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Introduction

The background in which people grow up greatly influences what they do with their lives. Poets, musicians, painters, athletes can all credit some aspect in their childhood as a motivation towards their careers. Authors in particular like to express through writing issues that they appreciate about their societies or those that they condemn and would like to see changes. Naomi Shihab Nye's writings have been heavily influenced by her cultural background, issues such as racism and the quest to bring peace to the Middle East.

Early life

Poet, novelist and songwriter, Naomi Shihab Nye was born on March 12 1952 in St. Louis, Missouri to a Palestinian father and an American mother. Nye began writing when she was a child aged 6 years. Her mother used to read stories to her during her childhood and this greatly influenced her to love

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literature and to start writing. Her earliest works were based on childish things that she saw and did. She loved things about her immediate environment and she could write about squirrels, cats, teachers and family (Barenblat, 1999). She was educated in Ramallah-Palestine, Old City - Jerusalem, Israel and in San Antonio-Texas, US from where she attended Trinity University and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and World Religions. Nye is an accomplished author whose works are celebrated by millions of people across the world.

Examples of her work

Nye has written poems, Short stories, a novel and a collection of short essays. Examples of her poem collections include; " Different ways to pray", " You and Yours" (2005)" transfer" (2011) " A Maze Me", " Field Trip", " 19 varieties of gazelle: Poems of the Middle East, " Red suitcase" (1994).

Examples of her short stories are; " There is no long distance", " Never in a hurry" and " Hamadi". " Habibi" (1997) is one of her best known novels. The novel is a semiautobiographical of herself through the story of an Arab-American teenager who moves from the US to Jerusalem in the early 1990s. This account mirrors Nye's very own movement from the US to the village of Sinjil when she was young. Nye also has a picture book titled " Lullaby Raft" which has also featured as the title of her two music albums.

Nye's Motivations for literature

In her early life and high school, Naomi lived in Ramallah- Palestine, Jerusalem-Israel and San Antonio, Texas. She saw many contrasts about culture, politics and religions in those places but she also noted many

similarities. This motivated her to write her first collection of poems titled “ Different Ways to Pray”. As an Arab American, Nye writes about her experiences about peace and heritage (Gómez-Vega, 109; Orfalea, 56). She is sensitive and aware of cultures. Her book *Sitti’s Secrets* (1994) addresses the American-Arab relationship with her grandmother-Sitti (Arabic for grandmother). She has been praised by other authors for capturing the emotions of a child who longs for the distant grandparent. The novel *Habibi* (1997) presents the story of a young man who moves from his country to Jerusalem in the 1970s. The book is autobiographical in its focus and as noted in *The New York Times Book Review*. It magnifies the lens of adolescence and explains the challenges of bringing up children in the 21st century.

One of greatest motivations was a visit to her Palestinian grandmother in the village of Sinjil where her political views were shaped (Barenblat, 1999). This has largely been a major focus of her works. The three places Ramallah, Jerusalem and San Antonio where she grew up have also influenced her writings. She says that each place had a distinct culture and politics (Nye, 2005; Nye, 2000). Her primary source of her works has been random characters she meets on a day to day basis, local life and her ancestry. Naomi’s first collection of poems titled “ different ways to pray” was motivated by the contrasts and the similarities between Christianity and Islam (Nye, 2002). As she grew up, she faced personal problems with racial issues, which influenced her writing (Gómez-Vega, 245). She was torn between her Arab and American cultures and nationalities but as she grew up, she developed deep humanitarian attitude, which motivated most of her

writings (Mercer & Linda, 35).

Nye has continued writing about her immediate environment placing a lot of emphasis on politics and the day-to-day lives of people in her society. She has focused on peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies and the world at large. For instance after the 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, Nye became a strong voice against terrorism and prejudice. After the infamous attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, there was a lot of misunderstanding between Arabs and Americans and this prompted her to collect all poems that she had written about the Middle East as well as her experiences as an Arab-American into a volume titled *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002). The collection was warmly received and appreciated by Americans for its timeliness and the relevance of the messages the poems contained.

Nye has also expanded her coverage of the cultural difference outside Arab and American cultures. In her neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas she interacts with neighbors who are mostly, Mexican American. In the collection of poems titled *Hugging the Jukebox* (1982) she focuses on ordinary connections between diverse cultures and their perspectives of other lands. In that collection she writes, " we move forward, confident we were born into a large family, our brothers cover the earth" (Mercer & Linda, 23). In that collection she is shown to create poetry from everyday occurrences. The poem " The Trash pickers of San Antonio" presents an account of trash pickers in San Antonio. The title " Hugging the jukebox" explains about a boy who is so enthusiastic about a jukebox that he adopts and even sings its songs in such a way that " strings a hundred passionate sentences in a

single line” (Mercer & Linda, 23). Nye uses a warm and celebratory tone as he elaborates on the events of people in his society.

