Understanding the “Other” in Naomi Shihab Nye’s You & Yours

Hayat Bedaiwi

ISLAMOPHOBIA STUDIES JOURNAL
VOLUME 7, NO. 1 Spring 2022, PP. 66–81.

Published by:
Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project,
Center for Race and Gender, University of California, Berkeley

Disclaimer:
Statements of fact and opinion in the articles, notes, perspectives, and so on in the Islamophobia Studies Journal are those of the respective authors and contributors. They are not the expression of the editorial or advisory board and staff. No representation, either expressed or implied, is made of the accuracy of the material in this journal, and ISJ cannot accept any legal responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions that may be made. The reader must make his or her own evaluation of the accuracy and appropriateness of those materials.

DOI:10.13169/islastudj.7.1.0066
Understanding the “Other” in Naomi Shihab Nye’s You & Yours

Hayat Bedaiwi

ABSTRACT: As a significant ethnic group in the United States, Arab American poets have always used the personal to tackle larger political themes in their poetry. Many writers have reacted to the political events around them, such as 9/11, and this includes Naomi Shihab Nye. In “Naomi Shihab Nye’s Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime,” Samina Najmi argues that the few critics who write about Nye do not focus on her “overtly political” 9/11 poetry. Nye deals with this theme in You & Yours directing the reader’s attention to the outcomes of 9/11 and war torn territories in the Middle East. In You & Yours, Nye repeatedly educates her readers by invoking sympathy for the other and observing their way of life, eventually allowing the reader to see a reality that they rarely observe in the news; the suffering, the pain and the humane part of the “Other.”

Key words: Other-empathy- personal as political- humanity- Naomi Shihab Nye

As a significant ethnic group in the United States, Arab American poets have always used the personal to tackle larger political themes in their poetry. Many writers have reacted to the political events around them, such as 9/11, and this includes Naomi Shihab Nye. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Storm suggest that Nye’s poetry “hinges on the feminist notion that the personal is political” (2007, 34). Samina Najmi argues that the few critics who write about Nye do not focus on her “overtly political” 9/11 poetry (2010, 151). Nye deals with the themes of 9/11 trauma and Arab stereotypes in You & Yours, directing the reader’s attention to the outcomes of 9/11 and wartorn territories in the Middle East.

My article adds to this conversation of the personal being political by arguing that Nye’s poetry invokes empathy for the “Other” in order to educate her audience on the struggles of Arabs and their representation in the contemporary world. Furthermore, Nye address the many unjustified associations laid on the image of Arabs through invoking themes of struggle, war, and politics. Nye presents the reader with poetic subjects who are Arabs, second-generation teenagers and terrorists. Nye writes these poems as a second-generation immigrant with a melancholic voice to further clarify the struggles of the “Other” for the reader. She draws the reader’s attention to the different everyday lives of her subjects, navigating spaces and “crossing lines”, to disrupt the East vs West paradigm and establish an understanding of the “Other” through invoking empathy for her poetic subjects. In representing the many “Others,” Nye educates her American readers on the struggles of the “Other,” and emphasizes the need to understand the “Other” and not make irrational judgments about their reality or their persons. Nye highlights the struggles of a hyphenated identity, arguing for a humanization of terrorists, distinguishing between government and citizens when it comes to the US war against Iraq, showing the role the media plays in the representation of the “Other,” and by presenting the struggles of Palestinians against Israeli occupation.

According to C. Daniel Batson’s definition of empathy as an experience of “perspective-taking,” I imaginatively experience the feeling, thoughts, and situations of another, in my paper to analyze the poetry of Nye (quoted in Davis 2008, 162). Davis describes feeling sympathy as being privileged, “because the privileged sympathizer will ignore differences in his or her zeal to connect emotionally with another person, usually a suffering one” (2008, 161). She
states that “many cultural critics and race theorists view sympathy as little more than a colonizing drive to incorporate the other into the self” (2008, 161). Davis implicitly shows that sympathy calls the reader’s attention to the universal “Orient” vs “Occident” argument. She argues that it is better to show empathy rather than sympathy, as the word sympathy endorses white supremacy over any other race, “Doris Sommer aggressively condemns cross-racial sympathy expressed by white liberals, calling it an ‘appropriation in the guise of an embrace’” (quoted in Davis 2008, 161). That is why I chose the word empathy instead of sympathy. Empathy allows the reader to feel the struggle of the “Other” and might also direct the readers on how to help the “Other” in breaking the stereotypes for the generation to come.

Judith Butler theorizes the need to understand the “Other” after 9/11 in Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence. Butler lashes out at the appeal of raising war against the “Other”: “instead of remaining open to a consequential decentering of First Worldism, we tend to dismiss any effort at explanation, as if to explain these events would involve us in a sympathetic identification with the oppressor, as if to understand these events would involve building a justificatory framework for them” (2006, 8). She goes on to assert that “[the] collective responsibility not merely as a nation, but as part of an international community based on a commitment to equality and non-violent cooperation, requires that we ask how these conditions came about, and endeavor to re-create social and political conditions on more sustaining grounds” (2006, 17–18). Butler urges the readers to “hear beyond” the things that they are able to hear, and to be open to narration that decenters the nation from supremacy (2006, 18). Butler emphasizes the importance of achieving a socially productive form of mourning after the events of 9/11 instead of advocating for violence that will not make the nation stand in solidarity. I will use this lens, to highlight Nye’s emphasis on understanding those labeled terrorists and to stop the dehumanization of their life and death by invoking empathy.

