

Questioning the Multicultural Identity in Postmodernist Arab-American Poetic voices

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Abstract

Arab- American poetry is multicultural in nature. It is the product of two opposing cultures which determine its identity. This paper aims to highlight the poetics of identity in the poetry of the Arab-American poets Sharif El Musa and Naomi Nye. It examines the role that Arab-American poets underwent since the last decade of the twentieth century until the present to go through a cultural dialogue and to present an authentic face of Arab- American poetry which surpasses assimilation and tactics of marginalization. The study looks into the multi-facet representation of the Arab-American identity through the diverse experiences of Sharif El Musa and Naomi Nye whose poetry in common challenges the hegemonized stereotyping of Arab-Americans, forging spaces for recognition and multicultural conceptualization of American identity and citizenship. It also shows how exile and displacement have been promoted positively in a way which transcends the boundaries of national identity and permits creativity, liberation and criticism in a multicultural atmosphere.

Key Words: *identity, multicultural, dialogue, displacement, recognition*

I. Introduction

The poetics of identity is at the heart in the discourse of multiculturalism. It is engaged with the question of ‘Otherness’, making it a challenge for the possibility of intellectual meeting among different cultures. Identity is a multidimensional concept which determines the way people make sense of themselves and of the world surrounding them. It is an intensive field of study which explores specific issues such as culture, race, religion, gender and education that conceive the way one perceives and is perceived. In his book *Writing Displacement* (2016), Akram Al Deek comments that identity is a dynamic construction which responds to the contextual changes that manipulate people’s conduct, judgments, and decisions: “Identity changes and shifts...varies in its reference and reality from one generation to another and from one place and time to another.”(Al Deek, 2016:66) The flexibility of identity makes it like a battleground on which conduct and habitations acquired by nature contend with those acquired by culture.

Configuring people’s identities in multicultural communities has recently become a matter of crucial concern. Cultural theorists Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka both agree that equality

and legal citizenship are not enough for people of hyphenated identities in multicultural communities. They call for public recognition and openness to cultural diversity in order to give members of minorities the opportunity to pursue their cultural practices and gain their ethnic rights of self-affirmation. Charles Taylor poses the question of collective identity as a key issue in multicultural societies. Human identities are biologically and culturally constructed and they are recognized through dialogic interaction. Taylor believes in dialogue as an important means of expression which helps to attain authentic membership :

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others, our parents for instance, and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live.” (Taylor, 1994:33)

Charles Taylor explains identity as a special way of life which entails considering “who we are” and “where we are coming from”, without imitating others’ way of life. It is how we make sense of our individuations and respond to the world surrounding us through experiences, tastes, aspirations and opinions. It is through dialogical interaction that identities are constructed. People do not live and work out in isolation. They interact with others through dialogue. Public dialogue is essential to overcome cultural hegemony which denies the potentiality of the ‘Other’ culture. However dialogical interaction, according to Taylor, is not enough in multicultural communities. Recognition and equality are as important as dialogue since they together form key factors to attain dignity and true citizenship. Taylor emphasizes ‘public recognition’ beside equality, stating that the demand for recognition is a necessity at democratic societies and he draws a connection between identity and recognition, arguing that ‘recognition’ or ‘misrecognition’ helps to shape our identities, that is, who we are and what sort of life we lead. He considers that misrecognition is a form of humiliation and oppression that can harm people and reduce their sense of humanity. (ibid: 25)

Language, according to Taylor, is an essential medium through which minority groups gain public recognition when their voice is heard by the social majority who is blind to their needs, views and the importance of their existence as part of the cultural texture of the whole community. Language and discourse give voice to the minority groups who are socially abandoned or partially represented. Taylor refers to language in its broadest sense whereby the languages of art, body or the deaf are all modes of expression and self-definition since they are used through dialogic interaction with others: “The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical.”(Taylor,1994: 32) Taylor’s argument is widely inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of “Dialogism” in which the latter delimits the centralized power system and emphasizes the

significant emergence of multiple voices which go through continuous dialogue so that truth is realized from different perspectives .

Will Kimlicka also emphasizes the essentiality of minority representation to speak for their interests and expose their collective identity. He believes that minority groups are only represented through individuals who share their gender, ethnicity, language or religion. Kimlicka calls his theory “Mirror representation” which he considers unfit all the time since it “suffers from a number of inaffirmities”, justifying that each group has subgroups with different experiences and interests; therefore a white woman cannot represent a woman of color as long as a man cannot represent a woman.(kimlicka, 1995: 140) Nevertheless; mirror representation is an appropriate mechanism for representing Arab-Americans who share a collective identity as Arabs regardless of their cultural and religious orientations. They are best represented by individuals who share their ethnicity and their experiences of immigration in order to give access for their voice and gain equal recognition .

Poetry in general occupies a little space in the American cultural stream which is more indulgent in fiction and storytelling; however Arab- American poets attempt to revitalize the role of poetry in the American milieu, connecting it with people. Layla Al Maleh argues that Arab-American literature since 1970s witnessed an age of literary renaissance with authors who thrive to introduce works that embrace an identity of its own, surfacing voices which are released from cages of mimicry and assimilation. (Al Maleh, 2009: 22) Unlike modernist Arab-American poetry, which fluctuates between nostalgia and imitation, postmodernist Arab-American poetry is more mature and authentic, representing political and domestic issues in the United States in addition to issues related to the US policy in the Middle East and the world.

