

Aspects of Multiculturalism in Naomi Shihab Nye's *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*

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Abstract

Multiculturalism as a term recently has been used to denote the celebration, acknowledgment and promotion of cultural differences. It is fundamentally defined as political and symbolic recognition of minority cultures, histories and traditions. The term is thoroughly inspired by liberal ideas of human rights and equality. The aim of this paper is to analyse Naomi Shihab Nye's collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle* through the lens of multicultural concepts. Recognition of differences, equality, belonging, and ethnic identity and are key concepts of multiculturalism and will be explored through Nye's depiction of her Palestinian roots. A reading of Nye's poems will investigate how the poet delves into issues of ethnic identity and how she envisions multicultural societies. In her poetry, she attempts to give a true image of the Arab with fine details from her memories and personal experiences and thus re-conceptualizes the Arab identity in pursuit of changing western negative orientalist attitudes. Achieving knowledge construction about the Arab identity, illuminating its major qualities with representations that balance negative stereotypical images, building bridges of cross-cultural understanding, reducing prejudices against Arabs and initiating dialogue between cultures are main concerns in Nye's poetic vision. Nye's poetry is representative of multicultural ideals particularly acceptance of difference, shared humanity and connectedness of cultures.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Naomi Shihab Nye, Arab American Identity.

Multiculturalism is a term that is closely related to questions of identity, ethnicity, inclusion and representation. Multiculturalism encourages cultural equality in societies that are made of people who come from different origins and have different religions in order to make better and more positive intergroup cultural relations. The term recently has been used to denote the celebration, acknowledgment and promotion of cultural pluralism in countries that enjoy cultural diversity. It focuses on developing equal relations between minorities and the dominant culture in modern societies. The term is new though the condition of a variety of people from different races, ethnicities and religions existing within one community is as old as history. The aim of this paper is to analyse Naomi Shihab Nye's collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle* through the lens of multicultural concepts. Recognition of differences, equality, belonging, ethnic identity and are key concepts of multiculturalism which will be explored through Nye's depiction of her Palestinian roots. A reading of Nye's poems will investigate how the poet delves into issues of ethnic identity and how she envisions multicultural societies.

In "Is Multiculturalism the Solution?" Michel Wieviorka defines the term as "the condition in which ethnic, religious or cultural groups coexist within one society" (881). The term is considered controversial because it deals with concepts that are usually considered as sources of tensions and dilemmas as it is concerned with identity, equality, freedom, belonging and difference (882). It has grown to cover a wide range of subjects "as diverse as cuisine and clothing, ethnicity and nationalism, education and religion, devolution and globalization" (Watson 106). The adjective 'multicultural' refers to the positive significance of visible features of cultural diversity concerning the variety of food, dress, music etc. available in a given society. The noun 'multiculturalism' refers to deeper implications of philosophical and political nature concerning "the coexistence of different orientations to engagement with the world, and the way in which those differences jostle for recognition within national and global boundaries, sometimes in relative harmony with each other, sometimes in real conflict" (Watson 107).

In his essay "Is Multiculturalism Appropriate for the Twenty-First Century?" Tariq Modood, a renowned multiculturalist, states that the 1960s witnessed the celebration of the human race as singular and equal. This sameness is not of color, language or religion but sameness of humanity. The idea of the superiority of the white race was abhorred and considered shameful. It was a turning point in modern history as assertions of importance of recognition and celebration of difference appeared as an overwhelming necessity. Modood gives a definition of multiculturalism that forms a comprehensive outlook of the conditions at that time:

At the very same moment that the related ideas of humanism, human rights and equal citizenship had reached a new ascendancy, claims of group difference as embodied in the ideas of Afrocentricity, ethnicity, femaleness, gay rights and so on became central to a new progressive politics of identity: being true to one's nature or heritage and seeking with others of the same kind public recognition for one's collectivity. One term which came to describe this politics, especially in the United States, is "Multiculturalism". (2)

Thus, multiculturalism is fundamentally seen as a political and symbolic recognition of minority cultures, histories and traditions (Bhabha and Bennett, 43). Its essential aim is to promote the ability to recognize the universal and the particular taking into account claims of both difference and equality.

In his most influential and canonical essay “Politics of Recognition”, the Canadian Philosopher and multiculturalist Charles Taylor argues that:

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning contemptible picture of themselves. (25)

Taylor further asserts that recognition of the equal value and worth of different cultures is a main ideal in multicultural thought. He advocates that an equality of difference is needed instead of equality of sameness so we need to start viewing other cultures as equal in worth though they are very different from the dominant culture and stop considering or judging other cultures by comparing them to us. In other words, minority groups are to be treated as equal to majority not because they are the same as the majority or assimilated to them but because they are seen as equal in dignity and humanity.

In “Multiculturalism and Integration” Tariq Modood expounds two key concepts which he perceives as central to multiculturalism, namely difference and equality. Difference refers to how people are identified by themselves and by others in terms of being ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘Chinese’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Arab’. This concept of difference is viewed through terms of race, ethnicity, culture, religion and nationality. Difference should not be smothered through assimilation which is impractical and illiberal. When difference is accentuated and expressed, discriminatory practices and conflicts should be challenged and mutual tolerance is encouraged. Group identities are marked as worthy of respect and treated as equal in order to ensure integration of individuals and groups within multicultural societies which should provide anti-discrimination measures and protection of human rights.

Equality is a multicultural ideal which denotes the perception of minority and different individuals as equal members socially and politically and not regarded negatively as alien or inferior. The ability of mainstream to recognize such ‘positive differences’ that are void of stereotyping, racism, discrimination and exclusion help minority groups perceive their identities as fluid and multiple. In multicultural environments that reject racism and white supremacy and employ new definitions of nationalism that provide a place for multiple identities, “the relationship between groups should be dialogical rather than one of domination or uniformity” (Modood, “Multiculturalism and Integration” 4). Within such a definition, positive differences of minority groups are accepted, cultural sharing is valorized, whereas social exclusion and separate communities are not valid options (Modood, “Multiculturalism and Integration” 6). Minorities who have suffered severe traumas due to long periods of hostility and racism are compensated when modern states adopt strategies of tolerance, recognition and integration.

