical works from the perspective of “world literature studies” and the ties between literary translation, decolonization, and nation formation. Drawing on Pascale Casanova’s concept of “translated men,” the article compares Kahanoff’s and Kattan’s cases to argue that their linguistic choices reflected their political ambivalences, yet have never barred their readers, editors, and translators from seeing them as “belonging” to specific canons.

## ON TRANSLATED MEN

**T**RANSLATION CAN BE AS EFFECTIVE in effacing cultural difference as it can be in bridging it. As scholars from various fields have shown, different forms of translation played a meaningful role in the long and multifaceted history of colonialism, imperialism, and modern nationalism.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, enterprises of textual exchange complemented, or simply followed, the colonization and annexation of peoples and geographical areas. In others, cultural colonialism manifested itself by way of establishing educational institutions in which the colonized were immersed in the language and literature of the colonizers.<sup>2</sup> Processes of decolonization and of gaining national independence were also often accompanied by practices of translation, with former colonies reclaiming local literatures, starting a counter-enterprise of literary translation, and reviving dormant and local languages.<sup>3</sup> Translation may serve, in other

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the anthology Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Douglas Robinson, *Translation and Empire* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997); and Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler, *Translation and Power* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

words, as a tool for building distinct identities as much as it may offer ways to circulate cultural knowledge across borders. It has a dual force to create and transcend national and geopolitical boundaries, to corroborate and undermine the division of the world in general and of the literary in particular into national units.

Whether we can think of the literary world, or of the world canon, in terms that transcend national identities is a question that has preoccupied scholars of “world literature” for decades.<sup>4</sup> The very notion of “world literature” resurfaced in academic discourses in the early 2000s, following publications such as Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters*.<sup>5</sup> Casanova has shown in this study that the emergence of modern forms of nationalism coincided with the rise of the idea that the world shared a literary canon. Yet, as more and more nation-states declared independence across the world throughout the twentieth century, the global literary sphere became less and less tolerant of literary border-crossing and multilingual creation. This type of intolerance has manifested itself most clearly, as Casanova has implied, in cases of writers whose national identities are not fixed or do not correspond with their language of writing. Is Franz Kafka, who wrote in German while living in Prague, a German writer? Is August Strindberg, who sometimes wrote in French while living in Sweden, a French writer? And what about more contemporary writers, such as Abdellatif Laabi from Morocco and Rachid Boudjedra from Algeria, who have written in both French and Arabic? Casanova has named these writers “translated men,” arguing that their dependence on literal or figurative acts of translation played a key role in the initial circulation and marketing of their works.<sup>6</sup>

Whether Casanova’s concept of “translated men” is useful for discussing any multilingual writer (male or female) is one of the questions this article seeks to answer. As Casanova herself maintains in *The World Republic of Letters*, analyzing “translated men” requires the literary scholar to account for the historical circumstances underlying their act of “choosing” a literary language; or to look for the “linguistic imbalance” that shaped their career and dictated their strategies of literary survival:

The various options available to writers in “choosing” a literary language are sometimes so hard to dissociate that it makes more sense to analyze them as elements of a single, continuous series of strategies. Linguistic imbalance—the sort of imbalance familiar to a tightrope walker—is inherent in these positions, which are at once difficult, marginal, and prodigiously fertile. The choice of one or another option, the passing back and forth from one language to another, gives rise to wavering, hesitations, regrets, and steps backward. They are not clear-cut choices, but rather a series of possibilities that are dependent on political and literary constraints and on the development of a writer’s career (which is to say the degree of national and international recognition his work enjoys).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An exhaustive discussion of recent debates around the difference between “national literature” and “world literature” is beyond the scope of this article. It is worth noting, however, that such debates have been expanded in the past couple of years specifically by scholars of Jewish studies. See Lital Levy and Allison Schachter, “Jewish Literature / *World Literature*: Between the Local and the Transnational,” *PMLA* 130, no. 1 (2015): 92–109; Lital Levy and Allison Schachter, “A Non-universal Global: On Jewish Writing and World Literature,” *Prooftexts* 36, nos. 1–2 (2017): 1–26.

