

Images of Palestinians in the Work of Naomi Shihab Nye

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Abstract. Naomi Nye, of the third American generation of Palestinian descent, in her work presents her father, a Palestinian-American immigrant, and her grandmother, a Palestinian woman who lived in the West Bank. She shows these two individuals as unique yet representative characters at the same time. From the onset, Nye values the skills and abilities of her bi-cultural father, particularly his verbal dexterity, and his deep commitment to the Palestinian cause as well as his family. On the other hand, she encounters in her grandmother a Palestinian woman who exhibits both a highly developed spiritual otherworldliness as well as earthy and maternal qualities that are perceived initially as essentially secondary in importance/value to those exhibited by her father. Over time, however, her perceptions of both of these relatives undergo a dramatic transformation. While she continues to admire the very positive characteristics of her father, she begins to recognize he is a person oddly lacking in authority in both cultures he inhabits. In addition, she discovers that her grandmother manages to convey meaning, reveal her identity, and exert authority over her environment through her word-less, largely non-verbal behavior, and emerges as the matriarch of the family.

Introduction

Naomi Shihab Nye has emerged in recent years as a leading Palestinian spokeswoman presenting an American perspective of Palestinians and Palestinian causes colored by her close family relationships. Currently living in Texas with her family, Nye is the daughter of a Palestinian father who immigrated to the U. S., and a Palestinian grandmother who lived "high in the hills" (qtd in Orfalea 64) in a West Bank village. She has received numerous awards for her work, she travels frequently on

lecture tours, and appears with some regularity in PBS documentaries and NPR radio programs. Jayussi has anthologized some of her poetry in the *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (356-362), and critics like Orfalea have called her “the outstanding American poet of Palestinian origin” (56). True to what Zogby has pointed out, that “Arab American poets find and express their identity through family” (27), much of Nye’s poetry, fiction, and essays include observations of members of her family, particularly her father and her grandmother. This paper proposes to identify the image Nye presents of Palestinian women of her grandmother’s generation, and the image of Palestinian men of the generation of her father. Both of these images are filtered through Nye’s eye and pen. As a hermeneutical experience, we observe Nye on her quest for understanding, as she progresses through what Palmer terms “deep” experiences (233), transforming and revising her perceptions of her father and grandmother, until she arrives at “a fresh way of seeing” (233). As Palmer points out, to reach these marvelous moments of insight, a writer will observe, discard, observe again, and finally reach conclusions. Holdheim terms this “an ongoing elucidation of the way understanding actually comes about” (12). 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. Clearly, this endeavor involves issues of translating culture and discerning gender issues which will be discussed later.

In regard to culture, Edward Said in his introduction to “After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives”, points out the difficulty of representing the complex reality of the Palestinian experience (Jayussi 722). At the same time he points out that “All cultures spin out a dialectic of self and other, the subject ‘I’ who is native, authentic, at home, and the object ‘it’ or ‘you’ who is foreign, perhaps threatening, different, out there” (723). Out of this dialectic emerges identity. Along this same line of thought, Bakhtin (1986), has argued that it is not necessary to immerse one’s self in a foreign culture and in the process forget one’s own in order to achieve cultural understanding. He argues that “Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time,” but rather embraces otherness. “Our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people,” he says, “because they are located outside us in space and

because they are others. In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding” (7). Iser argues that the space between cultures allows us to “open up the experience of otherness” (8) which, he contends becomes evident “only in individual manifestations” (8). Iser further points out that translatability “requires construing a discourse that allows for transposing a foreign culture into one’s own” (10).

If we proceed from the views proposed by Said, Bakhtin and Iser, it would follow that Nye is in an ideal position to understand the culture represented by her grandmother and that same metamorphosed culture represented by her father. She shares the American culture her father has seemingly assimilated and understands, and she is poised on the rim of her grandmother’s culture, an outsider in the enviable position of being open to what is essentially a foreign culture represented through the behavior and apparent value systems of her grandmother.

I would like to point out two issues that distinguish the image of Nye’s father from that of her grandmother, and in extension, Palestinian Arab men and women represented through these two figures: these are the language of silence and the differences between authority in the traditional sense and the ability of the grandmother to transcend and control the environment.

