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Hybridity and Memory: Inclusive Identity Constructs in Naomi Shihab Nye's Diasporic Verse

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Abstract

The present article explores how Naomi Shihab Nye's poetry navigates cultural identity. It looks closely at *Making a Fist* (1995), *My Father and the Fig Tree* (2002) and *Different Ways to Pray* (2006). Using ideas from postcolonial and multicultural theorists like Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, and Charles Taylor, the paper discusses how Nye's vivid images, memory, and everyday moments show Arab American identity as a changing and active process. The analysis suggests that Nye's poems go beyond describing displacement or nostalgia. For Nye, differences among cultures and identity are to be celebrated and received with a sense of inclusion among individuals and communities. The study shows that Nye keeps and reshapes Arab American identity through memory, daily experiences, and symbols. Her poetry is an important part of American literature and multicultural conversations.

Keywords: Hybridity, Cultural identity, Memory, Mnemonic agency, Inclusion, Diaspora

Introduction:

Identity inclusion can only be studied in relation to hybridity and memory in diasporic literature. Living and experiencing various cultures through migration affects an individual's identity formation, inclusion, and exclusion in a multicultural space. At any given time, each individual has a wide range of multiple social identities perpetually being constructed through identity negotiation by interacting with those affected by the role in question (Barth; Jenkins).

Individual memory plays a key role in aiding an individual's connection with the experiences of the past, resulting in the construction of a complex identity. Besides evoking the past, memory is a source of resilience that promotes inclusivity of identity and breaks rigid norms of cultural difference. Naomi Shihab Nye, as a poet of diaspora with Arab American heritage, engages with themes that interplay between inclusive identity, hybridity and its intricate link to memory. In her works, memories from the past, cultural artefacts, familial bonds and the hybrid nature of identity are tools of cultural inclusivity. Rather than alienating the diasporic subject, they actively participate in the cultural synthesis of inclusivity. She inhabits what Ahdaf Soueif calls "a ground valued precisely for being a meeting-point for many cultures and traditions" and "the language, the people, the landscape, the food of one culture is constantly reflected off the other" (6). The paper analyses how Nye skilfully finds an unproblematic common ground and blends her Arab cultural heritage in her writings, thus bridging the gaps between cultures.

Naomi Shihab Nye is a prominent American poet, novelist, and educator whose work is deeply informed by her Palestinian American heritage and multicultural background. Nye was born in 1952 to Aziz Shihab, a Palestinian descendant, and a mother of German American origin. She lived in St. Antonio, Palestine, and travelled worldwide. Her relocation to Palestine in 1966 and her journey back and forth helped her embrace cultural diversity. She is especially celebrated for writing that bridges cultural divides, encouraging readers to engage with complex narratives of displacement, memory, and resilience. In an article in "The New Advocate", Nye states"

> I receive letters from people I have never met, asking, "… Are you offended to be called a Palestinian American?" Not at all. I now call myself that. I am [sic] that. 'different' always felt like a compliment, not an insult. (121)

The complex nature of hybrid identity in Arab American cultural subjectivity is intensively discussed through continuously evolving dialogues in Nye's poetry. Her works, particularly the poems *Making a Fist* (1995), *My Father and the Fig Tree* (2002) and *Different Ways to Pray* (2006) offer a sustained engagement with postcolonial and multicultural frameworks. The child's question to the mother about death. In Making a Fist, "How do you know if you are going to die?"(Fist, Nye) and the mother's answer to the query, "When you can no longer make a fist" (Fist, Nye), make the reader aware of the child's growing discomfort towards the idea of displacement. This exchange transforms the child's sickly moment in the backseat of a car on the road north of Tampico into an allegory for persistence in the face of uncertainty and border-crossing, literal and

figurative. The strong bond of the mother and daughter and their effort to make a fist of effort towards all odds and differences while crossing borders of cultural difference emphasises their endurance in a diasporic space. The imagery of "watching palm trees swirl a sickening pattern past the glass" and a "stomach … split wide inside my skin" enacts the embodied nature of migratory trauma, while the poem's meditative conclusion "clenching and opening one small hand" evokes the ongoing, iterative process of identity formation in the aftermath of movement and rupture (Nye; Ahmed, Sarahan, and Abdelfattah 220).

