The Nature of Exile in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poems: Does She Remember the Land?

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Abstract

Naomi Shiheb Nye is an American Arab poetess, who lives within the Arab diaspora of Texas in harmony with other Diasporas. Her tie with Palestine is a tie of 14 years stay. Her sympathy with her father, Aziz, becomes the inciting element for her poetry. Besides, her mother, who is an exiled German, has a great effect on the visionary aspect of the nature of her exile. Nye's reaction to what is happening in Palestine seems to be very paradoxical and challenging in explanation. Her "peaceful" revolt seems to be against Zionism and the ideology of racism, rather than the loss of Palestine. Though she is far from her father's land, she does not consider herself as a stranger – an other *in America, where her father and some other intellectuals installed after the Nekba (War of 1967). These exile writers found this new land tolerant and accepting the melting pot. Such friction between their own culture and the cultures of other diasporas make them reconstruct another identity, which seems to exclude them from both their home and the host country – America. This in-betweenness is a home within literature – a home conceived with art, and where the self-reveals its nature and philosophical outlook through language.*

Keywords: *Naomi Shihab Nye, Arab Anglophone literature, Exile, Homemaking, Art and Identity.*

Introduction

Home and exile are two interrelated themes, which pre-dominate the American Arab poetess Naomi Shihab Nye's works. Her 14 years stay in Palestine does not really have a strong impact on the visionary aspect of her exile and notion of home. Nye seems to be different from the rest of the Arab diaspora of Texas. Thus, her art becomes different and the way to look at Palestine seems to be different too. Her sympathy with her father, who has lost his land and who died in exile, becomes the fulcrum around which her poetry revolves. Nye does not react as another in Texas, where she lives in harmony with other diaspoaras, but she is

rather against the ideology of Zionism exercised by Israel in Palestine. Her poems are words of tolerance and universal peace, where everyone and every confession could find a place to live without constraints of any sorts. But how can she re/construct, artistically, an identity and a space, where she acknowledges her own existence as a Palestinian and an Arab? To what extent is she able to represent in her poems the sense of loss and exile?

Self-Exile within Art: A World Within a Word

The act of writing is an act of self-discovery, which is dialogically related to one's own past, present and expectations. But being exiled, writers frequently include races and spaces within the mould of their artistic creation. El-Sayed El-Aswad points out that "Narratives imbue the past with personal and collective significance and construct present and projected life worlds. This means that individuals' sense of entities is an upshot of their subjective involvement in the world. Narrative mediates this involvement. Personal narratives shape how people attend to and feel about events."[1]

The critic Philip Metres in his article, "Introduction to Focus: Arab-American Literature," points out that diversity in culture produces diversity in the Arab artistic creation. This cultural variety affects their unity and disperses their efforts to unite at least politically. He writes: "They do not adhere to one political body and do not have one single culture. Besides, they face racism, xenophobia and marginalization. And, more particularly, Arab-American literature returns to the paroxysm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Lebanese Civil War, Islam, and patriarchy/ homophobia."[2]

And so, Arab American writers are parted between two driving forces: one that pulls them to their homeland, and the other that pushes them to the new geography they live in: America. They seem to be lost, dispossessed and exiled in both spaces. There is **No** literal space to live in due to Israel, and there is no easy location in this new geography, which holds new cultures, which impose, unwillingly, a new mode of behaviour and new manner of living different from theirs. So, what remains for them is the (re)creation of their homes in poetry and fiction.

[1] El-Sayed El-Aswad, "Narrating the Self among Arab Americans: A Bridging Discourse between Arab Tradition and American Culture," *Digest of Middle East Studies* (Fall 2010), 238.

[2] Philip Metres, "Introduction to Focus: Arab-American Literature," *Focus* (November-December 2012), 3.

