

“Nature in Naomi Shihab Nye’s works: A Vehicle for Creating Peace”**Chekra Allani**English Language and Literature
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In Naomi Shihab Nye’s works, the theme of nature as a creative force is recurrent, moving and poignant. It is often juxtaposed with the destructive forces of war and conflict. Nye’s romanticizing over nature gave it a glorified appeal and brought forth its nobility and magnanimity. Her subtle way of intermingling aspects of nature with daily individual experience touches the heart. In her poetry and prose, nature appears to be the connector and the comforter, and at times, it is the spiritual and the sublime. The aim of this paper is to delineate the multi-functions of nature as a vehicle for creating peace and for bridging the gap of misunderstanding and ignorance between East and West in this tempestuous period of human history.

Keywords: Arab-American literature, communication, eco-criticism, nature, peace, postmodernism, romanticism

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Introduction

Naomi Shihab Nye (1952-) is an Arab-American poet, an anthologist and an educator born in St Louis to a Palestinian father and an American mother. Nye showed signs of poetic ingenuity from her tender years. In her poetry and prose, she embraces nature as a connector between not only the US and the Middle East, but also between diverse cultures: 'Nye deals with nature as not just background but central subject' (AlKhadra & Majdoubeh, 2014, 885). She is influenced and 'infused' by canonical Romantic American writers and particularly Dickinson: 'It is like drinking water straight from Sitti's spring' (Nye, 1996, 141). Nye delineates nature in the different places she lived in: in Saint Louis, Jerusalem and San Antonio. In her narratives, 'Nature adds a deeper dimension to experiences already shaped by political and cultural contestations' (Bupujaj, 2015, 1). Nature is depicted in her works as the connector, the healer, and the sublime. It has a spiritual aura and an aesthetic value. At other times, we hear the environmentalist's voice lamenting humans' negative effect upon nature. Just like the Industrial Revolution's effect upon the Romantics, the technological revolution's impact is upon the postmodern 'neo-romantic': 'Could it be changing weather conditions or cell phone beams? Obviously, the current atmosphere sizzles with more electronic signals than any world of the past' (Nye, 2008, 2-3). Like Wordsworth, Nye can be an icon of eco-critical studies. The relationship of humans to nature and to their physical environment is crucial for serenity and sublimity. It is vital for connecting the disconnected, and including the excluded. The aim of the present study is to delineate these multi-functions of nature, as the connector, the healer and the transcendent, in Nye's works and their role in promoting peace and understanding in a period when Arab-American relations have become awry after the 9/11 incidents.

Nye's works have won many prestigious awards and have become part of school curricula within and outside the American continent. But in spite of the critics' interest in Nye's poetic ingenuity, no detailed systematic study has been attempted to delineate the multi-functions of nature in her works. AlKhadra & Majdoubeh, 2014 write about the schools of thought Nye belongs to, namely 'neo-romanticism' and postmodernism. Najmi, 2010 studies Nye's ridicule of the military sublime through the aesthetic of smallness and the sanctity of natural phenomena in her poetry. Bujupaj, 2015 does an eco-critical comparative study of Lisa S. Majaj, Naomi S. Nye and Mohja Kahf's works. Hitherto, the recurrent and significant use of nature in Nye's works to further a specific agenda has not been fully explored.

Nature in Arab American Women writings

Arab American women's literary works are the product of a bicultural heritage: the original homeland culture and their new home culture. The connection they have to the Middle East appears in Nye's writings as a blessing and a doom. Similarly, Edward Said places in an advantageous and at times solitary position those who have seen the world through the different cultures they possess: "exile carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality... It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelists, chess players, political activists, and intellectuals" (Said, 2000, 144). The 'mobility and skill' which Said refers to entail the responsibility of representing this amalgamation of cultures with its joys and woes in the writings of the displaced. Harb states that the 9/11 events, with the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, "marked a turning point in the lives of many

Americans" (Harb, 2012, 14). She adds that in this atmosphere "characterized by animosity and fear, Arab American writers insisted on making their voices heard and their perspectives represented" (Harb, 2012, 14). Arab American writings existed prior to the 9/11 incidents with icons like D. H. Melhem, Mohja Kahf, Lisa Suheir Majaj, Diana Abu Jaber, and Naomi Shihab Nye, but they promulgated more with the crucial need to prevent the entangling of every Arab American under one stereotype. In such an atmosphere of fear and hostility, Gómez believes that it is discriminating for the poet to keep attempting to "dissociate the word terrorist from its connection to her ancestral land" (Gómez, 2010, 110).

