



**SOCIO-POLITICAL ASPECTS IN SELECTED LITERARY WORKS OF
NAOMI SHIHAB NYE**

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ABSTRACT

Naomi Shihab Nye is a prominent Palestinian American poet. Naomi is an appealing figure paving the way for ethnic poets and young poets alike. The researcher will focus on her poetry that deals with her Palestinian society, the cultural diversity of her home in Texas and her experience in Asia, Europe, Canada, Mexico, Central and South America. More attention will be focused on the origin of Naomi and how the ethnic family has acted as a springboard for her future career as an author. Naomi offers insights into the Middle East that seems particularly relevant in our troubled political times. The literary works that the researcher will shed light upon are *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East, Fuel, and Habibi*. Naomi's experience as an Arab American is reflected through her poems. When reading her poems one can notice that she is a loving, caring person with great insight into the complexities that await all who venture into this area. Naomi's background as a child of immigrants from the Middle East puts her in an usual position to offer bridges between two cultures that have been subject to much mutual misunderstanding. It can be said that her poetry touches many themes, including the question of identity, cultural issues, motherhood, friendship and political issues connected with her people who live in the occupied territories of Palestine and those who live in America. Being bicultural, Naomi Shihab maintains some sensibility, otherness or attachment. Throughout her work, she challenges rigid boundaries, identification, calling attention instead to the multiple and often in the overlapping categories that constitute identity, culture, gender, ethnic origin, religion and geography.

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INTRODUCTION

Naomi Shihab Nye was born on March 12, 1952 in St. Louis, Missouri, United States to a Palestinian father and an American mother. During her high school years, she lived in Ramallah in Palestine, the old city in Jerusalem, and San Antonio, Texas, where she later received her B.A. in English and World Religion from Trinity University.

Descending from a half-Palestinian and half American family tree, Naomi Shihab Nye is an appealing figure paving the way for ethnic poets and young poets alike. Although she was born in Missouri, she is well travelled. She has been travelling the country and the world to lead writing workshops and lecturing on topics related to all ages. Drawing on her Palestinian heritage, the cultural diversity of her home in Texas and her experience in Asia, Europe, Canada, Mexico, Central and South America Nye uses her writings to attest our shared humanity. Her main intention is to create mutual understandings between people who come from different societies. In this reference, Naomi remarks, "I feel the need

for connection with young minds and hearts, country to country, growing more crucial by the second."

The idea of connections between peoples in two diverse societies is fundamental to Nye's own personal life. The daughter of a Palestinian immigrant and an American mother, Nye was brought up in two worlds. She remarks, "I felt I had an ideal childhood," Nye once told something about the Author (SATA) in an interview, "I grew up in a mixed neighborhood in St. Louis, in a home very nurturing for self-expression. I had the sense of people speaking up for themselves very early on. My father was a speculator teller of Middle Eastern folk tales. My brother and I always went to sleep with my father's folk tales and my mother's lullabies." Nye's father was a journalist and her mother a fine arts graduate in painting, so there was never any lack of verbal or visual stimuli. "But I don't remember being an obsession in our home like they are for me now," Nye told SATA. "I have twenty books stacked up by my bed at all the times and I get nervous when I enter someone's house and no books are available. I read incessantly, sometimes many things at once."

The fact that Naomi originated from Arab American roots that is transient and ethnic family acted as a spring board for her

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future career as an author. What is remarkable in this reference are her essays and anthologies of the Middle East, which include perhaps her most famous Middle Eastern based on theology, “*Different Ways to Pray*,” published in 1980. Loren (2000) remarks, “Naomi Shihab Nye offers insights into the Middle East that seem particularly relevant in these troubled times.”

Although Naomi Shihab is exposed to wide range of other cultures, she often chooses to write about the little details of life that we often take for granted. She clearly states, “I wanted to remember all of the details in my eventful and fruitful life.” She has had a hunger to write poetry. When she was seven years old she composed her first poem. Naomi Shihab Nye is the author and editor of more than 20 volumes of poetry. It is no wonder Nye describes herself as “a wandering poet.” She has spent over three decades travelling from coast to coast and throughout many parts of the world imparting her sage philosophy about the creation of poetry to teachers and students all off ages. She knows first-hand the power poetry conveys. Her definition of poetry is quite remarkable, she says in an interview (2002), “Poetry is the melodious, international language that carries our minds and hearts into deeper places than the shallow waters we splash around in all day long. Poems invite response and interpretation and usually act friendly, as if it were putting out a hand.” For Nye, poetry is a place of great and necessary refreshment. It is the true rest stop in life. It is an art with the help of which we can say something simple and true about our daily life and society.

