

“Reclaiming the Arab American Identity through Literature: The example of *Naomi Shihab Nye*”

LACHOURI Toufik

University of August 20th, 1955 skikda

ملخص:

Abstract:

The presence of different ethnic groups is what made America, culturally, a very diverse place. It is the only country where we can find Arabs, Italians, Russians, Japanese and French eating at the same Restaurant, but multiculturalism can only strengthen America if the members of different cultural groups are aware of who they are and the importance of their culture. Arabs started to face an identity crisis since 9/11. The latter was influenced by the difference between how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by the others. This article will shed the light on the importance of an Arab identity in a multicultural place and it will use the American-Palestinian poet Naomi Shihab Nye as an example. We aim to prove that the Arab identity strengthens America through the analysis of some poems of Shihab Nye. We will try to see how this poet used her pen to strengthen and celebrate the Arab identity in America.

إن تواجد مجموعات عرقية مختلفة جعلت من أمريكا مكانا غنيا بالتعدد الثقافي، حيث أنها الدولة التي نجد فيها العرب والايطاليين والروسين واليابانيين والفرنسيين يأكلون في نفس المطعم. لكن هذا التعدد الثقافي يزيد من قوة أمريكا إذا أدرك أفراد مختلف الثقافات حقيقة هوياتهم وأهمية ثقافتهم في أمريكا. بدأ العرب يواجهون مشكلة الهوية منذ أحداث 11 سبتمبر حيث تأثرت هذه الأخيرة بالتباين بين نظرتهم لأنفسهم ونظرة الآخرين لهم. وعليه سنسلط الضوء في هذا المقال على أهمية الهوية العربية في بلد متعدد الثقافات وسنأخذ أنموذجا على ذلك الشاعرة الفلسطينية الأمريكية "نعومي شيهاب ناي". نهدف لإثبات أن الهوية العربية تقوي أمريكا من خلال دراسة مجموعة من قصائد هذه الشاعرة لنرى كيف استعملت خبرها لتقوية الهوية العربية في أمريكا.

Even if many Americans today may deny the importance of the American multiculturalism, history will always emphasize its importance in building the American nation. The presence of different ethnic groups has made America a very diverse place. It is the only 'country' where we can find Italians Russians, Japanese, French and Arabs eating at the same restaurant. But, multiculturalism can strengthen America only if the members of different cultures are totally aware of who and how important they are. This issue applies to the problem of Arab American population in the United States. Finding themselves caught between the boundaries of a new society and an old tradition, Arab Americans face the dilemma of "*Doubleness*". The success of multicultural stories led by the African Americans has helped them to start calling themselves "ArabAmericans". This group of people faced the same troubles as the Puritans when they first arrived to their promised land. "Many travelers find themselves saying of an experience in a new country, that it wasn't what they expected, meaning that it isn't what a book said it would be." (Orientalism,93).

People from all over the Arab world have moved to the U.S, lured primarily by the American dream. Most of these "neo-Puritans" have escaped segregation, terrorism, and all sorts of problems in their own countries and fled to this Promised Land in an attempt to have a better life.

Before digging into the dilemma of identity we need to know first who are the Arab Americans? An Arab American is an immigrant or an American-born citizen with Arab ancestry. He might be a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew, but they all share stories of war, exile, non-belonging, a lost language and a lost identity.

While most of the Arab world is Muslim, the Arab-Americans are overwhelmingly Christian (77%). More specifically, 43% of these

Christians are Catholic, 23% Eastern Orthodox[...] and roughly 11% are protestant. Only 23% of Arab-Americans are Muslim. Arab-Americans live in every state in the nation and hold positions across society. They are taxi drivers and grocers, firefighters and law enforcement officers, nurses and dentists, businessmen and stockbrokers, designers and entertainers. Arab Americans are woven into the fabric of American life and history. (Shora 28)

The Arab community in the U.S. originates from 22 different countries, from the far East to the far West. The first Arab who came to the USA was a Moroccan slave known as Zammouri. He arrived to Florida in 1528. The immigration of Arabs to the United States of America is divided into three waves. The first wave started in 1924. There were almost 200.000 Arabs looking for the American Dream were almost 200.000 Arabs. In the 1960's a huge second wave started consisting of two kinds of immigrants, who were either highly educated students (doctors, engineers, scientists etc) or unskilled single man (looking for jobs such as mining, automobile industry etc.). The third wave started in the 1970's. It consists, mainly, of students seeking a better education, families or members of families who have escaped war and terrorism in their mother countries. All the troubles and the identity crash of the Arabs were intensified by the 9/11 catastrophe. Glen A. Love claims:

Still in the shadow of September 11, 2001, and the catastrophic destruction of the World Trade Center, which claimed thousands of lives, I hear again and again that the world changed forever on that day. The way we conduct our daily lives, our sense of our social environment, our systems of domestic security, our foreign policy, our attitude toward strangers, toward travel, toward our families, toward the future – all has changed. (164)

The destruction of the World Trade Center was a curse that fell hard on the entire globe; everything changed. The situation and the life of Arab Americans in the U.S were the most damaging consequence of it. Arabs found themselves strange again. The troubles that they thought they had overcome with their immigration came to life again because of this incident. So, along with the social, psychological and linguistic problems, Arabs now had to face the problem of being the enemy. Anti-Arab stereotypes and phobias started to develop as the new disease of the modern era. At this point, Arabs were forced, once more, to show America and the whole world their true nature. They wanted the world to see that they are merely another people who feel, live, think and act like any other American. One of the tools efficiently used by Arab Americans to fulfill this goal was literature.

Literature has had a significant role in strengthening Arab American identity. Arab American literature has been influenced by difference and the principle of acceptance of differences. Arab-American writers have understood the importance of writing themselves in a proper way. They know that we are living in a world in which you should write yourself, or you will be written by others:

Since 9/11, Arab Americans have been the subject of much discussion in both popular and scholarly forums. Books on the suddenly visible Arab-American community have been published recently or are forthcoming, and courses dealing with Arab Americans are gradually entering university curricula. This interest is cross-disciplinary, having become evident in numerous humanities and social science fields. (Orfalea 107)

Arab American literature is not a new body of literature. It goes back to the early years of the twentieth century. The first Arab American writers were

highly recognized and widely read. They were the first hyphenated Americans to be considered by the U.S Literary Committee as a literary force. In the early 1920's, these Arab American writers created what we know as the *New York Pen League* or *Al Rabitah Al Qalamiyah*. It consists of *Shoaraa El Mahjar* or *poets of immigration*. It consisted of poets mainly from Syria and Lebanon. The most famous of these poets are: *Elia Abu Madi*, *Mikhail Naimy*, *Gibran Khalil Gibran* and *Ameen Rihani* who was known as the father of Arab American literature. These poets wrote in Arabic then helped to have their works translated into English. Gibran's masterpiece *The Prophet*, for example, gained wide fame in the United States. It was a best-seller for a long period. Mikhael Naimy was also nominated for the Noble prize.

In "*Grandmothers, Grape Leaves, and Khalil Gibran: Writing Race in Anthologies of Arab American Literature*," Michelle Hartman lists three books of a great number of books which are easily accessible to different readers. She states that Arab American literature has turned into a great power, that was strengthening the position and perception of Arab Americans:

Arab American literature began to be increasingly anthologized starting in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Three major anthologies appeared between 1988 and 1999, making a broader range of Arab American literary works available than ever before. *Grapes Leave: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (Orfalea and Elmusa 2000), *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian Feminists* (Kadi 1994), *A Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (Akash and Mattawa 1999) are all easily accessible books, published by relatively mainstream publishers. Each of these three books embraces a significantly different focus, showing the breadth of Arab American literary production..." (170)

The only difference between the old Al-Mahjar writers and contemporary writers is that the former did not have an identity crisis (they did not focus on proving their Americanness), whereas the latter have been concerned with culture and identity issues:

The literature of Arab American writers continues to evolve as a cultural representation and as a literary accomplishment. The new generation of writers, including spoken word performers and rap artists, attend to the matters of their time as well as to the concerns of history. They follow the great tradition of Al-Mahjar. As the children of Gibran, Naimy, Rihani, and Madi, these writers will continue to make their marks and influence American literature. (Abinader 15)

On a general scale, Arab American writers have tried to give their own picture about their identity with its stable or unstable existence. Arab American writers often place themselves behind or in-between the hyphen. Their characters are often torn between two worlds, two cultures, two understandings and two languages.