Endless troubles on the political arena are counter parted with warm family ties and interconnections Arab American writers tried to establish through the themes of nature, of family, and of food. Arab American writers express love and nostalgia for the home country and integration in the new homes. In either context, the theme of nature prevails to further their agendas. In her introduction to her poems of the Middle East, *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, Nye says "When I finally met some other Arab American writers, we felt we had all been writing parts of a giant collective poem, using the same bouquet of treasured images (was there anyone among us who had never mentioned a fig?)" (Nye, 2002, 3).

Despite its strong presence in Arab American writings, nature has been a marginal topic in most critical interpretations of these literary writings, which explains the scarcity of the critical literature in this respect. Bujupaj explains:

"Perhaps because much Arab American writing engages with the flow of cultures across borders, a process which cultural anthropologist James Clifford famously termed 'the transit lounge of cultures', it may be difficult for critics to deal with the treatment of nature or even to notice it, for how can nature exist in a transit lounge?" (Bujupaj, 2015, 1).

The Arab American writers proved that nature can exist in this transit lounge of cultures. This is a romantic and a postmodern approach to nature. It is the new directions of ecocriticism: according to Marshall, "It seems that ecocriticism is not so much continuing along its path in the woods" (Marshall, 2005, 2). Urban nature prevails in many of the Arab American writers' works. From Majaj's Greek asphodel and olive tree, to Abu Jaber's Syracuse snow, to Nye's multicultural images. Yet, from the micro level of urban nature to the macro level of rural or countryside nature, Arab American poets showed great concern over the environmental degradation.

Diana Melhem the Arab American poet paved the way for the future of Arab American women writers. Her work is deep into the American context which reflects her integration. She brings forth the beauty of the American landscape echoing the father of free verse Walt Whitman: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (Whitman, 1855, 7). Melhem's adaptability came after a long period of anxiety, homesickness and nostalgia, hence the relishing of olives, figs, lemons, grapes, ensuring a continuity of Arab

American writers of their cultural contact with their roots:" if poets can write effectively, let their poems be like cedar branches, bury discrimination and injustice in leaves and olive boughs" (Orfalea, 1999, 104). The western metaphor of the cedar and the eastern metaphor of the olive tree connote a shriveling of boundaries.

In Diana Abu Jaber's works, the recurrent shift in terms of time and space has replenished her bouquet of 'nature metaphors' beyond the eastern culture or what Abu Jaber calls the 'Language of Baklava'. Yucef believes that she shows a "deeply-rooted bond between the present and the past, the American and the Arab" (Yucef, 2010, 234). Abu Jaber is able to shift her setting into her new home (in Syracuse New York) with similar ingenuity. She uses the imagery of snow, where 'snow' and 'ice' connote both beauty and menace. In her novel, *Birds of Paradise*, she shifts her setting to Miami, Florida, where she interweaves nature's storm with emotional storm and moves on at the end of her novel with a gentle sunrise shedding rays of hope. Miami's sun and sand, skies and stars, show the ease with which the author can shift from the microclimate of her ancestral land to the macroclimate of her new homeland, in Syracuse and Miami.

Lisa Suheir Majaj on the other hand combines eastern metaphors of nature like olives and figs with the asphodels of her third home Greece. The strong presence and varied uses of nature in Majaj's poetry invite an ecocritical reading of her works. Nye and Majaj attempt to build bridges not only between their two identities, but also between the multicultural identities they are exposed to, hence the rich and varied metaphors of nature. In the same way the fig tree connected the father to his homeland in Nye's poem, the olive tree in Majaj's poem "smoothed old scars" and "lulled the child to sleep" --the healing effect is obvious. However, the poet hears protests from her audience: "We have so many problems! / Our identities to defend, our culture under siege. / We can't waste time admiring trees!" (Majaj, 2009, 57). Yet it is Majaj's belief in hope and light that emanates from her imagined landscape that has no geographical limitations, but the stars and the whole cosmos.

