

Naomi Shihab Nye: A Border-Crossing Voice

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voice that pursues to cross the cultural divide, arguing that the poet's Arab-American lineage is the very means by which to implement a language of communion, not a language of division.

Where we live in the world
is never one place. Our hearts,
those dogged mirrors, keep flashing us
moons before we are ready for them
You and I on the roof at sunset,
Our two languages adrift,
heart saying, Take this home with you²

Abstract: *The author writes: Acknowledging her Palestinian and American origins, Naomi Shihab Nye (1952–) once said: “I didn’t fear differences. In fact, I loved them. This is one of the best things about growing up in a mixed family or community.”¹ Being born to a Palestinian father and an American mother, she came to be multiculturally oriented. For the past decades, Nye has gained great recognition for her poetry and prose writings about cultural differences, heritage, and peace. Her wide and multiple perspectives of a world of various ethnic traditions were crucial not only to her poetic groundwork for a new network of human relations but also to her interest in the multifaceted identities of people. It is the purpose of this article to explore Nye’s poetic*

Nye’s numerous volumes of poetry, which span from the 1980s to the present, have always scrutinized issues of people who suffer from segregation in terms of their ethnic, cultural, and geographic roots. How Nye draws on her Palestinian origin and her American upbringing to discern the connections between the two has always been a question in her poetry. Providing a different image for envisioning Arabs apart from the stereotype used in mainstream American mass media is equally important in her poetry. In this regard, she says, in the introduction to her volume *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002): “Arab Americans had the additional sadness of feeling the Middle East was rarely represented in a balanced way in the mainstream U.S. media.”³ Nye feels that it is her task as an Arab American to create a third space

1. Naomi Nye Shihab, ed. *The Space Between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1998), vii.

2. Naomi Shihab Nye, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (New York: Greenwillow, 2002), 34.

3. Nye, xiv.

beyond cultural boundaries to generate a cultural understanding of the Arab world.

A year after 9/11, Nye stated: “All of us who have a loving connection to the Middle East have a responsibility to represent parts of the culture . . . to counter the bad news.”⁴ She adds, “All of us, whoever we are, we’re all in positions as human beings to bridge things.”⁵ This longing to be a human bridge in implementing empathetic perception among cultures and nations runs through both her early and her later poems. Her poetry scrutinizes the lives of the common Arab people in general and Palestinians in particular and their daily life with the aim of finding some peaceful harbor in the face of their social and political turmoil.

Living in Palestine between 1967 and 1970, when she attended high school in Ramallah, witnessing the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and visiting the Middle East several times after becoming a poet exposed Nye to Arab culture, language, and the importance of writing. She was fascinated by her Arab background, people’s lifestyles, and their love for the oral storytelling tradition, which her grandmother, Sitti Khadra, embraced. Persis M. Karim notes, in *Contemporary American Women Poets*: “It was also during her stay in Palestine that Nye began to sing, play guitar, and write songs. Her background in music and her particular interest in the oral story telling tradition of the Middle East have contributed to her unique style—articulated in her poetry through her use of longer, rhythmic lines.”⁶ For Nye, poetry became a crucial medium

“for nourishment and for noticing, for the way language and imagery reach comfortably into experience, holding and connecting it more successfully than any news channel we could name.”⁷ Stories of farmers, villagers, family life, and landscape that she observed in Palestine were inscribed in her mind and found their way eventually into her poetry. Nye’s poetic output evolved to be part of neither formalist nor modernist contemporary poetry but became simply free verse written in an accessible language, reaching American and non-American readers alike.

In the title poem of her first volume, *Different Ways to Pray: Poems* (1980), Nye articulates a counter-sublime of universal human connectivity with the Middle East by emphasizing the Middle Eastern way of prayer. She lists different ways of worshiping and appealing to God—whether by kneeling, raising the arms to heaven, making pilgrimages dressed in white, or bending to kiss the earth—and so indicates that what matters is the very act of prayer that unites people. Suffering the same pain brings people together and gives them solace. In an overflowing narrative style, she ruminates on her memories in Jerusalem, where she saw Palestinians kneel in worship to God, “Allah,” imploring him to hear their prayers:

There was the method of kneeling,
a fine method, if you lived in a country
where stones were smooth.
.....
Under the olive trees, they raised their arms—
Hear us! We have pain on earth!
We have so much pain there is no place to store it!