Naomi Shihab Nye believes that the essence of poetry should revolve around topics, themes, episodes, and characters from the real life. In this reference, she says, “For me the primary source of poetry has always been local life, random characters met on the streets, our own ancestry sifting down to us through essential daily tasks.” Thus she announces her major themes that touch the reality of human life. Never one to write with a thesaurus than her heart, Nye employs “a direct, unadorned vocabulary” according to Pat Monaghan in a Booklist Review of *Red Suitcase* that conveys both depth and mystery. “I write poems and stories out of daily life,” Nye told Authors and Artists for Young Adults (AAYA) in an interview, “with lots of invention thrown in.” In poems described by Alison Heinemann (*Pawn Review*, 1980-1981) as “quiet, intimate, contemplative,” Nye observes the business of living and continuing among all the world’s inhabitants, whether separated by oceans or time. She lives in Texas but is regional only insofar as she has a strong sense of place wherever she happens to be; she is international in scope and internal in focus, as her poetry demonstrates. More than a simple tip of the hat toward fashionable multiculturalism, Nye’s work has been built on bedrock of such simple connections as everyday lives of people around the world, or of ancestry played out in primary daily tastes. Living in a dual cultural background is reflected in many of her poems especially those poems talking about the Middle East. Nye gives voices to her experience as an Arab American through poems about heritage and peace that overflow with a humanitarian spirit. About her work, the poet William Stafford (1996) has said, “Her poems combine transcendent liveliness and sparkle along with warmth and human insight. She is a champion of the literature of encouragement and heart. Reading her work enhances life.”

Nye has twice been awarded the Voertman Poetry Prize by the Texas Institute of Letters, in 1980 for *Different Ways to Pray* and in 1982 for *Hugging the Jukebox*, Nye was selected for the Pushcart Prize in 1982 and 1984. In 1988, she was chosen by W.S.Merwin to receive the Academy of American Poets’ Lavan Award. In the same year she was also a co winner, with Galway Kinnell, of the Charity Randall Citation for Spoken Poetry from the International Poetry Forum.

Naomi’s *Fuel* is a masterpiece of poetry. It is a collection of poems that find meaning in a world where we are so tired of meaning nothing. *Fuel* covers topics ranging from the border families of Southern Texas to small ferns and forgotten books to Jews and Palestinians in the Middle East. Rachel Bareboat remarks, 2007, “Nye is one of those writers who makes me want to read, and makes me want to live, and makes me want to write. What more can I say? *Fuel* is exactly what it claims to be: Something to take in and to consume, something that will impel you forward.”

The poetry of Nye has tremendous impact during 9\11 tragedy, with her unique ability to capture the significance of what the ordinary imagination cannot grasp. Her poetry took on a heightened value for the culture during those dark-dark weeks. Reading her poem “Kindness” is a clear example of spiritual practice. Royer Housden (2006) remarks, “ In this rendering yet redemptive poem “ Kindness”, Nye reaches down to the roots of our humanity which lie in the great heart where we all cry together.” In the poem, the picture becomes clear when she says:

Before you know what kindness really is
You must lose things,
Feeling the future dissolve in a moment
Like salt in a weakened broth.

("Kindness"
Fuel, 1998)

It can be said that Nye is the best-known Palestinian-American poet by far. Her poetry touches on many themes, including questions of identity, motherhood, friendship and death. She has an unusually positive interpretation of bicultural heritage and says she felt lucky to benefit from the dual perspective irregularity is her parentage. Kevin S Hile points out (1996) "being bicultural, she writes, allowed her to maintain some sensibility, "otherness" or "detachment". Throughout her work, Nye challenges rigid boundaries, identification, calling attention instead to the multiple and often overlapping categories that constitute identity, including gender, ethnic origin, religion and geography.”

Naomi Shihab Nye’s *19 Varieties of Gazelle* is a rare jewel. The voice of poems presented in this collection is perhaps one of the more authentic vessels of peace and dignity in the literary world today and truly beyond that society as a whole. While she has written in response to 9\11, so much of her earlier work demonstrates that some broad respect for all of mankind. Her work is largely timeless and resonates now no differently than it might have years before 9\11. Such universality creates the kind of poetry that likely will be remembered and quoted many years from now.