In the introduction to *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* (2008), Hayan Charara (1972-), an Arab-American poet and the editor of this book refers to the ‘ongoing endeavor’ of Arab-American poets to provide poetry which goes through a dialogue with American readers of different cultures to reverse the prejudiced stereotypes of Arabs and to permit the Arab-American voice “to prevail in public and mainstream discourse.” (Charara, 2008: xxvii) He argues on the conflation which has taken place since the events between Arab and Islam so that all Arab-Americans are put into the same pot and viewed by the American community as adherents of Islam :

For most Arabs, the use of these disparate terms interchangeably across large portions of American and European societies only further reinforces how little the “West” attempts to understand the cultures of the Middle East and of Islam. On the one hand, this error seems outlandish, almost laughable – one needs only to look up the words in a dictionary or do the most cursory research to discover why “Arab” does not necessarily equal “Islam”; or note that a large number of Arab Americans are Christians (a majority depending on

the source); or recognize the fact, quite puzzling to some, that there are among Arabs (not just Arab Americans) those with a Jewish heritage. (Charara, 2008: xxvii)

Arabs in general, whether Muslims or not, are portrayed as violent fanatics who all share their original belonging to the evil East. This misconception has consequently made the Arab-American victims of racial discrimination and goals of programmed violent personal attacks after the terrorist events of September/ 11, 2001 .

II. Representing identity in Postmodernist Arab-American Poetry

Poetics of exile, culture, race and female misconception are prominently tackled in contemporary Arab-American poetry to redefine the image of Arabs especially after the terrorist events of September/11, 2001. The poetry of Sharif El Musa and Naomi Nye, as a case in point, represents different axis of the exilic identity. They both explore issue related to Arab-Americans as displacement, exile, loss and family. Their poems represent experiences of writers who are situated in a middle space between the East and the West. They both seek to attain a better understanding between two alien cultures. However; Nye's parental polyethnicity makes her more inviting to cultural compromise, unlike El Musa who shows a resentful attitude and melancholic nostalgia to a home which exists beyond the geographies of the present.

The Arab-American poet Sharif El Musa is an engineer, an academician and a translator. He is the fifth of twelve children who all left their native village Al Abassiya in Palestine a year after the poet's birth in 1947. His father who used to plant fruit at his home village switched to "vegetables farming" after the family immigrated to Nuweimeh refugee camp in Jericho where the poet grew up. El Musa enrolled at Cairo University where he obtained a bachelor degree in civil engineering in 1970. He later received a master degree from Northeastern University in Boston and a Ph.D. degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. El Musa's poetry has appeared in numerous journals as *Poetry East*, *Banipal* and *Monitor* as well as anthologies as *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab-American Poetry* and *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab- American Poetry* which he co-edited with Gregory Orfalea. His translations of Arabic poetry have appeared in *Modern Arabic Poetry* (1987) and *On Entering the Sea: The Erotic and Other Poetry of Nizar Qabbani* (1996). (Orfalea & El Musa, 2000: 225) Despite long years of success, fame and settlement in Washington, El Musa is still haunted by the offensive images of displacement which transmitted from parents to offsprings that he uses poetry to heal his wounds and release his emotions from their cocoons .

El Musa exemplifies the exilic identity which is both colored by all aspects of social life in the United States but at the same time is inordinately allocating towards homeland. In his collection of poetry *Flawed Landscape: Poems 1987-2008* (2008), he pinpoints the question of identity or 'who we are' in poems which explore the melancholy of displacement and the bitter estrangement that Palestinian- Americans feel as human beings who mostly struggle in search for

their identity which has been subject to change over time, place and conditions. El Musa's collection *Flawed Landscape* is autobiographical in nature, including poems which are thematically divided into three parts that explore the traumatic effects of displacement, the importance of the family for the identity construction of the Arab- American as well as the burdens of exile and the search for a true homeland .

In the poems of the first part of the collection such as "In the Refugee Camp" and "To Feel the Humiliation", El Musa recalls the traumatic memories of war, displacement and dispersion when he fled his birth village, Al-Abbasiya, with his family during the year of Nakba in 1948: "*The huts were made of mud and hay, / their thin roofs feared the rain, / and walls slouched like humbled men.*" (El Musa, 2008:8) In "In the Refugee Camp", the poet uses a descriptive language to recall the memories which are deeply dug into his consciousness of the huts which were "made of mud and hay", of women's faces which "grew pale" and of chicken and children fed "fables from the lost land." (El Musa, 2008: 8) Despite the passage of time, the speaker in this poem is still experiencing bitterness and anger because of displacement that he travels back in the past, cursing all refugees, including Adam and Eve, "and the One who made them refugees." He is moving within the pivot of history, representing traumatized personal experiences of the past which left in him amalgamated feelings of abuse and victimization .

