

# Ancestral Voices in the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye: A Study of Cultural Duality



A Thesis Submitted by  
Fatma S. Assef  
For the Degree of MA in American Literature

## Supervisors

Prof. Nazek A. Fahmy  
Dr. Azza M. H. El-Kholy  
Dr. Susan S. Mashaal

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Serial No :	306
Classification :	440

Department of English Language and Literature  
Faculty of Arts  
University of Alexandria

2005

## Preface

Though still in its incipient evolutionary phases, Arab American poetry is already budding into a full-fledged being that has emerged as an offshoot of one hundred years of thorny existence on the American mainland. This body, now heading towards a quicker fruition, is evolving into an idiosyncratic and articulate ethnic expression of a race that was once considered by its host as the most eccentric of all foreigners.

This study focuses on the Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye, who, to my mind and for reasons that the thesis sets out to prove, best exemplifies the notion of dual cultural identity. Nye was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 12, 1952. Her father, Aziz Shihab, was a Palestinian immigrant from Jerusalem who came to the United States as a teenager and soon settled in St. Louis and married Nye's mother who is of Swiss-German descent. She received her high-school education in Ramallah, Old City, Jerusalem, and in San Antonio, Texas. She then received her BA degree in World Religions and English in 1974 at Trinity University in San Antonio. Nye is independent as far as her political tendencies are concerned, and is ecumenical in her religious visions. She is a freelance poet, essayist, anthologist, novelist, short story writer, folk singer, songwriter, teacher, juvenile fiction author, writer-in-the-

schools and translator. Nye was awarded numerous prizes and has acquired a worldwide reputation for being a cultural border crosser.

The study falls into four chapters and a conclusion. The first two chapters form the background of the research, the first is both historical and socio-political, while the second is theoretical. The common denominator that unites the poems elected and examined in chapters three and four, whether political or non-political, is the presence of Cultural Duality and Ancestral Voices.

Entitled “One Hundred Years of Pariahdom: Arab Americans Between Margin and Mainstream”, the first chapter presents a brief historical overview of the three Arab immigration waves to America and highlights Arab Americans’ modes of existence between their ethnic margin culture and the dominant mainstream. The chapter, thus, surveys who they are, when they came to the United States and where and how they settled. Significant aspects pertaining to Arab Americans, such as their political inclinations, social conflicts and rich ethnic heritage are investigated as well. The chapter then tackles the integration problems which Arab Americans had to deal with. Examples of discrimination against Arabs, the deterioration of their image and the loss of their identity lead into a discussion of how prejudice and media misrepresentations could cause collective silence and ethnic

invisibility, and how stereotyping could eventually lead to serious integration problems. Key concepts significant to the study like “Cultural Duality” and “Ancestral Voices” are examined in this introductory chapter.

The second chapter, “Cultural Studies and Sociological Cultural Criticism: Defining Cultural Duality”, examines some definitions of the term “culture” in preparation for a detailed discussion of “cultural studies” and “cultural criticism”, respectively, and introduces the critical approach suggested for the study. Focusing on the sociological perspective of cultural studies, the chapter also attempts to address ethnic issues such as ethno-cultural identity, hyphenated identity, ethnic literature, cultural border crossing, multiculturalism, mass media theories and, finally, stereotyping.

Chapter three is entitled “Straddling the Divide: Naomi Shihab Nye’s Political Poetry”. This chapter investigates Nye’s political poetry in an attempt to arrive at the formula she employs in her political peripheral, with which she succeeds to relate herself to the current political world events and crises as a bi-cultural ethnic individual. The relevant part of the critical perspective dealt with in chapter two is adopted in this chapter to investigate Nye’s political work. Here concepts of mass media, stereotyping and undermining



of typecast cultural moulds are applied to Nye's political poetry which examines relevant political themes and issues of mass media, stereotyping, silent resistance, invisibility, brotherhood and solidarity. The chapter sets out to prove, by illustrating from Nye's verse, that silence is a byproduct of Cultural Duality and is prompted by media misrepresentations of Arabs in America, stereotyping, cultural bias and military occupation in Palestine. Furthermore, it demonstrates how Nye's objections to American Middle Eastern policy stems from her own Cultural Duality. Reasons for her reservations include her awareness of the role of mass media in times of war; whether the intentional politically oriented filtering and black-out of news in America or the blatant censorship in the Old World. The chapter's focal issue lies in its argument that because of the numerous examples of silent resistance, defective Western propaganda reflecting sheer Palestinian violence ought to be reconsidered. The chapter also demonstrates Nye's attempt to undermine Western pigeonholing of Arabs by recommending Arab brotherhood. Arab solidarity is viewed as a solution for the collective silence and invisibility and a reflection of the more general human brotherhood, which, in turn, should secure Western commiseration for the Palestinian issue.

The last chapter, which covers the majority of the poet's output, is entitled "Speaking Through Ancestral Voices: Nye's Non-political Poetry". The main aim of this chapter is to arrive at the formula which Nye employs in her personal peripherals in order to naturalize her own cultural split and ease the strain of her duality. It presents her personal formula during her mission to attain the "whole self" in the form of six basic techniques on which the chapter is structurally pivoted. The first step to reach her target comprises her retrieval of the past through reconstructing memory which is encapsulated in heritage by resorting to her compelling Arab Ancestral Voices: ethnic practices and symbols such as storytelling, matriarchy, Arabic and ethnic rituals such as socializing clan habits, food and gatherings. The second technique which she employs is related to the issue of dual cultural identity and is, namely: border crossing. The wandering motif, which involves journeying into both the "other" and the "self", into the inward and the outward, is one of the most consistently eminent in her work and leads to, first, a thorough recognition of cultural differences and, second, an acknowledgment of the other and, in turn, of the self. The chapter illustrates how Nye is a universal philanthropist who manages to ground her split cultural self into a miscellaneous mélange of racial minorities. Her third technique is that of deliberately overcoming the risks of the

journey which presupposes cultural perils as feelings of displacement, invisibility, loss, constraint, estrangement and disjointedness. To achieve the whole self, she uses a fourth technique which consists of seeking both unison with nature and with small forgotten things in everyday life, a thing quite characteristic of Nye. The fifth technique is related to her American Ancestral Voice which she firmly acknowledges knowing that she is deeply rooted in the American tradition. Thus, she entrenches her duality and initiates the actual negotiation between the polarities of her character and attempts to merge the split. The sixth technique is related to solving the paradox of being an Arab American by reconciling between existent extremes that permeate the life of any ethnic member with a twofold background: Old and New World, past and future, containment and mobility, exile and home. By attempting as much, Nye sets out on her journey to find her whole self and to assimilate both identities and emerge out of the experience with a re-defined self. This procedure is intersected by various applicable tenets of cultural studies in general, and the sociological school in cultural criticism in particular.

Finally, the conclusion of the research sums up the thesis and illustrates how Ancestral Voices play a major role in defining Nye's Cultural Duality.