Ibis Gomez-Vega states that “for Shihab Nye, the war in the Middle East is personal; the people affected are her immediate family, so her work creates a space for the forgotten, the real people who daily suffer the not-so-little indignities of attempting to live life in a world at war” (2010, 109). I agree with Gomez-Vega that Nye’s work creates a space for the “Other.” The reader might question Nye’s reaction to political events such as 9/11. Susan Peckham gives a good explanation when she states that “in Middle Eastern culture, the best and most successful writing or art is considered to exist in service to one’s community” (2014, 19). Nye is responding to the political events around her because she stands as writer with a duty to her community, be it the American or Arab community.

Another reason for Nye’s reaction to these political events can be attributed to the need to build a constructive conversation between American and Arab readership. Susan Atefat Peckham, the editor of Talking through the Door: An Anthology of Contemporary Middle Eastern American Writing, writes in the Introduction:

We live in time of crisis and change. We struggle for a foothold in a country that is at once repulsed and intrigued by the many voices of its immigrants. And we struggle for a place in time that calls on us to speak the many languages of this world, a time that calls for an opening of many doors to intelligent discussion. (2014, 20)

Peckham highlights here one of the main characteristics of Arab American literature which is building bridges and paving the way for constructive dialogue. Arab American literature is a tradition that endorses mutual understanding between cultures, and tries to challenge the misconceptions of representation that the West has about the East. Peckham affirms the need for a voice to “unveil the distortion”, to prevent racial profiling, and promote cultural understanding (2014, 12–13). Because of the many political events, the image of the Middle Easterners in the eyes of the
West has changed from the past. The ridiculous, incompetent Arab is now the violent terrorist, and the oppressed women in hijab are now suicide bombers in “burqa.”. Nye is writing back against these ideas that most Westerners have of the Middle East.

My understanding of Nye’s poetry concerning the political and personal aligns with what Mercer and Storm’s argument suggests, that Nye is showing that “through observing the lives of others, we begin to dissolve the imaginary boundaries separating individuals, cultures, and countries” (Mercer and Strom 2007, 34). However, a point often overlooked when it comes to the personal and political is whether Nye expressly commits to one side over the “Other.” According to Lisa Suhair Majaj, Nye does not choose sides in You & Yours, “Nye’s poetry cannot be completely accounted for in terms of her ethnic identity, nor can her work be adequately described by a simple division into ‘Arab’ and ‘non-Arab,’ ‘ethnic’ and ‘non-ethnic’” (1999, 327). Edward Said in Orientalism reminds the reader of the difficult state of being that a Palestinian American goes through by living in the West:

The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. There exists here an unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental . . . it has made matters worse for him to remark that no person academically involved with Near East—no Orientalist, that is—has ever in the united states culturally and politically identified himself wholeheartedly with the Arabs . . . (2003, 27)

Unlike Said, she is not an exile, but a second-generation immigrant who has many privileges that exiles do not have, such as the ability to write from two different places of her identity. Nye has grown out of this non-existent state and found new possibilities for affirming both her ancestral and her American identity. By observing the world around her Nye can bridge the gaps of race, gender, and ethnicity. She can show the reader that the “Other” is also human.

Nye is sending a message to her readers that liminality can be a place of alienation as well as a place of possibility. Lisa Majaj states that Nye’s poetry “explores the markers of cross-cultural complexity, moving between her Palestinian and American Heritages” (2008, 282). This means that Nye uses the liminal space she is in to explore the ideas of representation and this liminal space gives her hope and possibility that she can change the negative ideas about Arabs and promote understanding for their struggle, whether after 9/11 or in Palestine. Nye is not grouped with writers that use intersectionality to write about their struggles, but it is this type of intersectional space that Nye presents the readers with, that allows the reader to see liminal space as a privilege rather than a hindrance to Nye as an Arab American poet.

Although Nye may appear to distance herself from her Arab identity in some interviews, she still understands what Arabs struggle and go through. For example, in an interview Bill Moyers asks Nye, “As an American, of Arab decent, do you feel after 9/11 that you have to explain yourself?” Nye answers that she is more identifiable as an American and that life is becoming more difficult for her cousins, where people they didn’t know took two steps backward “before they would agree to get to know them.” She does not identify as an Arab in this interview, but she understands the place her cousins are in when it comes to getting generalized by the negative stereotypes of Arabs and often blamed for some act that they did not do.

