CHAPTER V
CONTEMPORARY ARAB-AMERICAN POETS

I. MALE POETS:
H.S. HAMOD AND FAWAZ TURKI

II. FEMALE POETS:
D.H. MELHEM AND NAOMI SHIHAB NYE
H.S. HAMOD (1936- )

My poems are a mixture of sounds heard and unheard from my life... They are often songs to the courage and foolishness our parents demonstrated by coming to America and they tell of the comic and tragic lives they and we, all live, each in our own way- and yet each a part of some larger “we” that we as Arabs participate in.

H.S. Hamod
(Orfalea, Elmusa 164)

In an essay titled Arab American Poetry, Hamod wrote, “All Arab-American poets worth their salt blend their feelings about their actual or ancestral homeland with their experience in America” (1). This statement largely summarizes what Arab-American poetry is all about. Poets of old and new generations fuse “old country in their minds and hearts with their American experience” (Arab American Poetry 1). The result is poetry being born about Arab-American identity, hybridity, biculturality and it in turn, complements and contributes to the growth of general American culture and its creative edge.

Born in Gary, Indiana, in 1936, a son of a Muslim imam who migrated from Lebanon, Hamod merges his Islamic/Arab culture with that of modern America. His collection of poems, Dying with the Wrong Name and New and Selected Poems (1980) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. His other works include The Famous Boating Party (1970) and The Holding Action (1969). Hamod received his doctorate from the University of Iowa and is a frequent guest
on talk shows in Washington D.C., New York and in San Diego, where he speaks often about terrorism, Middle East, world affairs and contemporary poetry.

True to Arab-American tradition, Hamod like his contemporaries within his community writes with passion and commitment about identity, Arab culture and life in the US. “Clearly the Arab-American poets are not mired in a tradition of mere homage and nostalgia or simply adhere to safe forms and styles that allow them to be easily categorized” (Abinader 5). Hamod is a poet who goes beyond the “safe forms” to raise his voice strongly for the Palestinian cause. A harsh critic of US government and its policy of Israel, Hamod does not hesitate to voice his true feelings regarding the Palestine-Israel issue in his work. He writes in one of his poems, There is Something Dangerous about A Zoo in Rafah, about the plight of children, who become innocent victims of war:

in this nightmare
of Israel torture and destruction,
where children weren’t allowed
to go out
for fear of Israeli snipers,…
the two children,…
they didn’t move fast enough
when the Abraham shell
screamed through the air,
now
the two twisted children
lie in one another’s arms, tight
with fear, tightly bound—until,
suddenly
without breath (49-75)

Tackling the Palestine-Israel conflict in such manner presents unique problems to Arab-American writers. "With the escalation of US arms shipment to Israel since 1967, for an Arab-American poet to criticize his country's stance in anything but the most veiled terms was risky. He had no legs to stand on, political or literary, in the halls of power" (Orfalea, Elmusa xxiv). However, almost all poets speak for the Arab cause, which itself is a powerful statement against injustice and occupation by Israel. Hamod has written many essays on the crisis in the Middle East, often criticizing the US administration and US media for frequently distorting matters concerning Palestine tragedy.

Middle East politics have become an essential issue in Arab-American poetry. Along with the preservation of Arab culture and heritage, allegiance to Middle East politics is understood as a part of Arab-American identity. The current generation of writers who were born and brought up in the US, write with pride of their origins and express their desire to continue their association with the other side of the hyphen. Thus, poetry being produced is a celebration of adopting a new culture and it also underlines their hidden grief. As Hamod writes "...in truth, our ethnicity helps shape the way we see and the way we write- so it is a part of what our poems are made of" (Orfalea, Elmusa 164). Most of his work is related to his family, roots, immigration, food and language.

"There's always an old Arab in my mind" (Simarski 4), there's an amalgam of Hamod's father, his grandfather and others entwined in his poetry. Hamod makes constant references to the theme of family, especially to his father along with old country values and heritage, as he does in his poem Moving.

it was that way in my "old Country" of
stories of truth my father and grandfather and their grand father
before them
everyone everything stuck together things stayed
and when they moved
Family remains to all Arab-Americans a life line that ensures their existence. The loss of the family is loss of self. Family represents identity and its crucial element that binds them to their heritage. Hamod’s *Lines to My Father* (On the Death of My Father, Gary, Indiana, 1967), is a moving poem about his father and his death in 1967 in Indiana.