Historical trauma is an interdisciplinary theory of postmodernism which premises that past experiences of abuse and victimhood, due to wars, slavery, colonialism or genocide, affect the identity construction of the indigenous people and the polyethnic groups at multicultural communities as it is transmitted through a trans-generational cycle. It flourished since the 1960's on behalf of studies based on the survivors of the World War II and the Holocaust, examining the bewildering effects that traumatic experiences of the past had on them. Cathy Caruth, as a case in point, builds her theory on historical trauma upon Sigmund Freud's argument of the interconnectedness between literature and psychology. Caruth, in other words, believes that the language of literature can be used as a therapeutic medium to diagnose the injuries of past traumatic experiences :

"If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet."(Caruth, 1996:3)

Evoking the traumatic experiences of the past can become a healing force to live a better present and future. El Musa encounters the traumatic memories of the past, giving voice to the experience of silenced Palestinians who have been victimized by the Israeli tyranny. He acquires what Al Deek calls "a translated cultural identity" that is able to gain public recognition at multicultural communities because it is never imprisoned only in the past but compromises the

past with the present, finding a way of inbetweenness. (Al Deek, 2016:58) He looks forward crossing the cultural and epistemological borders of exile, promoting memories and imaginary visions. In his poem “The Eraser”, the poet produces a crafting metaphor of Israel which displaced Palestinians of their home village, cutting them off from their roots: “In the beginning the Eraser razed the village”, the poet uses the pronoun ‘He’, describing the eraser as frightening as a monster with a god-like image:

He let the villagers be frightened into fleeing

Their houses and their fields,

And He saw that they had fled

And He heard the ghosts talking

Strange talk in the empty house (El Musa,2008:13)

The poet juxtaposes the descent past with the present, alluding to the Biblical story of creation and Jewish Sabbath which claims that God created the universe in six days and took a break on the seventh. The poet draws a parallel between the story of Jewish Sabbath of the past, which illustrates the creation of the universe out of love and mercy, and the story of the Zionist Sabbath of the present which ironically destroyed life causing death, horror and displacement. God created this universe with all its creatures out of love and mercy. Zionism, the fetish of Israel, on the other hand, established its Zionist being, which is governed by the law of the forest out of hate and dispossession in six days, then took a break on the seventh:

and He saw all that He unmade and, O wow,

Was it good and, on the sixth day, He took a break.

Waking up on the seventh day

He saw that refugees had multiplied

Zionism created the Israeli being. It changed maps, ‘expunged’ the old names of places and caused increase in the Palestinians refugees everywhere. El Musa closes his poem with a visual image of refugees “conjuring forest fires”, suggesting that Palestinians will resist the Israeli being in different ways including reassembling their national identity simultaneously even in the exile

War and displacement contribute to the poet’s gloomy vision. Traumatic happenings of the past are fully grasped into his consciousness that he recollects them in the form of memories. Recollection of memories, according to Caruth, is a continuous ‘confrontation’ which forces itself upon the survivor’s mind over and over again. (Caruth, 1996:62) It disturbs the mind of the survivor, forcing him to tell the unspeakable. Telling; hence becomes a healing process to

grasp the threats of the past upon one's own life enabling him to reconcile the present and live a healthier future. The speaker in "To Feel the Humiliation" announces with a tone of empathy that war made him see everything: "Today I have seen of war/ all I want to see." (El Musa, 2008:10) He is struggling with an everlasting anxiety and traumatic memories that submerge beneath his conscious perception, evoking scenes of the Palestinian apocalypse of different people who witnessed the tyranny of war and the death of their loved ones. War rapes humanity. Its unbearable traumatic events leave the individuals who witnessed it with memories that cannot be easily retrieved :

A row of men with blindfolded eyes

and surrendered hands

squat, backs hunched ,

before a stone wall.

A young boy stays home

For five days, alone,

With the corpses of his family .

An old woman flails

Her arms in despair, begging

The distant heavens.

El Musa contends that it is with poetry that he can overcome the humiliation and touches the grief of his people. Poetry makes him stronger as "a monster with many hearts."(El Musa:13)

El Musa employs his poetry to bring to the surface personal experiences of diaspora, explaining feelings of estrangement and loss out of an involuntary exile which Palestinians were forced to undergo. Diaspora is one of the evil effects of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and military invasion. Arab diaspora began with the dispersion of the Palestinians outside Palestine who were the first Arabs to experience the paranoia of exile. However, Arab diaspora now encapsulates all subjects of Arab origin who experience voluntary or involuntary exile. In his essay "Reflections on Exile", Edward Said describes exile as "a terrible" experience which causes an "unhealable rift between the human being and his native place" Said argues that exile and nationalism are opposites this is why exilic poets live with the feeling that exile is a punishment which denies their dignity and identity. (Said, 2002:173-5 (

El Musa draws visual images from nature and domestic life to address the experience of exile, capturing the tensions of exile in poems such as "How Odd These Amphibians", "Sun Lines" and "How Things Migrate". In "How Odd These Amphibians", he uses the pronoun 'we'

to, metaphorically, depict the exiled individuals as amphibians whose “fins branched out into legs”. They leave water to live on land, but their eyes keep looking back to the place where they were “baptized”. The exiled person lives the agony of neither feeling at home on the new land where he lives, nor feeling close to his original land :

We go back to water

where we were baptized

in jets and trains, go there

with laser eyes and lawyers' ears,

with tongues sporting new tentacles. (El Musa, 2008: 56)

El Musa sums up describing the exiled people as “odd amphibians” who neither belong to water, nor to land. Exile is a psychopathological experience which makes the exiled tired of standing at an inbetween space that they can neither move back nor forth .

