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Multiculturalism and revolutions in the caucasus: Ali and Nino

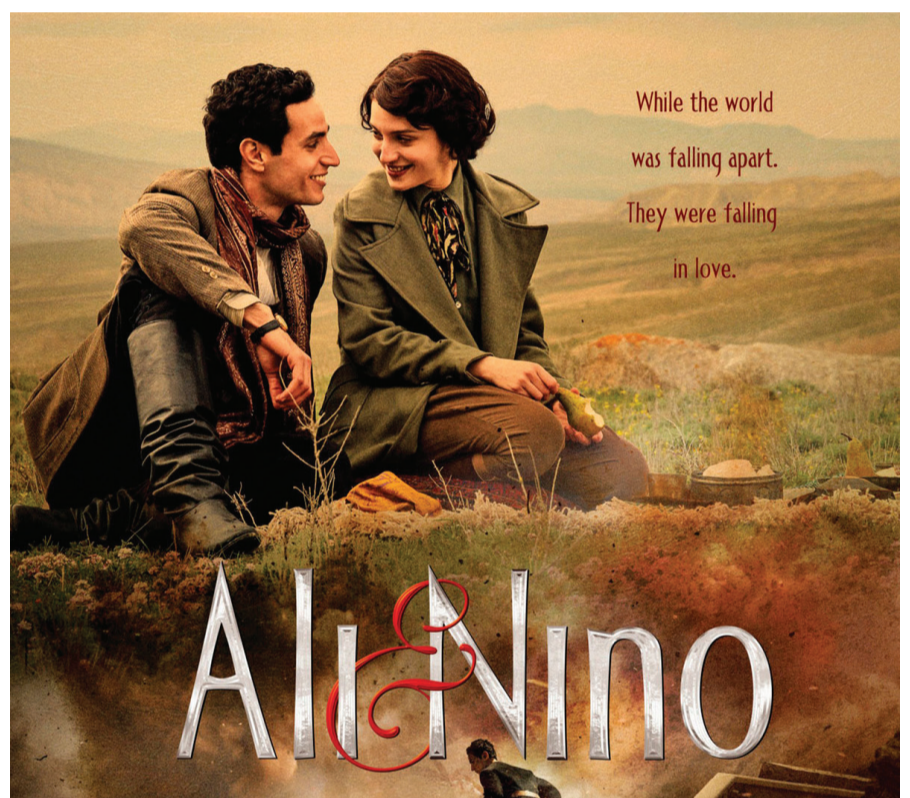
» Kurban Said's 1937 novel *Ali and Nino* tells the story of a pair of lovers from Baku whose lives are dramatically altered in the aftermath of the revolutions and new nation states arising post World War I. Although, from the juxtaposition of names, the premise seems to be an 'intercultural love story', the trials and tribulations of Ali and Nino, a Muslim Azeri and a Christian Georgian, stem more from jealous rivalry and the vicissitudes of war than from irreconcilable differences between their life styles. The lovers' fate being bound to larger revolutions in the world comes across more strongly in the successful 2016 film version directed by Asif Kapadia, than in the novel which lingers over Ali's brooding that Nino might not fit in within a harem context. These musings, however, mostly remain conjecture on Ali's part, and the discussion between the lovers, and later as man and wife, continue as to what kind of living quarters they will set up once the wars have ended and Ali – who has killed his Armenian rival and is afraid the man's family will take revenge – can return to Baku. Their love flourishes in makeshift homes in the mountains of Dagestan and during a brief sojourn in Iran before its ultimate test against the rigours of keeping a house as a married couple.

Kurban Said is thought to be the penname of Lev Nussimbaum, or so researchers agree. Tom Reiss has written a fascinating book called *The Orientalist* tracing the life of this enigmatic character. On the cover of the book Nussimbaum is pictured as an Ottoman in a fez – one of the personas he assumed in his peripatetic life, which took him to Berlin and even to Hollywood. Nussimbaum was from a Jewish family in Baku, and apparently was socialized by the different communities that lived in the town. His descriptions of its architecture, its people and Ali's feeling for Nino appear very true to life – a mindset shaped by being among the 'benevolent' ruling class in a multicultural city.

Ali Khan Shirvanshir, to give him his full, impressive name, came from a traditional, noble family and yet was also well-versed in European manners. The film opens with an opulent scene in Nino's parents house where they are celebrating her birthday. All the men are immaculately accoutred, and Ali who use late and who is even more so than the non-Muslim people assembled round

the table. He commands Nino's full attention. His gallantry, offset by the setting, is reminiscent of *War and Peace*. And, as in Moscow, there are revolutionaries demanding freedom, and capitalists – Nino's father among them – in Baku attempting to silence these critics in order to maintain the status quo, business as usual. The tension in Baku is presented as not so much between the different ethnicities but between Azerbaijan and Russia. Ali and Nino are not Romeo and Juliet; their families respect one another, and when, in the film, Nino decides to run away with Ali, her parents are scandalized, not because they think Ali is beneath them, but actually for the sake of form and convention. Ali and Nino have now, in a way, become stock figures representing the various

states were formulated after WWI, the book and more so the film provides an insight as to what was happening in Turkey's northeastern borders, and the fall out from the Soviet Revolution. It also alerts us to areas of multiculturalism that we don't usually talk about or see represented in media. Starting with the elusive authorship of the book – critics attribute the name Kurban Said variously to an Azeri and to a German baron-baroness couple- Ali and Nino is the product of a cosmopolitan world that had collapsed with WWI but was still resisting extinction between the two world wars. It is interesting to read in Tom Reiss's account of Nussimbaum's life that as a remnant of this cosmopolitanism Nussimbaum



forces that pull the Caucasuses in different directions. So much so that, the beautiful contemporary sculpture on the Batumi quay, 'Man and Woman', of two moving, perforated metal figures getting closer and then drawing apart have been nicknamed Ali and Nino. Following their adventures Ali and Nino set up home in Baku after the declaration of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in which he plays a prominent role. The film gives ample space for these political scenes in which Halit Ergenç, Sultan Süleyman of Magnificent Century, plays Fatali Khan, the first Prime Minister and provides for some metatextual Ottoman/Turkish presence. Ali and Nino host foreign dignitaries to garner support for the newly fledged but tragically short-lived republic of Azerbaijan. Immersed as we are in how the Balkan and Middle Eastern

liked to style himself as an Ottoman gentleman. It is interesting to note this choice: Germany, where he felt he culturally and intellectually belonged, had started to persecute Jews, and the Ottoman model of cosmopolitanism seems, for him to have been a refuge. Kurban Said's interest in the Ottoman Empire found expression in his only other known novel *Girl from the Golden Horn*, in 1938. This time, Said tackles another mixed marriage, between an Ottoman woman and a Viennese doctor, who in turn is a Bosnian who tries to downplay his Muslim heritage. As a text that straddles the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, it offers many points of comparison, and indeed, leaves the reader hoping for a film version at least as well made as Kapadia's *Ali and Nino*.