In *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Naomi masterfully presents larger themes which basically focus on the troubled Middle East. While reading the collection of poems in *19 Varieties of Gazelle* one learns to say things in a clear way. More

importantly, how to say the thing that matters that might already be lodged somewhere inside anyone in such a way that one can be proud of it.

Naomi makes it clear that the production of *19 Varieties of Gazelle* is a response to the September 11th attacks, which promoted in her a deep, almost haunting, desire to represent her Arab people in a more accurate light than that cast by mainstream media. Michael Wells (2003) pointed out, "in response to my post about the New Sincerity Movement, that a reaction to September 11th is unlikely to create a lasting impact on trends in art. Furthermore, both he and I have both seen more than our share of very bad poems written in response to September 11th. Naomi's work, thankfully, is nothing like this.

Most of the poems in this collection focus on the Middle East crisis. The stunning poem, "Spark", is about Naomi's relationship to gypsies; "Arabic" is about her relationship to the language she never fully heard; "Holy Land" focuses on her grandmother and makes beautiful music of an intimate memory; "Staying Close", wins credibility with us instantly with its opening line which delights the mind:

Wore small caps of snow
("Staying Close", *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

Most of the poems in *19 Varieties of Gazelle* admit in the language of modern news media, the language we have all gone numb to:

innocent children killed,
homes destroyed, politicians
hedging their bets.
("Staying Close", *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

Naomi seems to be attempting to let us in to her family so we will finally see Arabs in their full humanity and shed light on Arab culture especially Palestinian culture in a vivid way. I think this is particularly a tough passage to navigate in telling of momentous and personal. Subjects have much to do with the gangsters of art therapy. While it is personally satisfying to tell the full narrative, to speak out thoughts plainly on subjects we care about.....rarely does that in itself honor the reader enough to invite her in. Instead, we become prosaic in our narrative and lose the essential heat of the poem. "Jerusalem", for example, begins unnecessarily:

I'm not interested in
who suffered the most
I'm interested in
people getting over it.
("Jerusalem", *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

Yet from here she goes on to show us (rather than overtly tell us) real effects of this interest in a much more interesting way, using her father's bald spot as a metaphor. This kind of one-the-nose declamation crops up elsewhere as well, undermining our confidence in her confidence in us as readers. Naomi is trying to tell people how to feel in a skilful way.

It can be remarked that *19 Varieties of Gazelle* is a collection of poems which is political act that sets out to represent, celebrate, and build political capital for a particular group of

specific culture. For Nye, that culture is mostly Palestinian which she masterfully highlights in this collection.

Nye's poems amass everyday emotional details of Palestinian lives so that her readers can identify with them, see their humanity and, Nye hopes to highlight their blight in an artistic way that gains sympathy from people all over the world. She sees poetry as a powerful tool for peace. One knows what to expect from a Nye poem...a graceful, empathic rendering of characters in pain:

Even on a sorrowing day
the little white cups without handles
would appear
in a circle on a tray
and whatever we were able
to say or not say,
the tray would be passed,
we would sip
in silence,
it was another way
lies could be speaking together.

("Jerusalem", *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

This poem, like most of Nye's, emphasizes the characters' every day, ordinary dignity in order to remind us of our shared humanity. Nye's poems describe the details of Arab American and Middle Eastern lives often to similar effect, sparking understanding and compassion in the reader. Nye's characters in the poem feel edgier, though they do not need our empathy, and they expect our respect; they are presented as a welcome threat to conventional American cultural assumptions.

Nye's collection of poems in *19 Varieties of Gazelle* frequently try to comfort, to provide by the end of the poem some enlarging image to connect suffering to a larger stability. In her poems as in her eloquent letter " To Any Would-Be Terrorists", Nye maintains that anger is not the answer, she uses personal details to explain that we are all people, that we must recognize that and stop hurting one another. Nye hopes and trusts that knowledge will bring empathy. Indeed, Nye's poems call upon the closing strategy, locating some tiny comfort or universality in the difficult situations she describes in the Middle East. In Nye's description of luncheon in a park in a town shredded by war, the characters are still able, gracefully, to make a toast to "you":

.....who believe true love can find you
amidst this atlas of tears.....
People moved here, believing
and someone with sky and birds in his heart
said this would be a good place for a park.

("To Any Would-Be Terrorists", *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

Though the poem certainly does not suggest that the problems of war can be erased by a brief and generous meeting over lunch in a park, Nye concentrates on the positive sides for better prosperous future for the people of Palestine.