So, at the margin, as most of diasporas, Arab American writers feel that identity is not fixed – related to soil, tradition and people – but in essence, it is an on-going construction that overlaps with all the social, cultural, moral, and ethnic elements that surround them. Lisa Suhair Majaj raises such controversial matter and wonders:

> *What kinds of "home" are possible for Palestinians in the U.S., especially when return to the geographical space of Palestine remains precluded by political and military realities? Is home a physical place, an emotional state; is it found in history, in memory? Can homes be created or recreated through writing? Are definitions of home altered by the experience of exile, whether literal or metaphorical?*[3]

On the other hand, the Arab critic Elmaz Abinader, in his article "Children of Al-Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century," has positioned that all Arab American writers, whatever are their modes of artistic expression, are emotionally and spiritually linked to their homelands and their cultures, than the new life in America. He writes: "Arab American writers are going beyond stories and poems that are linked to the homeland and heritage. Their expressions explore new vistas – related to years spent living in the United States – and domestic political and social issues that affect their everyday lives."[4]

To develop such issue of exile versus artistic creation, the focus is put on the contemporary Palestinian American poetess Naomi Shihab Nye. Through her poetry, Nye tries to (re)construct a home of her own. Though her vision is not similar to that of her father, she, nonetheless, acknowledges from him the importance of living in a universal home, where peace reigns, regardless of race, ethnic and religion. The nature of her exile is not forced; it seems to be soft, kind and free. Lisa Suhair Majaj states that the Palestinian American writers, among them Nye, reconstruct a home nuanced and related to the way they conceive it. She writes:

> *Tracing the ramifications of exile and the need for homecoming, they not only give voice to their Palestinian identities, but also seek to forge understandings of home nuanced enough to contain all facets of their identities: as Palestinians, as Americans, as writers and as women. [....] But "return," in their work, signals a return not just to Palestine or to Palestinian history, but also to new visions of home and selfhood – grounded in history, memory, resistance, and the transformative power of the imagination.*[5]

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[3] Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Visions of Home: Exile and Return in Palestinian American Women's Literature," *ThaqafatEng Side* (14 February 2004), 251.

[4] Elmaz Abinader, "Children of Al-Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century," *Electronic Journals of the U.S. Department of State* 5, 1 (February 2000), 13.

[5] Majaj, "Visions of Home," 251-252.

In-betweenness is a home / exile within the self: It is introvertive and more inner because the writer cannot create real physical home in America, a kind of Palestine within Texas. In the words of Edward Said: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. [....] What is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both."[6] So, exile is only possible as a return within the self since the return to Palestine seems, for the time being, impossible. Majaj maintains that:

> *Americans in general and Arab American writers in particular have long identified a deep sense of homelessness as one of the most salient features of Arab-American experience. Pointing toward a history of invisibility and/or exclusion within American culture, and describing lives marked by experiences of marginalization and negative stereotyping, many identify the process of embracing Arab-American identity, after years of trying in vain to "assimilate," as a form of homecoming.*[7]

Majaj extends further claiming that: "The writer who negotiates exile, of whatever sort, is seeking not just a return to a particular geographical or emotional space, but is seeking to recreate the self in relationship to the world. If homecoming is a movement, a journey, homemaking is an act of creation."[8]

N. S. Nye seems to consider exile as a home within, and the only way to make it possible is through art. She fashions it through the ingredient of her father's land, culture and aspirations. "A traveler in the world able to make home where she goes, Nye is conscious of the tug of gravity rooting her in Palestine, yet conscious too of the tug of her US context."[9] As Nye suggests in a poem entitled "Fuel," being of mixed heritage does not mean fragmentation; it can also mean "leaving nothing out."[10] In an interview, when the journalist Melissa Tuckey asks her whether she crystallizes her land and home in her poetry, Nye replies: "I think poetry is huge for all culture, even though sometimes it feels discreet, subtle, somewhat underground. Where are we without our voices? I hope the breath keeps billowing, like wind. I hope more people breathe it and speak it."[11]

But Nye tries to soften the blow by recreating a world of/with words – Palestine through art. Martin Farawell states that:

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[6] Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," *Cultural Critique* 1 (Autumn, 1985), 137-138.
[7] Majaj, "Visions of Home," 253.
[8] Majaj, "Visions of Home," 254.
[9] Majaj, "Visions of Home," 263.
[10] Naomi Shihab Nye, *Fuel* (New York: BOA Editions, 1998), 60.
[11] Melissa Tuckey, "Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye," Saturday, July 18, 2009, http://www.salemshalom.blogspot.com/2009/7/interview-with-naomi-shihab-nye.html.