<sup>5</sup> Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 254–302 (“The Tragedy of Translated Men”).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

Casanova calls here for a careful analysis of scenarios in which a writer chooses a language yet never fully, or stably, embraces it. Like a tightrope walker, the writer with more than one language at her disposal is engaged in a balancing act, at once limiting and productive.

Reacting to Casanova's call, this article discusses two Jewish writers from Arab countries—the Cairo-born essayist and novelist Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff (1917–79) and the Baghdadi novelist and memoirist Naïm Kattan (born 1928)—whose choice of a literary language directly influenced the reception of their works while also reflecting their “wavering, hesitations, and regrets.” Kahanoff's and Kattan's hesitations and regrets were political by nature, pointing to each of these writers' attempts to become a part of a distinct literary canon on the one hand and of an international literary market on the other. Both writers started their literary careers in times of decolonization and nation formation in the Middle East, often commenting on language and translation in their memoirs and essays. They hoped to introduce their audiences to literary and political options that went beyond the division of the world into nation-states, yet were hampered by emigration and resettlement: Kahanoff to Paris and Israel, and Kattan to Paris and Montreal. Kahanoff made a name for herself in Israel in the 1960s as a Hebrew essayist and literary intellectual although she wrote mainly in English, relying on translation for the publication and dissemination of her work. Kattan chose French as his literary language, finding his place in Montreal's multilingual literary world around the same time. He has often mentioned, however, his intimate knowledge and love of Arabic, lamenting the career he might have had as a Baghdadi writer. In what follows, I survey Kahanoff's and Kattan's approaches to the languages they knew and the ones they did not, dwelling on the tension between their lives as polyglots and the circulation and translation of their literary works within monolingual contexts. I touch only briefly on the disparities between Israel's and Canada's language politics, yet seek to lay the foundations for future explorations of the linguistic imbalances dictating the reception of Arab-Jewish writers across the world.

### JACQUELINE KAHANOFF BETWEEN ENGLISH AND HEBREW

Born in Cairo in 1917, Kahanoff was educated in French and English and knew Arabic only superficially. She chose English as her literary language, publishing short stories, essays, and a single novel from the 1940s until her death in 1979. She started her literary career in New York, where she studied journalism in the mid-1940s. In 1952, Kahanoff moved to Paris for two years and, from there, to Israel. Living first in Beer Sheva and later in Bat Yam, Kahanoff became a reporter for international Jewish organizations, writing reports that sometimes served as the basis for her personal essays. She sent some of her essays to English-language periodicals while developing a relationship with some Hebrew-language publications in Israel. In the late 1950s, Kahanoff began contributing regularly to the Hebrew literary journal *Keshet*, whose editor, Aharon Amir, was a writer and a prolific English-to-Hebrew translator. Amir translated and edited Kahanoff's essays, admiring them, as he later revealed, for their thoughtful and moderate tone and for their potential to build bridges between Israeli readers and the geographical region in which they lived.<sup>8</sup> Kahanoff was, for Amir, an emblem of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism: a woman whose upbringing and education spanned cultures and languages, and who could therefore be an antidote to Jewish parochialism in Israel. Amir rarely mentioned, however, the fact that he had to

<sup>8</sup> Aharon Amir, *haqdama* [preface] to *Mi-mizrah shemesh* [From east the sun], by Jacqueline Kahanoff (Tel Aviv: Yariv hevrah le-hotso'ah la-or, 1978).

translate Kahanoff's essays from English to Hebrew in order to publish them. He did not credit himself with the title translator when publishing Kahanoff's essays in *Keshet*, nor did he mention his involvement as both an editor and translator in the preface to Kahanoff's Hebrew collection of essays, *From East the Sun* (*Mi-mizrah shemesh*, 1978).