In some poems, Nye is too critical. In the following poem, she wonders what can be in Israeli soldiers' minds when they abuse Palestinians, she says in one of her poems:

On the steps of the National Palace Hotel
soldiers peel oranges
throwing back their heads so the juice
runs down their throats
This must be their coffee break
guns slung sideways
They are laughing
stripping lustily
They know what sweetness lives within
How can they know this and forget
so many other things?
(“Jerusalem”, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

Though Nye is reproaching the soldiers, her reproach remains empathic. She wants to understand them emotionally, and though she fails, the attempt to feel what they feel makes her criticism of them sharper. In her preface to *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Nye says she believes that her beloved dead “wise grandmother” wants her to speak for those the soldiers’ abuse: “Speak for me too. Say this is not who we are,” the grandmother says in *19 Varieties of Gazelle*. Nye hopes to persuade Americans and Arabs alike that the Arab tradition and culture is not about fundamentalism or terrorism- that Middle Easterners are good people.

Central to Nye’s vision of the Middle East is a sense that it is always “they-that is, others-who are violent. Who made the bombs?” She asks “Do you know anyone who makes them?” When people pick up guns, it is “because guns were given.” Violence is imposed on unwilling victims. Nye’s poems do not represent those victims who turn violent; she restricts herself to representing the wise multitude who abstains from violence. Her poems thus depict a bifurcated world of evil killers and innocent victims in whom violence is an incomprehensible evil and its victims are always wise and good. The simplicity of Nye’s representation of the Middle East is a valiant effort to encourage us all to identify with what she sees as right, as effort that....I think forgivably....ends up tidying messy borders between good and evil. Nye takes seriously her grandmother’s urge to her to “speak for” others. She feels responsible to her Palestinian American background and to the millions of Palestinians whose voices have been silenced; she has determined to be their state woman in America, and in a way her sense of responsibility limits her. Poetry may succeed in healing when all else failed:

We will take this word in our arms.
It will be small and breathing.
We will not wish to scare it.
Pressing lips to the edge of each syllable.
Nothing else will save us now.
(“To Any Would-Be Terrorists”, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

Indeed, Nye is a strong believer in the power of language-workers to close the distances between us and maintain a strong sense of identity and clear picture of the Arab culture especially the Palestinian culture.

One of the celebrated poems of *19 Varieties of Gazelle* is “My Father and the Fig tree”. It is a beautiful lyric, in which the poet draws a picture of her beloved father but in a genuine poetic way, Nye is exploring her own self, her identity. The poem begins and ends with her father, speaking and

highlighting his personality; but he is portrayed through the eyes of the poet, the speaker. The transformation of the speaker’s consciousness is the point of this lyric. The poem opens with the poet’s observation of her father’s intense desire for figs, a desire which sets him apart from the others:

For other fruits my father was indifferent.
He’d point at the cherry trees and say,
“See those? I wish they were figs.
(“My Father and the Fig tree”, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*)

He prefers figs even to what his daughter, in conformity to common taste in America, prefers: the more beautiful and delicious cherries. The starting of this poem is a memory of early childhood: even as a child, the speaker senses that her father’s preference is too strong to be just a matter of taste and that the fig tree is not just a tree. In the hands of the skilful spinner of yarn that the father is, the fig tree outgrows its literal meaning. His bed time stories for his daughter “always involved a fig tree. Even when it didn’t fit, the speaker shyly remarks, “he’d stick it in.” He is careful to relate his favorite tree to the folk culture of the ancestral home through the character of Joha, thus creating a bridge between his daughter’s world and the old country Palestine. Consequently, the speaker grows up with an emotional attachment to the tree she has never actually seen. With the growth of the child, the tree grows in her consciousness. The father’s intention is realized-so far.

