

Samir Naqqash, *Shlomo Alkurdi wa ana wa alzaman* [*Shlomo Alkurdi, Myself and Time*]  
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NANCY HAWKER

## MIZRAHI WANDERINGS

Samir Naqqash is a leading Israeli novelist who writes only in his mother tongue: Arabic. Born into a Jewish family in Baghdad in 1938, he was a youthful witness to the turbulent period of Iraqi struggles against the British puppet government, led by Nuri Said. Iraqi Jews were by far the largest and most prosperous indigenous Jewish community in the Middle East at the time and played a significant role in the cultural, social and political life of the region. They were also, for the most part, staunchly anti-Zionist. Despite ongoing agitation for immigration to Mandate Palestine, the Iraqi Communist Party was a much stronger pole of attraction than the underground Zionist Hehalutz. 'Iraqi patriotism', as well as a notion of the Soviet Union as a bulwark against Nazism, were common Jewish motives for joining the ICP. In November 1947 the General Council of the Iraqi Jewish community sent a telegram to the UN General Assembly opposing the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. On the urging of its own Jewish members, the ICP issued an official protest against the Soviet Union's vote for the establishment of Israel at the UN Security Council—the only Arab Communist Party to do so.

Pressures on the community increased in 1950 when Nuri Said, working in tandem with the Zionist Agency and with London's full backing, instituted a voluntary 'denaturalization' programme for Iraqi Jews that would strip them of their nationality, citizenship and property rights, and give them twelve months to leave the country. The initial take-up for this programme was around 12,000, even though the Zionist Agency gave assurances that, so long as they could provide documentation, the Jews would be compensated for their confiscated assets once in Israel. During

the course of 1950, however, a spate of grenade attacks near Jewish cafés and public places in Baghdad resulted in an increase of applicants for denaturalization to over 120,000. To this day it is not clear who was behind the terror.

The thirteen-year-old Samir Naqqash and his family were among the Iraqi Jews transported to Israel in the 1951 airlift and subsequently housed in makeshift transit camps, together with immigrants from other Arab countries. Instead of the promised compensation, their carefully preserved bills and deeds were used as an excuse by the Israeli government to deny the Palestinians' countervailing rights to property confiscated by the infant state in 1949. (In 1952, when news came that two leaders of the remaining Zionist movement in Iraq had been hanged on charges of terrorism, the reaction of many Iraqi Jews in the camps was, according to a ministerial report of the time: 'God's revenge on the movement that brought us to such depths!') The Labour Zionist elite combined European prejudices as to Arab inferiority with the strategic need, as they saw it, to populate the land of Israel with Jews. Their co-religionists, 'rediscovered' in Arab lands after the Judeocide had drastically reduced the pool of potential European immigrants, were treated as purely demographic material. As an Israeli emissary to Libya reported, the Jews there were 'handsome as far as physique and outward appearance are concerned, but I found it very hard to tell them apart from the good quality Arab type'. Arab Jews were deployed as construction workers—literally, 'builders of Israel'—and subjected to strategic settlement and re-education plans by the newly entrenched European Zionist elite. The young Naqqash received a Hebrew education—a language he speaks very well. Yet his stories—the first of five collections appeared in 1971—and subsequent novels and plays are defiantly written in his native tongue.

Naqqash's latest novel, his fifth, *Shlomo Alkurdi, Myself and Time*, is published this month by the independent Manshurat Aljamal press, a small Arab-language publishing house run by Iraqi exiles in Cologne. One of Israel's foremost living novelists, his work is barely visible in that country and only one story has been translated (by his sister Ruth) into Hebrew. In true postmodern style, *Shlomo Alkurdi* begins at the end; but the themes and feelings of the novel are unfashionably historicized. The year is 1985 and the main character, an elderly Eastern Jew, lives in Ramat Gan, a comfortable if dull suburb of Tel Aviv, where he devotes himself to his memories. The book's first seventy-odd pages consist of an intricately structured recall of the main episodes in a life that has spanned Asia Minor, from the Kurdish city of Sablakh to Tehran and Baghdad, as well as trips (he was a merchant) to Moscow and Bombay; and traversed the century, from the First World War to the 1980s' present. Remembrance is worked out

through two parallel, and complex, sets of conversations: one with Shlomo Kattani (later known as Alkurdi), the persona of the narrator's younger life; and the other, polite if tough-minded, with Time, called upon to assist in recording these memories.