7. Nye, xiv.

4. Quoted in Jennifer Ackerman-Haywood, “Free Verse: GVSU Poetry Event Expects Full House,” (Grand Rapids: *Grand Rapids Press*, 2002): A1–A4.

5. Ibid.

6. Catherine Cucinella, ed., *Contemporary American Women Poets: An A-to-Z Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002), 253.

But the olives bobbed peacefully
in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.
At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,
and were happy in spite of the pain,
because there was also happiness.⁸

In being acquainted with her Arab father's family customs, lifestyle, intimate relations, simplicity, pains, and joys, Nye realized how faith was an essential part of their lives and culture. In a complete sense of harmony between people and their land, their prayers are lifted up, seeking God's help: "Hear us! We have pain on earth!" The focus on this spiritual dimension highlights the nature of the human identity in the Middle East: "happy in spite of pain":

Some prized the pilgrimage,
wrapping themselves in new white linen
to ride buses across miles of vacant sand.
When they arrived at Mecca
they would circle the holy places,
on foot, many times,
they would bend to kiss the earth
and return, their lean faces housing mystery.

While for certain cousins and grandmothers
the pilgrimage occurred daily,
lugging water from the spring
or balancing the baskets of grapes.

8. Nye, *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland, OR: Eighth Mountain, 1995), 18.

These were the ones present at births,
humming quietly to perspiring mothers.
The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses,
forgetting how easily children soil clothes. (18–19)

These lines echo Nye's reflection on her grandmother's strong faith and her pride for being "called 'Hajjia,' to wear white clothes after her pilgrimage. . . . She wanted people to worship in whatever ways they felt comfortable. To respect one another."⁹ Visiting Mecca, this holy place, is for these pilgrims a life-process of love and work; it is a quest for love of the land and a striving to build and rebuild it in a way that resembles the image of the mothers' constant "stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses / forgetting how easily children soil clothes."

Her visits to her father's homeland have influenced her outlook on the world. Nye emphasizes how important is to apprehend "human identity" regardless of its origin, heritage, or religion:

Once you know the Middle East, it is impossible to reconcile the media identity of the place with the spiritual and cultural identity. The human identity. Those of us who care that the generosity and humanity of the Middle East not be muted entirely beneath the heartbreaking headlines have responsibility to speak about it all, when we can. How to balance images? It is always the question.¹⁰

9. Nye, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*, xvii.

10. Quoted in Heather Marie Hoyt, "An 'I' for Intimacy: Rhetorical Appeal in Arab American Women's Literature" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2006), 170.

For her, poetic production “allows people to understand their feelings and those of others, which is why, in her poetry, [she] continues to write about the Arabs she knows and loves, not the ones who blow up buildings.”¹¹ Her poems are, therefore, endowed with new insights into the experiences and resilience of Middle Eastern communities under economic and political bondage. Behind these new insights is her aim to construct a third space to bridge her American birthright with her Arab roots, which connects the two cultures and brings them closer in one entity. To do this, she uses free verse and a simple and descriptive style throughout her poetry as well as an “adherence to the rhetorical principal of clarity.”¹²

In “What People Do,” for instance, Nye reflects on images of life in Jerusalem based on her father’s reports, letters, and portrayals as a former reporter and journalist for the *Jerusalem Times*, the *San Antonio Express-News*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and various Middle Eastern agencies. The poem unfolds via images of those Arabs who live in danger on a daily basis and their story of survival:

My father is writing me the story of his village
 He tells what people did in another country
 before I was born how his best friend was buried alive
 and the boy survived two days in the ground

 My father’s handwriting changes from page to page
 sometimes a wild scrawl and disconnected letters
 sometimes a new serious upward slant (40)

The instability of her father’s handwriting, wavering between wildness and neatness, reflects the conflicting situation of the military and the political repression that his people face. Above all, his writing signifies the empathy he feels for his fellow people, when seeing them suffer or even be buried alive. However, he envisions them persevering and resisting the adversity they encounter every day. As Nye proclaims in “Jerusalem”: “I’m not interested in / who suffered the most. / I’m interested in / people getting over it” (87).