While it is impossible to determine whether Amir actively sought to efface himself as Kahanoff's translator, his choice to present Kahanoff's essays as original Hebrew works created an illusion not only that they were essays about Israel but that they were also composed in the language of Israel's Jewish majority. What complicates matters further is the manifest respect Amir had for the task of translators in general, as the editor of *Keshet* and as a translator himself. In the nineteenth volume of *Keshet*, which came out in 1963 and was dedicated to the literature and history of northern Europe, Amir made sure to both credit the different translators who contributed to the volume *and* note the languages from which they had translated. He revealed nothing about his own work as Kahanoff's translator, assuming perhaps that if a work has never been published in its original language, the fact of its translation no longer mattered.

It is also possible that Kahanoff herself never wanted her works to be presented as translations. She, too, participated in the eighteenth volume of *Keshet*, contributing the second installment of an essay about a recent visit to France, "French Diary."<sup>9</sup> In this essay, Kahanoff recounts an instructive moment of language confusion that attests, as do many other moments in her writing, to her complicated relationship with the different languages she knew. Strolling in the gardens of the palais de Chaillot in Paris, she is stopped by an Algerian worker who wishes to know the time. The worker poses the question in French, yet Kahanoff replies in Hebrew, forgetting momentarily that she is not in Tel Aviv. The worker then inquires about Kahanoff's "Arabic dialect," but Kahanoff is too shocked and embarrassed to answer this question. Attempting to explain her emotional reaction, she writes: "This man, a blue beret covering his dark hair, resembled many of our own people. He could not know this. . . . And so he asked, bitterly, 'You're afraid of an Arab man talking to you, Madame, aren't you?' 'No, definitely not. The time is four thirty.'"<sup>10</sup> Prior to this scene, Kahanoff notes that the dual presence of French and Arabic in Paris could not be perceived as neutral. She reports noticing a gendarme inspecting the Algerian workers near the palais de Chaillot and wonders if he is there not to protect but rather to deter them. Their Arabic seems to unnerve him while invoking in Kahanoff a mixed feeling of familiarity and estrangement.

Both appearance and language function as metonymies in "French Diary," representing distinct cultural contexts and geographical areas: *francophonie*, the Arab world, modern Israel. Affiliated with each of these contexts and regions, Kahanoff accounts for the burden of choosing one. Hebrew is ostensibly the language in which she automatically speaks (in the 1960s), yet it causes her embarrassment in this instance. She uses this embarrassment to signal to her Hebrew reader that the affinities between Jews and Arabs are stronger than the differences between them, betraying a degree of identification with the Algerian workers. Still, Kahanoff's inability to communicate with the workers in Arabic separates her from them and generates shame. A similar feeling of shame figures prominently in other essays by Kahanoff, particularly the more famous

<sup>9</sup> Jacqueline Kahanoff, "Yoman tsorfati" [French diary], *Keshet* 19 (1963): 68–80.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. My translation.

ones in which she issues a call for cultivating a close cultural and economic relationship between Jews and Arabs in the modern Middle East.<sup>11</sup>

Kahanoff turned to descriptions of language politics frequently in her work, mainly in order to examine social and cultural tensions between religious or national communities. In her 1973 essay “A Culture Stillborn,” she revisits the Egypt of her youth and the culture battles that defined it.<sup>12</sup> The essay revolves around the question of modern Egyptian literature and the impact that a reality of colonialism and multilingualism has had on its development. In the prologue Kahanoff postulates, somewhat hesitantly, that “the delicate balance” between the disparate language communities in Egypt might have stood in the way of a joint production—by writers of various religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds—of a vibrant Egyptian literary corpus. She wonders, however, whether she herself is in a position to comment on Egyptian literature, doubting the knowledge she may hold about it as someone who never mastered the Arabic language. Kahanoff criticizes herself and other upper- and middle-class Jews who were living in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century for their ignorance of Arabic:

The Jews were so intoxicated by French culture that they did not pay attention to the advice of the Alliance for the Jews to learn the language of the land in which they lived. In the eyes of the middle-class Egyptian Jews of my generation, speaking in Arabic was considered out-dated and old-fashioned. Only the lower classes, that is to say the Jews of the ghetto, spoke Arabic. With time, they, too, mastered French in the schools offered by the community. The language of instruction was French, and Arabic was taught as a “foreign” language, as was English. . . . There were several positive aspects to acquiring French culture, but after all was said and done, French and English were not local languages in which people could easily or spontaneously express themselves. To a great extent we were a people without a language.<sup>13</sup>

Kahanoff’s cultural and political ambivalence emerges here from the description of the colonial languages she knows intimately: French and English. She admits that there is a positive side to knowing them, while lamenting the degradation of Arabic that resulted from their prioritization in her childhood. Kahanoff’s tone is one of reproach and regret, prompting Hebrew readers to dwell on their own ignorance of Arabic as inhabitants of a Middle Eastern country.