'So ends the story', says the dying—perhaps dead—Shlomo, towards the conclusion of this opening section. 'On the contrary', replies Time. 'It starts now.' The two argue back and forth until Shlomo finally concedes: 'Let matters occur as they wish to occur.' The voice of Time echoes in his head: 'Alright. Let matters occur as they wish.'

What follows is a vivid, more-than-realist account—Time is instructed to omit not so much as 'an atom of cigarette ash'—of Shlomo Kattani's business, love and family affairs in Sablakh, 200 miles north of Baghdad, during the First World War. The themes of time, cosmology and civilization recur, often cast as the metaphysical speculations of those confronted with the unfathomable social cruelty of the modern world. As distinct from the *real maravilloso* that has been seen as the stuff of Latin American literature, Naqqash's aesthetic draws on a 'terrible reality'—in Arabic, *waqi' rahib*—in his narrative fictions of Asia Minor and the Middle East.

A walled-and-gated city built of reddish stone, surrounded by hills of walnut, oak and pine, Sablakh—also transcribed as Saubalagh or Sawj Bulaq; present-day Mahabad, in northwest Iran—is best known historically as the site where the People's Republic of Kurdistan was first declared in 1946. During the First World War, and the dying days of the Ottoman Empire, its chief notable, Qazi Fattah, attempted to forge links with Bolshevik elements in the Tsar's army. Naqqash's narrative begins in 1914, with the young Jewish merchant Kattani's marriage to a local girl, Asmar, arranged by their fathers. Soon after, Kattani—the name means 'linen'—departs on a trade trip to Moscow with his business partner, Abu Mohammed. The wagons, laden with spices, wool bales and ceramics, will roll through a war-torn land: with British collusion, the Tsar's forces had taken the Azeri, Armenian and Kurdish regions from a weakened Persia some years before, and instigated risings among the Christian Armenians against their Muslim lords. With German backing, the Ottomans now contested Russian control.

While her husband is away, however, Asmar gets wind of the town gossip about him and Esther, the beautiful fifteen-year-old daughter of another Jewish merchant. 'Is this the effect of Esther?' she innocently inquires, when Kattani proves insufficiently amorous on his return. Embarrassed, he prevaricates. But soon after Asmar is blithely congratulating him: 'One thousand blessings upon you: her father has agreed. You can have Esther as a second wife'. Somewhat taken aback, Kattani has no choice but to consent: 'She was much stronger than me'. On the morning after his wedding night

with Esther, Asmar discomforts him further by bringing the couple breakfast in bed. Kattani takes her aside: 'You are the lady of the house, a servant should be doing this'. But the domestic drama is interrupted: a messenger has arrived from Tehran, summoning the bridegroom to an audience with the Shah of Persia.

The three-day journey to the palace is fraught with danger. Kattani is set upon by a band of rebellious Kurdish tribesmen, but gains their protection once they recognize him as a Sablakhi Jew, a Kurd like themselves. Their sense of community impresses him. By comparison, the occupant of the Peacock Throne is altogether less compelling. 'Come forward', calls the last scion of the Qajar dynasty, a diminutive figure. 'Kneel', commands the burly Palace Guard. Struck by the absurdity of the situation, Kattani can only remain prostrate, laughing into the carpet. The Shah wants to know all about his contacts in Moscow. 'I am only a merchant Jew. I don't know anything about anything.' Then has he had any contacts with the rebels? The Kurds, his Majesty warns, are preparing for revolution. Remembering his protectors, Kattani makes his obeisances and denials.

Back home he confers with Asmar, now in complete command, who reports rumours of trouble in the north. The bitter cold of the 1915 winter keeps the people of Sablakh in their homes, but outside they hear the tramping of military boots and words of a language that the polyglot Kattani has picked up on his travels: Russian. He is the translator when the Sablakh notables are summoned to the Russian Consul's residence, and the only one to understand His Excellency's speech:

People of Sablakh! The Tsar's army has entered your town in order to protect you and defend you against the Ottomans and their German allies. We will not hurt you nor your town, so go on with your work and do not pay attention to what is not your business. Woe upon the one who puts himself in the way of the army of the holy Tsar, and who helps his enemies.

Uncomprehending, the townspeople nod their approval: 'Long live Tsar Nikolai the Second!'