As she moves from her father’s account of Palestinian life to her own experiences in the Middle East, the speaker articulates her time in Jerusalem, traveling “the old roads again and again / wearing a different life in a house surrounded by trees” (40). It is only by being there that she is able to understand “what people do”:

I appreciate the daily braveries clean white shirts
 morning greetings between old men

 I would tell my father
 I cannot move one block without you
 I will never recover from your love
 yet I stand by his bed saying things I have said before
 and he answers and we go on this way
 smoothing the silences (40–41)

Nye’s aim is not to present a sentimental critique of the political exploitation of Arabs by Israelis or to draw idealistic models of Arabs but rather to reveal the simple and “the daily braveries” of “what people do” there. The effect of the experiences that Arab people like Nye’s father have lived is passed on to his daughter, who in return preserves with love this resisting Arab spirit of kinship with which “we go on this way / smoothing the silences.”

11. Ibis Gómez-Vega, “Extreme Realities: Naomi Shihab Nye’s Essays and Poems,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 30, Trauma and Memory (2010): 117.

12. Hoyt, 179.

Though the speaker is assumed to be the poet herself, as she addresses her father using the lyric “I” and pronoun “you,” the repetition of both pronouns construct an emblematic “you” and “I,” a reference to those who are different from us and with whom we may deny any connection. It takes the “I” and the “you” to integrate: “I cannot move one block without you / I will never recover from your love.” To emphasize a cross-cultural understanding of Arab and American cultures, Nye invites her readers to embark on the journey her poetry provides in an attempt to develop a dialogic encounter between the two, through which both are mutually enriched.

Part of this network of human relations that the poet underlines seems to be autobiographical, based on the sense of love and loss her own family experienced. This individual experience can stand in for that of many families living in the West Bank and the Middle East. Perhaps, it is Nye’s way of emphasizing that family life in the Middle East “must be acknowledged; it must be recognized, but so must the fact that families have been torn asunder by the displacement created by war.”¹³ As Alison Townsend remarks in “Inexhaustible Reality: Reading Nye,” “one has that sense that, though never overtly ‘political’ in content, her poems are political in the best sense of the word—precisely because they are rooted in personal experience.”¹⁴

The displacement her own Arab family experienced in Palestine has been a great evolving influence on Nye, a force that nourishes her sense of belonging to her eastern heritage. In “My Father and the Fig Tree,” Nye moves from the Middle East to the American Southwest, where her father is portrayed as a displaced Arab who

nostalgically ruminates on his most loved fruit tree, the fig tree, which he used to grow in his homeland. Within this anecdote, she reflects on her father’s identify as a Palestinian and his belonging to his motherland:

For other fruits, my father was indifferent.
He’d point at the cherry trees and say,
“See those? I wish they were figs.”
In the evening he sat by my bed
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
They always involved a figtree. (20)

The very title of the poem, “My Father and the Fig Tree,” indicates a strong sense of unity between the Arab father and his fig tree that he does not find in his new home in America. That love for fig trees reflects how they are greatly loved by all Palestinians and Muslims, who are accustomed to planting them in all their villages, figs being prominent in the Holy Quran. Nye, in other words, points out her father’s strong love for his hometown, his heritage, his religious culture, and the taste of the good old days, which is, perhaps, not quite understood by his six-year-old daughter who was raised in the States:

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.
“That’s not what I’m talking about!” he said,
“I’m talking about a fig straight from the earth—gift of
Allah!—on a branch so heavy it touches the ground.
I’m talking about picking the largest, fattest,
sweetest fig
in the world and putting it in my mouth.”
(Here he’d stop and close his eyes.) (20)

13. Gómez-Vega, “The Art of Telling Stories in the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye,” *MELUS* 26, no. 4, *African American Literature* (Winter 2001): 251.