The second stanza is a reflection of the poet’s father plan: at age six the speaker tastes a dried fig. She shrugs. The father became angry. His reaction to this is justified because he is afraid of the collapse of his projected build-up of the symbolic significance of the fig tree- a collapse implied in the speaker’s indifference to the taste of the dried fig. In his attempt to preserve the associations of the fruit in his daughter’s consciousness, he relates the fruit to mother earth and nature:

I’m talking about a fig straight from earth-
gift of Allah! - on a branch so heavy it touches the ground.
(“My Father and the Fig tree”, *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*) Though the speaker is not moved by the father’s reaction, she neither answers nor shows any mark of change in position. Indeed, the father who planned the symbolic tree in the consciousness of his daughter in the first stanza, and who tried to support the sapling when it was endangered by the wind of indifference in the second stanza, has no direct presence in the third stanza of which he is actually the subject. The action of this stanza took place during the youthful days of the speaker as it starts with “years passed”. Here the mother, America, is introduced but only to present her way of seeing the father: “What a dreamer he is.” To support her pragmatic position, she suggests the most obvious alternative: “Plant one!” Obviously, the mother misses the whole point of the father’s attempt. More important than planting an actual fig tree is implanting of a world symbolized by the fig tree in the imagination and the psyche of his daughter. The mother had the chance to express her view in her own words, and the speaker seems to understand her mother’s point of view. But she sympathizes with the view of her father. These words are uttered by a person who knows very well how whole-heartedly the father tends symbolic trees which filled her childhood and girlhood and established him as an unsurpassed master of such gardens

which are still vivid in her memory and consciousness. The father has no chance to respond to the mother's practical proposal to plant a tree. But his position needs to be stated: to implant a symbolic tree until it is firm, sturdy, and more importantly, unexposed to indifference or rejection.

The father victoriously returns in the final stanza. He calls his daughter, now an adult living in her house, in order to inform her that he has found an actual fig tree in the middle of Dallas, Texas. Remarkably is his way of breaking the news of his great find. The deft storyteller of bedtime tales about fig tree now becomes a singer of fig tree songs. Having saved his "fig tree song" for this very special occasion, he bursts into song when his daughter comes to see, and actually sees, the real tree. The daughter immediately recognizes the real tree and its fruit which seems to come directly from the symbolic world her father has spent a lifetime building up. More importantly, upon seeing her father pluck the fruits, she understands what they are to him: not just figs to be eaten; but "tokens, \ emblems, assurance\ of a world that was always his own." Now this world is hers too. She not only shares the joy of her father at the moment of his emotional triumph, she actually adopts his unusual, long-held position about figs by using his own words in describing the fruits.

Still her verbatim quoting of his words is more than the result of accepting his position. It is simultaneously the fruition of the dialectic of the poem: as an infant and a child she just accepted what her father said; as a girl and as a result of her own experience, she unjustifiably expressed lack of interest; as a grown-up she showed understanding for the opposite stand expressed by her mother; finally, in a marked shift of position, she returned to her initial childhood position. This amounts to an acceptance of her father's position; but this is an outcome of an adult's experience. She does quote his own words with a very significant difference. In his emotional outburst, he uttered his successive superlatives hurriedly without even pausing to breathe. The father's "the largest fattest sweetest" fruits becomes the daughter's "the largest, fattest, sweetest" fruits. The commas do not indicate a slight difference in punctuation, but a substantial difference in tone. The father's emotional, defensive tone is in contrast with the restrained, confident tone of the speaker. Her father's preference for fig trees is not as weird as she had thought after all: now she discovers that she identifies with her father and his taste.

The top of this evidence, of identification, of the continuation of the Arab father in his Arab-American daughter, of the fruition of the dialectic of the poem, is the artistic dimension of the theme of the poem. The poem itself is actually the clinching argument that the speaker is her father's daughter: like him she is a weaver of beautiful tales and the singer of sweet songs. Like father like daughter! Actually, she does better; she does not stick the fig tree in the way he used to do. It is the very essence of her song. Yet the fig tree is not just a tree; it is a symbol of her father's ancestral home. He sings in Arabic and she sings in English: he is an Arab and she is an Arab-American.

As with most collections, *Fuel* is too long, and sometimes quite ordinary. This tendency to get watered down by saying too much comes with the age we live in but does not become a sage. Her really good poems make up for the forgettable ones, but from a close search one would rather see a more

concentrated volume, topographically, or thematically. Generally these poems bring to life the conflict between words and action, where only the wind is "the one complete sentence," and the rest of us live like sleepers pressing our ear to the ground for the knowledge of what to do and how to do it. Nye is always listening like that. In one of her most famous poems, "The Man Who Makes Brooms," from her 1986 book *Yellow Gloves*, she is chided by others to "speak for my people." Instead, she finds a man who makes brooms and says nothing at all.