Tolerance is the ability to perceive the different others with an eye of respect and acceptance and stop thinking that they are strangers or enemies. It also means that different cultures are equal and of great value to its members. Tolerance of different ethnic minorities entails respect to their cultural and religious choices and practices and valuing what these cultures have to offer. Respect should accompany such acceptance of diversity where worth and dignity of the individual as well as his/her group are acknowledged. Respect refers to treating others in the same way we like to be treated with the same degree of courtesy and compassion.

Recognition means the ability to see and understand the reality that diversity is an important aspect of today’s modern world. It is the desire of the minority groups to be

validated culturally, economically and politically. Equality of dignity is a basic form of recognition where being equal citizens, equal humans and equal creatures of God's creation is acknowledged. It means showing respect for a person for his/her existence as a human being, his/her ability to suffer and withstand pain, and a conscious significance of his/her attributes and distinct character. Thus, "this seeing of others as equals to ourselves, as possessing the human requisites for equal participation, characterizes the moral culture of a society" (Blum 76).

Integration is the equal opportunity given to a minority to communicate with, and be part of, the mainstream within an atmosphere of tolerance to cultural diversity. Modood proposes an integration that provides social interaction between members of the majority community with immigrants and ethnic minorities. These social processes of interaction should produce an intercultural dialogue that will eventually end xenophobia and intolerance ("Multiculturalism and Integration" 4). In a nutshell, multiculturalism is a project-- based on human rights principles-- that aims at constructing new civic and political relations among the minority and majority to overcome deeply-entrenched inequalities that continued to exist after formal discrimination practices and laws were abolished. It is a genuinely 'transformative' project that encourages minorities and the majority on equal footing to "engage in new practices, to enter new relationships, and to embrace new concepts and discourses-- all of which profoundly transform people's identities" (Kymlicka, *Multiculturalism: Success* 9).

Ethnicity is an affiliation or identification with an ethnic group. Synonyms of ethnicity include ethnic affiliation and ethnic identity. Ethnicity could be based on physical attributes, presumed ancestry, and culture or national origin (Yang 39). Ethnicity can also be defined as an ascribed identity or an inherited cultural tradition that includes the various cultural attitudes, beliefs, practices, religion and language of a certain group. Abd Al-salam defines an ethnic group as:

a collectivity within a larger population having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance. (320)

Ethnicity remains a vital and essential characteristic in modern times due to the continuous immigration around the world. In different parts of the world, ethnicity is a very important factor that can affect opportunities of the ethnic group members in employment, education and politics. Ethnicity means having distinct qualities that refuse to wither away or relinquish in favor of other traits and it also refers to resistance of the 'melting pot' assimilation or homogenization of mainstream culture. Moreover, ethnic identities are closely related to the historical processes of the country of origin. Ethnic stereotypes are types of social classification or categorization where different groups are depicted with certain traits which can be misleading or abusing. Accordingly, different groups interact and perceive one another within the framework of these stereotypes which may not be accurate (Yang 41).

Arab Americans represent an ethnic minority that has always had a complex location compared to other minorities in the multicultural American society. They have been historically marginalized due to many factors, the most significant of which is the small numbers of Arabs compared to Asians or Latinos. The ambiguous location of the Arab American ethnic minority among other minorities resulted from their unclear or undetermined racial status whether they are white, nonwhite, people of color or even Asian.

Arab Americans were strongly rendered as invisible and ‘safe to hate’ as they are linked to Arabs who are often stereotypically represented as barbaric, violent, ignorant and uncivilized (Majaj, “Arab–American Literature: Origins” n. pag.). Though classified as white, Arab Americans still face racism and discrimination and therefore try to articulate their ethnic identity and simultaneously integrate into mainstream community instead of assimilating and relinquishing their culture.

Recently, as a minority group, Arab Americans have experienced a great deal of violence and hostility as a consequence of the events of September 11th 2001, which made it necessary for them to negotiate their status in the political, cultural and social context of their community. Struggling to change the demonized image of Arabs and Muslims and end their exclusion from the American identity, Arab Americans assert and celebrate ethnic roots culturally and politically through artistic events, journals, conferences and literature. These efforts to articulate and accentuate the Arab identity denote a shift from assimilationist tendencies of the earlier immigrants who did not pay much attention to their ethnicity or even tried to hide it in order to pass into the American mainstream. A cultural pride and ethnic assertion of the Arab and Arab American identity are major themes in ethnic literature produced by second generation Arab American writers (Majaj, “Arab- American Ethnicity: Locations” 323).

In this respect, Arab American literature has educational purposes similar to multicultural education as it conceptualizes cultural differences and promotes the celebration of heritage. Re-presenting identities of minorities is a current demand in the U.S. since limiting marginalization and racialization of ethnic groups is an urgent need to maintain the image of freedom and democracy in multicultural America. It is believed that the call for the equality between cultures or the recognition of their value is patronizing and even meaningless without a minority literature that serves as a proper vehicle to facilitate the knowledge or a discovery of the ‘Other’. Thus, multicultural literature is meant to offer correct images and better understanding of minority groups within one society so that racial tensions are decreased. It is concerned with ethnic and minority histories, heritage and identity. Minority writers attempt to convey visions of their countries of origin with the aim of constructing knowledge and reducing prejudices towards their cultures. Thus, ethnic literature displays “a mosaic of multiculturalism” and has become more concerned with resisting prior claims of assimilation as the idea of ‘the melting pot’ has been replaced with the ‘Salad bowl’ metaphor which implies a strong assertion of identity and retaining cultural distinctiveness (Alawi 1).