'What is going to happen?' asks the Rabbi afterwards.

'The snowstorm is gathering force', Kattani replies.

'War!' is the Rabbi's response.

Enver Pasha's army is sweeping eastward across the region, urging Kurds to take their revenge on the Armenians. Stories of the massacres reach Sablakh. The Russians evacuate the city and, in 1916, the Ottomans arrive. The Jews are scared by talk of an official 'allegiance to Islam', knowing what this has meant to Armenian Christians. Kattani discusses the situation with Abu Mohammed, who is reassuring: 'This craziness will pass'. On the contrary, as Kattani—and the narrator—are about to realize, the 'lunacy

of the world' has just begun. Famine descends on the previously prosperous town. Kattani now has five children to feed, and Esther is starting to go mad. The constant preoccupation with getting food for the household is superseded by fear for their lives when fifteen Jews (the Rabbi among them) and twenty-three Christians are killed by Ottoman troops.

'We have been asked to be Russians, Ottomans, Persians and Azeris. But we are Hebrews', declares a speaker at a meeting of the town's Jews to discuss the crisis. Kattani's muttered objection is stubborn: 'We are Sablakhis, Jewish Kurds'. But his determination to stay is shaken when Esther and her two children are savagely killed by Ottoman soldiers. When his young son Salman asks for an explanation, he is at a loss to describe the injustice of the world. Unwillingly—like so many others—Kattani hands over the keys to his house and business to Abu Mohammed, packs up the family possessions and departs with the Kurdish–Jewish caravan to Baghdad.

The reader knows, from the first section of the novel, what will follow. The family now live in circumstances much reduced from their fine Sablakh home, with its courtyard and fountain. Kattani—now known as 'the Kurd', Alkurdi—has a small shop in the bazaar in Baghdad's city centre. On a trip to Bombay in 1924, he picks up the idea of selling second-hand clothes—a novelty that earns him a second fortune in what is now British-run Iraq. Nationalist tensions are on the rise. In 1941, a local coup attempt against Nuri Said is put down by the British. On the principle that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', some of the nationalist elements had taken up Nazi propaganda themes when Britain declared war on Germany. Frustrated, they now vent their rage on local Jews in the attack known as the *farhud*, which claimed two hundred lives. The massacre has its reflection in the novel: Alkurdi is called to the street where Asmar lies, fatally stabbed. In 1951, his now grown-up children opt for denaturalization and the airlift to Israel, but Alkurdi cannot bear to go with them. Iraqi officers arrive as he sits sipping coffee in his shop in the now deserted Jewish quarter. The Kurd is now an Iranian in the eyes of the authorities, and must be forcibly deported to Tehran. In his drunken musings there, he dreams of returning to reclaim his business in Baghdad. Events conspire against him once more, however, and he ends up in Israel—a Jew forced to wander. An old man, he looks back on his life from Ramat Gan.

But the novel itself ends with the exile from Sablakh, a description that evokes the similitude of the refugee condition everywhere—not least the Baghdadi Jews' transfer to Israel and Arab dispossession in Palestine.

The caravan proceeds deeper on the trail; soon the sun sets. The wagons are swallowed by darkness and the unknown. They dream of purchasing

their lives in another country. Their rulers did not protect them of their own accord, and did not ward off the injustice of exile. They fled, taking with them junk. Junk, distant beloved Sablahk . . . and so, Sablahk, we became junk. At night the colour of the raven lies on the world and the fleeing caravans hurry forward in the darkness toward western borders. The people have already lost their identity . . . They hasten across the land of their ancestors, swallowed by the night. Shortly they will be swallowed by the lands of another, strange country, to become a group of poor immigrants, refugees.

The rupture in self-identity caused by migration resonates within the grammar of the novel: Alkurdi is variously presented in the first, second or third-person singular: is the dying man still the same person? At a meeting between the two in Ramat Gan, the narrator is in awe of his younger alter-ego, whose impressive history the book recounts. With a trembling hand, Alkurdi offers him a plate of bananas and apples:

Remember, my youth, try to! And eat another banana or apple. This remained the land of oranges. In Sablahk, they did not come in such quantities. Sablahk, its hills and valleys, where walnuts, acorns and pines grew.