Nye introduces her readers to both her father and grandmother on numerous occasions throughout the corpus of her work. In the autobiographical novel *Habibi*, Nye tells us that when they first meet, her grandmother sweeps Nye into an embrace and proceeds to throw her head back, roll her tongue high up in her mouth, and trill wildly. Her father attempts to silence his mother to no avail. She then “shimmied her arms in the air like a Pentecostal preacher” (41). Nye notices that her hands are tattooed “with the blue shape of flying birds” (41). Later in the novel the authority and strength of this old village woman are presented to us when she brings the narrator, Liyana, Nye’s autobiographical self, back to health after a serious illness. Before the appearance of her grandmother, the narrator had languished, sick with some disease she had contracted from the nurse at her school when she was immunized against cholera with an unsterilized needle. Her physician father treats her with modern medicine that fails to cure her. He also does not contact his mother right away. When she is told of the girl’s illness, her grandmother “was furious he hadn’t alerted her right away. Was he trying to insult her? Didn’t he know she could make Liyana well?” (142). When her

grandmother, Sitti, arrives, she proceeds to pluck silver straight pins from her belt, and stick them in the sheet around the girl's body. When she is finished, there "must have been hundreds of straight pins" around her body. Her grandmother then begins to pray, rock back and forth, open her hands wide over the girl, and flick her fingers as if she is "casting the illness aside" (143). When her brother returns home from school and sees the bed, he comments, "Wow. A voodoo bed." The grandmother is very upset with the father, frowning and shaking her finger at him. "He should have been smarter, especially since he was a doctor and all" (144). The next day the girl revives and begins her recovery. Her grandmother's religious faith and semi-verbal mumbling and muttering seem to have cured her.

More interesting than the village healing are the comments on authority emanating from this scene. Obviously, the girl's father has no particular confidence in the healing arts of his mother, choosing rather to depend on his modern medicine. He also neglects to phone his mother immediately and inform her of the situation, effectively exerting his authority over the scene, an act of power in contrast to his obvious impotence in managing any sort of cure. The grandmother, on the other hand, is not invited; yet when she does intrude, she makes her presence felt quickly, quietly, and effectively.

How should each of these characters be understood? Should they be seen as figures of the Arab culture? Or should they be seen by their relationship to each other? By what they are able to accomplish? Or by both? Feminists like Paula Teichner have pointed out that "It is a male voice that privileges the rational, the practical, and the observable" (67). It is also this voice that dismisses superstition. If we carry this point to its limits in Nye's work, we see that both medicine and patriarchy work to legitimize her father's figure initially as the authority figure. When her grandmother brings forth a cure through non-logical and largely non-verbal means, traditional healing comes into conflict with contemporary medicine, and this woman who has been silenced and ignored emerges with some dominance. Nye legitimizes this woman of silence as having power by explaining this special power in the language or rhetoric of the rational. If authority is defined by the power to affect change, then Nye's grandmother exudes authority. Sitti cures sick people when modern medicine and contemporary healing arts cannot.

Another set of examples illustrate how Nye defines power and authority, this time in terms of her poetry. In one of her better-known poems titled "Blood," (from *Words Under the Words* 121), Nye starts out with a quote from her father that "A true Arab knows how to catch a fly in his hands." The narrator points out that he is able to do just that—catch flies in his hands. When she turns her attention to other problems facing Palestinians, however, her father's ability at communicating in English and Arabic provides no solutions for serious Palestinian problems. He becomes oddly mute when faced with Palestinians' displacement and uprooting. She describes a time when she turns her attention to newspaper headlines that "clot" in her blood and she quite naturally turns to her father for answers.

"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?"

She then phones her father to talk.

"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 hearts graze?
What does a true Arab do now?"

The contrast between the ability at catching flies in his hand and the inability at solving serious national problems could not be more pronounced. The verbal skills that give her father power and stature fail him at the moment when he needs them most. This impotent face of authority stands in sharp contrast to the power of her grandmother who makes her presence felt on a personal level.

In the poem "the Words Under the Words" in the volume by the same name, Nye dedicates the poem, "for Sitti Khadra, north of Jerusalem," to the lady who has cured her when modern medicine could not. In fact, in the first stanza her speaker states:

"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.”

In order to establish the ways in which her grandmother exerts authority within her environment, the speaker then describes the days of this old woman, the way she has healed shotgun wounds and crippled babies. “She knows the spaces we travel through,” says the speaker, “the messages we cannot send—our voices are too short / and would get lost on the journey.” Underscoring the source of her grandmother's understanding and ability to effect change, the speaker describes Sitti's faith in God:

“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 stories of Joha and his foolish wisdoms,
He is her first thought, what she really thinks of is His name.”