Americans of Arab origin have been in the United States for over a century producing original literature that is representative of the Arab identity and dealing with its immigrant history. Arab American literature is an important ethnic literature which expresses issues related to Arabs and Middle Eastern people and which has taken prominent status recently with the purpose of informing western readers about the region especially after the 9/11 events. It is also this type of writing that can inform the readers about the dynamics of a society that is constituted of a variety of cultures. Thus, it offers the readers insightful visions that enable the understanding of themselves and others as they build bridges that help discover each other’s worlds (Abd Al-salam 309).

Naomi Shihab Nye is a prolific Arab American poet, novelist and anthology editor. She has contributed greatly to Arab American ethnic literature in the last four decades as she has started her career with poetry collections: *Different Ways to Pray* (1980), *Words Under the Words* (1994), *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002), *You and Yours*

(2005), *A Maze Me: Poems for Girls* (2005), and *Tender Spot: Selected Poems* (2008). She also wrote a novel *Habibi* (1997) about her Palestinian roots.

Nye's poetry collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002) comes as a response to the sad events of September 11, 2001 as she expresses her grief and hopes towards "the huge shadow cast across the lives of so many innocent people and an ancient culture's pride" (Nye xv). Her task as a poet is to "speak for her people" and defend them against charges of terrorism and violence. Her poems bring forth voices of Palestinian immigrants in their new home in the U.S. and opens up spaces onto the lives of their Palestinian ancestors in the Middle East. Giving simple accounts of the rhythms of their lives and stressing unique qualities of the Arab identity, Nye helps her western audience grasp and understand other cultures. Her poems form symbolical bridges that carry the reader to the land of the 'other,' thus

encouraging a deepened empathy and respect for one another, especially for those "others" who we might have imagined to be unlike ourselves, and make the world's myriad voices heard and recognized into a wide availability which illuminate those "others'" lives. (Nye, "From One Friend" 39)

In her poetry about her roots in the Middle East, Nye attempts to construct knowledge about her Arab ancestors. She chooses to tackle themes of home, recognition of difference, equality, tolerance and identity. Issues of having two homes, two inheritances, and two cultures are major themes in her poems. Her poetry is informed with an awareness of issues of the multicultural identity of Arabs in America. In an interview, she asserts "I don't agree with Americans who suggest that being an ethnic American diminishes this country's dignity or significance" (Long 32). She adopts the concept of recognizing the different mixtures and diversity in people saying "we are all fourths and eighths and sixteenths of all sorts of things" (Long 32).

This assertion is similar to Will Kymlicka's debate in his essay "American Multiculturalism in the International Arena" as he proposes that the most suitable and appropriate multicultural approach is one that has fluid conceptions of groups or minority boundaries and affiliations as "individuals should be free to decide whether and how to affiliate with their community of descent" (73). Nye's ideas echo those of Kymlicka about the adoption of a multicultural identity that is open-ended and fluid; "being a member of one group does not preclude identification with another, or with the large American nation" (74). Kymlicka states that disadvantaged groups and stigmatized minorities may be labeled with ascribed identities allegedly leading to their exclusion and segregation under multicultural policies which form a great challenge to multiculturalism. Thus, he advocates a model of multiculturalism that celebrates hybrid identities and multiple affiliations which allow shifting and fluid group boundaries. Multiculturalism also is related to a major concept of hybridity. The hybrid self is a comprehensive and balanced entity that allows intercultural relationships and communication eventually producing the multicultural identity.

Nye was born in a multicultural environment as her father is a Muslim Palestinian immigrant who escaped his country after what is known as Nakbha or the 1948 war that was catastrophic as Palestine was violated by what is now known as the Israeli state. Nye's mother is also a mixed race Christian American from German and Swiss decent. Nye was born and raised in a multicultural society where her neighbors were mainly Hispanic and Latinos (Majaj, "Arab- American Ethnicity: Locations" 328). In this environment, Nye learned to respect and appreciate other cultures. In her essay "Singing the Long Song", she

makes her vision clear; “we celebrate one another’s variations by learning more, testing more, listening to each other’s music. We widen our worlds” (119). Nye adds “for me the word ‘different’ always felt like a compliment, not an insult”, and she describes her multicultural neighborhood; “within the savory atmosphere of San Antonio, ethnicity these days feels more like a calling-card than a burden” (121). Her poetry reflects a vision of multiculturalism that “requires from us all a receptivity to difference, an openness to change, a passion for equality, and an ability to recognize our familiar selves in the strangeness of others” (Watson 110).

As a poet, Nye believes that if language is used to ‘label’ people of being ‘Arab’, ‘Black’ or ‘Muslim’, these labels should ‘identify and connect’. She proposes her vision about the responsibility towards one’s ethnic and cultural heritage:

as minority writers from a demonized community, have of necessity tended to address communal concerns more than individual ones... What adjustments are we making in our self-image and our understanding of our Americanness, now that our Arabness has a more visible presence? ... Ethnocentricity will not get us far, how may we live in a way which will counteract injustices and inequities that continue to exist? How may we help extend one another’s perception? (“Singing” 121)

In her poems, she tries to answer these questions and construes her vision of a world that is characterized by acceptance and recognition of different others hoping to create a world with less injustices and inequalities.