The issue of Arab women has been widely tackled by non-Arab Americans. They have always been mysterious to Americans. Therefore, the non-Arabs usually mistake or misrepresent the identities in their works, who have found themselves even more invisible in America than in their own homelands. The Arab American female writers tried to challenge the Western understanding and presentation of women, being as active as the male writers. Originally, they even participated in the Al Mahjer movement. Thus, Afifa Karam is considered the first Arab American writer to gain a general audience in America *and* in her homeland Lebanon. Contemporary Arab American women are more aware and more focused on women's issues in the Arab and the American worlds.

The American multicultural reality has strongly influenced the development of Arab American women writers, who have been influenced by the literature of Asian Americans, Native Americans and African Americans. They have created a special bond between themselves and the women of other ethnic backgrounds.

Arab American writers look to other ethnic American writers such as Toni Morrison or Maxine Hong Kingston as models for expressing aspects of their respective groups that reflected lived experiences. Azziz refers to such internal aspects as the 'intimacies' of one's culture. Such multicultural models resonate especially with Arab American women writers who are struggling to negotiate what Majaj refers to as the 'dual burden of both cultural and gender ambassadorship', this burden is a shared one among ethnic women writers who attempt to redefine and challenge the stereotypes projected on their group from outside and the negative practices within their own groups. (kaid 75)

The female Arab American poets of the twentieth century have continued the path of their Al Mahjar male ancestors. In addition to assimilating themselves to the other American ethnic groups, they always try to go back to the old in order to enrich and strengthen the new. Such diversities have made these poets neither Arabs nor Americans. They started to fall into *Bhabha's* "third spaces". This new space gave women a room to move freely and to write and talk on behalf of themselves. "In Bhabha's conception, third spaces become a locus of new power and authority. To some extent, Bhabha's third spaces are counter-cultural places of discourse characterized by challenge, enquiry, empowerment and creativity" (Sachs, ed. 94).

In their attempt to create new spaces, women can maintain more strength and self-confidence. Thus, Arab American women have become aware of a new place that helps them to stop being the victims or the enemies.

In the wake of 9/11, Arab American women became the target of all kinds of terror and violence. They were blamed for who they are; for being Arab women. The rebuttal they received fell even harder on Muslim Arab Americans. Islamophobic attitudes pushed Westerners to rebuff the importance and strength of Arab women and they were neglected by feminists themselves. Since Islam was considered an antifeminist religion, feminists had their role in silencing and discriminating Muslim women. Yet the artists at this period decided to help women to discover their real selves and to deny any other presentation on their behalf. Susan Muaddi Darraj was one of the first Arab American feminists who fought for the appropriate presentation of women. She published *Scheherazade's Legacy* in 2004. This book highlights the importance of the art of writing in empowering women's identities. It demonstrates Darraj's preoccupations and disappointments with the status, the perception and the reception of Arab American women. *Scheherazade's Legacy* fights all norms of silencing artists. It emphasizes the power of the word to enhance the survival of the marginalized:

So there can be a hazardous undertow to urging the artists to self-silencing in the Salman Rushdie affair: you don't want to be a cultural traitor like him, do you? It hangs very tacitly, very subtly, usually-over the head of all Muslim artists. But you know what? The dark side of who we are will not stay covered up, nor does it help us to cover it up, and asking the disturbing, subversive questions is a noble jihad. Fear is not basic for any art and never can be. (15)

Naomi Shihab Nye is one of the leading contemporary Arab American poets. She is a highly recognized poet who was deeply inspired by her family members, especially her father and her grandmother.

Palestinian American Naomi Shihab Nye is another poet who affirms and gives voice to Arab culture and tradition while at the same time making space for change. Nye, daughter of a Palestinian Muslim

father and an American Christian mother, is one of the most well known Arab-American authors: a prolific writer who has earned an avid readership among Arab-American and mainstream American audiences, children and adults, Nye has managed to bring Arab culture and politics into the US sphere in a deeply humanistic fashion. (Majaj 2008)

In her poetry, she tries to capture both cultures. She talks about war and peace, Arab Americans, and multicultural issues. Nye celebrates peace and unity through her lines. She stresses the happiness that arises out of harmony. According to her, when the English and the Arabic worlds merge, they can create a better person, a better identity and a better new world. In her poem Steps, Nye states:

They have learned the currency of the New World

Caring wishes for gum and candies

They float through the streets

Diving deep to the bottom

Nosing rich layers of crusted shell (Nye 79)

Nye's new world was once the world of a lost little girl who was wondering with her doll in her hands and searching for home. The little Naomi found herself in a crossroad between the Arabic and the English worlds. Her identity was torn between two things and she could not choose either of them. The "wondering poet" finished her twisted road as she decided neither to be an Arab nor an American, but to be an Arab American.