Nye’s sense of her identity is often characterized as optimistic. This sense of optimism is associated with second-generation immigrant’s notion of home or the place of belonging, where one can assert their relation to a place and establish their roots. Kate Long asks Nye what the significance of home is to her, “I have really only lived in three places—St. Louis, Jerusalem, San Antonio—not many considering migratory lives of so many in this world. San Antonio
feels most like home as I have lived here the longest. But everywhere can be home the moment you unpack, make a tiny space that feels agreeable” (Long 2009, 31). She goes on to explain that “[she] does not agree with Americans who suggest that being an ethnic American diminishes this country’s dignity or significance” (32). In Long’s interview, she chooses San Antonio over the other two places. She does not choose Jerusalem because she is a second-generation immigrant and she only knows Jerusalem through the stories of her grandmother and father, however, the phrase a “tiny space that feels agreeable” is packed with a sense of melancholy about belonging somewhere one can identify with. Having an ethnic significance to one’s identity is a positive aspect, according to Nye, because she is allowed to navigate both spaces and document what she sees. In You & Yours, Nye works to unpack the negative association with the word Arab, but she does this using the liminal space that she is part of.

It is Nye’s decision to dwell in the spaces of her two identities because it is a richer format and a new approach to advertise for understanding, “Unable to uproot her Palestinian origins or chop her American sprouts and determined to heal the painful schism in her hyphenated identity, Nye has decided to dwell in between cultures” (El Hayawi 2011, 180). Deema Hilal (2002) argues that Nye’s multicultural background allows her to navigate freely “between her Arab, Arab American, and American Identities without restraint.” This navigation allows Nye to focus on the “overlooked” peoples and remind readers of their existence.

Nye starts You & Yours with the poem “Cross that Line” to make the reader understand that she has a message to give. Nye acknowledges that there are always boundaries set by other powers to limit the voices of what these powers define as “trouble makers,” but these “revolutionaries” will always find a way to be heard and their influence will be great on the next generation to come. In this poem, the speaker is explaining to the reader that there are set boundaries for people like Paul Robeson, the singer and political activist. When she writes:

Remind us again,
brave friend.
What countries may we
sing into?
What lines should we all
be crossing?

The speaker is admitting that there are actual boundaries and that someone has set them in the first place (9). Like race these boundaries are hard to talk about, but they should be addressed and lines should be crossed by promoting understanding and empathy. The speaker in the poem reminds the reader that it is Paul Robeson’s voice that “left the USA.” Paul Robeson, the actor, singer, and civil activist, who was well known for his political turbulence in the US in 1947 where he was labeled a communist empathizer (Geriuch 2020). His voice was able to cross the borders and send a message. Nye points out the similarity of Arab American struggle to other minorities in the USA, and this is exemplified in the reference to Robeson in this poem. All his life, Robeson was trying to “cross the line” that white people had placed before him. The speaker in this poem intends to follow Robeson’s footsteps. Like Robeson, the speaker shares this liminal space where they are able to express themselves even when they are prosecuted. The speaker hopes that their words will send a message to the reader of what it means to be the “Other.”

In You & Yours, as mentioned earlier, Nye mixes personal life with the political. The book is divided between the exploration of a hyphenated American identity and the state of Arabs in the Middle East. As for the personal, Nye tries to explore the tensions of living in two communities. Nye exists in two communities and often experiences having a hyphenated identity, and in “Frequent
Frequent Flyer” the reader is introduced to the feeling of a person trying to define the idea home as an immigrant. The speaker in this piece thinks of the airport as a place to belong to, imagining the gate as the bedroom and tidying it whenever the speaker gets a chance to. For the speaker, the “airport is the hopeful second home place, the precious enroute, the hour you could be anyone who ever passed through” (22). This declaration can be read in two ways. The first reading of this statement shows that in the second home the traveler could be anyone, and this fact itself shows the distorted identity crisis that Arab Americans go through or it can be read in a different light. When the speaker admits to being able to be anyone in an airport, it is liberating and it makes the speaker think that, with full assimilation, anywhere can be home. Yet, it is not assimilation that the speaker seeks. The airport is the speaker’s home, but the speaker has always leave it to go somewhere else. It’s like the speaker is looking for a place to plant their roots, but the airport does not allow for this. There is no strong community that the speaker can relate to, and that is why the speaker chooses to dwell at a gate that allows for further wandering and passing forward.

Another poem that draws on the idea of home but mainly focuses on belonging and community is “Sewing, Knitting, Crocheting.” Nye comments on gender specific acts that were used to form a community for the individual, where women felt that they are closer together, and how this action changed over time. The three women in this poem are separate from one another, even though they are indulged in this communal act of “delicate operations” (18). The speaker states:

But a grave Separateness
has invaded the world.
They sip with eyes shut
and never say
Amazing
or
Look at us
or
May your thread
never break.

(36–45)

This craft that used to make women come together to form a bond has changed into a craft that causes alienation of the individual in a society. In this poem, Nye is showing the reader the difference between old and new generation of women, and how the new generation wants to swap their traditions and values for something that is called “individuality,” which will in fact alienate them and not bring them together.

PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE AND INVOKING EMPATHY FOR THE OTHER

Nye documents her ancestry by presenting the reader with themes of Palestinian struggle for independence in her poetry. “Don Chu Go” is a poem that immortalizes the struggles of Arab ancestry in Palestine. The poem is in memory of Maury Maverick (1921–2003), the American politician and activist who had controversial opinions on the place of the Palestinian people and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The speaker in the poem urges a girl to “Use [her] voice!” and “Cry out for pain, injustice” (24–5). The speaker does not like it when the girl speaks of “pretty pink sunrise” because there are people who suffer in the world, and her ancestors are not free yet. Referring to Maury Maverick in this poem adds to the message of fighting to keep the memory and story of all the ones who are not yet free. The reader can sense the speaker’s frustration about keeping the memory of their ancestry alive.
Nye uses the theme of refugees in two of her poems to invoke empathy in the reader’s minds towards the “Other.” The life of a refugee is highlighted in two poems, “Please Describe How You Became a Writer” and “Renovation.” Nye gives a glimpse of a child’s perspective on being a refugee, reminding the readers that people from Palestine have different childhoods and being a refugee has helped shape them and made them who they are, willing to fight back, willing to speak, and most important, willing to write. In “Please Describe How You Became a Writer” the speaker describes the urge behind becoming a writer. To the refugee in the prose poem, the first-grade textbook is insulting, because it portrays people as “dull” and they had to dictate to them to do things like “come” or “look.” The first-grade speaker in this piece does not want to be dictated to. The first-grade speaker has an opinion about things. Nye was not a refugee, but she has grown up listening to the horrific stories that her father used to tell her, about Palestine and how they had to move out of Palestine, and all the things they lost in the process. The reader will understand at the end of this short piece how the state or the story behind being a refugee has shaped these people they call “Other.”

In “Renovation” Nye exposes the reader to the pain of being a Palestinian under Israeli occupation. The reader is presented with a family that wants to renovate their home because of the “mold” that eats everything up (40). As the married couple are “sabotaging” their 100-year-old cottage, the speaker is reminded of the Palestinians overseas, who have their homes taken away from them daily. The reader gets a dark description of the new home, which looks like a refugee camp. The family’s experience is described by the speaker as being like “camping out at home” and the family is “trying to replicate the happy hour at the hotel down the street,” but whatever they do does not allow them to forget about the mold (41). To the reader, the act of renovating itself implies new beginnings, and sounds unpleasantly positive, but the speaker in this story tries to pull the reader back to the awful Palestinian crisis. The speaker then calls on the Palestinian crisis overseas, where they cannot go out to “buy fresh oranges” and “they [cannot] go to school” (42). They do not live normal everyday lives, but they struggle form day to day in order to survive.

Nye shows that the second generation of Arab Americans cannot always understand the Palestinian crisis. The teenager in “Renovation” is appalled by fact that they simply don’t have water in the house and that they are renovating. The speaker tries to convince the teenager that he is in a better place than the Palestinians overseas as the teenager can’t imagine someone taking his house, his computer, or if someone “blows up [the] room and says, Ah, too bad, we call it security, no one cares if you suffer” (43). When the teenager resorts to calling the police, the speaker tells him the police might not have any power. The teenager is not convinced in the end, and demands the speaker to stop speaking because it makes no sense to the teenager. The speaker in “Renovation” criticizes the word “demolished”, and how soft its sounds for so violent an act. The noise on “Gaza Strip” documentary does this horrific act justice, as it embodies the horror of hearing 100-year-old houses being knocked down (42). While the speaker is in a faraway place, probably the United States, Palestinian homes are being lost and destroyed.

As part of telling the “Other” story, Nye switches tone in You & Yours, mostly in the second half of the book, to talk about the struggle and representation of the “Other.” As Gómez-Vega argues, Nye is a poet at heart, but she is also a storyteller, “one who focuses in the lives of everyday people, especially her own relatives, to understand the world around her,” where stories are tools for survival and they are an attempt to make sense of the difficult moments in the hard realities (2010, 245). Especially since the 9/11 events, Nye has become one of the few American poets telling a story, writing to disrupt and correct the image of Arabs as terrorists in Western media. According to Gómez-Vega, “writing personal poems in the shadow of larger communal issues has become Shihab Nye’s life work. She writes the negative stereotypes
of Arabs without losing track of the political turmoil that cause their grief and displacement in
the first place” (2020, 121). In “This is Not Who We Are”, it pains Nye that she must explain
herself and her people, as she argues that Arabs are not terrorist, in an issue of the Oprah maga-
zine. She strongly suggests that there is a big difference between terrorist and immigrants, and
it is unfair to allow immigrants to be scorned and mistrusted in America because of these
extremist minorities (Gómez-Vega 2010, 110). I’m of the opinion that Nye enjoins her audi-
ence to pressure one-dimensional narratives of the “Other,” and urges them to have empathy
towards these minorities because they live in different circumstances and lead a difficult life,
that of survival and little hope.