In the introduction to *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Nye mentions how the members of her father’s family were exiled from Palestine and the effect of this dislocation on her father that lasted almost all his life. She gives an account of his life as a child living in Jerusalem among Greek, Armenian and Jewish cultures. This happy childhood ended with the 1948 war that resulted in the immigration of many Palestinians who lost their homes and everything they owned. The father immigrated to the U.S. and lived in the new country while he had another world in his mind. Her father as well as her mother respected this ethnic heritage as they cooked traditional Arab dishes, received friends and travellers from the Middle East who shared figs and peaches, spoke Arabic and listened to Arab music. In her poetry, Nye uses autobiographical memories and personal accounts of her own visits to the Middle East to paint this world. Her poetry is a mirror of this ethnic heritage and the strong preoccupation with Palestinian roots. She believes that her poems are tools that will create recognition, dialogue and true representation of her country of origin as she states that among other Arab writers she feels that they “had all been writing parts of a giant collective poem using the same bouquet of treasured images” (*19 Varieties of Gazelle* xiv).

Nye begins her volume of poetry *19 Varieties of Gazelle* with an emphasis on the importance of difference in the opening poem “Different Ways to Pray”. The poem has religious imagery that sheds light on Muslims as people who favor peace and stability. It points out that people are different in their ways to connect themselves to their Creator asking for help, guidance and mercy yet they are free to choose their own method and traditional rituals and practices to do so. It begins: “There was the method of kneeling, / a fine method, if you lived in a country/ where stones were smooth” (3). The poet’s interest in Islamic religious practices such as the pilgrimage denotes a certain pride in her ancestors’ culture. Raising their hands to heaven, kneeling and performing certain practices are different

methods that “fuse them to the sky” (3). Palestinian people ask heaven for help to endure the sufferings of life each in his/her own way:

Under the olive trees, they raised their arms-

Hear us! We have pain on earth!

We have so much pain there is no place to store it! (3)

The poet merges the religious imagery of the worshipping and prayers with symbols from traditional environment of Palestine such as ‘olive trees’. The poem paints images of the surrounding environment that coexist peacefully with painful conditions in the colonized land of Palestine: “But the olives bobbed peacefully/ in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.” (3). The message of the poem is that Muslims are not violent or chaotic but they are peaceful human beings with hopes and pains. They are different but their difference is acceptable because it reflects a lot of dignity and purity. The poet blends the serenity of such people who pray and work with cultural symbols like olives and thyme as they enjoy their simple life despite all its hardships. She admires their ability to cope with pain and still enjoy eating

... flat bread and white cheese,

and were happy in spite of the pain,

because there was also happiness. (3)

Nye describes the Muslim act of pilgrimage to Mecca giving her readers a glimpse of an important religious act of worship that fills the hearts of Muslims with feelings of spiritual serenity and purity: “wrapping themselves in new white linen/ ... they would circle the holy places,” (4). She gives details of the prized journey of the pilgrimage as “they would bend to kiss the earth/ and return, their lean faces housing mystery” (4). The poet adds that there are other ways to pray which show devotion but in other different ways:

While for certain cousins and grandmothers

the pilgrimage occurred daily,

Lugging water from the spring

or balancing the baskets of grapes. (4)

Sharing small details of the simple daily rituals of Palestinians, who are often charged with violence, is Nye’s strategy to uncover the realities to the Western eye.

These were the ones present at births,

humming quietly to perspiring mothers.

The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses. (4)

Nye wants her readers to discover that there are different people in a remote place of the world whom they can relate to and that they are worthy of respect and recognition. She believes that different ways to pray should be accepted and appreciated whether they are religious rituals or simple everyday activities like stitching needlework, bringing water from springs or collecting grapes from fields because they are done with love and dedication. The poem gives another dimension of a society that has lost some of its younger generation to the

West by immigration of the younger generation who forgot their prayers when they immigrated to the West; “they prayed to Allah to mend their brains” (5). Nye alludes to the alienating effect of immigration to America and getting swept away by the mainstream culture suggesting that younger generations should find their connection with their origins and reject assimilation.

“Different Ways to Pray” is an ethnic poem that presents images that refer to Arabs and Muslims as an aspect of celebrating heritage and difference. It serves as an image of life and culture of old Palestine with detailed domestic activities. The poem is a call for respect of diversity as it stresses a need to understand, discover and accept others who are different. The theme of the poem is resonant with Parekh’s definition of the proper dialogue between cultures in his book *Rethinking Multiculturalism* as having

the willingness to enter into unfamiliar worlds of thought, love of diversity, a mind open to new ideas and a heart open to other’s needs, and the ability to persuade and live with unresolved differences. (340)

In “Half and Half”, the reader is encouraged to ponder a debate between tolerance within one society which has different religious sects on the one hand and religious exclusiveness that shuts every person away from the other. Within the Palestinian frame of reference there are three religions that should live side by side despite all pressures. The poem juxtaposes two contrasting characters: a Christian Palestinian man who is in a state of separation and the other character is a woman who is connected physically and spiritually to everything surrounding her. The poem illustrates the theme of difference and how it should be embraced and accepted. It starts with words of the first character who decides that it is not possible to embrace two cultures or appreciate other religions:

You can’t be, says a Palestinian Christian
on the first feast day after Ramadan.
So, half-and-half and half-and-half.
He sells glass. He knows about broken bits,
chips. If you love Jesus you can’t love
anyone else. Says he. (96)

This character’s words indicate separation and exclusion as he cannot accept the fact that his society is made of half and half referring to Muslims and Christians or a state of cultural plurality even though Jews are not mentioned in the context of the poem. The imagery of broken bits of glass is similar to broken society whose members insist on seeing each other as unequal or not important. The poem carries an inherent argument that if difference and religious disparities are rejected, the society becomes separated in a way similar to broken pieces of glass and loses its beautiful harmony which occurs only when different people live in coexistence with each other.

The second character in the poem is a woman who lives in harmony within her society. She is able to grasp the importance of difference.