Nye has rooted her Arab American belonging in her father's experience as a Palestinian man living in America. She witnessed the way her father struggled to stay strong and to provide a living for his family.

She marveled at his language ability and understood some of the problems of a Palestinian coping with a new culture. She saw his drive to maintain his otherness while trying, sometimes unsuccessfully, to make a living for his family. She was aware of the fragile balance between being the person in authority and yet failing in different ventures like his business because he did not quite have control over his environment. Nye dimly connected her sense of identity with this Palestinian-American figure representing in part the “uprooted fig” who finally found a sense of belonging, and the patriarchal figure whose sense of power came largely through his verbal dexterity. (Kutrie 13)

Nye is usually associated with Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg since they are also concerned with identity issues. Her interest in other cultures and traditions did not prevent her from focusing on the individuality of people. She has captured a wide audience with her multicultural poetry insisting on the importance and uniqueness of each person, and urging people to share their differences. Nye believes that such a sharing will help in the making of a better world.

In *Different Ways to Pray* (1952), she writes:

There was the method of kneeling,
a fine method, if you lived in a country
Where stones were smooth.
The women dreamed wistfully of bleached courtyards,
Hidden corners where knee fit rock.
Their prayers were weathered rib bones,
Small calcium words uttered in sequence,
As if this shedding of syllables could somehow
Fuse them to the sky.

There were the men who had been shepherds so long
They walked like sheep.
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!
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. (1-19)

Such poems celebrate the Arab tradition of simple ordinary people. The different approaches that people use to pray kneeling, sitting, talking..., are seen by the poet as tools to connectedness. This poem shows how people come to achieve self-awareness, especially with their connection to the earth. Nye explores multiculturalism with highlighting how different people can pray in different ways to reach the same end. Her Islam did not affect her poem. Different non-Muslims have responded positively to *Different Ways to Pray*.

Nye depends on metaphor, imagery and story to represent people's attempts to make sense of their lives. She tries, as well, to convey some peaceful anti-war messages. Throughout her poetry, she seems to advocate more peace and stability rather than violence and chaos. Nye succeeds with each of her poems to reach into different parts of our humanity. Her skillful talent has made her a universal poet and taken her beyond the limits of the hyphen. Nye poem "kindness" is a great example of the poet's capacity to gather different voices around her. It highlights the sorrow and the hope for happiness, standing for an optimistic attitude towards our world.

Nye writes: Before you know what kindness really is /You must lose things, (1-2)

Kindness in this sense holds a complex meaning. These lines show that our universe is complicated. We always lose something in order to gain something more important. We need to consider the greater good and the rightful principles that we might lose things for. “Feel the future dissolve in a moment /Like salt in a weakened broth.”(3-4)

The above lines prove how the most important things in our lives can easily slip out of our hands. Nye focuses on the future which is the most important thing that everyone is working for. She associates the future with salt. They can both dissolve in a moment. These lines prove that we can sometimes lose the most important things in our lives to possess kindness.

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.(5-9)

Once again, the poem explains to us what the things we can truly lose are. The speaker says that we can lose whatever we have in our hands. The way she writes it proves this thing is close to us and that we hold tightly onto it. We can, also, lose money which is something crucial in the lives of a lot of people. It is something that we work for hard; we have counted and saved carefully.

All these precious things can be easily lost for the sake of kindness. In other words, we need to get rid of all our beloved things to be able to see, hear, and feel the sorrow and hardships of life.

The next lines continue with the same idea proving that all the good things are actually blinding us from the harshness of reality:

How you ride and ride
Thinking the bus will never stop,
The passengers eating maize and chicken
Will stare out the window forever.(10-13)

These lines show how we get tricked inside of our heads as we ride with the belief that the bus's destination is forever. This idea prevents us from feeling the suffering of others. It disconnects and distances us from the outer universe. Thinking that the bus will never stop puts us in a very passive attitude where we get trapped in a world with no sense and no sensibility. We feel that the other passengers are having their happy endless journey eating maize and chicken. Such a journey will keep them in the same position, "staring forever out of the window" into a world that they can never understand unless they give up their most precious moments: 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.(14-15)

Nye believes that in order to reach the deepest point of kindness, "Tender gravity of kindness", we should give up our future, our property, our money and our happiness to that dead Indian. The loss of all these pleasurable things would help us to feel the way he feels. It would help us to 'walk in his shoes', that is:

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. (18-20)

These lines are at the heart of the poem. They stress the most sensitive side of humanity; how we can feel each other and carefully listen to each other. When

we listen and understand each other's suffering, it will be impossible for us to hurt each other.