In her theory of understanding the “Other,” Butler argues that most Americans “have
probably experienced something like the loss of their First Worldism as a result of the events
of September 11 and its aftermath,” and she goes on to argue that “the violence that we inflict
on others is only and always—selectively brought into public view” (2006, 39). She urges that
“the notion of the world itself as a sovereign entitlement of the United States must be given up,
lost, and mourned, as narcissistic and grandiose fantasies must be lost and mourned” but that
is not what the United States did (40). The general response to 9/11 by Americans is described
resourcefully in a long list here by Butler:

anxiety, rage, a radical desire for security, a shoring-up of the borders against what is
perceived as alien; a heightened surveillance of Arab peoples and anyone who looks
vaguely Arab in the dominant racial imaginary, anyone who looks like someone you
once knew who was of Arab descent, or who you thought was—often citizens, it turns
out, often Sikhs, often Hindus, even sometimes Israelis, especially Sephardim, often
Arab Americans, recent arrivals or those who have been in the US for decades. (39)

In the previous passage, Butler highlights how Americans have reacted to any Arab
descent or Arab-looking alien. The general tone that one gets from this long list is the growing
Islamophobia and xenophobia that predominates these ideas about the someone who is not
white, and American. Nye situates her writing in the middle of this gloomy atmosphere and
writes back against these the idea of the “Other” as alien and non-human.

In his book, Said lays the grounds for speaking out against the wrongful victimization
of Arabs in the eyes of the West. Said argues that

the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like
“America,” “the West,” or “Islam” and invent collective identities for large numbers of indi-
viduals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed,
their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in influence and mobilizing power. (2003, xxix)

Through the education of her readers about the reality of the “Other”, Nye hopes to
invoke empathy for the kind of life that the “Other” lives in the readers’ minds and hopes that
they will be more understanding of their struggling and misfortunes.

NYE IN ACTION

Harb states that “Arab American writers insisted on making their voices heard and
their perspectives represented. They gave talks on American campuses and circulated poems,
theses, and letters online in the days and weeks following the events of 9/11” (Harb 2012, 13).
One notable letter titled “Letter from Naomi Shihab Nye, Arab-American Poet: To Any
Would-Be Terrorists” was circulated online in the few weeks immediately after 9/11 (Harb
2012, 14). The letter emphasized “her unique location at the intersection of these two cultures
which] gives her a complex perspective informing her pain and her insistence on the importance of crossing boundaries. Nye’s letter also constitutes an attempt at controlling or at least containing the chaos and immensity of her shock and hurt” (Harb 2012, 25). The letter tries to break the relation between the two words Arab and terrorist. Nye addresses the letters to the terrorists in a motherly tone and fashion, as if the mother is bringing them up again, this time using a more logical and emotional view of life to promote understanding and show the importance of humanity and the obligations we have to this “delicate” planet. Harb states that these literary productions convey their author’s feeling of anxiety and responsibility (14). However, the production of writing by Arab Americans after 9/11 was also to speak back against the stereotypes and demonized version of the Arab that the West beholds about the East.

As part of invoking the feelings of empathy for the “Other,” Nye directly tries to show the reader the reality of the “Other.” Nye brings up the issue of suicide bombers in “Renovation”; “Suicide bombers, those tragic people driven insane by oppression, do not come out of vacuums.” (42). This line may sound like the speaker is trying to make excuses for these disturbed people. The speaker suggests that the background that they were brought up in made them the way they are:

They come from demolished homes. They saw their fathers’ blindfolded, hauled off to prison in buses. They saw their friends gassed by poison, blown up intestines strewn in the dust. Their mothers wailing and bloody. Why is this almost never considered in the news? Sometimes where everything is coming from is just as critical as where everything is going. (42)

The speaker’s explanation of the suicide bombers’ circumstances allows the reader to see the hopeless lives they are living, all the tragedies they go through, and all the trauma they must bear witness to. By showing all these images, Nye is trying to form an understanding of their suffering. She is definitely not giving them excuses to perform such outrageous acts. Nye is also criticizing the media for not showing all sides of the story. The Arabs the West gets to see on CNN or Fox News are angry, bloody, and full of resentment. The West does not see the blown-up body parts of children, or massive genocides that are happening every day in the Middle East.

Nye tries to break down some Arab stereotypes by showing the human side of those people that are considered the enemy to the West. For example, in “Interview, Saudi Arabia” the speaker invokes the feeling of a parent who has lost his child to terrorism (65). The parents are described as waiting for their sons to call home, but at the same time they are expected to explain themselves and to declare that it wasn’t them that caused the tragic event of 9/11 (65). While memories of their children show the innocence that they once lived in, their horrific act shows that they appear to be strangers even to their own siblings (65). The image of the “fathers [blinking] in tear” invokes empathy, if not sympathy on the behalf of the speaker, for these parents who do not know how their children could go astray and do such an evil deed. The parent’s evil children left the world, but they gave their parents the burden of always having to defend themselves and tell the world that they have no hand in this act of terrorism and that they themselves are not terrorists.