A woman opens a window – here and here and here-
placing a vase of blue flowers.

on an orange cloth. I follow her.
She is making a soup from what she had left
in the bowl, the shriveled garlic and bent bean.
She is leaving nothing out. (97)

The woman represents tolerance and acceptance. This character is more tolerant to the items in her world as she has a look from all angles “here and here and here” creating her own free space of wholeness. As she is opening her window, we see her vase of flowers and the colorful cloth of her table. The image of the woman doing her daily routine and very simple tasks like making a soup within a bowl which includes different ingredients is such an ordinary act but it denotes a sublime meaning. The food imagery of the woman making her delicious soup using all different ingredients “leaving nothing out” is similar to that of the multicultural metaphor of the ‘salad bowl’. The metaphor implies inclusion and wholeness rejecting exclusiveness and separation. It denotes the poet’s approach to an identity that is pluralistic and inclusive constructed in relation to recognition and acceptance of difference: “Nye celebrates difference, invoking the possibility of transformation and a wholeness woven of multiplicity” (Majaj, “Arab- American Ethnicity: Locations” 328). The woman’s inclusive identity is opposed to the man’s exclusive identity. The poem juxtaposes the man’s rigid vision of intolerance towards religious difference with the woman’s love of the world as she cherishes beauty in the smallest things like her “vase of blue flowers on an orange cloth”. The speaker asserts her support of the second character by saying “I follow her”. Nye’s poetic diction is characterized with clarity and simplicity yet loaded with deep thoughts and insightful visions (Yousif 38).

“Half and Half” certainly construes a multicultural model that encourages the interaction of different ethnic and religious groups and advocates the fruitful participation of every member regardless of roots, culture or religion. This engagement between cultures and voluntary ethno-cultural interaction will result in more harmony and understanding. Thus, the ethnic conflict is resolved by acceptance and tolerance of difference. The poem suggests inclusion and aspires for prejudice reduction that will ensure social cohesion. This poem offers an illustration of Caleb Rosado’s definition of the essence of multiculturalism as:

the ability to *celebrate* with the other in a manner that transcends all barriers and brings about a unity in diversity. Multiculturalism enables us to look upon the Other, especially the Other that society has taught us to regard with distrust and suspicion, and to be taken advantage of, not as a “potential predator but as a profitable partner”. (5)

In her pursuit to give accurate portrayal of the Arab identity, Nye chooses members of her family to be representatives of the Arab identity. The Palestinian grandmother is a symbol of wisdom and endurance. This simple woman who could not read or write thought fanaticism and politics were ridiculous. She was a symbol of tolerance between religions as “she wanted people to worship in whatever ways they felt comfortable. To respect one another” (19 *Varieties of Gazelle* xvii). Nye mentions that she wrote her poems in response to her grandmother’s wish to show the real identity of Arabs who are not terrorists or haters. The grandmother once asked her granddaughter to speak for her people and “say how much I hate it. Say this is not who we are” (19 *Varieties of Gazelle* xviii). Nye celebrates her Arabic heritage incarnated in this grandmother figure and devotes few of her poems to do so. “My Grandmother in the Stars” explores the poet’s relationship with her old Palestinian

grandmother as one of unique and peculiar nature. Though they do not possess each other's language, they are connected with a mysterious bond:

Where we live in the world,
is never one place. Our hearts,
those dogged mirrors, keep flashing us
moons before we are ready for them
You and I on a roof at sunset,
our two languages adrift,
heart saying, Take this home with you,
never again,
and only memory making us rich. (69)

In this poem, the speaker expresses her sadness after her grandmother's passing away. She remembers her words and advice. The speaker regrets that she will not see or meet her on earth and she imagines her image among the stars. She misses the wisdom of this Palestinian old woman and remembers their good time spent together. The poet is connected to her grandmother though they are separated by the difference of language as they enjoy a connection of the heart. She believes the language of kindness through which she communicated with her grandmother is capable of creating harmony and overcoming divisions: "through crossing the boundaries of language, Nye is actually trying to create a conversation with the world to transcend discrepancies of culture and ethnicity" (Yousif 40).

"My Grandmother in the Stars" searches for new human bonds and breaking of linguistic and cultural barriers through the character of the grandmother who resembles other grandmothers in many cultures. The poem portrays the grandmother figure which stands as a symbol of many Arab women who emanate wisdom and strength of character. Nye gives an image of a woman who inspires connectedness between generations and worlds. Nye focuses on everyday details, even the simplest ones are telling details to show the truth about ordinary people such as her grandmother. She wishes her readers to discover that difference is not a cause of fear or intimidation. Nye's grandmother or Sitti Khadra is an example of difference but it is a difference that binds cultures not separate them. The speaker is astonished by the "figure of the ancestor" who is the "benevolent, instructive and protective" (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 364). The message the poem sends is that differences of languages and religion are neither barriers nor obstacles when people choose to connect and relate to each other.

"Lunch in Nablus City Park" is another example of how the poet tries to redress the gap between what the western mind thinks about the Palestinians who are imagined as terrorists obsessed with violence and their real identity. The poem offers optimistic images of a group of people who decide to forget the violent conflicts of war as they enjoy their lunch and discuss their family and love problems. The first lines of the poem reveal the astonishment of the poetic persona that these friends can still enjoy life despite its harshness:

When you lunch in a town

which has recently known war
under a calm slate sky mirroring none of it,
certain words feel impossible in the mouth. (136)

The poem represents a manifestation of Bhabha and Bennett's definition of art as a tool of speaking of vivid experiences which inform existential conditions of people who are misrepresented, marginalized, disadvantaged or discriminated against ("Liberalism" 44). The poem is a portrayal of a group of Palestinian friends who sit while their table is served in a restaurant in a park. Clear skies do not reflect the military violence currently happening on earth and nature is also taking a break from war as:

Plumb birds landing on park benches
surely had their eyes closed recently,
must have seen nothing of weapons or blockades. (35)