> *A poet could avoid the dilemma by taking the position that poetry shouldn't be "political." But Nye's poems are attempts to stay connected to the world and to others. She refuses to abandon the attempt despite the violence and injustice she must therefore bear witness to. It is almost as if she discovers how we are connected through the act of bearing witness.*[12]

Nye's love of Palestine is the love of someone, who is not offensive, repulsive and wanting. It is rather a universal love that joins the whole fragments of the world together: East with West, South with North, and Jews with Arabs. She seeks for a world where all the exiles, those who denounce violence, despotism and hatred, can live together regardless of their race, culture and ethnic: an exile, who excludes Zionism, chauvinism and the like. Farawell maintains that: "Love requires that we give our attention to another, however difficult it may sometimes be. We must love them, with all their human flaws and foibles, and not some idealized, false image. Nye reminds us that loving the world, and one's own country, requires the same quality of attention."[13]

To reach such world of exiles, Nye uses food as a symbol of belonging and identity. Though she leans more to Palestinian food, she likes the food of others. Exchanging food means laying the ground of a "world of another-own": the world of the in-between. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom state that:

> *Her poems convey the idea that through observing the lives of others, we begin to dissolve the imaginary boundaries separating individuals, cultures, and countries. Nye's focus on food and its link to the histories of marginalized, often forgotten people, underscores the notion that our connections to each other must extend beyond the boundaries of self and of geographical space. She illustrates the need for connection beyond the self through her focus on the domestic space, often a kitchen in which the daily rituals of cooking and eating enlarge understanding and compassion for a world beyond the boundaries of the individual.*[14]

Nye tries to annihilate the barriers that exist between her and the other. *She* and *the other* should melt into *one*. No foreignness should exist: the stranger should no longer remain a stranger. Familiarity is the corner stone of friendship. And so, Nye transforms anger into kindness. She makes of the difficult moments a means of departure to the world of peace and harmony. She herself acclaims that: "I know we need to keep warm here on earth / and when your shawl is as thin as

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[12] Martin Farawell, "Poetry Fridays: Naomi Shihab Nye," *The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation: Imagine a Better New Jersey*, July 31, 2009, blog.grdodge.org/2009/07/31/poetry-fridays-naomi-shihab-nye.

[13] Farawell, "Poetry Fridays."

[14] Loraine Mercer and Linda Strom, "Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," *MELUS* 32, 4 (Winter 2007), 35-36.

mine is, you tell stories."[15] Ibis Gomez-Vega claims that Nye is a peace-maker poet that speaks for the soul of people. She writes: "[Nye] reminds her readers that before you know what kindness really is you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth."[16] This idea is very illustrative in "Half and Half" in *Words under the Words: Selected Poems.* In this collection, Nye marks her transcendental philosophy, which reckons pardon for any exiled individual, whose motif of exclusion is only claiming a land on which he lives among other people. She writes:

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
Catches the thread of all sorrows
And you see the size of the cloth.[17]

Her poem "Different Ways to Pray" signals the visionary aspect of exile. Exile is not physical: the physical is only a means of departure. It is rather transcendental and exclusively based on different beliefs and creeds. Nye writes:

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 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.
These were the ones present at births,
Humming quietly to perspiring mothers.
There were those who didn't care about praying.
The young ones. The ones who had been to America.[18]

This poem "explores the different ways people achieve self-awareness and revere the world. Poems document the new level of thinking and responding that

[15] Naomi Shihab Nye, *Red Suitcase* (New York: BOA Editions, 1994), 26.
[16] Ibis Gomez-Vega, "An Essay Review: The Art of telling Stories in the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye," *MELUS* 26, 4 (Winter 2001), 248.
[17] Naomi Shihab Nye, *Words under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland, OR: The Eighth Mountain Press, 1995), 67.
[18] Naomi Shihab Nye, "Different Ways to Pray," in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature: Contemporary Period: 1945 to the Present.* 2977-2978, 5th Edition, ed. Paul Lauter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 2978.

results from getting to know oneself."[19] It is the sense of prayer, which is the essence of interconnection between people. We diverge in beliefs but we pray for the same motto. "Handed me one perfect pink rose, / because we had noticed each other, and that was all."[20]