The tone of El Musa’s poetry fluctuates between the melancholy of displacement and the joy of living, producing personal experiences that are stunningly engaged with the common. Naomi Nye, in comparison, is brighter in tone, projecting a bicultural identity that challenges the centralized modes of being. She employs her poetry to attain cultural compromise, using English language to address a wide majority of readers. Her poetry is mostly narrative, telling stories of Palestinians in exile in an attempt to establish a cultural dialogue, drawing the readers’ attention and empathy to the experience of the ‘Other’. In her study “Between Empire and Diaspora: Identity Poetics in Contemporary Arab American Women's Poetry”, Safaa Abdulrahim argues that Nye’s poetry seeks to surpass the politics of geography and make a transcultural connection among people through acknowledging “otherness as a glory and not a threat.”(Abdulrahim, 2013: 116) Nye delimits categories of cultural binarism and looks instead into multiplicity and how it constitutes identity at multicultural communities. Describing her friendly outlook to others, the poet says in an interview with her on Al Jadid magazine: “You'd like to have friends in the world, and whereas I always felt friendly with people of other ethnicities, there was a tremendous pleasure in having a bond with people who had a closer link to my own background.”(Nye, interview, 1996, www.aljadid.com) As a bicultural poet, she is keen to represent the Middle East, which has been long ignored in the US media, in her poetry:

All my life I thought about the Middle East, wrote about it, lived in it, visited it, worried about it, loved it.....I was born in the United States, but my father stared back to the Middle East whenever he stood outside.(Nye,2005:xii)

Nye is an award winning poet who is referred to as “one of the major voices in contemporary American literature.”(Camille et al, 2012:447) She began writing poetry at an early age and was influenced by the simple poetic style of the American poet William Stafford(1914-1993). Her father is a Palestinian refugee, who left his homeland since 1948, and her mother is an American of German and Swiss origins. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1952, but moved back with her family to Jerusalem at the age of fourteen. They left to the United States after one year when the war broke out there in 1967. The experience of displacement strongly influenced the poet’s identity, giving her an inspirational vision as an American poet of Arab/Palestinian origin.

Nye was aware of her bicultural identity since childhood. In the preface to her poems in the anthology of Arab-American poetry entitled *Grape leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (2000), she writes about the gravities of ancestry commenting that her sense of otherness was nonetheless encouraging rather than irritating :

I felt lucky to have this dual perspective inherent in my parentage, and I was encouraged to explore other ethnic and cultural perspectives as well. Perhaps being bicultural helped me maintain some sense of “otherness” or detachment: while I was growing up in the United States, there was a quiet, old-world part of me which stood back and observed. It took me a year’s residence among the Arabs and Armenians of Old City Jerusalem to make me feel distinctly American, as well. (Orfalea & El Musa, 2000:266)

Nye mentions that she felt as an outsider at first when she moved to Jerusalem that she had a sense of homesickness especially to her friends, but then she began to love the place and got to love and come closer to her paternal grandmother whom she mentioned in several poems by her .

Nye is the author and editor of various poetry collections as well as a novel for teens which won six awards. Her novel *Habibi* is a semi-biographical work which tells the story of Liyana Abboud, an Arab-American teenager who moved to Palestine with her family in the 1970s. The novel has been praised for its tense emotion and imagery, describing violence in Jerusalem. In 1988, Nye received an award from the academy of American poets. In 2010, she was elected to the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets, and in 2013, she was named laureate of the NSK Prize for Children’s Literature. Nye is married to the American photographer Michael Nye and they reside with their son in San Antonio, Texas. (Orfalea & El Musa, 2000: 265)

Naomi Shihab Nye is a poet whose vision is constructed under the rubrics of multiculturalism. She draws the attention to the responsibility of Arab-American writers to build the cultural bridges between the worlds, depending on their poems to bring the shattered parts of identity together. Hence, her poetry crosses the boundaries, introducing a universal human message to all people despite their different color skins, ethnicity or gender. She believes that the

two hyphens of the Arab-American identity are closely connected as a pulse that they together determine the way how Arab-Americans live and think .

In her poetry collection 19 varieties of Gazelle, she explores the factors that work together to establish the identity of the Arab- Americans as religion, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. In her poem “All Things Not Considered”, the poet explores the evil effects of violence out of the distortion of religions, handled by politicians for purposes that serve their political strategies. She opens the poem with a straightforward and powerful line that takes the readers directly into the environment which she intends to bring them through: "You cannot stitch the breath back into this boy." (Nye, 2005: 133) The poet-speaker uses an outraged tone against religions which are employed as evil excuses for committing tyranny against humanity. She portrays realistic scenes of different innocents they are violently killed in the name of supporting religion:

A brother and sister were playing with toys

When their room exploded

.....

The Jewish boys killed in the cave

were skipping school, having an adventure.

Asel Asleh, Palestinians, age 17, believed in the field

Beyond right and wrong where people

come together

to talk. He kneeled to help someone else

stand up before he was shot.