While writing for Four Winds Press, Nye said that her environment, local life and the random people she meets in the streets are also a major inspiration for her literary works. She also states that “ through small essential daily tasks” she gets to learn how people can coexist harmoniously regardless of ethnic, racial, gender, or religious differences. Paul Christen while writing an article in Contemporary Women Poets described Nye as, “ the voice of childhood in America, the voice of the girls at the age of daring exploration” (poetryfoundation. org). She has also been described as being, “ international in scope and internal in focus” (poetryfoundation. org). Nye gains these attributes due to her versatility in writing and the effectiveness of her works in delivering messages borne from personal experience and convictions as an Arab-American.

Nye is very much attached to what is going on in the Middle East with a special focus on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The poems in her collection *Yellow Glove* (1986) address the conflict. The poem, “ Blood” is exclusively about the Palestine-Israeli conflict in which Nye describes a café in the combat-weary city of Beirut. She bemoans, “ a world where no one saves anyone” (Nye, 23). This is in reference to the armed conflict that was going on in Beirut in the late 1980s. “ Red Suitcase” (1994) also explores the impacts of violence on daily life in the Middle East.

The poems *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2002) were meant to urge for peace, understanding and the elimination of prejudice among Americans and Arabs. Her book, *You and Yours* (2005) also explores

issues about peace in the Middle East. She elaborates issues about her as a mother and a traveller.

Nye is also a versatile writer and she has produced literature for children, poetry translations and song recordings. She has edited anthologies such as *This Same Sky* (1992) an award-winning collection which features stories from sixty-eight countries and 129 poets! Nye is motivated to translate literary works because she believes that translations improve the quality of a literary piece. To quote her, “ when someone asks how much is lost in translation I view it as, how much is gained!” (Nye, 2000). In the collection titled *This Same Sky*, Nye managed to organize the stories to represent global range and to make the stories appeal to a wider range of readers. Nye compiled and edited a collection titled *The Tree is older than you are* (1995) which is a bilingual anthology of Mexican poetry. Interestingly, Nye compiled the collection titled *I Feel a Little Jumpy around You* (1996). This is a collection of “ his and her” poems where a poem written by a man is paired with one written by a woman. The anthology *The Space between Our Footsteps* (1998) presents the work of 127 modern Middle-Eastern artists and poets which represent 19 countries. In these collections, Nye tries to make poetry interesting to read and more so make it educative to divergent people.

Nye’s poems have urgency in the spoken language and she uses direct and unadorned vocabulary, which she uses to address emotive issues about peace and stability. In a simplistic yet strongly worded poems and stories, Nye’s works continue to condemn injustice, prejudice and terrorism

reminding Americans that they have ties to other lands and that the concerns for humanity are truly universal.

Awards

Nye's prowess in writing, the motivations behind her writings and the effectiveness of her literature on societies has given her numerous awards. Some of them have come from the Texas Institute of Letters and the International Poetry Forum. She has won four Pushcart prizes, the Carity Randall prize among many others. Nye has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a Witter Bynner Fellow and a Lannan Fellow. The fellowships and awards have also motivated Nye to come up with literature that unites the world and one that is appreciative of the diversity of human cultures.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the manner and place in which someone grows up has a major influence on their undertakings as adults. Naomi Shihab Nye was born 50 years ago and she is one of the most popular poets, Naomi Nye is a celebrated Arab-Palestinian author whose works are premised on the need for peaceful coexistence between different cultures of the world. She has written numerous poems, collections of short stories, novels and other literary works. Nye's works have been motivated by her growing up in Ramallah-Palestine, Old City -Jerusalem, Israel and in San Antonio-Texas Nye states that she has always loved gaps of social needs in the society. She discovered that social justice and peaceful coexistence of divergent cultures is still a problem and that people have not embraced to live with each other regardless of ethnic, racial, or cultural differences. She writes about

integrations with her neighbour and also about global issues such as injustice, peace and war in regions such as the Middle East. She extensively uses her own examples in life to show that indeed humanity needs are universal and that all cultures need to tolerate, appreciate, and complement each other for the good of humanity.

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