Throughout Arab American writings, the omnipresence of nature keeps shifting from a pause to smell roses to a call to preserve nature. Hence the vacillation between sun and snow and between olive trees of the East and red wood of the American West.

Despite the omnipresence of the theme of nature in Arab American writing, the critical terrain is too limited. Critics have recurrently delved into themes of multiculturalism and identity, leaving nature as a 'peripheral topic.' The treatment of nature by Arab American writers shows that they can shift settings be it in the western wilderness or in the eastern landscape. Their eye for beauty is omnipresent and they can use it to reconcile the past, the present and the unknown as in Abu Jaber's works, to connect and communicate better as in Nye's, and to heal the sorrows of the past as in Melhem's. Whether they use the olive tree, the fig tree, the asphodel or the red woods, what matters most are the explicit and the implicit messages of connectedness, of hope and of universal peace.

Theoretical framework: Romantic and ecocritical reading of Nye's works

Before proceeding with the analysis of the selected works, it is essential to put the current study within its theoretical framework. One might wonder how Romanticism, often considered as an out-of-date movement (Rothbard, 2007, 17), could be approached along with ecocriticism, a very recent analogue movement (Garrard, 2004, 16). It is actually in the primary sources, be it in the collections of Nye's poetry, her novels, her short stories and her picture books that one cannot help but notice the strong presence of nature, a topic that comprehensively prevails in romantic writings and practically two centuries later in ecocritical literary theory. But Nye is not only a romantic writer, she is also a postmodern, and unlike modern fiction and modern criticism that unite over the rejection of romanticism, (Rothbard, 2007, 17) "Romanticism is still relevant in the age of Postmodernism... being an all-inclusive movement... inevitably open to Romantic influences" (AlKhadra & Majdoubeh, 2014, 886).

The seeds of romantic thought go back to the French philosophers Denise Diderot (1713-1784) and to Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Their works had a profound impact upon the development of romanticism in fiction in England and beyond the continent, in America. The Romantic Movement flourished for over a century from the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth, after which realism emerged, followed by naturalism, and subsequently modernism. The latter gave way to postmodernism, an all-inclusive movement that is still 'en vogue'. Romantic writers are considered "lovers, even priests, of nature" (Bygrave, 2004, ix). It is no wonder that Nye could be a romantic and a postmodern concurrently because "postmodernism swerves away from and encompasses all previous movements" (AlKhadra & Majdoubeh, 2014, 886). Despite the fact that Nye does romanticize over the rural and the urban, she seems to lament the good old days, when the ecology was better preserved, and to worry about the present days: "If all honeybees disappear, human beings would have four years left on earth" (Nye, 2008, 8). Therefore, Nye's works would relevantly be approached from an eco-critical perspective. In our 'brave new world', the romantic conception of nature took a new approach as eco-criticism emerged in the late 1970s raising ecological and environmental concerns (Hutchings, 175). These concerns are not novice; they have deeper roots that go back to the rise of the Industrial Revolution and to the Romantics' apprehension about its repercussions over nature.

Ecocriticism is a fairly recent approach to literature, coined by William Rueckert in 1978. It is a redefined area of literary research that sheds light on the relationship between literature and the natural world. The movement hibernated for a decade between its creation in 1978 until 1989 when it got revived by Cheryl Glotfelty who commended its adoption in the study of nature writings (Black & Cokinos, 1994, 1). Cokinos defines it as "the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it" (Black & Cokinos, 1994, 3). Thomas Dean added that "Ecocriticism is a response to the need for humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction. In large part, environmental crises are a result of humanity's disconnection from the natural world... a mentality of specialization that fails to recognize the interconnectedness of all things" (Black & Cokinos, 1994, 5). Glotfelty states that environmental writings enhance dualism that proclaim nature as a separate entity

from humanity, while ecocritical writings unite both (Glotfelty & Fromm xx). The connection of the humane and the natural world is a theme that permeates Nye's works enhancing an ecocritical reading. Henceforth, the concepts of interconnectedness and 'green' peace are tackled under the umbrella of the romantic and ecocritical theories.