.....

Mohammed al-Durra huddled against his father

In the street, terrified. The whole world saw him die.

Nye, intentionally, uses names of real people as al-Durra and Asel Asleh to elicit the empathy of her readers. She repeats the word ‘holy’ at different places of the poem to signify her skeptic attitude of all religions which are promoted for evil purposes rather than for peace and brotherhood: “if this is holy,/ could we have some new religions please“ .?

The poetry of Nye mostly shows adherence to the American tradition of storytelling. However she explores personal experiences related to the Palestinian/ Israeli conflict and its bitter consequences. It is, according to her, a conflict that would desperately be resolved. She

constantly tackles themes of war, death, exile and dislocation, examining issues related to them as food or customs. In her poem “Olive Jar”, the poet narrates a personal experience when she was questioned by an Israeli crossing guard while visiting her Palestinian relatives, exploring the hardships that Palestinians meet if they intend to make a visit back home:

At the border an Israeli crossing-guard asked

where I was going in Israel.

To the West Bank, I said. To a village of

olives and almonds.

To see my people.

What kind of people? Arab people?

.....

Do you plan to speak with anyone? he said.

His voice was harder

And harder, bitten between his teeth.

I wanted to say, No, I have come all this way

For a silent reunion.

But he held my passport in his hands.(Nye, 2005:80-1)

Nye's experience of getting closer to her relatives in Palestine strengthens her Arab hyphen and makes her more able to understand the fabrics which constitute the different cultures .

In his essay “Naomi Shihab Nye and her Palestinian-Influenced Writings”, John David Brantley argues that the stories which Naomi Nye tells her readers in her poetry takes them to people and experiences that they would otherwise never know so that “the strange becomes familiar and the stranger becomes a friend”. She erases the borders of cultural binarism so that there would be no “Self” or “Other”, but all are gathered under the tree of humanity. (Brantley, 2004, www.lib.latrobe.edu.au) Readers are introduced to different people in her poems as the old man Fawzi, the Armenian schoolgirl who has lived in a room of stone, Mohammed, the poet’s uncle who went to the mountain but never returned back, and of Abu Mahmoud, the Palestinian whom the military settle across his valley. The poet tells the stories of these everyday people in a way that introduces her readers to different worlds and different cultures. In her poem, “Mr. Dajani, Calling From Jericho”, Nye tells her readers about a Mr. Dajani who is a well-known weatherman in Jericho city: “If we came to Jericho and said his name,/ anyone would lead us to him”(ibid:130) He lives a simple life, breeding chickens and swans. He loves reading books, but

they are hardly ordered to his old city which is wracked by the war. Mr. Dajani never quits his calls for peace even on the day of the worst news of declaring war. Mr. Dajani is the mouth piece of the poet herself, whose voice overflows with a humanitarian spirit, calling for peace, social equality and recognition for the indigenous everywhere:

we never stop holding our branch of the olive tree

even though for some it is such a little branch.

All we ever wanted was respect.

Regular bits of dignity and respect.

Too much to hope? (ibid:131)

Nye draws upon the time she spent in Jerusalem and on her Palestinian background in several poems such as “The Small Vases From Hebron” in which she tackles the Palestinian-Israeli conflict caused by the sacred city Jerusalem since the war in 1967. The poet describes the nightmarish life which Palestinians in Hebron undergo out of war. In some lines of the poem, the poet uses the pronoun ‘we’, indicating her pride of her Palestinian identity. Palestinians create life; whereas Israelis end it: “Here we place the smallest flower/ Which could have lived invisibly/ In loose soil beside the road”.....“Here we entrust the small life,/ thread, fragment, breath.”(Nye,2005:63) Nye skillfully employs paradox placing opposites side by side without dissonance [bombs/ growing plants]. She draws a stark metaphorical image of small petals of flowers which grow vastly inside the glass vase like exploding bombs :

Nothing of the smaller petal

Perfectly arranged inside the larger petal

Or the way tinted glass filters light

The poet with exquisite wording takes the reader to the other image of glass crushing out of the Israeli bombing so that opposite images of life inside the vase and death of Palestinians by Israelis are intermingled :

Men and boys, praying when they died,

Fall out of their skins.

The whole alphabet of living ,

Heads and tails of words, sentences, the way they said,

’Ya’Allah!’ when astonished,

Or “ya’ani” for “I mean” a crushed glass under the feet

Still shines. (Nye, 2005:64)

Despite the hardships of war and their consequences on Palestinian lives, Nye is a poet who calls for peace, considering it the sole means of cultural dialogue and brotherhood. In “Ibtisam Bozieh”, she says:

How do we carry the endless surprise

of all our deaths? Becoming doctors for one another, Arab, Jew,

instead of guarding tumors out of pain

as if the hold us upright? (54)

Bozieh was the 500th Palestinian martyr who dreamt of being a doctor but was shot by an Israeli veteran, while looking out of her window. The poet laments the political and religious hatred as well as the rivalries on the West Bank which are received by cosmic indifference:

People in other countries speak easily

of being early, late. Some will live to be eighty.

Some who never saw it

Will not forget your face .