While we are reading *Fuel*, Nye offers us wisdom. She tells us how to live and see the world. Nye is more subtle. She is courteous, even ladylike, but equally bold in thought. Indeed, Nye is graceful, but she is fierce. *Fuel* opens with "Muchas Gracias Por Todo:"

This plane has landed thanks to God and his mercy.
That's what they say in Jordan when the plane sets down.
What do they say in our country? Don't stand up till we tell you.

Stay in your seats. Things may have shifted.
This river has not disappeared thanks to that one big storm
when the water was almost finished.
We used to say thanks to the springs
but the springs dried up so we changed it.
This rumor tells no truth thanks to people.
This river walk used to be better when no one came.
What about the grapes? Thanks to the grapes
we have more than one story to tell.
Thanks to a soft place in the middle of the evening.
Thanks to three secret hours before dawn.
These deer are seldom seen because of their shyness.
If you see one you count yourselves among the lucky on the earth.

(*Fuel* 1998)

With these couplets one is firmly lodged inside Nye's point of view. The difference between the Arab perspective and the American perspective has appeared. The difference between the Arab perspective, and what most Americans think the Arab perspective is, has appeared alongside it. "Stay in your seats. Don't stand up until we tell you" takes on at least two meanings; suddenly inside the words we have all heard a flight attendant intone there's social commentary. Don't stand up. "Stay in your seats. Things may have shifted." Naomi skillfully uses this introduction in such a way to encapsulate the Middle Eastern experience.

Nye makes the feminist slogan "the personal is political" real. Her Arab heritage is part and parcel of her poetry: if you want to hear what she has to say, you have to accept the Arab voice she speaks in. It's unsettling, particularly for a liberal American Jew who wants to consider herself fair to both sides in the complicated saga of Israel and Palestine. The poems dealing with the Arab experience are among her strongest. One reads them again and again because there is a truth in them because they do not blame. As Nye wrote in a much earlier poem, "Jerusalem":

I'm not interested in
who suffered the most.
I'm interested in
people getting over it.

Fuel holds beautiful poem called "Fundamentalism", Nye puts her judgment in the form of a question set. Gentle enough on the face of it, but underneath it is a political interrogation of the accused:

Because the eye has a short shadow or
it is hard to see over heads in the crowd?
If everyone else seems smarter
but you need your own secret?
If mystery was never your friend?
If one way could satisfy
the infinite heart of the heavens?
If you liked the king on his golden throne
more than the villagers carrying baskets of lemons?
If you wanted to be sure
his guards would admit you to the party?

The boy with the broken pencil
scrapes his little knife against the lead
turning and turning it as a point
emerges from the wood again
If he would believe his life is like that
he would not follow his father into war.

("Fundamentalism", *Fuel*)

The theoretical voice in this poem is highly appreciated, which has a special power of truth behind it. We also admire the other ways Nye finds of showing these truths-shyly or apologetically at times, as if it would be impolite to be more declarative, let alone imperative, but in the other poems as in "Wedding Cake," Nye often puts her revelations into the mouths of others of others, or even the mind of a babe, as in "Wedding Cake":

Once on a plane
a woman asked me to hold her baby
and disappeared.
I figured it was safe,
our being on a plane and all.
How far could she go?
She returned one hour later,
having changed her clothes
and washed her hair.
I didn't recognize her.
By this time the baby
and I had examined
each other's necks.
We had cried a little.
I had a silver bracelet
and a watch.
Gold studs glittered
in the baby's ears.
She wore a tiny white dress
leafed with layers
like a wedding cake.

("Wedding Cake", *Fuel*)

Nye presents the things, the voices, and the coincidences of the world around us. The feeling behind them is all the more palpable for not being explicitly spoken.

Habibi is a masterpiece of fiction produced by Nye. This is a realistic fiction book. It came into light in the year 1996. This book has won several awards including the Jane Addams Children's Award (1998) and the American Library Association Notable Books for Children (1998). Ms. Nye has lived in both America and the Middle East and has firsthand

knowledge of the attitudes of the various cultures within the Middle East. This experience adds to the authentic feeling of the book.

The story involves a bit of dating and a lot of beautiful reflective passages. Liyana is "half and half," half Arab and half American. She has not experienced her Arab half until her family moves from St. Louis, Missouri, to Jerusalem. They have moved back to her father's Arab family and village. Liyana makes her transition as new émigré, learning about her heritage, her family, and herself. There are times when she does not feel one bit at home in this new and foreign culture, but that change over the course of the book. As Liyana's sense of home expands, so, too, does her sense of herself and of her family. As Liyana struggles to find friendship in this new world, she learns that she and everyone else must learn to write a new story for themselves and for the war-torn Middle East.