Nature, the connector and the healer

Nye uses nature in her poems as a means to further her agenda, an agenda that is explicit at the beginning of her poem *Jerusalem* where she states: "I'm not interested in / who suffered the most / I'm interested in / people getting over it" (Nye, 2002, 92). Intermittent revenge is only likely to prolong the conflicts and wars. Nye calls for peace not for calculation of casualties on either side. Within the narrative, a child writes his own poem and draws his own painting. The poem within the poem stresses the child poets' plea for 'getting over' their woes: "A child's poem says / 'I don't like wars, they end up in monuments' / He's painting a bird with wings / wide enough to cover two roofs at once" (Nye, 2002, 93). In order to give authenticity to the child's voice, the speaker appears as a witness. Hence the shift from the first person to the third person narrative within the same stanza. What a 'tableau vivant' the child paints! A bird with wings wide enough to connect two roofs at once; the concept of nature as a connector is therefore clearly illustrated in the hyperbolic size of the bird's wings stretching out to put together the severed roofs. The neighboring roofs have deeper connotation to the two different cultures Nye belongs to. Being a bicultural person, she knows the importance of connecting them together. In Nye's works as in other Arab American writers', we often encounter a duality in terms of space, "like a cherry with two pits at its heart" (Bujupaj, 2015, 21). The child in Nye's *Jerusalem* does not understand conflicts and political agendas, like Wordsworth's child in *Anecdote for Fathers*; his utterance comes truthful from the heart. Nye's child was straightforward in his rejection and his hatred of wars. The poem ends with an assertion that it is never too late to sow the seeds of peace. "There is a place in this brain / where hate won't grow. / I touch its riddle: wind, and seeds. / Something pokes us as we sleep. / It's late but everything comes next" (Nye, 2002, 93). The metaphors of nature 'wind' and 'seeds' used in this stanza have an implicit connotation to our responsibility. We are responsible to sow the seeds of peace and the wind will disseminate and pollinate. To follow the positive and productive forces of nature is more fruitful than the destructive forces of hatred and revenge that keep poking our conscience and disturbing our 'sleep'. The words 'wind' and 'seeds' are the riddle the poet finds the answer to. It is an implicit allusion to the individual and the collective duty of all to sow the seeds of peace in young adults' minds so we may reap interconnectedness and amity. In her *Letter to Any Would Be Terrorists*, Nye says it is "peace, not violence, that fixes things. You could ask any one of the kids in the Seeds of Peace Organization and they would tell you that" (Gerhardt, 2014, 14).

The function of nature as a connector recurs in many of Nye's works, poetry and prose. In her collection of poems, *Honeybee*, Nye shows nature as a connector in various insinuations. She states that "Bees are fabulous communicators," they "can tell each other where the good flowers are. They can find their ways back to their own hives even if you try to block or trick them" (Nye, 2008, 1). Bees have the natural ability to communicate better than humans. In her poem *Bees Were Better*, Nye wonders why people are breaking up while bees are connecting: "I studied bees, who were able / to convey messages through dancing / and