Familial imagery is constantly explored in postmodernist Arab- American poetry which is written by poets who are more conscious than their predecessors to preserve the heritage of their home culture alive in the United States. Thus, images of father, mother, grandfather and grandmother are entwined in their poetry to suggest their commitment to their roots despite their integration with the new culture. They also suggest the generational clash between Arab-American parents and their siblings. Family to Arab-Americans equals identity. It is the bond which connects them to the legacy and values of their old culture. Loyalty to family traditions reflects the poets’ sense of their Arab identity which is at conflict with their present consciousness as American citizens .

As Arab-Americans, family forms a corner stone in the poetry of Sharif El Musa and Naomi Nye, representing their commitment to their home culture. El Musa recalls the lessons of his mother who taught him the way religion determines the human’s ethical conduct :

Among the things mother told me

as a child:

Every person has two angels

standing on his shoulders.

And they weigh every deed.

On the right, Nakir,

For the good deeds;

for the bad, Nakeer,

on the left.(El Musa, 2008:38)

The poet's mother is a woman who has an undying religious commitment which she tries to preserve in her family by transmitting it to her son who exhibits a division in his self-identity. The speaker is living a moral struggle out of the cultural clash between his family's ethical and religious principles and the new cultural principles which he acquired in exile. It becomes a burden that hunches his back as the years pass: "That is why my gait is tilted now/ And as the years pass-/ My back will grow hunched." He lives in a state of spiritual "nakedness" because of the clash between his mother's teachings and the different American life-style which makes him more mentally independent but less spiritually content .

El Musa uses 'father' image as a symbol of his ancestral culture. In his poem "In Balance", he evokes memories from the past, emphasizing his fragmented consciousness in exile and his struggle to preserve the traditions of his home culture in balance with the customs of his host culture in the United States. He addresses his father in his fantasies, drawing upon the generational distance of father-son relationship. The father's identity is indicated in the poem through the use of the pronouns 'you' and 'your':

I was powerless against you then

you noticed only my violations.

Now we stand in balance

In the brass pans of the scale,

And I sit next to you,

Marvel at how the sun baked your face (El Musa, 2008:39)

The poet compares the father's passionate bond to the land and the peasantry life in Palestine despite its hardships with his loss of that cultural worldview in exile. Unlike the poet, the father's lifelong habitation on his land made him establish a certain cultural conceptualization derived from his body/ land bond .

El Musa employs nature imagery, such as 'apricot tree' and 'grapevine', that are abound with sensations of smell, taste and tactile, evoking a longing, which surpasses time and space, to his

remote land that bears his roots. He also employs personification, representing his father's land as an entity which is in harmony with the sentiments of its inhabitants who have been displaced by Israelis:

Father; this apricot tree so lush,

Climbing madly toward the sky,

Yet bears no apricots.

She must be infatuated with herself.

Father; the grapevine in Uncle's garden

Speaks no grapes.

She must be in mourning

Over his death, he planted her.

Familial imagery which fuses with nature images can be also traced in El Musa's poem "No Flowers for Flowers' Sake" which explores the poet's deep connection with his homeland even though he lives at distant geographical and cultural contexts:

I could blame my being such a philistine on my parents

Who grow olives and pears and figs and whatnot.

The blossoms of their orange trees are only a prelude to the fruit.(El Musa, 2008:41)

Being an American of Arab origin, the speaker-poet occupies an in-between space of cultural identification, representing an identity of multiple fragments. The in-betweenness of the poet's identity is evoked through environmental imagery. The poem is crowded with images of trees and flowers which go through a process of cultural call and response, representing the hyphenated identity of the speaker which fluctuates between two different cultures. Flowers are personified as 'sublime' creatures that have 'patrician' ways of living. They can; therefore, go through a cultural dialogue of a sublime kind even better than human beings. Images like 'pansy', 'daisy's petals' or 'tulips in Washington' which are as large as American women, resemble the American hyphen of the poet's identity, then his Arab hyphen pulls him back in the last stanza, introducing images of tree blossoms related to the Palestinian environment such as orange tree blossoms. The poet contends that the blossoms of his home culture are more sublime and beautiful since they never flower for flower's sake but their flowering is rather 'a prelude to the fruit.'

In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said contends that binary opposition is the principal dogmas of Orientalism which is based on the systematic difference between the West, which is

superior, rational, humane, developed and the Orient or the East, which is aberrant and underdeveloped. Said further argues that Orientalism is a political discourse adopted by Western institutions which insist to uphold negative stereotypes of Arabs in order to justify expansion and exploitation of these people and their resources. Orientalism, today, resumes its strategy at multicultural communities where Arabs are part of their social texture. Taking into consideration the colonial goal of Orientalism along history Arab- Americans, as a case in point, embody the 'Other' who are silenced and marginalized. The negative stereotyping of Arabs grew since the Arab-Israeli war in 1967 which caused the conflation between Arab, Islam and terrorism. Unlike other minority groups, Arab-Americans lack the political power which enables them to impose a better cultural representation of themselves. Hence, Postmodernist Arab- American writers felt the responsibility to punctuate their writings with issues of voice and identity and to create a cultural dialogue that could reverse the negative stereotyping and maintain recognition for them. Naomi Nye, for instance, is a poet who felt the responsibility of bearing witness to the heritage of her home culture through her poems which bear witness to family and blood ties. Like Sharif El Musa, Naomi Nye resorts to familial imagery which reflects her double identity and her nostalgia to a remote homeland that has become a distant dream: "As I sit here in Texas, pickup truck in the driveway, tortilla factory down the block, my grandmother's West Bank village keeps returning to me."(Orfalea &El Musa,2000 :266)