The world, Nye wants to reproduce artistically, lies in the words she chooses for her poetic composition: the world is the word. With words, she creates space for all people of the globe, mainly those who are prevented of their real land and real space. In her poems and interviews, she speaks about Middle-East food and flora: she often refers to the fig tree and mint, which are so specific to her father's homeland. She even plants mint in Texas trying to reproduce Palestinian environment and climate in America. Rosemary and Reisman point out that: "That herb represents soothing and refreshing qualities that comfort and sustain Nye, transporting her emotionally to places and people she loves. She plants mint in her garden, even when climatic conditions are unfavourable, indicating her determination to pursue what she values."[21]

Nye uses the herb mint to notify peace, forgiveness and mainly reconciliation, after violent clashes. In other words, mint softens rages of war and hatred and unites opponents more than differentiating between them. But, paradoxically, this mint is not kept out-there in Palestine: it is brought – here – in America. This means that she brings her father's culture in America as a symbol of difference, but also as a cultural contribution in the American diasporas. But Nye does not really know how this herb (mint) is used and prepared in Palestinian manner. This symbolises that she is stranger to her father's culture. Probably, it is only through her inciting father not to forget the homeland that she is reproducing Palestinian land, rites and tradition in Texas.

Nye is, somehow, stranger to all what is Palestinian; yet, she is fascinated by it. She feels that it is a duty to write about Palestine, the homeland of her father. Rosemary and Reisman maintain that: "Nye, who lacks memories of the mint snowball except for what her mother has shared, feels estranged and disconnected from her past and suffers an emptiness that she fears cannot be filled. She perceives the mint snowball as an unattainable ideal."[22] Her ignorance of the recipe of mint implies her ignorance of her Palestinian cultural background.

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[19] M. Rosemary and Canfield Reisman, eds., "Nye Naomi Shihab," in *American Poets* 3 (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2011), 1440.
[20] Nye, *Words under the Words: Selected Poems*, 43.
[21] Rosemary, "Nye Naomi Shihab," 1442.
[22] *Ibidem*, 1442.

Nye seems to be parted between two driving forces: Palestine (the father) and America (hospitality). She tries to compensate her sense of loss and indecisiveness through a world recreation: she uses and fuses both worlds (father and hospitality) within a new world, which unites these twin poles of her identity and being. In her article "Images of Palestinians in the Work of Naomi Shihab Nye", Marcia G. Kutrieh underlines such uneasiness of Nye in recreating a new universal world, which holds some ingredients of her father's blood and tradition. She writes: "In regard to Nye and her view of Palestinian men and women, we as readers, follow her journey to elucidate deep structure, clarify ambiguities, and sort out contradictions while enriching her understanding with new meaning, reflected, of course, through her text."[23]

Nye does not write to respond to the realities of her home and Palestine, but, rather, she looks at them from afar: Mass media. Thus, her poems are not as forceful and revolting as those of her compatriot Mahmud Darwish. They are rather cries of someone, who hates violence and wants a universal peace. In "Blood," she laments:

Today the headlines clot in my blood.
A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.
Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root
is too big for us. What flag can we wave?
I wave the flag of stone and seed,
table mat stitched in blue.
I call my father, we talk around the news.
It is too much for him,
neither of his two languages can reach it.
I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,
to plead with the air:
Who calls anyone civilized?
Where can the crying heart graze?
What does a true Arab do now?[24]

Nye looks differently to the problem of Palestine; so, she writes differently. Through her poems, she tries to make the reader think and be in favour of her visionary quest of universalism. In his article "The Healing Power of Art," Donna L. Miller points out that: "When we hear people's stories, when we share intimate aspects of self and culture, when we accept new ways of knowing, we can reduce ignorance, grow hope, and diminish hate."[25]

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[23] Marcia G. Kutrieh, "Images of Palestinians in the Work of Naomi Shihab Nye," *JKAU: Arts & Humanities* 15 (2007), 5.
[24] Nye, "Blood," 2980.
[25] Donna L. Miller, "The Healing Power of Art," *The ALAN Review* (Summer 2012), 30.