could find their ways / home to their hives / even if someone put up a blockade of sheets / and boards and wire / Bees had radar in their wings and brains / that humans could barely understand" (Nye, 2008, 66). People ought to learn from bees the way to keep connected through dancing not through guns. Nature in *Bees Were Better* seems to be offering lessons to college students, to thinkers and researchers, to revert to nature and to be able to communicate like bees that never lose their paths despite humans' attempts to relocate bees in wagons, seeking better pastures. The vanishing nature has engendered a negative impact upon the feelings of people and their conduct towards each other. Our relationship towards our environment has degenerated; likewise our connection towards each other has loosened. In the first part of the poem, the setting is urban, parking lots, artificial fountains and library. In all these settings, disconnection is so recurrent that it upsets the poet: "I could not sit at that table again" where two people are breaking. However, with the change of setting, from an urban to a rural setting, nature seems to be providing smooth communication between bees. Scientific research revealed that "Bees had radar in their wings and brains that humans could barely understand" (Nye, 2008, 66). In the last stanza, Nye shows her role as a poet and a researcher "I wrote a paper proclaiming / their brilliance and superiority / and revised it at a small café / featuring wooden hive-shaped honey dippers in silver honeypots / on every table" (Nye, 2008, 66). Bees become a symbol of proper communication that humans ought to emulate. The café where the poet revised her paper has a reminder on every table 'honeypots' and 'honey dippers' are omnipresent as an aide-mémoire to overlook our differences and to live in peace with each other. Nye seems to be 'infused' by Emilie Dickinson's poem *Nature* where she depicts nature as "the Bumble bee / Nature is Heaven / Nature is Harmony / So impotent Our Wisdom is / To her Simplicity" (Ackley et al, 277) Like eco-critical theorists, Nye is seeking harmony with nature. She grieves over the disappearance of bees causing empty hives. Like the romantics who were concerned over the Industrial Revolution's impact upon humans, Nye and the eco-critics worry over the 'colony collapse disorder' caused by the Technological Revolution.

Moving from honeybees to frogs, Nye seems to be quite selective of the symbols that are able to convey her messages of connection and adaptability. In the same manner the bees are a symbol of proper communication, her selection of the 'frog' In *Frogs Did not Forget* shows the ability to live in two worlds. Being amphibians, they can live in water and in land. In either setting, they have the ability to adapt themselves well. The play with words 'frogs' and 'forget' implies an inherent physiognomy that goes beyond the lexicon to convey human ability to adapt to different environments. This close connection of similar consonants goes parallel with their ability to connect in aridity and in humidity adjusting themselves well in both contexts. During 'huge dry days', they may hibernate, but 'after the rain, they sing on six notes'. After the title *Frogs did not Forget* an enjambment takes us straight to the first couplet of the poem, after which the poet poses a question: "The Frogs Did not Forget / how to do what they do / through the huge dry days / where were they hiding? / One might lose a tune / abandon a tradition / fall into a crack but the frogs after the rain / were singing on six notes" (Nye, 2008, 32). The question posed by the speaker is actually a wonder more than a question. In this state of hibernation where the frogs hide somewhere during arid seasons, aren't they likely to forget how to live in rainy seasons, the speaker wonders? The fact that they have not abandoned their habit and that they have not fall into oblivion stresses their dual amphibian

nature, a nature which leaves the speaker at the end of the poem in a state of delight after listening to the singing of the frogs: "pleasure poking its throaty resonance / back into my brain" (Nye, 2008, 32). The implicit message here shows the importance of adaptability: it is a matter of survival. Similarly, in her poem *Honeybee*, the message of communication brings inner peace, so is our ability to adapt ourselves in different cultural milieus. Being bi-cultural herself, it is imperative that the poet adapts well to her new home, while keeping connected with her ancestors' home.

In her novel *Habibi* with her poetic prose, Nye moves on from inner peace to world peace. In *Habibi*, she depicts nature as a connector between Arabs and Jews. Grandma's closeness to nature --that prevails as well in her picture book *Sitti's Secrets* and in her collection of poetry *19 Varieties of Gazelle*-- softens her to the point that she accepts the Jewish friend of her granddaughter Liyana in spite of others' hostility. Grandma gives a story in which she likens Omer to a shepherd with comforting power: "The shepherd had a healing power... He could make the air feel calm again when it felt troubled... He could fix it... Your friend has her friend's same kind of hair. He has his exact same shape of head. He has something in the way he turns his eyes to things" (Nye, 1996, a, 260). This seems to be a clear reference to the pastoral where, according to the Romantics, we ought to all live in peace and harmony with nature regardless of our ethnicity, religion or cultural background. A strong link to the notion of connectedness pervades Nye's anthology *Under The Same Sky* where Nye consecrates one whole section to nature (Nye, 1996, b, 92-124). The title of the anthology stresses the concept of grand communication since we all share the same sky. However, this multicultural approach to nature necessitates further research with a comparative approach to explore the various and multiethnic selection of poetry the rich anthology encompasses.