Nye captures personal experiences which register the father-daughter universal bond and draws upon the theme of family universality. In poems such as "My Father and the Figtree", "Arabic Coffee" and "My Grandmother in the Stars", Nye ponders the Middle East, her home culture, through familial imagery which gives her access to her roots. She is deeply tied to her family that she cannot give up her Palestinian roots and desert the people of her home culture who need her poetic skills to voice them. She is also tied to her grandmother who resembles her motherland. The image of sitti, the Palestinian grandmother, who wears a white scarf on her head even while she is asleep, is constantly explored in Nye's poems as in her novel *Habibi*. Despite her simplicity and peasantry outlook, sitti is an emblem of the marginalized who wedge with strength, wisdom and dignity, their feet downward the earth despite the prejudice and persecution of the powerful institutions. In her autobiographical children story *Sitti's Secrets* (1997), Nye tells the story of the young girl Mona, describing her visit to her grandmother who lives in a Palestinian village on the West Bank. The love, that the girl and her grandmother share, transcends cultural and language barriers. They could create a language of their own even though they do not speak the same human language. The poet and her sitti, the affectionate name she uses to call her grandmother, are deeply tied. Nye writes: "...she has swarmed into my consciousness, poking my sleep, saying, it's your job. Speak for me too. Say how much I hate it. Say this is not who we are." (Nye, 2002:xviii) The poet, for this reason, feels herself compelled to write about the people of her ancestral culture through the image of her grandmother so that the world would hear the other side of the story and know who is good and who is truly villain. Nye's grandmother resembles all the simple Palestinians who face the Israeli aggression with

religious faith and wisdom: “My grandmother’s eyes say Allah is everywhere,/Even in death./...../when she tells the stories of Joha / and his foolish wisdom”.(Nye,2005:14-5) She has the strength and stamina that nothing surprises her neither a ‘shotgun wound’, nor a ‘crippled baby.’

In several of her poems, Nye characterizes the father image, providing an intimate image of the pains that can be brought on the exile. In her book Arab- American and Muslim Writers (2010), Rebecca Layton argues that the image of Nye’s father in her poems provides an opportunity of cultural conversation despite hatred and binary opposition. In her poems “My Father and the Figtree” and “Arabic Coffee”, Nye unifies the image of father with food as indicators of culture and tradition. They both bring her closer to her home culture and give her readers access to the universal culture she attempts to create in her poetry where she can transcend the cultural rift. The father image indicates his identity which is constructed through his connection to his native land; whereas food serves to “link the histories of the marginalized” and of the subjugated individuals. (Layton,2010:63)

For other fruits my father was indifferent.

He’d point at the cherry trees and say,

’See those? I wish they were figs.

Nye employs the father image in this poem to represent the determination of Arab-Americans to maintain their home identity while living in the United States. This image symbolizes the longing of the exile to home culture and traditions. The poem evokes vivid images of sight, sense and taste, resembling the father’s nostalgia to his home culture. It also illuminates the issue of identity which resides in a state of betweenness, giving it a confusing nature:

At age six I ate a dried fig and shrugged.

’That’s not what I’m talking about!’ he said,

*’I’m talking about a fig straight from the earth-
gift of Allah!- on a branch so heavy*

it touches the ground.

*I’m talking about picking the largest, fattest, sweetest fig
in the world and putting it into my mouth. (Nye, 2005:6)*

Nye, again, pays homage to the Joha image which is an emblem of wisdom in Arab heritage, brought on with irony and wit: “Once Joha was walking down the road / and he saw a figtree” The image of Nye’s father leaning over the stove to prepare Arabic coffee brings into mind

memories of childhood in the Old city of Jerusalem. He serves as a paradigm for the suffering of the exiles who share the evil effects of diaspora. Coffee, in Nye's poem "Arabic Coffee" signifies the hundred disappointments that the exile faces in the diaspora and the memories of home which are tucked like "pocket handkerchiefs": Make it blacker, Papa,/Thick in the bottom./ Tell again how years will gather / in small white cups..."(Nye, 2005:38) Coffee signifies faith, and hope for a better future. The word 'gather' suggests the power of coffee to gather people who exchange memories that will preserve their strength during the times of distress while drinking blacker coffee .

The familial imagery in the poems of both poets indicates the significant role of the family as a corner stone in constructing the Arab- American identity. However, familial imagery in El Musa's poetry is combined with environmental imagery, indicating his peasantry background and his spiritual commitment to his native land. Nye's familial imagery, on the other hand, fuses with images of food providing an opportunity for cultural compromise despite binarism.