Likewise, in the “The Sweet Arab, the Generous Arab,” the speaker is breaking down those stereotypes of an Arab by showing the reader the Arabs that the speaker knows. The speaker starts the poem by stating that no one is mentioning this kind of Arab “enough”, this “sweet” Arab (1). Then the speaker gives a list of the Arab that they know. The Arab that the speaker knows simply “extends his hand” to say hello, and will welcome you if you were to pass by his shop. Even if this Arab is a refugee, then he will invite you for a Coke in his “ramshackle hut” (57). For the speaker, the Arab will not kill “a mouse, a bird” (11). Even cracking an egg makes the Arab sad (12). These
lines are supposed to show the reader that the Arab that the speaker knows is very gentle and humane. Then the speaker shows the general stereotypes that often accompany an Arab’s name such as “rubble and “blast”, educating the reader to how the Arab word has become synonymous with war and destruction (57). By the end of the poem the speaker mourns the family, who couldn’t entertain their “little lost cousins” with a Ferris wheel ride (57). The reader feels these are the simple things that give them joy, like a Ferris wheel ride, yet again, they can’t have these things because of their political plight. All these images show the hopelessness of their reality and pain that is passed down from one generation to the other.

One form of stereotypes that is associated with Arabs nowadays, especially after 9/11, is that there is a dangerous situation whenever there is an Arab on a plane. In “My Perfect Stranger,” the speaker describes an encounter between a little girl named Layla and the persona of the poet, Nye. After a series of playing around with the things on the plane like the table that comes out of the chair, and turning the pages of the “exotic merchandise in the airport catalog”, the girl plays “Find me” with the poet persona (78). After staring hard at the poet the girl decides that the poet looks tired and that she needs a picture to cheer her up (78). She decides to draw a picture of a blue flower “with green leaves” (78). She then spells the poet’s name and signs it with her name, Layla, which is an Arabic name. After learning that the girl is from Middle Eastern descent, the poet wanted to share her “ethnic link” with the girl (78). Then the poet satirically imagines the girl replying to her by saying “We’re Arabs!” and how everyone on the plane would hear her. The poet didn’t mention it to the girl, and she ends the piece by stating that she kept the blue flower that the girl drew. In this piece the poet exposes the negative associations that are often equated with the name Arab, especially after 9/11. In the piece the poet fears that she might cause hysteria on the plane, with an innocent little girl stating that they are “Arab.” This incident records the fearful propaganda invoked against Arabs after 9/11 and how they are all not to be trusted to board a plane. The reader can sense the speaker’s hesitancy to announce her Arabic heritage on a plane and can see through the eyes the poet in the poem how the image of Arabs after 9/11 has been always associated with something negative and violent.

**THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ON WAR AND MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE OTHER**

Nye’s collection is not shy of war topics as she challenges the picture of war as a liberating or even a civilizing agent in human lives. Nye voices the general American disagreement with war on the Middle East. The poem “During a War” begins with a letter ending with “Best wishes to you and & yours, / he closes the letter.” (56). The speaker wonders where “yours” ends (56). The speaker questions the role of the community and the whole earth towards the yours. What could have they done to prevent such deaths? She uses phrases like “we did not want,” “we tried to stop,” and “we were not heard” desperate to show their position is against the war. The use of pronouns in interesting this poem because by using we, the speaker is emphasizing that the most Americans did not want to wage a war so quickly after their public mourning in 9/11. The speaker is for the idea that violence only begets violence.

Nye distinguishes the American people from their government in “He Said Eye-Rack.” This poem deals with the opinion of war from a United States side. Her father made a great impact on how Nye perceives the US government and that is clear in her poetry and the perception of herself as an American. In an interview with Kate Long, Nye states that “Because I had an expressive Palestinian father (Aziz Shihab), who never stopped describing what he saw as the terribly unfair situation in his homeland, supported mightily by the U.S. government, issues of identity and empathy, or lack thereof, became a big part of my awareness. My father loved
the United States but grieved over many of its international actions” (Long 2009, 32). “He Said Eye-Rack” starts with “Relative to our plans for your country, / we will blast your tree, crush your cart, stun your grocery” (1–3). The speaker is also criticizing President Bush’s side of the story about war. President Bush in the poem seems to justify the war to the Iraqi people when he states that, “We are not dealing with peaceful men. / He said, ‘reckless aggression.’ / He said, ‘the danger is clear.’” (12–14). All these sum up his unreasonable opinions on wars. The last statement is that “We are against the lawless men who rule your country, not you.” (17–18). The effects of war reached everyone, not just those labeled as “enemy.”

In “Johnny Carson in Baghdad” the speaker suggests bringing in a famous comedian instead of the government and soldiers of the United States to Iraq. Nye’s choice of Carson is interesting because it shows the power the media has in educating millions of people about the “Other.” Carson is an American comedian who established the “format for television chat shows including the guest coach and studio band.” (Willson 2016). He had strong power in the television industries as he moved his show from New York to California, and in his last appearance as the host of The Tonight Show he attracted 50 million viewers. If Johnny Carson is brought to Baghdad, then he might make the “Other” appear exotic and naïve. The act of “putting on a turban” shows the “Other” is different from Americans and a turban is a costume that foolish Arabs wear. In fact, Carson is described as a manipulative person in these lines:

He would never have broken down a door
Or been cruel to a prisoner,
but when everyone was laughing, might have done
some sleight-of-hand to move people
to a better place, make them look
agreeable, more agreeable, more like one another,
the way they truly are, instead of this stupid
wreckage that lessens us
on both sides of the sea.
Don’t you wish?