Yet as much as Kahanoff sought to encourage her Israeli readers to acknowledge their location in the Middle East and cease modeling their country on European values, she herself struggled to feel at home in either Arabic or Hebrew. In her 1962 essay “Wake of the Waves,” she recalls, for example, a trip to Palestine she had taken in 1937 with her friend Sylvie. More than two decades later, she traveled from Tel Aviv to Paris to visit Sylvie, leaving Israel for the first time since settling there in 1954. The act of traveling provokes in Kahanoff a spell of involuntary memory, giving way to ruminations on Hebrew. She opens the essay with a description of the

<sup>11</sup> A detailed discussion of Kahanoff’s stance on the relationship between Israel and the Arab world is beyond the scope of this article. It has been at the center of several studies of Kahanoff’s work, notably: Gil Z. Hochberg, “‘Permanent Immigration’: Jacqueline Kahanoff, Ronit Matalon, and the Impetus of Levantinism,” *boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 219–43; and David Ohana, “The Mediterranean Option in Israel: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacqueline Kahanoff,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 21, no. 2 (2006): 239–63.

<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff, “A Culture Stillborn,” in *Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, ed. Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011), 114–27. Excerpts from Kahanoff’s essays below are quoted from this anthology.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–24.

multilingual crowd on the Israeli ship she boarded, dubbing herself part of a group that was once “fluent in many languages” until it embraced Hebrew as a broken language of communication.<sup>14</sup> Later in the essay, Kahanoff recounts how she and Sylvie noticed, back in 1937, the desire to create a monolingual Hebrew space in Palestine. Sylvie was aghast when she realized that Jewish communities in Palestine, particularly in the kibbutzim, knew no French, English, or Arabic. She was also shocked to find out that these communities insisted on using Hebrew exclusively despite the incapacity of this newly modernized language to connect them to “the world.”<sup>15</sup> Kahanoff reacted differently to these realizations, envying the Zionist tour guides, who accompanied Sylvie and her, for their knowledge of Hebrew. If Sylvie viewed Hebrew as emblematic of a new type of Jewish nationalism that “cut people off from the world,” Kahanoff was supportive of the cause of “reviving” Hebrew.<sup>16</sup> She nonetheless quotes Sylvie extensively in “Wake of the Waves,” letting her old friend’s anti-Zionist sentiment flow freely through her autobiographical text. In another essay, “Reunion in Beersheba,” Kahanoff unfolds a stance closer to Sylvie’s, describing a family of newly arrived Egyptian migrants who are told by relatives that even as people who know five widely spoken languages, they must learn Hebrew in order to find a job in Israel.<sup>17</sup>

Did Kahanoff’s hope to improve her Hebrew, which she emphasized in “Wake of the Waves” and at which she hinted in “Reunion in Beersheba,” persist for years after her move to Israel? Did she ever become capable of “choosing” Hebrew as her literary language, to use Casanova’s terms? As the filmmaker Rafael Balulu, who directed a recent documentary about Kahanoff’s life, noted in a radio interview in 2018, few sources other than Kahanoff’s essays have survived to convey any clear messages about her choices.<sup>18</sup> Balulu directed his documentary as part of a series of literary monographs titled tellingly *The Hebrews*, downplaying to some extent—as Amir did—the fact that Kahanoff was never a Hebrew writer.<sup>19</sup> The very production of Balulu’s film may be seen as a sign of Kahanoff’s absorption into the Hebrew literary canon, coming out as it did on the heels of an exhibition about Kahanoff in the Museum of the Land of Israel in Tel Aviv.<sup>20</sup>