My father is sitting on a park bench besides me

Taking the air, watching my children in the grass,

He is talking of water,

Trying to rest,

But he must go, his mosque waiting.

My father, dreaming of water when weakened,

When I found him, had only blood in his mouth. (15-21)

Parents and grandparents are often associated with the life of the old country. He places his father in their native land, among relatives and food. *Lines to My Father* shows his loyalty to his parents, ancestors, and above all to his native land.

My father is moving East, to Lebanon, eating kib’be, his

Mother offering him grapes and shade,

He is walking in the mountain, drinking water... (12-14)

The memory of their ancestors is a vital link that binds them to their roots. In his poetry, Hamod tries to find sense of homeland, of community, of family different and contrary to the one he is living presently. Food, landscape, music, memories of Arabic spoken, all have become emblems of Arab-American heritage. *Leaves* is one such poem that speaks of these elements.

Tonight, Sally and I are making stuffed
grapeleaves, we get out a package, its
drying out, I've been saving it in the freezer, its
one of the last things my father ever picked in this
life- there're over five years old...

We find his Arabic letters
all over the place (1-23)

Poetry itself is a part of Arab heritage. For Arabs, it is a fundamental
literary form, dating back to the quasida or ode, the pre-islamic oral poetry of
monorhymes. Further, poetry is seen as a force of inspiration and celebration.
"The ancient Arabs wish one another joy but for three things- the birth of a boy,
the coming of a poet and the foaling of a noble mare" (Orfalea, Elmusa xv). In the
present context Arab-American poets, "writing in a society less sympathetic to
their calling and in a different language from their ancestors, may have
nonetheless retained the Arab belief about centrality of poetry to human life"
(Simarski 3). In the poem Leaves, Hamod shows that poetry is a part of their lives,
a public treasure, a connector of people and it is not isolated in the academy.

Last week my mother told me, when I was
asking why I became a poet, "But don't you remember,
your father made up poems, don't you remember him
signing in the case as we drove- those were poems.

Further, as in the case of Naomi Shihab Nye and many new generation Arab-
Americans, Hamod regrets his inability to speak in Arabic.

Even now, at night, I sometimes
Get out the Arabic grammar book
though it seems so late.
Hamod's poem *After the Funeral of Assam Hamody*, is a case in point that highlights the increasing tension between the first and the new generation Arab-Americans. In the poem, Hamod is placed in an uncomfortable situation when his grandfather orders him to stop the car for prayers in the middle of South Dakota. Hamod writes about the undying religious faith of his grandfather and father and the clash between them and Hamod, who enjoys an unprecedented independence, growing up in the US.

6 pm

middle of South Dakota
after the funeral in Sioux Falls
my father and grand father
ministered the Muslim burial...
me- driving the 1950 Lincoln
ninety miles an hour

"STOP! STOP!"
Stop this car!"...

"It's time to pray"- the Hajj
yanks his Navajo blanket
opening the door (6-23)

Hamod is embarrassed by their behavior and at the same time, is concerned about their safety. Hamod is quite aware of the fact that Arab immigrants often have been the object of discrimination and marginalization. Further, practicing a religion in public, in a predominantly Christian environment cautions Hamod to be extra vigilant. A clash exists between the grand father and the grand son,
Arab/Islamic culture and American culture, spiritual East and the technological West. Hamod remains undecided, uncertain of where he really belongs.

I get out of the car

but don’t go to the blanket

My father says to the others:

“He’s foolish, doesn’t know how
to pray”...

Three old men
chanting the Qur’an in the middle
of a South Dakota night

Allahu Ahkbar

Allahu Ahkbar...

I’m embarrassed to be with them (45-72)

Hamod in his poems especially in After the Funeral of Assam Homady, mixes both languages, Arabic and English. “I’ve always mixed Arabic with English in my poems. Certain things have more power in other languages” (Simarski 4).

Three old men
chanting the Qu’ran in the middle
of a South Dakota night

Allahu Ahkbar...

Ash haduu n lah illah illiawahh...

Muhammed rasoul illah
in high strained voices they chant

_Bismee lahee_

_a rah 'manee raheem (58-67)_

On the one hand this poem can be seen as an attempt to preserve the native language and on the other, to celebrate Arab/Islamic heritage. Verses from the Holy Qu’ran are unchanged and the translated version is not given. Thus Arabic is seen as powerful emblem that represents their culture.