The grandmother in *Habibi* seems to be teaching a lesson to include the other rather than alienate him/her. She is the voice of wisdom and understanding that Nye believes to be lacking nowadays on both sides. Liyanna's grandma accepts the Jewish boyfriend of her Muslim granddaughter and gives him a restorative and curative supremacy, an act bearing an implicit message for western readers to accept their eastern analogues. Unlike Omer's Israeli mother, who appears leery to approve of his relationship to Liyanna, the Palestinian grandma is trying to instill examples of peaceful connections by initiating the acceptance of the other. Nye states in an interview by Joy Castro: "if grandmas ran the world, I don't think we'd have any wars" (Castro, 2002).

It is on top of the mountain as well where Omer and Liyana find comfort and peace: "They climbed the highest hill above the village to the abandoned stone house where her uncle used to live. He had been a recluse and almost never came down. Omer offered his hand to Liyana more than once...She felt a great peacefulness floating in the air" (Nye, 1996, b, 261-2). Connections are therefore better made when we are closer to earth. Words like 'shepherd', 'mountain', 'hill' and 'spring' have the ability to bring people together: "Rafik broke the spell, galloping down the road toward the spring where he and Omer scooped cold water straight into their palms. They splashed their own faces... We wish our family lived up here" (Nye, 1996, b, 256). This is a typical Romantic approach that shows the corruption of civilization and the urban as opposed to the sanctity of the rural and of the landscape. However, unlike the

Romantic poets, Nye does not shun the urban, she romanticizes over it too. From springs, fountains, hills and mountains, she can move on to write with the same passion about restaurants, coffee shops, city parks and supermarkets, making her a postmodern par excellence: "Nye revives Romanticism and keeps it alive well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries [but at the same time], she has turned the urban landscape in the modern world into what the natural was in Romanticism, a landscape which evokes uplifting, transforming mystical experiences" (Khadra & Majdoubeh, 2014, 886). Nye's ability to shift between the urban and the rural with similar passion reflects her bicultural identity and her integration. As a second generation immigrant in the US, she integrates into the urban environment of St Louis and San Antonio, as well as in her father's homeland. She claims this duality to have had a deep impact upon her writing. In an interview, Nye explains that these three places are each "deeply precious" to her and that she often finds them "weaving in and out of [her] writing. Each place has such distinctive neighborhoods and flavors" (Barenblat & Nye, 1999).

Nature, the spiritual and the sublime

The recurrent theme of nature in Nye's collection of poems *19 varieties of gazelle* draws the attention of the reader where nature appears at times the healer, and at times the mystical. In Nye's *Different Ways to Pray*, as in Mohja Kahf's works, the spiritual aura prevails in the poet's attempts to fuse the mundane with the celestial world through the metaphors of 'rock' and 'stones' beneath, and the 'sky' and 'moon' above. The olive tree under which the shepherd prays and implores God to hear his laments represents the sacred, the auspicious and the serene. "The olives bobbed peacefully" (Nye, 2002, 1), connoting God's response to the shepherd's prayers by yielding plentiful crops of olives which connect people together around the dinner table "where fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme" (Nye, 2002, 1) are served along with "flat bread and white cheese" (Nye, 2002, 1). Pain dissolves in these brief moments of happiness and in the simple treats the olive tree presents. This blessed tree has been mentioned seven times in the holy Quran. As in Surat An-Nur, it has been compared to the light of faith:

Allah is the light of heavens and the earth. The metaphor of his light is that of a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp inside the glass, the glass like a brilliant star, lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, its oil all but giving off light even if no fire touches it. Light upon light... (Qur'an, An-Nur, 24- Verse 35).