Both the film and the exhibition partake in a “Kahanoff renaissance” of sorts, which may be interpreted as the outcome of what Casanova has defined “literary consecration”: the process by which a writer’s work undergoes a second phase of canonization in its national context once it begins circulating in the international literary field.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in her lifetime Kahanoff was known, thanks to Amir and her other translators, mainly in Israel. Her essays nearly disappeared from the public eye after her death, until the Israeli writer Ronit Matalon quoted her extensively

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 137 (“Wake of the Waves”).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 156–57 (“Reunion in Beersheba”).

<sup>18</sup> Director Rafael Balulu, radio interview by Galei Zahal, May 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vabRi6\\_NKtU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vabRi6_NKtU) (accessed April 2019).

<sup>19</sup> A film about the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever is another case in point. For details about the series in which this film is included, see <https://ivrim.co.il> (accessed April 2019).

<sup>20</sup> For details about the exhibition, see <https://www.erezmuseum.org.il/e/396/> (accessed April 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 126–36. A writer whose work has been “consecrated” is a writer whose name has made the rounds beyond the borders of her immediate national community, then returned to the community to undergo a second phase of canonization. In this paradoxical submechanism of canonization, an international community grants a final “stamp of approval” to a “national” writer. Most films in the series *The Hebrews* (see n. 19) perform this second phase of canonization, celebrating authors whose work is already well known not only to readers of the language in which they wrote but also through translation.



in the 1995 novel *The One Facing Us* (*Ze'im ha-panim eleinu*). Matalon's novel was translated into English in 1998, paving the way for Kahanoff's name to reappear in literary magazines and academic journals in the Anglo-American world. This renewed attention to Kahanoff's work, as limited as it may have been, reached a peak in 2011 when a collection of her essays was published in the United States. Only after the publication of the English anthology was Kahanoff's sole novel, *Jacob's Ladder* (1951), translated into Hebrew.<sup>22</sup> A modest yet edifying process of "literary consecration" has thus been completed, granting Kahanoff posthumous fame in academic circles in Israel and North America.

The editors of the English anthology of Kahanoff's essays, Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh, have pointed out along these lines that it is impossible to discuss Kahanoff's work without taking into account her intricate linguistic background.<sup>23</sup> Dubbing Kahanoff an English-language writer, Starr and Somekh have also revealed that some of her works had to be *re-translated* into English to be included in the anthology. The irony of this was not lost on them: "Paradoxically, much of this [Kahanoff's] significant body of work has never been published in English to date. This volume is intended to introduce this important writer to a wider audience and to make her work available in the language in which it was written."<sup>24</sup>

Yet since Kahanoff never saw any of the languages she knew as "her own," the paradox of her literary biography lies not in her dependence on translation and retranslation but rather in the way in which her editors, translators, and documentarists decided *for her* with which language and, by extension, with which national community she ought to be associated. Amir presented Kahanoff as an Israeli woman who traveled the world, whereas Starr and Somekh emphasized her fluency in the languages of European cosmopolitanism. Kahanoff's linguistic preferences clearly led to a difficulty in locating her work on a global literary map: should it be categorized as that of an internationally consecrated Israeli writer, or should it be included in a canon of postcolonial, "Anglophone" literature?

Whatever the answer may be, Kahanoff's case shows that "translated men" or, rather, "translated women" may take unpredictable linguistic paths. For Casanova, authors from multilingual backgrounds are usually forced to "choose between translation into a literary language that cuts them off from their compatriots, but that gives them literary existence," and translation into "a small language that condemns them to invisibility or else to a purely national existence."<sup>25</sup> In Kahanoff's case, the promise of "literary existence" seems to have hinged on the opposite path: she had to be translated into "a small language" in order to gain "literary existence," renouncing any promise of international fame that her English and French knowledge may have offered.