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker acknowledges the power of “the words under the words,” meaning that softens the rough edges of our world. The speaker finds it necessary to extol the virtue of her grandmother's “unspoken” means of universal communication that while carrying profound impact is not always acknowledged as having the importance of verbal communication:

“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.”

The differences and contrasts between these two poems and the individuals described are pronounced. While her father seems overwhelmed by the tragedy inflicted on Palestine, her grandmother repairs wounds, cures the sick, and nurtures crippled children. While her father who knows two languages is unable to speak in the presence of Palestinian problems, her grandmother who knows no verbal language manages to communicate in an unspoken word-less language. And, finally, her grandmother finds sustenance and meaning in her faith. Nye never mentions her father's faith in this poem. We know from her essays that her father is a non-practicing Moslem. We learn in the course of the essays that when she was a girl, he was a popular speaker delivering lectures on the Holy Land and “the Palestinian Question.” During one Christmas season he fell into a “ministerial swoon” (“Thank You in Arabic” 34), briefly considered becoming a preacher, and enrolled in a

seminary. Before they left for their year in Palestine he dropped out of the seminary.

This pattern of starting some activity and then stopping or failing at it marks her father's character throughout Nye's work. In the course of the essays she tells the story of her parents' attempts at running a business. In "Commerce," she describes how her parents opened a series of import shops. When they left the shops and went on a vacation one year, the Sheraton stockroom where they stored their pre-Christmas inventory went up in flames. "But the insurance on the business lapsed during our absence, right before the blaze" (24). While the narrator "kept tonguing the word lapsed, lapsed," her father "who often proposed his belief in fate as ruling the universe received a call at our motel" (24). This belief in fate, a basic and fundamental idea of Moslems, a deep-seated cultural and religious belief, is stated almost in passing and in the same breath as the statement that her father has received a phone call, effectively trivializing, on the narrator's part, the importance of fate in relation to the earth-shattering events. The narrator also stresses her amazement that her father would allow such an important business decision to be neglected. The family's livelihood is profoundly affected by the loss of their inventory and the impression throughout the essays is that they never quite recover financially, at least they never try to do business again.

In contrast to this image of her father as an ineffectual businessman, Nye offers a portrait of a loving father figure. In her collection of essays, *Never in a Hurry*, Nye presents positive, comforting images of her father during her childhood. In "Language Barrier," Nye describes her father's verbal dexterity and how her father's English is perfect though he has a tendency to mix up his *bs* and *ps*. "He had a gentle, deliberate way of choosing words," (28), she says, and he tells his children *Joha* stories, the same stories mentioned in the poem about her grandmother, seemingly a cultural link from generation to generation. It seems that he has at times said a few things to his children in Arabic, though she admits she had not learned to say "Thank you" in Arabic until she was fourteen. Like the father figure described in the poetry, this man is also articulate as reflected in stories he tells to his children.

The speaker in "Arabic Coffee" unites these contrary images of her father and establishes a tension between her father as a loving parent figure and as a failed authority figure. The speaker begins the poem by describing her father making traditional coffee: ". . . he let it / boil to the

top, and down again. / Two times. No sugar in his pot." Almost as an aside, the speaker then adds mention of "The hundred disappointments, / fire swallowing olive-wood beads / at the warehouse and the dreams / tucked like pocket handkerchiefs / into each day" The speaker juxtaposes the family's catastrophic financial loss to the simple tradition of sharing a cup of coffee so lovingly prepared. Clearly, her father is a fine host, carrying the tray with the coffee like an "offering" to his family and friends. In this traditional act of generosity, her father successfully holds onto remnants of his Palestinian culture, maintaining and reviving customs from his Arab roots. The loss of the beads, symbolizing his failure at business, however, intrudes into this homely scene, a constant reminder that in a new and different culture he doesn't function as effectively, much like his mixing up his *b*'s and *p*'s in the midst of his remarkable verbal dexterity. No matter how well he prepares his coffee and brings the traditions of his homeland to his American family, as a patriarchal figure he has failed at bringing his family financial security, and even in memories of her happy childhood his daughter never has forgotten that.

Arab identity as depicted in these incidents is determined by personal characteristics, national identity, and the ability of individuals to bring about change. The speaker's father has loads of personal talents ranging from manual to verbal dexterity. He is someone who apparently feels deeply for the plight of Palestinians yet at the same time feels impotent to solve the major problems of homelessness and national identity. He loves his family but cannot offer them financial security. The grandmother's dexterity seems to be more earthy, one more attuned to curing disease and solving immediate problems. She is depicted as capable and quite sure of the unspoken power of prayer and the power of her ability to communicate without either of the two languages her son understands.