Drawing upon Stuart Hall's theorisation that cultural identity consists of "being" rooted in continuity as well as "becoming" through transformation (Hall 225). Naomi Nye used storytelling to resist colonialism and its effect on her homeland, Palestine. She tells stories about her Arabic root to preserve her identity and transmit her Arabic culture. She wants to preserve the memories of her homeland, her father's memories, and her grandmother's stories. She used poetry to "recreate experience" (GómezVega 117) The mother's wisdom passed down and embodied in the gesture of the first provides a model of cultural transmission that is both mnemonic and performative, allowing the speaker to hold onto identity "still lying in the backseat behind all my questions" (Nye).

Making a Fist a reflective poem revolving around the bond of a mother and daughter, engages with themes of multiculturalism and displacement. The mother's lens of endurance and acceptance helps the child understand cultural displacement and displacement from the world, as they travel with illness. In My Father and the Fig Tree, it connects three multicultural worlds. The narrator in the poem is the daughter of a Palestinian refugee and a German American. She decodes her father's connection to the fig tree. The fig tree is the lost home, memory, and symbol of exile for the father. The mother and daughter do not share this sense of belonging. Different Ways of Praying explores the theme of culturally diverse and distinct practices of praying in the Middle East. The poem describes women who pray in private corners, men who cry for relief from earthly pain, pilgrims who journey to holy places, those who find spirituality in daily labour, and even some who disregard prayer altogether..

My Father and the Fig Tree further explores the intersection of memory, longing, and identity, using the figure of the fig tree as a rich symbol of rootedness and generational transmission. The father's persistent wish "For other fruits my father was indifferent. / He would point at the cherry trees and say, / 'See those? I wish they were figs'" is emblematic of diasporic nostalgia and the enduring pull of homeland (Nye, Fig tree). The father's elaborate folktales, always featuring a fig tree regardless of context, highlight the mnemonic agency of storytelling as a means to preserve, reconstruct, and transmit Palestinian heritage across temporal and spatial divides (Storytelling of Palestinians' Experience. The fig becomes a symbol of identity, an anchor, memory and nostalgia for the father, which safeguards his identity.

Bhabha's framework of "double voicing" and "third space" is vividly manifest in the father's dual relationship with his lost homeland and his new surroundings in America (Bhabha 54). He is caught between the "world that was always his own" and the bland substitutions of American gardens, "lima beans, zucchini, parsley, beets" (Nye, Fig tree). The poem's closing movement, where the father, in Dallas, Texas, finally cultivates a fig tree "plucking his fruits like ripe tokens, emblems, assurance of a world that was always his own," epitomises the creative flourishing that is possible through hybridity and negotiation (Nye, Fig tree). Growing and claiming the fig in diaspora signifies adaptation to and partial reclamation of lost history. Charles Taylor states:

> Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others. 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 self is intrinsically connected to equality in differences, which can be traced in the multicultural mirror of mother, father, and daughter relating to the fig tree. Nye's Different Ways to Pray approaches multiculturalism within the realm of cultural and spiritual practices. There is an equal acceptance of different spiritual practices in the Arab American cultural space. Nye writes, "There was the method of kneeling, / a fine method, if you lived in a country / where stones were smooth" and "the ones present at births, / humming quietly to perspiring mothers" (Pray). The world created by Nye through her words focuses on the adaptability of multiplicity in custom as she juxtaposes the lines "the young ones … who had been to America," and elders who "prayed for the young ones. …" (Nye, Pray). She subverts a particular, advocated form of spirituality and advocates individual choice-based practice of spirituality. This is illustrated through the older man, Fowzi. His spirituality was vernacular and spoke to God as easily as he spoke to his goats.