What caused Kahanoff to make this choice and tip the balance in the direction of Hebrew remains an open question. Perhaps it was her assessment of Egyptian language politics under colonial rule that led her to deem national literary existence more important than an international literary career. Perhaps the message she sought to convey to Israeli readers—that they lived *not* in Europe but rather in the Middle East—could not have been conveyed in any language other than Hebrew, let alone in English or French. Psychological reasons may have also been at

<sup>22</sup> Now out of print in its original English, *Jacob's Ladder* lives on in Hebrew. See Jacqueline Kahanoff, *Sulam Ya'aqov*, trans. Ofira Rahat (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute and Gama, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Starr and Somekh, *Mongrels or Marvels*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 257.

play. Maybe Kahanoff stopped believing in her ability to appeal to an English-language audience as soon as she left New York and London.

Kahanoff's turn away from prose fiction to the essay genre in itself raises the question of whether her career could have moved in a different direction had history itself been different. That Kahanoff's career was both thwarted *and* redirected by decolonization and the foundation of nation-states in the Middle East seems obvious. Yet her case can neither represent the triumph of monolingual national literatures over and against more porous models of world literature nor be considered proof that multilingualism has no place in a literary world divided into national units. Rather, Kahanoff's "literary existence" was one in which translation played a dual role, allowing her to balance herself on the tightrope that stretched from the Egypt for which she longed, through Anglo-American spaces, to the Israel she sought to change.

### NAÏM KATTAN BETWEEN FRENCH AND ARABIC

Unlike Kahanoff, Naïm Kattan never depended on translation to be recognized as a Francophone memoirist and novelist, but his linguistic choices were equally informed by the political realities of the postcolonial Middle East. Born in Baghdad in 1928, Kattan was educated in multiple languages, studying French and Hebrew at the Alliance israélite universelle while speaking Arabic at home and on the street. He went to a Muslim high school, where he honed his understanding of Arabic and was also exposed to English as the language of the many British institutions in the Iraq of his childhood. As Kattan recounted in his 1975 memoir *Farewell, Babylon (Adieu, Babylone)*, he left Baghdad for Paris on a scholarship from the French government in 1947. It was then that he made the transition from writing mainly in Arabic to writing mainly in French, a transition he later described as the most difficult thing he had done as a writer.<sup>26</sup>

In 1952, Kattan traveled to North America for the first time and became enamored with the idea of settling there. He chose Montreal for its *francophonie* but was scarcely prepared for the city's language politics:

I met with an unexpected reality: French was the language of Catholics. As a Jew who spoke French, I was something of an anomaly. Oddly enough, it was precisely this that allowed me to make a living. Whoever I approached, English-speaker or French-speaker, advised me to go see "my people." ... It soon became clear to me, as a newcomer, that the Jewish community of Montréal spoke only English or Yiddish and had very little contact with the French Canadian majority. I therefore proposed ... creating a cultural newsletter that would help forge a link between the cultures of Jewish and French Canada.<sup>27</sup>

Kattan's initiative to link Jews and non-Jews reflects his understanding of his own position as an "outsider" in Montreal whose knowledge of French could nevertheless serve as a cultural asset. He had come to the city in 1954, ignorant of the divide between communities and languages there, and became determined to upset any automatic association of English with Judaism and French with Catholicism. He soon played a role in Quebec's "Quiet Revolution," working to open

<sup>26</sup> Naïm Kattan, introduction to *Farewell, Babylon: Coming of Age in Jewish Baghdad*, by Naïm Kattan, trans. Sheila Fischman (Boston: David R. Godine, 2007), ix.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.



up Quebecois culture to non-Catholic influences alongside other writers whose linguistic and religious backgrounds varied.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas Kahanoff was fated to live her life as a literal “translated woman,” Kattan shunned existing in a literary language he did not know. Yet he, too, was critical of forms of Jewish parochialism, seeing himself as a “translated man” in the figurative sense of the concept. A Francophone journalist from Baghdad, who also spent time in Paris, Kattan was surprised to find in Montreal a Jewish community that distanced itself from its immediate environment by not learning French. As he has shown in *Farewell, Babylon*, the Baghdadi Jewish community in which he grew up moved readily between languages and dialects to avoid isolation while maintaining a distinct collective identity. Centering on its narrator’s adolescent years in Baghdad in the late 1930s and early 1940s, *Farewell, Babylon* is Kattan’s most circulated work and the place where many hints about his linguistic choices may be found. The memoir was translated into English shortly after its initial publication, and three decades later, a second English edition came out, after a US-led coalition invaded Iraq. If translation is the “afterlife” of a literary work, as Walter Benjamin has famously suggested, then the republication of a translated work grants it a second afterlife.<sup>29</sup> *Farewell, Babylon* came to life anew when it was marketed in the Anglo-American world in 2005 as a monument for an Iraq that could have been.