14. Alison Townsend, “Inexhaustible Reality: Reading Nye,” *Women’s Review of Books* 13, no. 3 (December 1995), 27.

The daughter's shrugging from the taste of a dried fig might indicate, on the one hand, her lack of awareness of what fig trees represent for her own father; on the other hand, it recalls her love for her motherland: "The taste of figs brings back joy, solace of a peaceful childhood spent with family in Palestine."¹⁵ Interestingly enough, the father is unwilling to plant a fig tree in his garden lest it fail to grow or be a kind of abandonment of his own roots, "an admission, perhaps, that the world of his memories is lost forever"¹⁶:

Years passed, we lived in many houses,
none had figtrees.
We had lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets.
"Plant one!" my mother said.
but my father never did.
The last time he moved, I got a phone call,
My father, in Arabic, chanting a song
I'd never heard. "What's that?"
He took me out back to the new yard.
There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
a tree with the largest, fattest,
sweetest fig in the world.
"It's a fig tree song!" he said,
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
emblems, assurance
of a world that was always his own. (20–21)

15. Gómez-Vega, "Extreme Realities," 112.

16. Ibid.

Managing eventually to plant a fig tree years after he moved to Dallas, Texas, the Arab father is finally willing to deal with his sense of exile and reconstruct his memories within an Arab environment that he creates himself. The very fact of living between spaces, the Palestinian and the American, seems a sort of a journey that wavers until a third space is established that joins the other two spaces together. Within the sweet taste of "a fig tree song!" he is able to preserve his love and past memories as he joyfully "pluck(s) his fruits like ripe tokens, / emblems, assurance / of a world that was always his own." The fig tree becomes a sort of third space through which the father tries to establish a new venue that invokes the feeling of being home, a home with "an Arabic inscription above his door, '*Ahlan Wa Sahlan*' (34), meaning 'Welcome.'" This third space serves to cross disparate landscapes of home or exile, to travel in spirit and achieve a sense of peace. Though the personalized perspective of her father's love for his fig tree might sound emotional, it becomes one of Nye's poetic images to bridge gaps among cultures and to "write the 'other side' of the Arab story through her poetry."¹⁷ Nye's family memories, whether in the background of her writings or not, function as a way to share her gift for speaking for others.

Emphasizing the value of embracing differences, Nye celebrates her Arab background, trying to record experiences and capture details of Arabs' lives that counter Western news media's stereotypical and superficial images. The character of her uncle, Muhammed, in "For Muhammed on the Mountain," is another Palestinian figure Nye focuses on, exploring her fascination with his "silence" and move to the mountains, where he went on a quest

17. Ibid., 113.

to be “living close to clouds” and discover the mystery of life. The speaker emphasizes that her uncle, unlike the uncles of her American friends in grade school, “who rode motorcycles, / who cooked steaks outdoors or paid for movies,” was a “mystery,” fearless and strong (33). As Gregory Orfalea states, the speaker “wants to learn from him the secret of a secret’s life we all harbor inside and about which we seem to know so little.”¹⁸ The speaker also highlights her uncle’s way of praying, from which she wants to learn the simplicity of living:

This is what I am learning, the voice I hear when I wake at 3 a.m.
It says, Teach me how little I need to live
and I can’t tell if it is me talking, or you,
or the walls of the room. How little, how little,
and the world jokes and says, how much. (35)

In her uncle’s morning prayers, she recognizes both the simplicity of life and its plentitude at the same time.

Nye, in her sense of belonging to multicultural origins, embraces her Arabic familial and communal history and feels “doomed by our blood to care.”¹⁹ In “Blood,” a poem published in *Yellow Glove* (1986), Nye addresses again the sense of disintegration Arabs face under the influence of powerful political forces. In particular, she addresses the Palestinians’ tragedy of displacement and uprooting, which is suggested in the poem by the figure of the “Homeless fig, this tragedy, this tragedy with a terrible root /

18. Gregory Orfalea, “Doomed by Our Blood to Care,” *Paintbrush* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 58.