Through her poems, Nye wants to connect individuals together and makes them understand humanity and the world she wants to recreate in art: it connects people together with peace, kindness and wisdom. A world for everyone, who denies his space and race and, yet, he believes in one race and one space: humanity and universality. "As we individually escape into artistic creation," Miller maintains, "we discover potential; art renews our hopes and gives us reason to dream. Art provides a place to battle the demons in our lives and to survive the fight."[26] In the same vein, Safa'a Abdulrahim states that Nye believes a lot in words. She shows her sense of loss: loss of the father, the land of the father and more importantly, the sense of being far from Palestine. She writes: "Her faith in the power of words to renew and uplift the spirit is the fuel that feeds her soul."[27]

In her doctorate dissertation entitled "Transformative Acts: Arab American Writing/ Writing Arab America," Lisa Suhair Majaj is driven by Nye's poetry and its growing interest for readership because of the way she transforms, through language, her father's loss into an everlasting now. She writes: "I was struck by how her poetry grew quietly in threading, so that everything felt linked and expanding. And I was captivated by the subtle insistence, in almost every poem, on the value of different perspectives, different ways of seeing and being in the world."[28] Majaj acknowledges the rich background of Nye. She seems to tell us that Nye is more than a Palestinian. She has visited many spaces and places and brushed up with different cultures of the world. Majaj writes:

> *Moving between her Palestinian and American heritages, the multiple cultures of the southwest where she resides, and the different countries to which she travels, her poetry explores the markers of cross-cultural complexity. While honoring the specificity of culturally rooted lives, Nye also emphasizes the liberating possibilities of border crossings. […] Nye grounds selfhood upon the recognition and articulation of differences.*[29]

Such selfhood, a self within words, manifests only when the external constraints make it react, kindly, through the amount of emotional intensity that words, in which it dwells, enable it to express. The poem "Kindness" speaks about sympathy and solidarity of those who suffer and who do not have a place of peace and tranquillity. Nye invites every exiled to see these sufferings and feel the humiliation in the same manner the oppressed people feel it:

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[26] *Ibidem*, 31.

[27] Safa'a Abdulrahim, "Between Empire and Diaspora: Identity Poetics in Contemporary Arab-American Women's Poetry," PhD in English Studies (University of Stirling, June 2013), 124.

[28] Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Transformative Acts: Arab American Writing/Writing Arab America," PhD in American Culture (The University of Michigan, 2012), 44.

[29] *Ibidem*, 126.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.[30]

Connection between people ensures communality and makes them near to one another and share the same motto: live with and for *one-another*. This is what Nye seems to tell the reader. Her universalism makes her link the sufferings of the other with her own, as a human being rather than as a Palestinian.

This sense of loss and forgetfulness, but of belonging and togetherness, hovers over her poem "For Lost and Found Brothers." There are many evidences, which demonstrate such philosophy of exile in Nye's poetry. Exile does not mean being absent from the feast of life, but, rather, reformulating the world on her own shape: connection. In this poem, she writes:

For you, brothers.
For the blood rivers invisibly harbored.
For the grandfather who murmured the same songs.
And for the ways we know each other years before meeting,
how strangely and suddenly, on the lonely porches,
in the sleepless mouth of the night,
the sadness drops away, we move forward,
confident we were born into a large family,
our brothers cover the earth.[31]

Home and America

Being in America, Nye seems to lose vivacity and nostalgia to her homeland – Palestine. Probably, she sees her duty to revive what her father lost as land more than herself. In a reply to a question by Kathleen Herndon, about her awareness of her homeland, she replies:

I travel all the time. I see people everywhere, and I think Americans are profoundly open-hearted people, Americans of all backgrounds. Whatever their personal feelings about what's going on right now, whatever their political convictions, whatever their background, whether they've traveled or lived in the Middle East as you and I have, whether they've never been there or never want to go there, there's still a sense of openness and kindness and acceptance that I find. It was just this back and forth, this merging of cultural exchange, but I didn't think of myself so much as an Arab-American when I was a kid. Just the same, I do think the world leads us into identities,

[30] Nye, *Words under the Words: Selected Poems*, 45.
[31] *Ibidem*, 51.

and I don't think it's bad to have those, if people try to give you an identity like, "you're a western writer," "you're a woman writer."[32]

In another interview when James Blasiname raised the notion of home and borderlands, Nye explains her position, which is quite paradoxical. It is probably due to the short lived time (14 years) she, so young, spent in Palestine:

James: Some of the book's poetry deals with Borderlands and how some young people are residents of two cultures but accepted by neither. Can you explain how that is, please?