Indeed, the opening scene of *Farewell, Babylon* marks it as a work committed to exploring forms of coexistence in the religiously and ethnically diverse Baghdad of the 1940s. The scene describes the narrator and a group of his friends chatting at a Baghdadi café about Arabic literature and whether it has ever produced “real” novelists.<sup>30</sup> One member of the group, Nessim, makes a choice the narrator defines as “uncommon” (*inusitée*) when he starts speaking Arabic in the Jewish dialect, using the accent he uses at home. The narrator reacts to Nessim’s act with great embarrassment because of what he portrays as the delicate linguistic balance in Baghdad: “We were the only Jews in the group. All the others, except for a Chaldean and an Armenian, were Muslim and their dialect served as our common language. . . . Every religious community had its manner of speaking. All of us—Jews, Christians or Muslim—spoke Arabic. We had been neighbors for centuries. Our accents, certain words, were our distinguishing marks.”<sup>31</sup> Disapproving of Nessim’s choice, the narrator insists on using the common Muslim way of speaking in Baghdad. He is shocked to witness his other friends—all of whom are non-Jews—cooperating with Nessim. The entire group tries out the Jewish accent, learning slowly from Nessim what syllables

<sup>28</sup> Montreal’s language politics has changed since the 1950s, following the arrival of French speakers from North Africa, the Caribbean, and other non-Catholic regions. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this change or tackle the differences between French and Quebecois French. For a discussion of translation politics in this context, see Annie Brisset, *A Sociocritique of Translation: Theatre and Alterity in Quebec, 1968–1988* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2006). For a study of Montreal’s literary scene in the twentieth century, see Sherry Simon, *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 260.

<sup>30</sup> This question about the production of modern Arabic novels is reminiscent of Kahanoff’s question about Egyptian literature. Both questions suggest that Kattan and Kahanoff began contemplating literature as members of an intellectual milieu in Iraq and Egypt (respectively), and that European aesthetic categories (“the novel”) fed the literary debates they had at the time. For recent discussions of the relationship between European and Arabic literary forms, see, e.g., Nouri Gana, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Kattan, *Farewell, Babylon*, 8.

to emphasize. The reader later learns that Nessim is a proponent of Zionism and that he no longer wishes to conform to the mores of the Muslim majority in Iraq. Later in the novel, the narrator describes both his and Nessim's success as students of classical Arabic verse, noting that their teacher was not always thrilled to see Jewish youth outsmarting their Muslim peers when reading and interpreting the Koran.<sup>32</sup> The incident at the café anticipates, but also inverts, this tense scene in which a teacher actively ignores Jewish students. Yet both anecdotes highlight the emergence of new types of national feelings in Iraq in the 1940s.

Elizabeth Dahab has argued that the opening scene of *Farewell, Babylon*—and the memoir as a whole—may be read as carrying a message about the “internal exile” of the Jewish community in Iraq, but has not situated the scene in the broader context of the historical transformation that *Farewell, Babylon* attempts to apprehend.<sup>33</sup> Nessim's decision to foreground his Jewishness via linguistic means symbolizes first and foremost his Zionist politics. He wishes to express a new sense of Jewish difference, engaging in a larger debate about the future of Jews all over the world, which was taking place at the time. Yet his non-Jewish friends' spontaneous choice to follow his lead disarms Nessim, prompting him to be playful and leading the narrator to contemplate Baghdadi language politics in detail. He points out that language in Baghdad in the 1930s and 1940s was divided, not across religious or ethnic lines, but rather across the lines of social class. The upper and middle classes incorporated French and English into their speech, while the lower classes had little to no access to these languages. As Ella Shohat has claimed in her own reading of the opening scene of *Farewell, Babylon*, the linguistic reality in Iraq in Kattan's time was even more complicated. People from different geographical regions spoke slightly different dialects and had different accents. At play in the Iraq of Kattan's memoir was therefore a tension between the distinctiveness and mutual imbrication of dialects.<sup>34</sup> When it came to French and English, however, only the well-off could “choose” to use them.