19. *Ibid.*, 56.

is too big for us.” The issue of identity and belonging is highlighted here to raise a question: “What flag can we wave? / I wave the flag of stone and seed” (121). The title of the poem, “Blood,” refers to “being an Arab, to carrying the Palestinian tragedy in the blood,”²⁰ a sort of a holy mission that one cannot ignore, motivating the speaker to carry on the resistance to this displacement by means of stone and seed.

The speaker is attracted by newspaper headlines that “clot” in her blood, making her turn to her Arab father for answers:

I call my father, we talk around the news.
It is too much for him,
neither of his two languages can reach it.
.....
Who calls anyone civilized?
Where can the crying hearts graze? (121)

In the face of the violence and displacement, “the best that [Nye] can offer is a humane vision of her gentle Arab father who can barely speak . . . he is stunned into silence.”²¹ The benevolent father figure stands for the peaceful realm she tries to emphasize throughout her poetry. In “Arabic Coffee,” a poem published in *Yellow Glove*, the speaker extends the image of the Arab father who survives the “hundred disappointments” he faced in America after he was displaced. The hospitality and the joy he shows by serving Arabic coffee for his guests, “an offering to all of them” and “the center of the flower,” “juxtaposes the family’s catastrophic

20. Gómez-Vega, *Extreme Realities*, 114.

21. *Ibid.*, 115–116.

financial loss to the simple tradition of sharing a cup of coffee so lovingly prepared.”²² The success the Arab father revealed in being a good host is contrasted with “lost dreams” that are “tucked like pocket handkerchiefs / into each day” (130). But that sense of loss is not an obstacle for the father to hold on to “remnants of his Palestinian culture”; it urges him instead toward “maintaining and reviving customs from his Arab roots”²³ as “a motion of faith. The Arabic coffee denotes the third space in which the Arab father finds a remedy for facing the new and different culture he does not interact with so successfully. As Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom point out, these simple ingredients in Nye’s poetry “take on a sacred meaning that reflect her Palestinian American roots. . . . [She] uses food to construct spaces wherein they imagine the possibilities of peace, love, and community.”²⁴ Her descriptions of the “eggplant / from its nest of leaves,” “marble-sized peaches, / hard green *mish-mish* and delicate lilt / of beans,” in “The Garden of Abu Mahmoud” (124), or mint-filled gardens on the West Bank establish a deeper understanding and compassion for a world beyond the boundaries of individual spheres.

As a keen observer of the Arab conditions and turmoil in the Middle East, “Nye has used her writing to provide a human face to the oft-caricatured Arab.”²⁵ Yet, she knew that her writings must be neither preachy nor propagandistic. In “The Words under

22. Marcia G. Kutrieh, “Images of Palestinians in the Work of Naomi Shihab Nye,” *JKAU: Arts & Humanities* 15 (2007 A.D./1428 A.H.): 10.

23. *Ibid.* 10.

24. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, “Cooking up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye’s Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber’s ‘Crescent,’” *MELUS* 32, no. 4, *Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures* (Winter 2007): 34.

25. Annie’s New Letters (& notes), “Palestinian-American Poet Naomi Nye,” accessed April 4, 2017, http://anniesnewletters.blogspot.com/2011_10_02_archive.html.

the Words,” a poem dedicated to her grandmother, Sitti Khadra, whose life in North Jerusalem is portrayed as an example of perseverance, Nye travels through the mundane and ordinary places, pondering her grandmother’s simple life. She emphasizes that differences are not reasons for ill-considered assumptions about Arabs but for overarching humanity:

My grandmother’s hands recognize grapes,
the damp shine of a goat’s new skin.
When I was sick they followed me,
I woke from the long fever to find them
covering my head like cool prayers.