Throughout these poems, Nye's reliance on intimate, quotidian imagery, such as meals shared, needlework performed, and trees tended, serves as an antidote to reductive stereotypes that frequently dominate mainstream representations of Arab or Palestinian identity (Bloem 11; Storytelling of Palestinians' Experience). Her poetic voice is deeply aware of the Orientalist gaze and persistently corrects it by foregrounding the dignity, creativity, and resilience of ordinary Arab American lives (Said xv; Ahmed, Sarahan, and Abdelfattah 218). The effect is to "humanise the Palestinian experience amid conflict, showcasing individual suffering and resilience," as recent scholarship observes (Storytelling of Palestinians' Experience 1).

Memory functions as both content and method in Nye's work; her poems are not only about remembering but also perform acts of remembrance, reinscribing Palestinian and Arab American experience in the cultural archive (Masood 129; GómezVega 117). By privileging storytelling as an act of mnemonic agency, Nye preserves and empowers identities "at risk in a civilisation

troubled by racial divisions" (Abdelrazek 113). Her poems embody the ethical imperative outlined by Taylor: to acknowledge the "real damage" done by misrecognition or marginalisation, and to offer instead a space in which cultural difference is not only tolerated but affirmed as constitutive of a just society (Taylor 25).

Crucially, Nye's nuanced engagement with hybridity reframes it not as a diluted or conflicted state but as a generative, vital process. Making a fist closes with the speaker, who is "still lying in the backseat behind all my questions, / clenching and opening one small hand" (Nye). This gesture is both rooted in family history and open to the future, articulating a vision of identity that is participatory, mobile, and capable of transformation. The literal and metaphorical border crossing runs throughout Nye's poetry, suggesting survival is contingent on the willingness to negotiate between cultural worlds, hold onto inherited strengths, and adapt to new circumstances (Bhabha 54).

My Father and the Fig Tree further exemplifies the interlinking of memory and place as the father's nostalgia is ultimately given form through the successful cultivation of a fig tree in Texas. Plucking ripe fruit, he claims tokens "assurance of a world that was always his own" (Nye). This moment stages a reclamation of subjectivity and homeland that is incomplete but meaningful, embodying the agency Hall sees as essential to diasporic self-fashioning (Hall 225). The mother's alternately practical and nurturing role mirrors the complexities of negotiating family belonging in bicultural contexts (Masood 130).

In Different Ways to Pray, the coexistence of pain and happiness, "the men ate heartily … and were happy despite the pain, / because there was also happiness" (Nye) resonates with Taylor's assertion that recognition and inclusion are incomplete unless hardship is counterbalanced with dignity and hope (Taylor 36). The variety of prayer forms and the turn toward everyday acts as sacred, balancing baskets of grapes, stitching dresses, reinforces Nye's egalitarian, inclusive poetics, in which all forms of devotion and cultural practice merit respect (Ahmed, Sarahan, and Abdelfattah). By centring "minor" characters and marginal rituals, she subverts dominant hierarchies and reimagines Arab American identity as fundamentally open, dialogic, and solidaristic (Majaj; Bloem 9).

The cumulative effect of Nye's poetry is to offer a paradigm of hybrid identity grounded in mnemonic agency, everyday inclusiveness, and resilient hope. Her work foregrounds the power of narrative and metaphor to recover and recreate meaning in the context of loss, migration, and fragmentation. Rather than seeking closure or an essentialist definition, Nye's speakers remain in motion, inhabiting the productive spaces "in between" cultures and generations (Bhabha 54; GómezVega 117). The poems invite readers, regardless of origin, to inhabit these spaces of encounter and exchange, advancing the project of multicultural understanding as a daily, reciprocal, ethical pursuit.

Conclusion

Naomi Shihab Nye's selected poems embody a nuanced and deeply ethical model of cultural identity as a continuous practice of remembrance, hybridity, and inclusive transformation. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Hall, Bhabha, and Taylor, this analysis has shown how her poetry reclaims voice and dignity for Arab Americans and other minoritised subjects, destabilises stereotypes through intimate detail, and positions ordinary acts and memories at the heart of cultural survival and creative belonging. The complexity of memory, adaptation, and the perspective of symbolic significance of culturally specific artefacts is represented through the multicultural lens of Nye's world of words. The three poems analysed in the paper trace Nye's use of the hybridity of identity and memory to create an inclusive identity by blending Arab American heritage.

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