The opening scene of *Farewell, Babylon* also foreshadows the narrator's eventual decision to take a step away from the politics of Arabic and Hebrew in Iraq by immersing himself in French. As Kattan once explained in an interview, he had consciously chosen French as his writing language when he was a young man because he associated it with freedom: “I chose French because for me, the liberating West was Francophone. France was the country that liberated me. When I began to read French, I found everything.”<sup>35</sup> Kattan ascribed to French his personal liberation, but this liberation was political to the core. In the same interview, he noted that specific French works had driven him to adopt French as a language that both suited and shaped his ideology. Bringing up memories from the Second World War, Kattan explicitly linked reading and translation to political events, as he contemplated his choice to leave Iraq for postwar France and Arabic for French: “I was of/from the Arabic language [*J'étais de langue arabe*]; I was very rooted in this culture, but I began translating Western works. . . . The liberation of France was my liberation. I had a very strong feeling when Paris was liberated; I remember perfectly the moment I learned about it on the radio. I took to the streets and said: Paris is liberated, I'm going there. Paris has been liberated for me!”<sup>36</sup> Kattan's statement about “being of/from Arabic” gives way

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 131–32.

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Dahab, *Voices of Exile in Contemporary Canadian Francophone Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 72–73.

<sup>34</sup> Ella Shohat, “The Invention of Judeo-Arabic,” *Interventions* 19, no. 2 (2016): 181–82.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Allard, “Entrevue avec Naïm Kattan,” *Voix et images* 11, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 13. My translation.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

in this soliloquy to his declaration that Paris was liberated *for* him. It becomes clear that Kattan chose French over Arabic to express loyalty to a West he knew chiefly through the reading and translation of literary works. He made this choice as it were before leaving Baghdad for Paris, but he could not anticipate at the time his subsequent move from Paris to Montreal.

Was Kattan too accustomed to writing in French within a multilingual, colonial, or de-colonial context to settle in the capital of French literature? Did he wish to remain standing on that “tightrope” Casanova deploys as a metaphor for writing between linguistic worlds? Like Kahanoff, Kattan could not but be affected by the historical events that transformed the Middle East right when he began building a literary career. Shortly after his move to Paris, Israel was founded and Jewish life in Iraq radically changed.<sup>37</sup> Many Iraqi Jews, including the majority of Kattan’s family, migrated to the Jewish nation-state, where Hebrew was declared an official language. Kattan ostensibly opted for life in the French-speaking world, tying his “literary existence” to what Dahab calls the “exilic” literature of Quebec.<sup>38</sup> Yet, like Kahanoff, he could scarcely cease revisiting the complex linguistic landscape of his homeland in his autobiographical works, tackling issues such as literary belonging and the division of the world into nation-states, time and again.

These issues stand at the center of contemporary works on translation and world literature, from Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* to Rebecca Walkowitz’s more recent *Born Translated*. Walkowitz asks in this new exploration of cultural circulation and canonization whether the concept of literary belonging has in fact “outlived its usefulness” in our current globalized world.<sup>39</sup> What Kahanoff and Kattan prompt us to ask is even more radical: has the concept of literary belonging *ever* been useful for creating and understanding literary works? Casanova’s tightrope metaphor may be apt, but its reliance on the distinction between “national” and “international” does not take into account the possibility of writers who never wanted—or never managed—to be either. A

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<sup>37</sup> For a recent study of this wave of Iraqi Jewish migration, see Orit Bashkin, *Impossible Exodus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Dahab, *Voices of Exile*, x–xii.

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25.