The speaker's realizations about her grandmother's character have evolved gradually. In the essay "One Village," the speaker confirms the earthy, elemental characteristics of the old woman who milks the cow every morning, and lights the oven heated by "the dung of sheep and goats," barefoot with "her headdress drifting about her" (50). Her father comments that he doesn't think his mother should be lighting the fire, for this "Could be dangerous," he says. The narrator points out that she does it better than anyone else in the village. In this moment we realize the

narrator's initial marvelous innate understanding of her grandmother from the perspective of someone removed from the culture altogether.

We learn that Sitti performed a pilgrimage a few years before and has worn primarily white garments ever since. It is the word-less quality about her grandmother, however, that the narrator believes will affect her life. "Maybe this is the heritage, that deep well that gives us more than we deserve. Each time I write or walk to think, I drop a bucket in it. Staring at my grandmother, my Sitti, as she sits on the low bed, rocking back and forth in time with conversation, tapping her fingertips on her knees, I think, this is the nectar off which I will feed" (51). Echoing her description in the poem "Words Under the Words," the speaker acknowledges that it is the unspoken, the sense of self, that has touched her. This passage carries such profound import that a photo of Sitti sitting in her bed, leaning forward over her knees, is placed at the beginning of her poetry collection. When asked about the presence of Israeli soldiers, her grandmother replies that after their arrival and the dispersal of the ugly cats they brought, the good ghosts who floated up to the ceiling and sang songs disappeared (52). She describes these ghosts as having "warm honey voices" with "a soft yellow light that glowed" (53). She no longer hears their singing. Unlike her practical son who worries about the fire and about his mother getting burned, she is attuned to ghosts and understands life on a spiritual level.

In the final essay in the collection, "One Moment on Top of the Earth," this spiritual woman is dying. When she learns that her family is traveling to see her, she revives and refuses to lie down again. Love of her family, of her son and granddaughter, brings this woman back to life. In *Mint Snowball*, Nye revives this moment of her grandmother's recovery and comments that her relatives no longer hear the Israeli soldiers "pounding the streets with the butts of their guns" (51). She adds, "My relatives didn't see them anymore. 'They're invisible.'" It seems that the spiritual quality of her grandmother who could see ghosts has affected her family with the ability to shut out the nearby soldiers, similar soldiers to those who scared away the friendly ghosts.

The norms that identify the life of Nye's grandmother seem to conform to the "maternal thinking" Grimshaw identifies as one type of feminist thinking as it relates to philosophy. Grimshaw points to Sara Ruddick's work on maternal thinking arguing that the task of mothering is essentially in contradiction with the task of waging war, especially

since the objectives of each task are contradictory (Grimshaw 241). “Maternal thinking” is “giving, attending ... entirely outgoing, focused on the welfare of the child” (248). Nye’s grandmother seems to embody this maternal image even during the war Palestinians are waging for their land and national identity: she takes care of gunshots, patiently helps her granddaughter recover, and gives of herself through her stories and the care she takes in baking bread. What is interesting in this scene, however, is that she exhibits all these traits toward her grandchild. Her son, Nye’s father, is far away and physically unable to be on the receiving end of her care and concern. Moreover, when he is around he is not particularly approving or welcoming of his mother’s unusual talents. He most decidedly comes across as his mother’s son in his ability to tell stories, and in his attempt to bring his own family closer to his relatives. However, beyond their shared love of family and story-telling, these two figures share little in common.

Two related issues emerge from this discussion of Nye’s father with his verbal arts and her grandmother who, in her essentially non-verbal condition, manages to convey the essence of what she is and what she represents to her granddaughter. The first issue involves the value attached to verbal and non-verbal communication. The second issue is the problem of how messages are being conveyed; Nye’s grandmother speaks only Arabic; Nye’s targeted audience speaks English. Nye herself admits that she has understood her grandmother’s verbalized comments largely through someone, often her father, who has translated them for her. This second issue then involves the problem Nye has encountered in using a translated text.