Sharif El Musa, Naomi Nye and Mohja Kahf share a cultural identity with a distinctive set of practices and customs as well as a distinctive history. Despite their diverse experiences which reflect different axis of the Arab- American identity, these three poets employ their poetry to espouse the politics of recognition, respect and reciprocity which are the legitimate goals of multiculturalism. The melancholic tone in El Musa's poetry suggests his senses of otherness and alienation in exile. Through metaphor, juxtaposition and environmental imagery, the poet attempts to heal the wounds of the past and decrease the cultural gap. Nye's polyethnic background is shown in her compromising attitude. Her poetry attempts to cross the boundaries between the 'Self' and the 'Other', considering that both give meaning to the discourse of multiculturalism.

III. Conclusion

Postmodernist Arab-American poetry reached a state of maturity which enabled it to free itself from the cultural barriers which forced modernist Arab-American poetry to fall within the scopes of homogeneity and assimilation. Postmodernist Arab-American poets have successfully promoted their works provocatively to create a cultural dialogue and gain recognition for themselves as part of the American multicultural texture. Their poetry is reaping the fruit of the

polyculture. It has reached a stage of maturity which makes it an integral part of the American literary scene, delving into new subjects related to US internal and external policies.

The threads of displacement and diaspora are leitmotifs in postmodernist Arab-American poetry, representing diverse exilic experiences which take into consideration the difference between first and second generation immigrants; however they collectively share common senses of alienation and inbetweenness. The Arab-American poet Sharif El Musa, who is a first generation immigrant, reflects the issues of estrangement, displacement and a deep-rooted connection to his home culture in his poetry which is considered an evocation of the diasporic consciousness. This is shown in the repetitive reference to his home culture which ranges from recalling traumatic historical events of Palestine to alluding to the holy Koran. His poetry elucidates the reciprocal relationship between trauma and identity in the sense that trauma can influence the manner that identity is constructed in the same way that the second can determine the way that the first is perceived. This is clearly seen in El Musa's poems which exemplify the exilic identity that is moaning under the burden of traumatic memories of war and displacement .

El Musa's poetry is full of environmental imagery that draws on surrealistic and impressionistic elements by creating bizarre images based on juxtapositions. His main goal is to stretch the cultural boundaries, liberating readers' thinking in order to compel them decide. El Musa's poetry provokes a sense of 'double- consciousness' or 'twoness' by proposing a double sense of the self: American and other. The poetry of El Musa can also be categorized under "a broader tradition of diasporic Palestinian literature" that is written in English but is closely bound to Palestine because it invokes issues related to its colonization such as abuse, assimilation, religious discrimination and infidelity. Steven Salaita asserts that this stuffed writing is common among authors of Palestinian origin: "..., the invention of a national entity called Palestine, despite the lack of a geopolitical space with the same name, was done largely by Palestinians in exile, in both the West and the Arab World." (Salaita, 2007:131-2) El Musa's poetry instills the difficulties of Arab exclusion from the American major community at a time when this minority group experiences commitment to the American life in the United States .

The poetry of Naomi Nye exemplifies a different experience of the hyphenated identity which is based on cultural compromise. The Arab descent in Nye's poetry is flavored by her American identity in a way that fosters a constructive dialogue which defines who she is. Her poetry sings her desire for human love, peace and tolerance especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in order to cross over the cultural trauma that struck the American community collectively. Nye's poetry is inspired by the folk tales which her father told her every bedtime. She recalls that he "never dwelled too long on troubled politics, since the inequities and losses hurt too much for one in exile. But he created, through language, a place of playful characters and ancient, spicy traditions."(Nye, 2004: 88) She employs the human senses to produce images of lived experiences so that her readers can listen, hear, see and touch experiences they never lived before. In In her poems "My Father and the Figtree" and "Arabic

Coffee”, as a case in point, Nye employs olfactory and taste imagery to reflect her father’s cultural legacy and her Arab hyphen. Being an Arab Muslim, figs is her father’s preferable fruit. They are mentioned in the holy Koran and planted mostly by Palestinian farmers. His commitment to his roots is indicated in the folktales which “always involved a fig tree.”(qtd. In Ibis, 2001:245) Coffee, as well, is a synecdoche to the Palestinian roots of Nye. It is not merely a national drink but rather a symbol of the strength and endurance of the Palestinians even during anguish .

Nye’s poems indicate her sensitivity to the bicultural fabric of her blood which she considers a blessing rather than a point of cultural conflict: “ Being bicultural has always been important to me: even as a child I knew there was more than one way to dress, to eat, to speak, or to think.” (qtd. In Orfalea &El Musa, 2000:266) Unlike El Musa whose hyphenated identity contributes to a general gloomy mood in his poetry, Nye comfortably celebrates her bicultural origins in a way that makes her poetry brighter and more cosmopolitan even in the poems which portray the tensions of exile. Nye’s bicultural origins influence her connection to her motherland which thrusts her to come closer to the life of the Palestinians, producing poems which narrate the everyday life hardships of these people .

Familial imagery is significant in the poetry of Sharif El Musa and Naomi Nye. It serves as an indicator of the Arab hyphen of both poets’ identity. The images of the father, mother or grandmother in their poetry help to bring together two irreconcilable cultures. However, El Musa’s familial imagery provokes a sense of lament and bewilderment, unlike Nye’s images which celebrate hyphenation as a source of creativity and certitude.

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