My grandmother’s days are made of bread,
a round pat-pat and the slow baking.
She waits by the oven watching a strange car
circle the streets. Maybe it holds her son,
lost to America. More often, tourists,
who kneel and weep at mysterious shrines. (36)

Nye’s emphasis on small things in the feminine sphere of her grandmother’s domestic life, especially food, functions to reveal that the personal is political. For Nye, every detail of Sitti Khadra’s life and every ordinary story about people in the West Bank count as a reflection on the public and political spheres. Samina Najmi notes that Nye’s poems are “often set in kitchens, gardens, grocery stores, and other domestic spaces traditionally associated with women and women’s work. Her domestic alchemy turns images of food and household tasks into sacred objects that signify larger themes of gratitude, everyday acts that represent larger truths and reveal rich

personal and political histories.”²⁶ In portraying her grandmother’s daily life, Nye implements a language of communion, not of division. She employs a delicate and understated language and narrative, and she details aspects of everyday experience with absolute clarity of imagery and with a gentle, authoritative voice to make her visions reachable. Ibis Gomez-Vega asserts, “Her work aims for clarity and achieves it because the poet herself is consciously trying to reach readers and non-readers alike, anyone who can make the time to hear a good story.”²⁷ Similarly Phebe Davidson proclaims in *Conversation with the World* that Nye is always “concerned with the detail of daily life and the emotional weight it carries, [she] is a poet who finds poetry everywhere around her.”²⁸

Focusing on “everyday details” is one way to articulate wider truths about ordinary people like Sitti Khadra and about those who are different from us in terms of culture and country of origin:

These little everyday details
My grandmother’s voice says nothing can surprise her.
Take her the shotgun wound and the crippled baby.
She knows the spaces we travel through,
the messages we cannot send—our voices are short
and would get lost on the journey. (36)

Though Sitti Khadra’s “days are made of bread, / a round pat-pat and the slow baking,” she “knows the spaces we travel through, /

26. Samina Najmi, “Naomi Shihab Nye’s Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime,” *MELUS* 35, no. 2, *Multi-Ethnic Poetics* (Summer 2010): 158.

27. Gómez-Vega, “The Art of Telling Stories,” 251.

28. Phebe Davidson, *Conversation with the World: American Women Poets and their Work* (Pasadena, CA: Trilogy, 1998), 153.

the messages we cannot send,” only through living the smallness of things.

To open her readers to the spirit and wisdom of a faith that is perhaps other than their own, Nye draws attention to Sitti Khadra’s strong wisdom, peace, and faith in the face of loss via her constant adherence to “Allah,” God, who is everywhere:

My grandmother’s eyes say Allah is everywhere, even in death.
When she talks of the orchard and the new olive press,
when she tells the stories of Joha and his foolish wisdoms,
He is her first thought, what she really thinks of is His name.
“Answer, if you hear the words under the words —
otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges,
difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones.” (36–37)

This old woman’s voice is a direct call for tolerance and insightfulness to make new human spaces and connections emerge. She reminds her granddaughter “to look for meaning in life, to look for the words under the words, which is exactly what the life of this poet is about, creating a context for understanding through story telling.”²⁹ As opposed to Western media and news outlets that drive a wedge between people, Nye creates through the figure of her grandmother “for one brave second” a way to “stare / openly / from borderless skins” (“Eye-to-Eye,” 11). The speaker exalts her grandmother’s “unspoken” wisdom as a means of softening the rough edges of a hard world. Nye asserts in a conversation with Davidson that she shares Sitti Khadra’s “awareness of the abiding word—the words under the words. . . . I always had the sense that

29. Gómez-Vega, “The Art of Telling Stories,” 248.

she was reading everything. She could read everything—between and above and through and beyond. She had a penetrating intuition about things.”³⁰

In “The Man Who Makes Broom,” Nye portrays another Arab character, a broom maker who “is like nobody,” though he looks like “all men, / the man who sells pistachios, / the man who rolls rugs” (127). In him, the speaker finds resistance and dignity “that continues, dream after dream.” The brooms he makes, the “pink seam he weaves / across the flat golden face of this broom” in “his stony corner” is his “own shrine” (127). Broom-making is described, therefore, in terms of a sacred act of faith imbued with religious imagery. The way the broom maker weaves the straw becomes his way of making his own shrine.