Another notable poem of H.S.Hamod is _Dying with the Wrong Name_, dedicated to all the immigrants “who lost their names at Ellis Island”. The Arab-American community has been largely shaped over a century long history of immigration. The first settlers who immigrated to the US in the early 20th century encountered many unpleasant encounters and had been subjected to widespread discrimination. This particular subject has been exploited by many of the Arab-American writers, including Hamod. In this particular poem, he describes their life struggles in the New World.

And you know, these were not small

men, each was severe...

Nephew Sam ran a cigar store in Michigan City...

And my father went

from Lebanon to the packing houses in Sioux Falls

and Sioux City to the steel mills in Gary, from

nothing to houses and apartments worth more than

a million- in each sweaty day in Sioux City (24-35)

In the same poem Hamod raise the issue of the importance of the “name”, which many were forced to give up upon their arrival at Ellis Island.

A man in a
dark blue suit at Ellis Island says, with
tiredness and authority, “You only need two
names in America” and suddenly- as clearly
as the air, you’ve lost
your name. At first it’s hardly
even noticeable- and it’s easier, you move
about as an American- but looking back
the loss of your name
cuts away something part,
something unspeakable is lost. (19-23)

The loss of name is significant. As Hamod explains, it simply servers an
individual from his or her own family and ethnic origins. It was a heavy price they
had to pay. He ponders on the consequences of dying without your own name.
Since Hussein died without relatives and
because they cut away his last name
at Ellis Island, there was no way to trace
him back even to Lebanon, and Im’a Brahim
had no other name than mother of Brahim,
Even my own father lost his, went from
Hussein Hamode Subh’ to Sam Hamod.
There is something lost in the blood,
something lost down to the bone
in these small changes. (4-13)
As Hamod writes in the poem, these immigrants died with an incomplete name, such as Nephew Sam or mother of Brahim which does not reveal much about a person’s family, thus identity. Hamod’s own father changed his name from, Hussein Hamode Subh’ to Sam Hamod. It is a sacrifice they made in the process of assimilating in to a new culture, part of Americanization. As Hamod writes, “There is a sense of belonging and also a sense of being “the other” who will never wholly fit into the ultimately, none really want to totally fit if it means they have to give up their ethnic heritage” (Arab American Poetry 1).

Arab immigrants and their children, including the writers show that the Arab heritage is still a part of their life. Although the second and third generation Arab-Americans have been born and brought up in the US, longing for the old country remains strong. Hamod presents the case of his father as an example of never losing “the other edge of Lebanon” in Dying with the Wrong Name.

My father, a man I came to know...

where his name, that language, Hussien, Sine Hussin, Im’a Brahim Aslamu Aleikum,

all of these sounds were part of his name, this was that other edge of Lebanon he carried with him, that home, that same good food of the rich smells, it had to be these moments,

these things

were not lost, but were alive and living in this room,

in this house, in these people, in this moment. (84-93)

Memory too plays an important role in the works of Hamod. For an Arab-American poet it is as vital as heritage and identity. Memories of the country left behind along with cultural aspects such as food and music, often find a place in poetry. In Hamod’s poems, as I’ve mentioned several times, he brings back memories of past atrocities. Sabra/Shatilla: In Sorrow is one such poem. The
massacre of Sabra and Shatilla in September 1982 shocked not just Palestinians but a whole world. Lebanese Christian phalangist militia men who entered these refugee camps in Beirut in order to eliminate Palestine “terror cells”. However, consequently hundreds were killed including Palestinians, Syrians, Algerians and women and children.

It is nothing, the blood
into stony ground nothing, we can say
nothing, the flares red and white, blue nothing (1-3)

The conflict between Israel and Palestinians has resulted in thousands being killed in every year and a mass immigration of refugees. These atrocities don’t escape the attention of Arab-American writers. Poets like Hamod are outspoken critics of the US administration and Israel. Even in his poems, his tone is bitter, determine to voice the sufferings of his fellow country men. In comparison to the literary giants of the first generation, modern day writers, write in a more simple, yet passionate style. They do lack the philosophical touch and the Sufi influence. Nonetheless, they are effective. Hamod’s poem, Dying with the Wrong Name was nominated for Pulitzer Prize.