The seemingly prosaic detail of the fruit in this declamatory passage is not without meaning. The 'Land of Oranges' is a literary appellation for pre-Zionist Palestine. Its orange groves were renowned and the harvest exported. Israeli plantations and irrigation systems brought bananas and apples but the land remained, indeed, that of oranges. The novel insists on recalling erased narratives such as these; and in nationalist histories of the modern Middle East, those of the Kurds and Arab Jews are even more forgotten than the Palestinians'. Alkurdi's only power is his ability to remember—as resistance but also as revenge, against the enemies who destroyed Sablahk, killed his wives or brought him to live as an alienated refugee in Israel. His reproach against Time is that it has tried to dull his vengeful determination, as he drifted through the scenes of his exile. This work is a reply to Time, the product of that will.

Although much of Naqqash's fiction has an autobiographical basis, this novel is a partial exception. Shlomo Kattani Alkurdi was a neighbour of Naqqash's in Tehran in the sixties, with whom he would share a drink and talk about the past—Alkurdi on occasion getting so drunk he would shout abuse at his attentive interlocutor. However fantastical the narration at times, the story is true. The themes it brings together, however, are typical of Naqqash's work as a whole. Some have characterized his attitude as nostalgic, and certainly *Shlomo Alkurdi* indicates a preoccupation with realities long gone. But his last novel, *The Angels' Genitalia* (1996), also published by Manshurat Aljamal, contains striking, surreal descriptions of the travails of

an Arab Jew—with his ‘terrorist’ face—at a Ben Gurion Airport checkpoint; though not more surreal than the everyday reality.

Marginalized in Israel, where his self-description as an exile from Iraq flies in the face of Zionist claims to have ‘rescued’ Baghdadi Jews from a ‘holocaust’, Naqqash’s battleground is the Arab literary scene. Here, he introduces the concept that Jews also have an Arab history—whereas Israeli–Arab antagonism has categorized the two identities as mutually exclusive. Of course, Middle Eastern Jews—*Mizrahim*, in Hebrew—have for centuries been part of the cultural mosaic of identities that formed the social horizons of the region before the rise of nationalism.

Other Iraqi-Jewish writers of similar anti-Zionist conviction—Shimon Ballas or Sami Mikhael, for example, both well known in Israel—have now chosen to write in Hebrew, or sometimes in both languages, and to fight their ground within the Israeli scene. This allows them a less isolated position than that of Naqqash and perhaps more influence in challenging Zionist sensibilities. Israeli literary circles puzzle over Naqqash’s refusal to write in Hebrew—a question to which Naqqash replied (in Hebrew) with some asperity in a recent interview: ‘What do you want of me? I am only preserving my autonomy!’ This defiance is perhaps what best characterizes his literary project. He is ‘simply’ writing in his own mother tongue, a global language; it is the world around him and its ‘lunacy’ that have made it a political struggle to do so.

The reception of this Israeli writer in the Arab literary world has also been guarded, although the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz has called him ‘one of the greatest living artists writing in Arabic today’. Here, though, Naqqash’s particular linguistic politics have created further difficulties. Naqqash writes in the high Arabic common in *belles lettres*, but in the frequent conversations between Iraqi Jews in his work he uses a particular Baghdadi-Jewish dialect spoken, in the late 1940s, by perhaps 140,000 of the city’s inhabitants and only 80 per cent intelligible to their Muslim or Christian compatriots. Today it is almost a dead tongue, and even Naqqash’s fellow Iraqi Jews have complained that it makes for difficult reading and has to be supplemented with intra-Arabic translations. Again, the use of a Jewish–Arabic language that nationalists on all sides would rather forget makes him doubly alienated—though his focus on language, politics and identity has attracted the attention of postcolonial literary studies. In contrast to such psychological preoccupations, other Iraqi-Jewish intellectuals in Israel have tended to focus on social and class issues. Some, such as Sasson Somekh and David Semah, have attempted to create a common Arab front—pioneering Palestinian issues, publishing articles and poems in Arabic anti-establishment newspapers such as *Al-Jadid* in the fifties.

Shimon Ballas's first novella in Hebrew, 'The Transit Camp' of 1964, also indicates a more material concern with the Arab Jews' plight. The two approaches complement each other in valuable ways, but perhaps it is time to translate Naqqash's writings into Hebrew, as much-needed rebuttal of a world-view that would deny Jews a meaningful history outside the State of Israel—or, on the other hand, would erase an older Jewish history within the wider Middle East.

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