Celebrating this craft, Nye shows that “in the midst of war, the Jerusalem broom maker remains dedicated to his work. . . . Labor done with firmness is political.”³¹ His story becomes part of all the stories of those unknown Arabs who are part of a larger history of humanity; their stories can be read as part of what it means to be human in this place and time. For Nye, every individual story becomes important because “it reveals the larger history of a culture or an individual. She often equates political oppression and discrimination with the silencing of individual stories.”³² As an Arab American who can apprehend both sides of these stories, Nye realizes that if these stories are not told, something will be missing. She craves for justice, love, and kinship and for an acknowledged identity of her ancestral country, the place that is considered an “other” in America.

30. Davidson, 156–157.

31. Mercer and Strom, 38.

32. Ibid.

To go beyond cultural and language barriers, Nye wonders, in her collection *Red Suitcase: Poems* (1994), whether she needs to understand Arabic to feel the pain of people living there. Language as part of one’s culture and identity becomes the means to uncover the struggle of people toward justice and self-identification. Thus, in “Arabic,” she recalls what an Arab once told her in Jordan in 1992 as he looked at her with earnest and laughing eye”:

“Until you speak Arabic—
—you will not understand pain.”
Something to do with the back of the head,
an Arab carries sorrow in the back of the head
that only language cracks, the thrum of stones
weeping, grating hinge on an old metal gate.
“Once you know,” he whispered, “you can enter the room
whenever you need to. Music you heard from a distance,
the slapped drum of a stranger’s wedding,
wells up inside your skin, inside rain, a thousand
pulsing tongues. You are changed.”³³

Though Nye is familiar with her Arab father’s homeland, as one who values words, she seems still in the process of probing its language. She admits her shame over being unable to understand Arabic, her inability to “weave the rug,” to weave together Arabic words. She can produce perhaps only their “sound but not the sense.” This lack of knowledge of Arabic makes the poet wonder:

I thought pain had no tongue.

33. Nye, *Red Suitcase: Poems* (New York: BOA, 1994), 19.

Or every tongue at once, supreme translator, sieve. I admit my shame. To live on the brink of Arabic, tugging its rich threads without understanding how to weave the rug . . . I have no gift. The sound, but not the sense. . . . I touched his arm, held it hard which sometimes you don't do in the Middle East, and said. *I'll work on it*, feeling sad for his good strict heart, but later in the slick street hailed a taxi by shouting *Pain!* and it stopped in every language and opened its doors. (*Red Suitcase*, 19)

The speaker tries to articulate the meaning behind her heritage and what it means “to come from a place so deeply ingrained in the mind that figs savored in childhood retain their taste forever.”³⁴ However, having no gift for speaking Arabic did not stop the speaker from crossing the limitations of language and culture to touch the man's arm; she “held it hard / which sometimes you don't do in the Middle East.” Body language becomes a way to construct a space of empathy and kindness through which the language of pain can never fail to open the doors to human kinship, as she says in “Words When We Need Them”:

Into the breath,
wordless but ripe
with all possible words,
messages not yet gathered
or sent. (*Red Suitcase*, 25)

34. Gómez-Vega, *The Art of Telling Stories*, 250.

Similar is Nye's reflection on the importance of her grandmother's “crumpling of syllables” in “Holy Land,” connecting her to a world that cannot be explained by means of words. Sitti Khadra engages in

crumpling of syllables,
pitching them up and out,
petals parched
the names of grace, hope,
.....
a woman who couldn't read
drew lines between our pain
and earth
stroked our skins
to make them cool. (*Red Suitcase*, 23–24)

While it might sound meaningless in terms of language, Sitti Khadra's unsaid words are in themselves “waterfalls”: “she could have said anything, / . . . and made a prayer” (23). The gesture of striking skins is also a means to cross the limits of language and break up differences. Through crossing the boundaries of language, Nye is actually trying to create a conversation with the world to transcend discrepancies of culture and ethnicity.