In these lines all ethnic, racial and cultural problems dissolve. And only this way, we can say that we are citizens of the world; we are multicultural. Through these lines, our poet links, connects and gathers the whole humanity together. Naomi's kindness theory, or therapy, solves all multicultural and ethnocentric issues. When we feel each other's pain, we will become one body with one soul, regardless of our origins and backgrounds.

Nye goes on writing:

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. (21-26)

In order to obtain kindness, we need to acknowledge sorrow as the second deepest thing inside of us. These lines prove that if we want to be kind, we need to feel and understand sorrow. Both of them walk hand in hand to connect human beings together. They are two faces of the same coin. It is only when you touch the sorrow and when you come to realize it as the second deepest things that the deepest thing can come to you. When you understand others' sorrows and respond to them, kindness will accept you:

Then it is only kindness that makes any 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. (27-28)

Nye succeeds to merge not only the Arab with the American but the whole humanity together. Her holistic attitude gives her clear boundaries for her identity. Even if it is concerned with the Arab tradition, her poetry celebrates the American tragedy of storytelling. The identification with both cultures has given her a great strength. This recognition has helped her to fend off troubles and any kind of identity crisis especially in the post 9/11 period.

Multiculturalism has enriched the American society with the different multi-cultural and multi-ethnic diversities it consists of. Arab Americans have succeeded to re-establish their lives in America. Their successful story they have marks the rebirth of a new mixture of “Multicultural America.” The long path they took and are still taking is summarized in Nye’s poetry in a very thorough way. The ‘multiculturality’ of Arabs that has already come with them from their homelands is an additional point in the match of the U.S.A vs. the rest of the world.

Works cited

Abdelrazek, A. T. *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Broader Crossings*. New York: Cambria Press, 2007.

Abinader, Elmaz. «Children of Al-Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century.» *US Society and Values: Contemporary US Literature, Multicultural Perspectives* 05.01 (2000): 11-17.

Darraj, Susan Muaddi. *Scheherozade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004.

Fludernik, Monika, ed. *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2003.

Fodda-Conrey, C. *Contemporary Arab American Literature: Transnational Reconfiguration*. New York: New York UP, 2014.

Hartman, Mitchell. «Grandmothers, Grape Leaves and Khalil Gibran: Witing Race Anthologies of Arab American Literature.» Jamal, Amaney et Nadine Naber. *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008. 170-203.

Kadi, Joana. *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writing by Arab Americans and Arab Canadian Feminists*. Cambridge: South End Press, 1994.

Kaid, Nassima. «Hyphenated Selves: Arab American Women Identity Negotiation in the Works of Contemporary Arab American Women Writers.» Oran: university of Oran, 2013. phd dissertation.

Khaled Mattawa, Munir Akash. *Post-Gibran Anthology of New Arab American Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Kutrieh, Marcia G. "Images of Palastinians in the Work of Naomi Shehab Nye." *JKAV: Arts and Humanitites* 5 (2007): 3-16.

Love, G. A. *Patriarchal Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Envirenment*. Virginia: U of Virginia P, 2003.

Majaj, Lisa Suhair. «Arab American Literature: Origins and Development.» 2008.

asjournal.org. 05 07 2014.

Nye, Naomi Shihab. *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. New York: Green Willow Books, 2002.

“Different Ways to Pray.” *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*. Portland: Oregon: Far Corner Books, 1995.

---. *Fuel: Poems by Naomi Shihab Nye*. New York: BOA Editions Ltd, 1998

---. «Steps.» Nye, Naomi Shihab. *Fuel: Poems by Naomi Shihab Nye*. New York: BOA Editions, 1998. 79

Orfalea, Gregory and Sharif Elmusa. *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*. Vol. 15. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. 4 vols.

Orfalea, G. *The Arab Americans: A History*. Olive Branch Press, 2006.

Sachs, N. M. ed. *Rethinking Educational Practice through Reflexive Inquiry: Essays in Honor of Susan Groundwater-Smith*. New York: Springer Science and Business Media B.V., 2011.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Shora, N. *The Arab American Handbook*. Seattle: Cune Press, 2009.