In this particular poem, Sabra/Shatilla:In Sorrow, he gives vivid descriptions of unforgivable and unforgettable scenes.

it is in the face, frangiah, gemeyal, it is
nothing, mustache moves,
nothing, these words
nothing of bazookas, crunch
of bone, nothing, it is nothing, the
children run hiding under the bed...
be peaceful brothers and sisters and do not run away
we are all Arabs we will do nothing it is nothing we do nothing
If Sabra/Shatilla: In Sorrow and Dying with Wrong Name establishes Hamod as an outspoken Arab poet, poems like Dinah Washington on the South Side of Chicago help him justify himself as a poet who is firmly rooted on the both sides of the hyphen. Arab-American poets such as Hamod or Naomi Shihab Nye are not restricted to just one ethnic identity. They build a new identity merging the inherited identity with that of the adopted country. Their diasporic identity gives birth to poetry that synchronizes Arab heritage and American experience. Dinah Washington on the South Side of Chicago appears an American poem in essence.

the truth

that she was a singer possessed

by the muse

intoxicated with music

and her voice carried that love to us

through those long lonely Saturday nights

on the south side of Chicago, thorough the smell of

heroin and scotch, “alone together”

she’d “remember April and you” (30-38)
Along with family, language, immigrant experience, food too is a vital part of Arab culture. Food brings people together. He writes about kib'beh, stuffed grape leaves, fatiyah etc and in Dying with the Wrong Name, an atmosphere of celebration and unity is created around traditional food.

you know the smell of this room, meat and fried onions,

fresh garlic on the salad, tartness of lemon

twists into the air, and ease toward evening

as you walk in

all the silence splits into hellos and hugs

while the world comes together

in the small room. (66-72)

Hamod’s writing also betrays the fact that he is alienated from his native culture and it is deeply regretted. His life, family settled in the US moves further and further away from the Arab/Islamic culture. Moving is a case in point.

so we move now

my new wife and I, my children

move further away like lost

shipmates crying to me for help

asking for some sound, some signal to understand

about this Arabic I sometimes speak what Islam means to horizons…

and me their father-too far

away to be of much help

to be any use…

I sometimes think about a life
I've never known except for a little while
in some old country of time that I remember my father and
grandfather (1-21)

Hamod who was born and brought up in the United States, remembers Middle East from his visits. He has grown up thoroughly immersed in the American culture. As he writes in the poem Moving, he wanted to play baseball while his grand father and father talked about the old country. Again the poet highlights the clash between old and the new generation, memory and perception, a discernible orientation toward one or the other side of the hyphen.

Among his poems written about the American experience, The Double Dream of Falling occupies an important place. Written in the aftermath of September 11 terrorist attack, it is dedicated to the "souls who perished on 9/11." Hamod who is critical of US government on the Palestine issue, attacks the president and the Mayor of New York in his poem for exploiting the incident for political advancement.

Of every day, President Bush and Rudy Guliani
Stepping on the souls of the perished, stepping up
Their political careers, Rudy milking every second, every
Minute every hour he could
With cameras flashing, video recording always in a fresh suit...
He and Guiliani became heroes
on the blood of innocent thousands (43-58)

Hamod condemns the attack and sympathizes with victims. The perpetrators are blamed for misinterpreting the Holy Qu'ran.

While the fools who

Misread, misunderstood and
Defiled the Qu’ran, thinking they
Were going to Heaven
Found themselves quick
In the initiatory (63-71)

Hamod severely criticizes the American media. America itself has become part of their obsessive news culture following the terror attacks on the twin towers.

Wake up America...

Guess what America

You’re part
Of the news-- now
You are the
New, that obsessive broadcast...

Repeated (11-22)

The incident has been over politicized and exploited by the media and the politicians. Hamod reveals how these people, especially President George W. Bush and New York Mayor Guiliani used the blood of the victims for their personal advances.

And when Guiliani was voted Time’s Man of the Year,...

No one in these places understood why Guilini was
Such a hero, all he’d done was step on the souls
Of the dead,...

No one understand why Bush suddenly decided he
Was a warrior, never having been to war,
But here was his moment...

he didn’t want to

Solve the problems, but wanted to make more

War...

Bring more death, more

Revenge (100-116)

His rhetoric is similar to the one he uses when writing about Israel-Palestine conflict. Hamod expresses his anger and frustration open at the political leaders for failing to resolve hostilities. In both cases, the real victims have been forgotten. In an essay titled Crisis in the Middle East, he writes, “Jews want to live in peace. The Arabs both Christians and Muslims want to live in peace. We Americans want peace and justice. So where are the problems, why can’t we solve them?”(1).