(23–32)

The speaker shows the manipulative side of politics. Carson might be the actual politics that the US wants to play out in Iraq, but it fails because the soldiers cause the “wreckage” emotionally and physically (30). While everyone is laughing about Carson wearing a “turban” or “dress[ing] as a woman,” Carson in his own magical way is moving people around and appropriating their lives so that they might look familiar (17–20). The people of Baghdad laugh innocently as they are being displaced, robbed of their black gold, and appropriated by politics.

One of the issues that Nye addresses is the fact that the media can also contribute to distributing unjust images of Arabs. Nye is speaking against these images that are seen in the media of angry dangerous Arabs, and the poetry she writes allows her to invoke empathy in her readers, “Poetry provides People with the tools to recreate experience. It does not change the experience, but it makes empathy possible, which is why, in her poetry, Shihab Nye continues to write about Arabs she knows and loves, not the ones who blow up buildings” (Gómez-Vega 2001, 117). Alisa Solomon questions the journalism that covers human rights and how “we know about the preventable suffering of others perhaps half a world away, and how do we come to know it?” (2006, 1587). The main question that Solomon asks is why some subjects get to be projected as human and others not. Looking at the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts Solomon mentions one instance where “On 16 January 1989, ABC’s World News Tonight ran a
segment of some 350 words on the Israel Defense Force’s introduction of plastic and rubber bullets into the arsenal used to put down Palestinian demonstrations” (1588). Solomon argues that presented in this frame the protest is seen as rational because the Palestinians are acting against the violence inflicted upon them (1588). The frame used to present this story was an uprising of a people against their occupiers (1588). The viewers can then see how signifying the occupation part of the frame of the story humanizes the Palestinians’ revolt against occupation. The media have to be cautious in the frames they choose to present other nations and their struggles, because any wrong representation can last a lifetime and may be difficult to change in the future.

One poem that tackles the idea of media representation of the “Other” is “Your Weight, at Birth.” In the poem the speaker shows the role of the media in manipulation of facts:

An American TV announcer’s voice sounded excited
  to be present at the births—
  over & over again
  he hailed the table of sandwiches & bottled water
  provided by Israeli soldiers
  who actually looked perplexed
Whenever the camera came in close.
One is born to wear a helmet, carry large artillery.
One is born to be thin, to wear raggedy clothes
  & be shot in the leg. And some are born
  to wonder, wonder, wonder.

(17–28)

The speaker shows how the camera is only getting half of the picture of the Palestinian people’s struggle with Israeli soldiers. The journalist praises the sandwiches and bottled water, but forgets to see the human disaster of women giving birth to children that will either be killed in battle or live in starvation and oppression under the occupation of the Israeli government. Butler asks questions on why the Muslims and Arabs are not thought of as humans in the media, “Is our capacity to mourn in a global dimension foreclosed precisely by the failure to conceive Muslim and Arab lives as lives? . . . Are the Palestinians yet accorded the status of ‘human’ in US policy and press coverage?” (2006, 12). Nye tackles this concern in her poem “Your Weight, at Birth.” In the poem the speaker shows the reader the unfruitful situation of the Palestinian lives, “how we wish the best for one another when someone/ is being born, born
  into deportation & exile, / born, & banished” (6–8). The act of giving birth sounds really hopeful and optimistic, but the speaker in Nye proves the opposite to the reader, that the babies are being born into exile and banishment, their home is taken away from them, and they could not possibly stay and build a decent life for themselves. Nye presents a different view of Arab lives, that Arabs lives matter and they continue to suffer from oppression in different ways.

As Butler remarks, the lives of Palestinians as well as other minorities should be counted as human lives and they should be as important as any American or European life. In her analysis of one news story, Butler sheds light on the fact that Palestinian lives do matter. In the story, Rudolph Giuliani refuses to accept the Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal’s remarks when he described action of taking the Palestinian lives by the Israeli soldiers as “slaughter.” In addition, Giuliani refuses a check the prince gives willingly to the World Trade Center relief because in a statement the prince asks that the “United States take a more balanced stand toward the Palestinian cause” (Butler 2006, 12). Giuliani responds to the prince’s statement in
a conference: “Not only are those statements wrong, they are part of the problem. There is no moral equivalent to this attack. There is no justification for it. . . . The people who did it lost any right to ask for justification for it when they slaughtered four or five thousand innocent people, and to suggest that there is any justification for it only invites this happening in the future.” The Saudi prince did say that “he condemned terrorism, and expressed his condolences for the more than 3,000 people killed when hijacked jets slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon” (Butler 2006, 12–13). Giuliani’s comments might make the reader understand that First World lives matter more than Palestinians. It is obvious that the Saudi prince, according to the New York Times editorial, “did not think that the US policy failure, which he deems true, to honor the Palestinian cause, justifies the attacks. But he did think that long-term US–Arab relations would be improved were the United States to develop a more balanced approach” (Butler 2006, 13). In other words, the prince is not justifying the attack, but he is hoping for an understanding that all these are lives that matter, and the prince highlights that these lives are forever lost to the terrible act of terrorism.