Likewise, in *Different Ways to Pray*, Nye explicitly links the olive tree to peace and to plenitude. In the relatively arid setting of the Middle East, the olive tree seems to be a rich source of nutrients from which oil is extracted, lamps are lit, and the fruit is pickled and served as a treat to boost the meager diet of the poor shepherds and the laity; hence the blissful connotation of the olive tree.

In *My Father and the Fig Tree*, the coordinating conjunction 'and' links the father to the fig tree, a connection which appears at all levels, the cultural, the religious and the spacious. The father's obsession with the fruit and the tree is obvious from his indifference to cherries which do not grow in his homeland. However, his nostalgic wish for the cherries to turn into figs delineates his attempts to connect to his roots, to Palestine. Being the first

generation immigrant, the father shows more attachment to his homeland than his daughter who is born in the US and has sporadic visits to her father's homeland. She and other second generation poets are indeed able to connect, as is noticeable from their writings, but they are not able to do so with the same intensity as the previous generation. The father is born in Jerusalem and has childhood memories that link him strongly to his birthplace. In the same poem, the father weaves humorous folk tales of Joha, deliberately including figs and fig trees, an obsession that offers him a sweet sensation of a world he is craving to connect to. The spiritual connotation of the fig tree is prevalent in the father's attempts to share his love of figs with his beloved ones. However, his daughter's response is negative as her exposure to the fruit comes in its dried form. He finds difficulty integrating into his new home, and she finds it similarly difficult to feel the intensity of the emotions of nostalgia to her father's home. To her reaction, the father reiterates: "That's not what I'm talking about! He said / I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth / Gift of Allah! On a branch so heavy / It touches the ground" (Nye, 2002, 7). In Nye's poems, the fig tree, like the olive tree, is a "Gift of Allah". Indeed, the fig tree is stated in the holy Quran in Surat Al-Tin where in the successive four oaths the fig (Al Teen in Arabic) comes in the first lieu: "By the figs and the olive, and Tur of Sinin, and this city of security, we have indeed created man in the best of mold" (Qur'an, Al-Tin 25, Verse 1-4) Some commentators state that the value of Al Teen is in its extraordinary nutritive value, others believe in the special connotation of the tree that grows on the sides of the two holy mountains, lands where prophets appeared. Another interpretation of the fig tree is its existence in heaven when Adam and Eve, ashamed of their nakedness, started grabbing fig tree leaves to cover their intimate parts. The existence of the fig tree in heaven gives it a sacred aura in this respect. Hence the father's interjection about the fig fruit "Gift of Allah!" The succession of three superlatives "largest, fattest, sweetest" (Nye, 2002, 7) that describe the fig stresses the deep connection between the father and the fig, an implicit connection to his land where fig trees are plentiful and where memories of his childhood rush vividly with a sensation so sweet that he needs to pause, to 'stop and close his eyes'. The image of the fig in his mouth conjures itself and carries him to the origin of the tree, to the Jordan Valley, the origin of revelations, to his own roots. Wondering from one location to another in his new land, he carries along the sweet memory of the fig tree till the 'dreamer' plants a fig tree in the middle of Dallas, Texas. It remains however ambiguous whether he plants, creates or merely dreams about the presence of the fig tree. All that matters is that he feels himself no longer alienated. He finally integrates and his new home starts to feel like his old home, thereby blending both eastern and western cultures in a harmonious existence. Gómez sees the father's planting of the fig tree in the US as an "admission that the world of his memories is lost forever" (Gómez, 2010, 112). However, the cheerful tone of the last stanza in the poem lends a more likely interpretation of connection of both cultures rather than a permanent loss of his homeland. This narrative poem comprises an implicit message to some western readers who stigmatize eastern cultures as inferior. Nye states that poetry lies within the tradition of storytelling: "I know we need to keep warm on earth/ and when your shawl is as thin as mine, you tell stories" (Nye, 1994, 26). The stories she weaves are at many instances told by her father who infuses them with eastern images.