The following lines blend the worries of this group of gatherers with wishes for a better future as they share traditional dishes: "A plate of hummus, dish of tomato". They discuss personal matters of love, marriage and education. "I will not marry till there is true love, says one,.../ He says the university of Texas seems/ remote to him/ as Mars,..."(36). These friends enjoy their meal as their table "sends laughter into the trees". The amazed speaker then asks some philosophical questions:

Where do the souls of hills hide
when there is shooting in the valleys?
What makes a man with a gun seem bigger,
than a man with almonds? How can there be war
and the next day eating, a man stacking plates,
on the curl of his arm, a table of people
toasting one another in languages of grace: (36-37)

The personification of the hills as humans who hide in the serene natural surroundings as they hear the sound of raids is an illustration of the antitheses between the peaceful nature and the violence of war. Sound imagery is vivid in this poem as the frightening sounds of violent military raids are juxtaposed with the laughter in the earlier lines. Nye's stylistic strategy of asking questions is a manifestation of the inquisitive nature of her poems that instigate the reader to think and discover.

The gathering friends are praying "in languages of grace" that each one of them has his hopes fulfilled, which shows they are sensitive, cultured and educated. Moreover, they still hope for a better future "amidst this atlas of tears" (37). Nye ends her poem with a sad tone juxtaposing the incongruent present with the past that was full of peaceful wishes. The park represents a hope for peace amidst a painful present. The speaker describes the person who built this park as "someone with sky and birds in his heart/ said this would be a good place for a park" (37). Nye's choice of words like 'skies', 'birds' and 'heart' signifies

freedom and purity in contrast to occupation and violence. The poem certainly carries political implications and a clear concern to represent the Palestinian identity as particularly characterized by love of life, hope and endurance.

“Lunch in Nablus City Park” is a poem that reflects Bhabha and Bennett’s concept of ethnic survival which means an awareness of being in the midst of life and language engaging with the world, producing history and showing agency. Cultural survival means being related to after and before trauma and loss, as individuals build a new life and continue maintaining their cultural identity, tradition and history (Bhabha and Bennett, 46). Nye’s portrayal shows Palestinians achieving survival in a relentless pursuit of preserving identity in the way Bhabha defines it. In this poem, we come to understand that others have their own feelings, hopes and aches and that it is time we start “to extend our sympathies from our loved ones to all those who, as we now see, are like them” (Raz 194). The intricate details of the place and the individuals’ lives with all its realities, joy, loss, pain and hope are meant to reach at a greater truth of the unity and dignity of human feelings.

As an Arab American poet, Nye affiliates tightly with her community of descent and presents cultural markers of her country of origin. Nye’s poetry is loaded with small objects in natural surroundings that turn into greater meanings that possess grandiose. These small and very simple objects such as the olive trees or the olive jars that serve as symbols of the Palestinian heritage represent Nye’s strategy to point out her Arab heritage for which she demands recognition. Through images of olive and fig trees, Nye is challenging separation and exclusion as she merges the two sides of her existence and identity through these symbols: “Nye’s poetry often draws experiences of small, joyful connection to personal place and to nature with which human beings heal themselves from trauma and resist the grandiose claims of ideologies of separation and exclusion” (Bujupaj 3). Olive and fig trees are cultural symbols as they refer to the country of origin as well as to the religion because these two trees are mentioned in the Quran and they have such a deep significance for Arabs.

In “My Father and the Fig Tree”, Nye tackles issues of identity and belonging through personal family details. Her Palestinian American father and his fig tree represent a real story which asserts the relationship to the country of origin. The poet’s memories construct the main body of the poem:

For other fruits, my father was indifferent.

He’d point at the cherry trees and say,

“See those? I wish they were figs.”

In the evenings he sat by our beds

weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.

They always involved a fig tree. (6)

The poem examines glimpses of familial experiences and memories that seem to be particularly autobiographical. Nye remembers how her father weaved tales to her as a child. The father’s stories that always contained a fig tree are symbolical of a collective heritage and tradition of Arabic folktales. The father’s relationship to his culture and homeland is symbolized by the fig tree and its fruits. The poem illustrates the father’s loss and displacement through his longing for his homeland, as “Years passed, we lived in many houses, none had fig trees.” The father refuses to plant his own fig tree at first but after so

many years he finally moves into a new house which has a fig tree in its backyard. He calls his daughter and starts singing her a song in Arabic.

The last time he moved, I got a phone call.

My father, in Arabic, chanting a song I'd never heard.

"What's that?" I said.

"Wait till you see!"

He took me out back to the new yard.

There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,

a tree with the largest, fattest figs in the world. (7)

The father is joyfully singing a song about a fig tree which denotes a lost collective heritage he wishes to restore. The home imagery stresses the importance of belonging as the Palestinian American journalist never lost contact with his roots and he lived with his memories from a lost country through his fig tree. The poet wishes to reveal feelings of displacement and longing for the past as they are common in the Palestinian experience and invites her readers to "embark on a journey her poetry provides ...to develop a dialogic encounter between the two cultures, through which both are mutually enriched" (Yousif 34).

"It's a fig tree song!" he said,

plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,

emblems, assurance

of a world that was always his own. (7)

At the end of the poem, the father has his American version of the fig tree which helps him create and revive his deep sense of a personal place that is only his. This fig tree enables him to maintain his imaginary connection between his present home in the middle of the American West and his lost home back in Palestine. Though the father is dislocated, his new fig tree brings him a new version of his home that has always been inscribed within his memories through the taste of the fig fruits or "his small tokens of home". The father establishes and reconstructs a feeling of being at his home of origin at last by having his fig tree, which helps him transcend his exile and gives him inner peace (Bujupaj 17).