Butler calls out to the media, asking them to show “pictures we were not supposed to see” to allow the public to sense “shock, outrage, remorse, and grief” (2006, 150). She wants “ethical outrage” to happen so that the viewers can reach a better understanding of the reality of the “Other.” (151). In You & Yours Nye presents the reader with personal lives of poetic subjects to invoke empathy and create an understanding for the “Other.” Like Butler, Nye is asking for a different image to be presented to the public, instead of angry terrifying Arabs. She wants the readers to see the generous, hopeful Arab, who tries to keep his humanity alive, when all else is being destroyed before his eyes. She does this by presenting and highlighting the struggles of a hyphenated identity, arguing for a humanization of terrorists, distinguishing between government and citizens when it comes to the US war against Iraq, showing the role the media plays in the representation of the “Other,” and by presenting the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation. Nye is hoping that the readers will see that we all share a common humanity.

ENDNOTES

1 Nye is “the author of six books of poetry, a book of essays, a novel for young adults, several children’s picture books, and a number of edited collections of poetry, she has been featured on American national television programs such as Bill Moyers’ Language of Life and is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the prestigious Guggenheim Award” (Majaj 1999, 326). Hind El Hajj and Sirene Harb show how the political poetry of Lisa Majaj, Suhair Hammad, and Naomi Shihab Nye uses a “complex web of interactions between history, space, identity, and mobility redefines geographic, discursive, and communal locations and revises processes of racialization underlying the formation of communities of white American and ethnic minorities” (2015, 225). These three Arab American writers “[employ] mobility to destabilize racialized structures and definitions underlying ethnic and white identities and challenge the invisibility of related power hierarchies and hegemonic discursive formations” (Hind and Harb 2015, 225).

2 In my opinion, Arab American literature and culture is more visible today because of changing world politics. The political episodes start with the immigration quotas of the 1920, the naturalization act in the 1970s with citizenship for white persons, perquisite cases, 1911 Bureau of immigration and naturalization, 9/11 events, and ongoing struggle of Arab and Israeli conflict (Majaj 2008). Shalal-Esa (2003) shows that there is “a rich body of immigrant literatures, including many powerful works by Arab American Women who have set out to interrogate their own, often fragmented, identities” (24). These women are building bridges to other marginalized communities of color (24). Nye as an accomplished poet, essayist, and anthologist is coming up with a new discourse where Arab American feminist writers get their “strength from feminist black theorists, and postcolonial thinkers [. . .] wielding their pens to chronicle decades of racism, oppression, and marginalization in the united states, and to begin uncovering the particularities of their own ethnic histories” (Shalal-Esa 29003, 24).
There is a difference between empathy and sympathy. Kimberly Davis claims that by reading fiction one can develop an empathetic feeling for the multicultural “Other”: “Reading fiction can help a person to develop an understanding of the plight of others and a sense of moral shock and outrage, which sociologists cite as important precursors motivating political action” (quoted in Davis 2008, 175). I assume that it is not just fiction that allows a reader to come to an understanding of the struggles of the “Other.” Poetry can effectively help the reader in his understanding of the “Other” because it is also a narrative of the experiences of the “Other.” Poetry can help shape and express political action. For example, Nye was invited to read during the presidency of Bill Clinton at the White House and Library of Congress (Elmusa 2007, 107).

As Patricia Hill Collins states in “What is Intersectionality?”, “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complicity in the world, in people, and in human experiences [. . .] Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people a better access to the complexity of the world and themselves” (2016, 2).

I will use line numbers when quoting poetry and page numbers when quoting prose.

Asian and Arab American literature are not shy of the writing about 9/11, especially after the backlash these communities have received after the traumatic events, where they became seen as subsects rather than patriotic citizens who are afraid for their country as well. Rajini Srikanth gives a detailed list of mainstream South Asian writers, and Arab American writers and the fiction they wrote in a post-9/11 era. He gives examples such as John Updike, Don DeLillo, Amy Waldman of mainstream writers that have reacted to the traumatic events of 9/11 directly in their writing (74). These mainstream writers were not writing because of fear of persecution; they were writing to heal their pain as a “nation.” The Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie states that “to talk about a ‘War on Terror’ novel is to really talk about the decision made by various governments (including those of the US and Pakistan), rather than to place the terrorist of 9/11 at the center of the narrative” (73).

Bonca praises Bruce Springsteen and his 9/11 album, “The Rising,” with the title song “Begin in the Towers” going through the feeling of trauma after 9/11, “Beginning in silence, meditation, and fear, it ends in the recognition of communal suffering—which is, after all, much of the point of art” (137). According to Bonca, Springsteen “listened to the silence at the heart of the massacre, has honored it, and then proceeded to transform it into music” (139). She argues that “the song stands as a vital, vibrant testament that popular culture can transcend its usual limitations, that it—and academics who write about it—needn’t be merely part of the noise, but truly be a help to those trying to get beyond it. Somebody got it right” (139). These writers show the horror of living after the events and being victimized for a crime that they did not commit.

The paradigm of East vs West is explained in Orientalism. Said defines Orientalism as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) the ‘Occident’” and Said believes that “Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient that it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient” (2003, 6). Another definition of orientalism is “the ineradicable distinction between western superiority and oriental inferiority” (2003, 42).

REFERENCES