To establish this conversation between people of her Arab homeland and the Western world, Nye engages the history that is being written by the “feet” of Arabs, as she points out in “Going to the Spring”:

Pages are turning centuries of breeze.
These feet write history on the dirt road

and no one reads it, unless you are here
to read it, unless you are thirsty. (*Red Suitcase*, 10)

In addressing the anonymous “you,” Nye invokes in her readers a tangible recognition of the historical and familial legacy people have. She offers a metaphorical or actual visit to the Middle East, where one could give voice to and preserve the legacy that Arab Americans have left behind. She suggests her responsibility to bear this familial and communal history, to being “doomed by our blood to care.”³⁵

This quest for roots, home, and identity in Nye’s work is one way to restore the sense of belonging that is lost in the process of settling somewhere else. In “Kindness,” the sense of loss becomes the means to bridge disintegrated human networks and nurture kindness within:

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
.....
Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

35. Lisa Suhair Majaj, “On Writing and Return: Palestinian-American Reflections,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 2, no.1 (2001): 120.

You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
(*Words Under the Words*, 42–43)

The speaker addresses an anonymous “you” to help her readers see “the deepest thing inside,” the unspoken sorrow of others that the poet endeavors to make heard and to reveal through her poetic voice. A language of kindness is for her the answer for the several political, social, and cultural obstacles that marginalize the “other” and separate “regions of kindness.” She endeavors to create cultural bonds of human connections that dissolve into the sorrows of the “Other,” regardless of how different this Other might be:

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase
bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.
(*Words Under the Words*, 42–43)

The “I” and “you” are the very ingredients for making kindness possible and pain bearable. This optimistic note that Nye brings to her poetry, which stems from the rich and multicultural environment in which she lived, both in Palestine and of her Arab American family, aims to assimilate contrasting but harmonious elements “mixed melodies, fragrances, textures”:

crushed mint and garlic in the kitchen, cardamom brewing in coffee, fabulously embroidered Palestinian pillows plumped on the couch. And always, a thrumming under chord, a hovering, hopeful note: Things had been bad, but they would get better. Our dad had lost his home, but he would make another one. People suffered everywhere, but life would improve. I refuse to let that hope go.³⁶

Her culturally and politically defiant posture focuses on how to be committed to other people and face loss, violence, war, and exile with the fundamental truth of human connectivity. Her understanding of her country of origin's past and present conditions makes her nourish a diligent quest for human justice and a way to tell the Western world about what it declines to recognize:

What we have lost is not just personal property but family legacies: the land, homes, and history that should have been our children's birthright. What has been lost is not just our past but also their future. And how do we teach new generations about their heritage, show them where their roots lie buried when Palestine does not even appear on the map? As writers and as human beings, we seek to give voice to our histories, to speak of what the world refuses to know.³⁷

In her later poetry, in which the language of testimony to those displaced and exiled prevails, Nye continues to juxtapose the unspeakable sense of pain of her Palestinian and Middle Eastern characters with her belief in perseverance: "I know we need to

keep warm here on earth" ("How Palestinians Keep Warm" 26). The potential for change and sustaining faith in transcendence are the central concerns of her volumes of the late 1990s and onward. *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002), in which she collects many of her early and new poems on the Middle East and the Arab American experience, emphasizes fortitude in the face of cultural, ethnic, and political isolation. Nye's belief in crossing cultural divides is based neither on false optimism nor on an idealistic vision of the contemporary world. Rather, it is based on her belief in the wisdom of overcoming divisions of all kinds, for "Where we live in the world / is never one place. Our hearts, / those dogged mirrors, keep flashing us / moons before we are ready for them" ("My Grandmother in the Stars," 41). Nye provides her readers with an authentic voice that promotes a sense of humanity to connect them with horizons beyond their own—work that positions Nye—using a description and compliment she once received from her friend and poet, Wendy Barker³⁸—as "a human switchboard."

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38. Nye and Joy Castro, "Nomad, Switchboard, Poet: Naomi Shihab Nye's Multicultural Literature for Young Readers: An Interview" MELUS 27, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 233. Wendy Bean Barker (1942–) is an American poet who is poet-in-residence and a professor of English at the University of Texas at San Antonio, where she has taught since 1982.

36. Quoted in Gómez-Vega, "Extreme Realities," 118.

37. Majaj, 122.