Habibi is a strong and significant book. One of its strengths lies in the way Nye has developed her characters. Through Liyana's eyes, the reader can experience life in Jerusalem, life as an Arab, and life as an outsider. "Liyana herself is brought to life so skillfully that an identification with and concern for her will carry the reader forward into this rather subtle and sometimes slow-moving book, sustaining the reader's interest."

Liyana Abboud's emergence into womanhood is complicated by the fact that she walks a live between two completely different cultures. Her entire life has been lived in the United States and has grown up thinking with a Western mind. But life takes a drastic turn for Liyana when her father announces that the entire family is moving back to his native country Palestine. For Liyana, the announcement and the final destination seem like the end of everything that is important to her. She is being asked to leave the stability of the United States and move to war-torn Palestine where soldiers with guns patrolling the streets in a common sight. In addition, she is being asked to leave behind the boy who has given her the first taste of passion. Liyana knows very little about her Palestinian heritage almost none of its language. She journeys to her father's homeland and must learn to become a member of her own family. Life in Palestine seems very bleak until she meets Omar. In Omar, she finds a friend in a land full of strangers and second chance to experience love. But the boy whom she falls in love with turns out to be Jewish. Through this relationship and other events throughout the book she questions the reasons for the hatred between the two groups-Palestinians and Jews. She finally settles into her life in Jerusalem and discovers there is not much that she actually misses from America.

This book contains many terms from Arab culture. It holds the thoughts and fears of a newly immigrated teenager. Issue of tolerance, war, peace and religious practices are omnipresent. Religious practices such as the muezzin giving the last call to prayer over a loudspeaker from the Mosque in the village of Sitti (grandmother) gives the reader a hint of the religious practices of this Arabic community. "They unrolled their blue prayer rugs from a shelf, then knelt, stood, and knelt again touching foreheads to the ground, saying their prayers in low voices." This was in contrast to the informal beliefs of Liyana's Mother and Father. Mother says they are a spiritual family, not a traditionally religious one. Liyana had not been

raised within any particular formal religious group. The entire family believed in reincarnation, because it made sense to them. They did not believe in the devil, just people doing devilish things. Shortly before leaving America she had her first kiss, which at the age of fourteen, is not unusual within the states. However, when she arrived in Jerusalem she and her father had a conversation in which he tells her "Public kissing – I mean, kissing on the mouth, like romantic kissing – is not okay here. It is simply not done." Adjustments between the two cultures were very difficult for Liyana. There was some integration of Arabic and Jewish words such as at the Wailing Wall the Jews in yarmulkes were praying and tucking notes into the wall. Liyana's friend Omer tells of the Shiva – the time when family members remove their shoes, do not leave the house and mirrors are covered to mourn the dead, a Jewish tradition. We find the meaning of the title of the book, HABIBA, which means darling, a dearly loved person, chosen. Other words such as ana tayyib- I'm fine and ana asif, I'm sorry are sprinkled throughout the book. The names of the people in the book took on the language of the Middle East with names such as Khalad, Rafik, and Omer. Meals when they arrived in Jerusalem included such things as olives, marinated turnips, plates of baba ghanouj and hummus and hot flat breads. At the market when her mother wanted to buy a chicken a live one was plucked from a cage and its head chopped with Liyana and her mother watching. As a result, Liyana became a vegetarian. Clothing was completely different within the Palestinian community where Liyana's shorts were totally inappropriate and the family looked strangely upon her wearing her jeans with patches in the knees. She was accepted into an Armenian school where the wearing of her ring was considered inappropriate and she had to wear the uniform of the school. The languages were foreign to Liyana, her brother and her mother. There were so many languages within a small area. Great cultural shocks had to be overcome for adjustments to the new life. When Liyana became ill following an immunization injection for Cholera her Sitta came to cure her even though her father was a medical doctor. Sitta used many pins to confine Liyana within the sheets of her bed, the pins "looked like a metallic running fence." Following this Sitta said many prayers and flicked her fingers as if she were casting the illness aside. Soon Liyana began to feel better.