Naomi: It is true that some people who live in Borderland situations feel at home in neither place, but it is also true that some of us end up feeling at home everywhere.[33]

Being American, but consciously felt different because of being *not white* or *not quite white*, Nye wants to have a world without tension, a world where she could live being herself and being sympathetic with others, who are not white – or quite white – but who are likewise Americans. Such vexed relationship to American citizenry is rendered complicated by the problem of racial ambiguity. Ibis Gomez-Vega states: "Although she shares her father's Palestinian ancestry, she does not recognize it as a marker."[34] Whatever is her Americanness, the place she gets in America is diasporic and essentially based on ethnicity and race. Her recognition of being so has made her think of an in-between world, which becomes a niche of exile for her. In her poem "Arabic," in *Red Suitcase* collection, she writes:

I thought pain had no tongue. 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.[35]

But being unable to speak Arabic correctly, she is not seen by a common Arab as non-Arab. Tanyss Ludescher points out that: "Arab American women writers face their own particular set of problems. When Arab American women criticize the patriarchal nature of their society, they are often accused of

[32] Kathleen M. Herndon, "On Life, Art, and politics – A Conversation with Naomi Shihab Nye," *Conversation* 25, 1 (Fall 2008), 26.

[33] James Blasingame, "Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* (September 2010), 67.

[34] Gomez-Vega, "An Essay Review," 251.

[35] Nye, *Red Suitcase*, 86.

abandoning their own culture and adopting Westem modes of thought."[36] In the same vein Anissa J. Wardi *et al*. maintain that:

> *Cultural and ethnic beliefs are inextricable from one's worldview and thus the speaker of "Home" is caught in a liminal space, poisoned, as he is, between his Arab worldview of family and an American worldview, which encourages independence and individuation. The multiple registries of movement literalize the speaker's tensions, as the family's immigration to America has resulted in the father's inability to live in accordance with his inherited worldview.*[37]

In the same context, the critic Gomez-Vega in his article "Extreme Reality: Naomi Shihab Nye's Essays and Poems," claims that Nye is safe in America and does not have the same feeling of war as those who live in Palestine. She looks at the war from afar, and, thus, she does not reproduce faithfully the intensity of sufferings and sorrows the Palestinians undergo. She writes:

> *Her poetry reflects the realities of the war-torn ancestral homeland and the peaceful life that she leads in the American Southwest where she lives with her husband and child in relative safety. [...] Although war rages across the ocean in the land of her ancestors, the American Southwest provides safety, solace, peace, a space where a poet can think about the state of the world and hope to effect change.*[38]

And so, exile seems to be very special for Nye. It is not of the land she did not live in. She is identified more with America than with the Arab world. That is why her exile is not intense and intensive. She mollifies her father's anger rather than her sense of loss of Palestine. Majaj points out that:

> *Exile, moreover, exists in relation not only to the lost homeland, but also to the complex and contradictory space of the present. Situated at a remove from both Palestinian and U.S. culture by virtue of their dual; identities, Palestinian-Americans may find themselves not only exiled from the geographical homeland they may never have set foot on, but also excluded, politically and culturally, from U.S. identity.*[39]

Diversity of/in culture is a rich heritage, which is communal to all Americans of the diasporas. R. William Ferris points out that: "In the stories they tell from different points of view, U.S. authors of a multitude of backgrounds build bridges of understanding over which all of us can cross into each other's worlds."[40] The long-time home of Naomi Shihab Nye is no doubt San Antonio

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[36] Tanyss Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature," *MELUS* 31, 4 (Winter 2006), 106.

[37] Aniss J. Wardi and Katherine Wardi-Zonna, "Memories of Home: Reading the Bedouin in Arab Literature," *Ethic Studies Review* 31 (Summer 2008), 69.