In this poem, two prominent multicultural themes are tackled: hyphenated identities that are changing and dynamic, and the connectedness of cultures in order to reach harmony and transcend pain. The poetic persona in Nye's poem follows Kymlicka's cosmopolitan model of multiculturalism which encourages fluid cultural boundaries, voluntary affiliation and multiple identities. The hybrid identity shown in this poem enjoys a dynamic, fluid and developing nature which represents and emphasizes the necessity of new cultural combinations. The father figure is emblematic of immigrants whose identity is far from being fixed or self-contained but flexible and fluid seeking inclusion while proud of ethnic roots (Kymlicka, "American Multiculturalism" 74). The father is a strong example of a hyphenated identity defined by Homi Bhabha as "double-voiced ...and double-languaged [having] two

individual consciousnesses...as there are two epochs” making his life (“Culture’s in Between” 34). Nye’s representation of the hybrid identity displays a very important multicultural aspect of adjusting to a new environment without losing connection to one’s roots. Her depiction of the Arab identity, using an admirable character and the figure of a loving father, is reliable because she is not presenting imaginary characters but she is giving authentic references from reality. In his new home, the poet’s father can enjoy a fluid and changing identity that has both his past and present.

Nye searches for other representatives of the true Arabs in pictures saved in her memory of her Palestinian people as part of her pursuit for their recognition. Her responsibility of balancing the image of the Arab is accompanied by another burden of the poet as an Arab American towards her Palestinian history. She uses her poetry to reduce the prejudices against her people and sheds light on the injustices caused by a legacy of violent occupation. The poet feels an overwhelming necessity to represent her people and demands recognition for their true identity and their sufferings. In “The Man Who Makes Brooms”, the poet states her true mission:

So you come with these maps in your head
and I come with voices chiding me to.
“speak for my people”
and we march around like guardians of memory,
till we find the man on the short stool who makes brooms. (18)

Her choice to be one of the “guardians of memory” enables her to keep her people’s heritage alive and helps tell the other side of the story. The poem records her memories about a simple broom maker in Jerusalem who demonstrates and symbolizes the resilience of the Palestinians:

Thumb over thumb, straw over straw,
he will not look at us.
What he has lost or not lost is his secret. (18)

The description of this craftsman who works with devotion and precision is symbolical of a larger truth about Palestinian people and is casting shadows on their political crisis under Israeli occupation.

You say he is like all the men,
the man who sells pistachios,
the man who rolls the rugs.
I say he is like nobody,
across the flat golden face of his broom
is its own shrine, and forget about the tears. (19)

The poet's stories about Palestine keep its history and heritage alive although they are fragments about simple people, they "forge a link in the chain against erasure." Her poems are political acts that aim at the survival of a whole heritage that is often denied or undermined (Majaj, "Arab- American Ethnicity: Locations" 329). The poet's responsibility is to bring these realities closer to the eye of the readers so as to establish human connectivity and human sympathy. The poet believes that only by recognition of and learning about the 'other' that the 'self' starts to communicate and understand humanity better. Moreover, Nye makes sure that her poems mirror her ethnic origin so that "the 'true' are visible enough" (Bhabha, "Culture's in Between" 31).

In "Olive Jar", the reader feels the poet's pride in her cultural heritage as she describes the olive jars that contain salted green olives that came from the trees in Palestine. "Green light-skinned olives, / planets with slightly pointed ends- / ... it was a good year for the trees." (80). At the borders, as she is passing to the other side of the borders to visit her Palestinian family, an Israeli guard asks:

where I was going in Israel.

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

olives and almonds.

To see *my people*. (80) (italics mine)

Nye connects herself to the land of Palestine and its people as a part of her family. She mentions olive trees and almonds as symbols of her original country, Palestine. Thus, she adds a deeper dimension to experiences that are shaped by political and cultural contestation when she uses very simple items from the natural environment of both her Arab background in Palestine and her western homeland in America (Bujupaj 2). Olives are closely related to the Arab tradition in Palestinian land, which is very famous for its beautiful olive trees and olive oil. They are also a symbol for peace as well as an essential domestic item that shows the warmth of family life and relationships. The olive jars and the olive trees are small items in Palestinian environment yet they carry tremendous power in Nye's poetry as they reflect political and cultural significance (Najmi 159). Nye is celebrating her ethnic roots when she chooses these symbols of culture to become main themes in her poems.

The speaker's pride of her belonging to the Arab people is evident as she asks herself: "What kind of people? Arab people? / uncles and aunts, grandmother, first and second / cousins. Olive-gatherers" (81). The investigating questions of the Israeli guards are bringing family memories to the speaker's mind as the soldier asks her if she as a writer intends to speak about political issues. So the speaker of the poem starts to remember her family gatherings where they share food, laughs and family talk about weddings. The speaker emphasizes that the geographical divide between her and her Arab family does not affect the depth of feelings and the strength of family ties. "... O space of ocean waves, / how long you tumble between us, how little you / dissolve!" (81). The poem suggests that barriers and boundaries between people can be overcome with sincere feelings of sympathy, kindness and acceptance.

The Arabic language is a cultural marker of the Arab identity. Nye is influenced by the language of her Arab family though she cannot speak it. She advises her readers to "read Rumi, read Arabic poetry" and believes that poetry makes people more sensitive and humane (Hirschfield 31). In her poem "Arabic", Nye shows her pride of Arabic as a language and

deploras her inability to speak it. The narrator in “Arabic” celebrates language, history and religion of the Arab culture. The Arabic language is connected to experiences of pain and loss in Nye’s memories. It is the language of her suffering people in Palestine “Until you speak Arabic, / you will not understand pain.” (90). She describes the richness of the Arabic language and its inherent music that has the capacity to change moods and personality. For her it is “...Music you/ heard/ from a distance/... well up inside your skin, inside/ rain, a thousand/ pulsing tongues. / You are changed” (90). Lamenting her inability to speak Arabic, the poet emphasizes her pride of the Arab part of her identity.