The most important significant cultural difference within this book was the differences in the feelings of the Arabs, Jews, Palestinian and other Middle Easterners. Their cultural differences brought bombings, attacks, and prison among the various groups. There were areas within the city which different groups were not accepted. A young friend Khalid was shot and Liyana's father was imprisoned for a day because a group of soldiers thought that Khalid had been involved in the killing of a young man. Her Sitta's home was wrecked as soldiers went through it looking for a relative and then they left as quickly as they came. This was very difficult for Liyana to understand. She met a young Jewish boy and bonded a friendship with him. One her father found unacceptable. Yet in the book it was this friendship that brought forth the sharing of feelings from both sides that at least among this small group of people peace was possible and desired.

The cover of this book illustrates the three characters who so varied in their beliefs are drawn together. There is Omer in

his yellow checked shirt that Liyana finds him so handsome in, Liyana in her contemporary American clothing which is unacceptable to her family and Sitta, her grandmother in the traditional clothing of the Arabic community. In the background we find the old city with a part of it special to each group -- all tied together, yet so different. Will there ever be peace?

Ruth Feldman (2002) remarks, "The book, *Habibi*, is interesting and enjoying reading. The setting of the book with an American immigrating to another country and the experience of the immigrants returning home is of a great interest." The book gives an understanding of the lives of the people that we read and hear about on the news daily. It gives the perspective of being in the countries where the turmoil is going on. These things we tend to read and forget, but the people of the Middle East cannot forget – it is their life.

Each chapter begins with a brief message to give thought to. One of the chapters has a touching opening that is "When we were born we were blank pieces of paper; nothing had been written yet."

This book is unusual because the plot revolves around the character development. The main story line of this book follows Liyana and her family's progress as they grow into their identities. This makes *Habibi* especially suited to supporting work with characters. Liyana is a complex character, exemplifying the contradictions of teenagers. The book chronicles her growth, from asking closed questions and answers to a more open and inquiring way of being. Throughout the book, Liyana models a sensitive and literate teen: she reads voraciously and writes in her notebook. She also rereads her notebook and reflects upon the entries and her life.

At the beginning of each chapter, there are italicized lines, which are from Liyana's point of view, although they are written in third person. These lines deserve attention. They can help readers focus on the events of the upcoming chapter and to grasp Liyana's changing attitudes.

Nye has used drama and the beauty of the setting in Jerusalem to contrast (in a variety of ways) Liyana's past life in America. Jerusalem is ancient, full of mystique and story, which Liyana soaks up gradually. The setting can be seen as a metaphor for the contrast in lifestyle of Israel/Palestine and America. The central themes of the book are wrapping in both with the setting and the development of Liyana's character. *Habibi*, therefore, becomes a great example of the interdependence of all the elements of the story. That is, an understanding of the plot and the theme and characters in the book. The setting, the plot, and all the other elements in this story (and in most stories) need to be seen as an intertwined braid, each influencing the others.

Naomi Shihab Nye is an award-winning writer who has turned her hand to children's books, poetry anthologies, picture books, and young adult novels which one way or another deal with the idea of connections. Nye has not only made poetry accessible to a young audience, but has also introduced young readers to a bigger world than encompassed by the walls of their schools. Compiling poems, short stories, and art work from creative people around the world, she has attempted to open windows on the world, to build bridges between "us" and "them".

Naomi's background as a child of immigrants from the Middle East puts Nye in an unusual position to offer bridges between two cultures that have been subjected to much mutual misunderstanding. With her two anthologies *This Same Sky* (1992) and *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2000), Nye strikes to combat threats of war with timely collections of poetry, hoping that sharing art will lead to greater peace. Speaking of motivation for compiling *This Same Sky*, Nye says in an interview (2003), "It was during the Gulf War, and the country was pulsing with hatred for Arabs. It was a scary time for me, and I wanted to bring the war down to the human level for the children I was working with. So I found some poems by Iraqi poets and had the kids read them and let them see that these people were no different than we were." Even as Nye writes of the differences in cultures in sometimes so homely as bread. Heinemann (2002) says that, "Nye goes beyond cultural and ethnic distinctions to explore essence." For example, from "Madison Street," somewhere in America the poet says, "I was not here when all this started\ still there is some larger belonging." Then somewhere" north of Jerusalem": My grandmother's eyes say Allah everywhere." With her acceptance of different "ways to pray" is also Nye's growing awareness that living in the world can sometimes be difficult. Indeed, reading the poems of Nye tells us about the true difficulty that people face in intercultural nation, especially when speaking about Arab American immigrants. Reading her is a spiritual practice as her poems up lift the spirit. She touches the roots of humanity in the striking messages that are presented in her literary works.

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