In response to *My Father and the Fig Tree*, Edna Gorney validates the role of nature as a vehicle for peace in her poem *To a Palestinian Sister-poet*. Despite her initial assertion of the

self over fig trees, almonds, olives, grapevines, dates and pomegranates, she comes back in the last stanza to delineate the laden nature with man's belligerent stance throughout history (Gorney, 2004, 27). In spite of all this pain and suffering, nature is still generous "And the land / drinks / all this pain / and the almond tree blossoms / and the sweet figs ripen / and fall to the ground" (Gorney, 2004, 21-7). Neither the Palestinian poet, nor her Jewish analogue can bear with these conflicts and wars. Like her Jewish sister-poet, Nye 'claims feminine space in a politically defiant posture against traditionally masculine turfs of war and international politics' (Najmi, 2010, 158).

In her poem "For Mohammed on the Mountains", the mystique of the mountains avails in her uncle's retreat "like a god / living close to the clouds" (Nye, 2002, 17). Nye prefers him to all her uncles and to her friends' uncles. 'What attracts her most to him is his romanticism: The fact that he abandons human society... and that he is alone' (AlKhadra & Majdoubeh, 2014, 889) living like a hermit so close to nature, an experience reminiscent of Wordsworth who was educated by the forces of nature around him at the Lake District. Like Nye's uncle Mohammed, who, in the poem, starts his "travel across the ocean" and up to the top of the mountain, Wordsworth started his boat through the Lake District, an experience that eventually defined the course of his life: 'I dipped my oars into the silent lake / And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat / Went heaving through the water like a swan /' (Owens, 2004, 162). This childhood episode was the source of his inspiration that towered in his Alps' climbing journey. He traveled through hills and cliffs and ragged mountains and got trapped in the mountain, in the dark. The same fatal experience that killed Wordsworth's father, turned out to be a creative force that kept Wordsworth alive and awe-stricken, and had a profound effect upon his imagination. Like Uncle Mohammed, the reclusive experience connected him to all the elements of nature: "A meditation rose on me that night / Upon the lonely mountain when the scene / Had passed away, and it appeared to me / The perfect image of a mighty mind / Of one that feeds upon infinity / That is exalted by an under-presence / The sense of God, or whatsoever is dim / Or vast in its own being" (Owens, 2004, 164). The power of the sublime seems to have taken possession of all his faculties and absorbed them in bewilderment. Shaw believes that "The concept of the sublime lends itself well to the idea of transcendence, in the poetics of romanticism" (Shaw, 2006, 3-4). This is the sublime in the romantic experience that Nye is captivated by. It asserts the link between the mundane and the celestial world in the mystical experiences of both Wordsworth and Nye's uncle Mahmoud.

Conclusion

Throughout her works, Naomi Shihab Nye tries to spread awareness among her readers of the importance of communication between different cultures and between the mundane and the celestial worlds. In her poetic and prose narratives, she uses nature as a means for creating and sustaining peace and serenity, a theme which prevails not only in the selected works above, but also throughout many of her works. Through the concept of nature, she manages to further her agenda of establishing connections between Western and Eastern cultures and of revealing the relationship of humans to their physical environment: the landscape and the cityscape. Her various uses of the element of nature make her a Romantic, a Postmodern and at times an Eco-critic: She is a typical Romantic in the transcending, spiritual and deified contexts of nature in her works. However, she swerves from the Romantics in her infatuation with the urban along

with the rural. This equal merging of both spaces makes her a Postmodern. Yet, explicit malaise with the environmental crisis and its negative effect upon human relationships enhance the validity of an eco-critical reading of her writings through the new approach of the ecocritical theory 'urbanature'. The recurrent juxtaposition of the American woods with the Palestinian landscape and the deliberate merging of the western and eastern metaphors of nature emphasize the poet's plea for a peaceful co-existence. Nye finds in her imagined landscapes rays of hope of a better world with less animosity and more understanding. Within the three contexts of Romanticism, Postmodernism and Ecocriticism, interconnectedness is the fundamental theme that Nye tries to establish, interconnectedness between humans to emulate the productive forces of nature rather than the destructive forces of hatred and disconnection. Being an Arab American writer or what she calls herself 'half and half', Nye sows the 'seeds of peace' and creates a world in which 'kisses are more important than gunshots'.

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