Feminist criticism offers some insights that address both issues. Benstock has pointed out from a feminist perspective that men have relegated women to silence and invisibility (2); in the same breath, however, she points out that even when women were “choked,” they have still managed to speak, to smuggle “messages past border sentries” (2). Nye’s grandmother has obviously been able to formulate messages to her granddaughter past any sort of restrictions imposed by cultural or linguistic differences. Their understanding has been, as Nye says, under the words, non-verbal meaning that would get lost if verbalized, communication that hovers somewhere between words and meaning, between the signifier and signified. As such, whether and however her

father has translated his mother's words would seem to be immaterial; it is not the words themselves that carry meaning.

From the perspective of authority as defined through text in this context, Marcus has pointed out that in a patriarchal society, the pen is equated with manhood (87). Nye's father wields a metaphoric pen represented in his language dexterity, yet fails to establish the authority necessary to begin to solve serious problems or establish financial security for his family. Nye's grandmother would seem to be without this tool of authority and control. Interestingly enough, Nye wields her pen and confers any sort of authority this old woman may need. So how does her grandmother then manage to convey her sense of self? Nye imparts through descriptions of her grandmother's maternal behavior a symbol of her control of her environment; the images of her stove, her choice of costume, and the use of her hands and trilling noises to convey meaning become symbols of her national identity. Her grandmother emerges as a powerful woman, not in the traditionally male dominated culture in which land ownership determines potency and verbal dexterity inspires respect and confers power; but rather in a counter culture in which feminine values acted upon have the power to bring about positive change.

Nye's realization about her Palestinian relatives has not been achieved through some sort of epiphany. Rather, it is the result of an extensive series of events and perceptions over a number of years. Before Nye traveled to the West Bank and came to know her remarkable grandmother, her idea of authority had been shaped by her experiences with her father. She marveled at his language ability and understood some of the problems of a Palestinian man 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.

When she meets her grandmother, Nye encounters someone who represents a very different face of authority. This woman accomplishes change through action, not words, her healing arts and spirituality transcending time and space. Gradually over time, Nye's grandmother becomes the central figure in her writing. Nye also comes to appreciate the ways in which this fascinating Palestinian old woman manages to subvert traditional sources of power represented by words and guns. Nye is deeply affected by her grandmother's connection to spiritual non-verbal forces, forces representing the source of her power and establishing her identity.

We realize how Nye's attitude towards her father and grandmother has changed over time. When she first met her grandmother, she echoed her father's patriarchal attitude, concerned that the old lady needed to be careful around the fire, and that she had no business meddling with healing the sick. Gradually, however, the speaker becomes aware of all the attributes of Sitti's character which define her as a matriarchal figure: beloved, head of the family, exuding power over events and people. Concurrently, as Sitti's character begins to take center stage in the poetry and prose, and helps define the identity of the speaker as a Palestinian-American, the familiar and beloved figure of the father begins to recede into the shadows. This transformation in attitude has evolved over a long period of time in the speaker's life, and in the final analysis has a profound effect on the way that Nye's speaker defines her father, grandmother, and herself in her later writing.

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صور الفلسطينيين في أعمال نعومه شهاب ناى

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المستخلص. تبدي نعومة شهاب ناى - الكاتبة الأمريكية المنحدرة من أصل فلسطيني - معرفتها وتفهمها لوالدها الفلسطيني الأمريكي وجدتها الفلسطينية التي تعيش في الضفة الغربية. وتسجل ناى ما يجعل والدها وجدتها شخصين ذو خصوصية متفردة، وفي الوقت نفسه ممثلان للوضع الفلسطيني. وتبدي ناى إعجابها بمهارات وقدرات والدها المتمكن من حضارتين، وخاصة قدرته اللغوية وإخلاصه العميق للقضية الفلسطينية، ولعائلته. وفي الوقت نفسه تجد ناى في جدتها امرأة تبدي قدرة روحية تهتم بعالم الآخرة، بالإضافة إلى صفات الأمومة، واهتمام بهذا العالم، وتبدو صفات الجدة هذه غير مهمة في البداية مقارنة مع صفات والدها، ولكن عبر النصوص يتغير موقف ناى منها بشكل ملحوظ. فبينما تستمر صورة والدها صورة إيجابية إلا أنها تشير إلى أنه شخص غير قادر على ممارسة أية سلطة في كلتا الحضارتين اللتين يعيش فيهما. كما تكتشف أن جدتها قادرة على إيصال معانيها وشخصيتها وأن تمارس سلطة على البيئة التي تعيش فيها دون حاجة إلى استخدام الكلام، وذلك عن طريق تصرفاتها التي تجعلها أمًا للعائلة بأكملها.