...I admit my
 shame. To live on the brink of
 Arabic, tugging

 its rich threads without
 understanding
 how to weave the rug... I have no
 gift.
 The sound, but not the sense. (91)

As an Arab American, she is well aware of the political history of the Arab region especially Palestine. She accompanies the ability to understand Arabic with the ability to feel pain. She draws a strong connection between suffering and painful experiences with the richness of Arabic. This significant stress on the Arab language and identity is directly inviting her audience to discover this part of the world that exists strongly within her character as an Arab American and proves her multicultural concerns of recognition.

“Steps” is a strong example of how Nye appreciates multicultural modern societies that enjoy social mixing and cultural sharing. In this poem, there is a picture of a multi-layered society with children from all ethnicities who are able to build an inclusive community. The first lines betray a multicultural setting:

A man letters the sigh for his grocery
 in Arabic and English.
 Paint dries more quickly in English. (42)

Nye’s poem starts with an implication of the depth of the Arab culture represented in the language which has the curliest letters symbolizing the language’s richness and long history. The differences between the two languages are symbolical for the cultural differences within the society.

The thick swoops and curls of Arabic letters
 stay moist and glistening.
 till tomorrow when the children .

show up jingling their dimes. (42)

The children who are different in their cultural backgrounds carry books which refer to their love for knowledge and their potential for learning and education. Thus, the poem hints that multicultural education for ethnic minorities ensures their full integration into their western communities, increases their self-esteem and builds up their assertion of identity.

Girl in the red sweater dangling a book bag,

sister with eyes pinned to the barrel

of pumpkin seeds.

They are lettering the sidewalk with their steps. (42)

These children represent an important part of the society together with other children from other minorities, so they deserve better education and economic conditions: 'learned', 'dimes' and 'currency' are emblematic for Nye's economic and educational concerns. These children represent one layer of the many layers constituting their community. Their simple steps and wishes for enjoyment of sweets are symbolical for a good future that has less prejudices and less injustices.

They have learned the currency of the New World.

carrying wishes for gum and candies

They float through the streets,

diving deep to the bottom,

nosing rich layers of crusted shell. (42)

Nye believes that children of minorities are the carriers of culture as they will keep their heritage alive; "One of these children will tell a story/ that keeps her people alive." (42) Therefore, the existence of ethnic cultures in a multicultural community is not a hindrance to its unity or cohesion as critics of multiculturalism claim. The poem echoes Modood's description of multicultural societies: "as a result of social mixing, cultural sharing and globalization in which dominant identities of modernity, such as of race and nation, are dissolving, people have much more fluid and multiple identities" ("Multiculturalism and integration" 5). Nye's vision as shown in the poem is similar to modern societies that adopt multicultural ideals where individuals reject tendencies of forming separate communities and prefer to form rich layers of cultural diversity.

"Steps" is a poem which gives an insight into the children's life in a community which respects and enjoys tolerance towards difference. The children's smiles and laughs are significant of the well-being peacefulness of their existence and their psychological stability. Their innocence and purity is clear as "Their long laughs are boats they will ride and ride, / making the shadows that cross each other's smiles" (43). The imagery created by words like 'boats' and 'cross' suggests positive contact and communication with one another. The poem gives an image of a society that is not fragmented or separated. It gives an image of children full of hope, smiles and enjoying their childhood; eating candies. Despite their differences and their belonging to minorities, they belong to their new country; "They are separate and together and a little bit late" (43). The poetic image has children who will grow up into

citizens described as “autonomous subjects, who have learnt to make their own choices, to communicate better every day with others. They fight against exclusion and social inequalities with cultural recognition” (Wieviorka 905). The image given in the poem is that of a democratic coexistence and a comfortable hybridity typical of a successful multicultural society.

The concept of prejudice reduction is detected in the poem which represents children who learn to value difference of others because they are not prejudiced when they are born. The poet believes that giving our children models to follow is the answer to many injustices in multicultural societies. Providing these children with a sense of general compassion for other ethnicities, traditions and religions will enable them to broaden their minds and hearts and they will be able to contact one another and “to engage with the ‘larger family’ of humanity” (Nye, “Singing” 122). This poem strongly challenges the anti-multicultural concept that the different other is an enemy. The poem teaches the readers that they do not have to be alert or feel threatened by such imaginary enemy. It promotes a capacity for empathy and a willingness to share in social activities among members of society.

To conclude, in an atmosphere of prevalent Islamophobia, xenophobia and racial hostility, especially after September 11th, 2001, the burden to reshape the Arab and Arab American cultural image has increased. Nye’s collection *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* reflects a genuine concern to promote cultural tolerance and challenge demonized representations of Arab and Islamic values and practices. Nye’s poetry reflects an important multicultural concept of accepting positive difference which means valorizing particular human traits and experiences and appreciating each story as it signifies larger historical and cultural meanings. Discovering the different ‘other’ socially and psychologically has been one major theme in the poetry under study which eventually helps to change and develop intercultural relations.

To sum up, the analysis of the poems shows Nye's multicultural views which assert that it is only by recognition of equal rights, worth and dignity of different others that inequality and discrimination can come to an end. So, our world needs more knowledge and practice of these multicultural concepts in order to overcome feelings of hatred and hostility towards the ‘other’. Furthermore, a deep sense of cultural pride of Arab ethnicity is instantly captured on reading her poems as they emphasize Arab culture, represent and celebrate the Arab identity as worthy of respect and recognition. In pursuit of recognition and visibility for her people, Nye passionately weaves authentic narratives about a world where unheard-of-Arabs possess true and genuine identity. In her poetry, there are strong advocating voices of acceptance of the ‘other,’ recognition of difference, and respect for all cultures. She again affirms the Arab American identity as fluid and changing, and insists that it is a crucial part of the multicultural context in the United States.

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