[38] Ibis Gomez-Vega, "Extreme Realities: Naomi Shihab Nyer's Essays and Poems," *Alif* 3 (2010), 109.

[39] Majaj, "Visions of Home," 253.

[40] William R. Ferris, "An Introductory Comment," *Electronic Journals of the U.S Department of State* 5, 1 (February 2000), 5.

(Texas) – it is a kind of melting pot, which fuses together different races, from Latinos and Blacks to Lebanese and Palestinians, and other ethnics. Poems of her collection *Is This Forever or What? Poems and Paintings from Texas* do reflect such background and show Nye's ties to such place, its people and its culture, more than the place of her father's land – Palestine. In "San Antonio," she writes:

I remembered the old men
in the west side café,
dealing dominoes like magical charms.
It was then I knew,
like a woman looking backward,
I could not leave you,
or find anyone I loved more.[41]

In her article, "Wandering Poet – Naomi Shihab Nye," Lauren Newkirk Maynard seems to excuse Nye's acknowledgement of her belonging to San Antonio than to Palestine due to three reasons: the first one is that Nye was born and spent almost all her life in San Antonio, with its people and diversity of culture; the second, Palestine seems to be so far because she spent (as a teenager) no more than 14 years, as a visitor more than a settler; the third, Palestine is at war-time: thus, no peace possibility is ever given to her to visit the land of the father.[42]

Space location is the key of Nye's search. She is lost between her father's land through blood – Palestine – and her birth place America, which has influenced her identity formation. In her doctorate thesis about Nye, Wafa Youcef Al-Khatib writes: "Naomi Shihab Nye is one of the Arab-American writers whose works reveal a deep understanding of our weakness, our humanity, as the stories she creates define her ties to the people who endow her with an appreciation for heritage and a strong sense of what she has lost and what she has gained as she defines her own place in the world."[43]

Within diaspora, Nye tries to connect with individuals and forge tight boundaries. Her exile is rather personal than communal. She sees, from her own niche, people with a special eye trying to recreate life based essentially on

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[41] Naomi Shihab Nye, "San Antonio," in *Is This Forever or What? Poems and Paintings from Texas* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), printed by Poets.org, https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/san-antonio.

42 Lauren Newkirk Maynard, "Wandering Poet – Naomi Shihab Nye," Just Buffalo Literary Center (2011/2012), 5, www.justbuffalo.org/babel.

[43] Wafa Yousef Al-Khatib, "An Examination of Postcolonialism, Multiculturalism and Hybridity in Naomi Shihab Nye's *Sitti's Secrets, Habibi, 19 Varieties of Gazelle Poems of the Middle East* and *Red Suitcase*," Master in English Language and Literature, Department of English Language and Literature (Amman, Jordan, January, 2009), 5.

inner/outer vision. Al Khatib maintains that: "Nye also writes from a universal perspective in which she tries to take care of the inner lives of the people, which make her poetry very close to the way many people think and feel, utilizing her ethnic experience that reflects her attitude towards the world including the Middle Eastern culture."[44] So, space coins her belonging; she feels American more than Palestinian. Of one hundred fifty five (155) poems in her three published collections, only fourteen (14) have Arab or Palestinian content – less than nine percent.[45]

The dilemma Nye lives in is due to her helter-skelter state. She feels that her duty is to write about her father's land, but at the same time, she feels rooted in America. But to what extent is she able to fuse both in reality? Amal Abdelrazek maintains that: "Arab-American women are not quite the same as Arab women or the same as American women, nor are they quite the «other»; they stand in that undetermined threshold place where they constantly drift in and out."[46] Sana'a Abdulrahim describes in-betweenness as a feeling within writers themselves, more than society. In her doctorate thesis about empire and diaspora, she writes: "Adnan, Nye, Kahf and Hammad have extended themselves across both worlds and cultures, drawing on both, yet developing their new diasporic multi-layered perspectives; neither are these perspectives Arab, nor are they American."[47]

By presenting to American readers Palestinians as humans, who are suffering, Nye wants to universalize Palestinian cause not as a typical matter – the loss of the land – but as people, who deserve to live in a world of peace among all other races and ethnics. Thus, she seems to tell us that acceptance to live with the other, as she does herself in American, is the only issue of peace for Palestinians. In other words, she is against the suffering of people rather than the usurping of the land. Abdulrahim states that:

> *Naomi Shihab Nye always claims that her experiences in Palestine and San Antonio have led to the formation of her poetic vision through the prism of [….] the "radical multiculturalism." It is a mode of multiculturalism that seeks to move beyond binary classifications of identities and rigid boundaries of identifications. Rather, it moves towards more inclusive relationships and commonalities within the context of difference*

[44] Al-Khatib, "An Examination of Postcolonialism," 23.
[45] Al-Khatib, "An Examination of Postcolonialism," 41.
[46] Amal Abdelrazek, "Scheherazad's Legacy Arab-American Women Writers and the Resisting, Healing, and Connecting Power of their Storytelling," *The MIT: Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 5 (Spring 2005), 150.
[47] Abdulrahim, "Between Empire and Diaspora," 20.

to denounce and transform persistent realities by forging alliances that cross race and other tropes of classifications of different groups.[48]

Regardless of ethnicity, race and colour, human beings are alike. Humaneness is innate within every one of us. Nye, subsequently, looks at Palestinians through this angle. Her poems incarnate such vision of oneness, which enhances everyone to feel compassion and empathy and reach a good comprehension of human nature. Being of mixed cultural heritage and bounded by more than one culture, Nye's poems offer a kind of ambiguity in identifying which of the cultures she is near to. In this context, Majaj claims that:

Nye offers a nuanced meditation on the notion of cultural "blood inheritance," moving from a lightly humorous consideration of the possibilities of being a "true Arab" offered by her father's folk tales, to a deeply troubled questioning of the implications and responsibilities of this identity.[49]

In her poem "Blood," she says:

Years before, a girl knocked,
wanted to see the Arab.
I said we didn't have one.
After that, my father told me who he was, "Shihab" – "shooting star" –
a good name, borrowed from the sky."
Today the headlines clot in my blood.
Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root
is too big for us.[50]

Nye seems to be haunted by the loss of the father, who died in exile without seeing his land independent. That is why she writes about his people and his land to free herself from the burden of this past. In "The Man Who Makes Brooms," she writes:

So you come with these maps in your head
and I come with voices chiding me to
"speak for my people"
and we march around like guardians of memory
till we find the man on the short stool
who makes brooms.[51]

Which home does Nye consider as a real space for her? Is it the palpable effective concrete one? Is it that of her father? Or is it the universal one, where all people live in with different cultures, conditions and positions? Nye's poems seem to reveal more than what she wants to tell us: she hides her visionary aspects of

[48] Abdulrahim, "Between Empire and Diaspora," 120.
[49] Majaj, "Transformative Acts: Arab American Writing/Writing Arab America," 127.
[50] Nye, "Blood," 2979.
[51] Nye, *Words under the Words: Selected Poems*, 127.

life. In her artistic creation, she is very ambiguous. In this ambiguity, she exiles herself. Majaj maintains that:

> *But overarching all of these is the idea of a home in the self: a space shaped by cultural, political, social, religious, familial, gendered and geographical factors, but which cannot be reduced to any of these. In this sense, home-space rewrites the multiple dimensions of exile – physical, cultural, emotional, spiritual and metaphorical -- and creates the grounds for both identity and agency.*[52]

Conclusion

Through her poetry, Nye seeks to create a world of peace, where people of the Middle-East could live together beyond tensions and contentions. She perceives a world through the lens of her world: a world where all diasporas live in harmony, like America, she dwells her. America, for her, is a world of cultures – the world of the worlds. Though Nye is of a Palestinian origin, among her one hundred fifty five (155) poems (published in three collections), only fourteen (14) dealt with the ancestral homeland of the father; the rest are about Hispanic Southwest, where she lives, and about Latin America, where she has most of the time travelled.

Nye's exile is not the one that is tinged and imbued with nostalgia and homesickness. Possessing a mixed heritage, she does not feel uprooted: she is at home wherever she goes. Her father's home, which holds three monotheistic religions, could be an inspiring element to lay the ground for her own world, where harmony between people is built up.

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[52] Majaj, "Transformative Acts: Arab American Writing/Writing Arab America," 209.

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