Hamod, as writer is engaged in political activism on Arab issues and preservation of Arab culture in their lives, while also seeking to integrate into the American context. Like many of the Arab-Americans, he is affected by the issue of identity and writes out of experience. He stresses on the conflict between second and third generation Arab-Americans. His work is part American and part Arab-Islamic. Both American and Arab identities are integrated in the work. And the work produced is a combination of both cultures. As Hamod explains the “double vision gives us something worth seeking and hearing about” (Arab American Poetry 2).
FAWAZ TURKI (1940- )

and I read *Time* magazine.

a safe time to think…

about Palestine and olive trees,

and I pity myself

and the place I came from.

(Being A Good *American* 41-53)

Palestine American writer, Fawaz Turki is best known for writing in English the first member of a Palestine who grew up in a refugee camp. *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile* (1972) one of the most acclaimed works by a Palestinian was followed by its sequel, *Soul in Exile: Lives of Palestinian Revolutionary* (1988). Another notable publication of Turki is *Exile’s Return* (1994). His essays on the fate of Palestine have been published time and again in journals such as *International Herald Tribune, New York, World View, Journal and Palestine Studies*. Among the poetry collection, *Tel Zaatar was the Hill of Thyme* (1978) is seen as his finest work. Turki has been a writer in residence and the Virginia Centre for the Creative Arts and a visiting professor at the state university in New York at Buffalo. As a publicist and an organizer for the Palestine cause, he is widely engaged in political activism, and has led Palestinian delegations to international conferences.

Born in Haifa in 1940, Turki grew up in a refugee camp of Borj el Barajni on the outskirts of Beirut. His life story is around the frustration of a people bereft of identity and gives a clear vision on the philosophies and emotions of the Palestinian people. “Palestinians have suffered the institutionalized humiliation of military occupation, the helplessness of statelessness, the ravages of concussion bombs, the horror of massacres. We here suffered merciless sieges by frenzied packs outside out camps in Lebanon and degradation from the code of bullying which is embraced by setters on the West Bank” (Turki, “A Soul in Exile” 3).
Palestinians for decades have longed to return to their ancestral land. Their desperate need is to live in a country where they will have a government, their own politics, bureaucrats, elected bodies, and most importantly a future. "Memory and imagination have watered the dream of generations of Palestinian refugees giving birth to something more formidable, more exquisite, than even first love" (Turki, "A Soul in Exile" 2). He expresses the desire of his people and their desperation in his poem titled, Moments of Ridicule and Love:

In moments of desperation

Palestinian poets wish

they had a government to assail,

politicians,

bureaucrats,

elected bodies

to ridicule.

We never realized

that dragging such comic trivia

into a poem

could be,

like first love,

an exquisite thought. (1-13)

Though his rhetoric is severely critical on the subject of Zionism, it undergoes a dramatic change when he speaks of ordinary Israelis. For example in his poem In Search of Yacove Eved, he writes of an ordinary Israeli who himself suffered much owing to the violence caused by the ongoing conflict.

Yacove Eved was an Israeli....
whenever I passed him in the park,

I always said

Salaam Yacove

and Yacove Eved

always waved both his arms

and said Shalom shaaer.

Yacove Eved is like me

he knows all the stabbed drams

all the ones who died

and who now keep company

with their gods ...

he knows all the lovely travelers

all the ones who never returned

whose ships are lost at sea. (1-32)

As Turki writes, at present, he is unable to find Yocove Eved, and he dedicates these verses to him. The poem, a touching paean to an Israeli is tragic, but in a positive light. It celebrates the notion of brotherhood against an environment of violence and hostility. As he believes, “The poet’s work must not only reflect his society’s aspirations, but attempts to be its window on a life and aspire to lend dignity, to its shattered landscape” (Orfalea, Elmusa 196). Turki attempts to portray his people in a positive light, giving them a better self image, associate them with human qualities instead of the negative, stereotypical image of terrorist and suicide bombers frequently associated with them.

Turki believes that the destiny of Israel and Palestine can not be resolved separately. Zionism and its impact on the Palestinians hover over them as a shadow.
“It has touched them in such a grotesque and sustained way that the very heart of crisis in their soil, the very way they map their landscape of awareness, the very tension of every movement, have come to be rooted in that devastating historical encounter, when they were disenfranchised five decades ago” (Turki, “A Soul in Exile” 1).

As a Palestinian who grew up in refugee camps, he naturally draws material from his own experiences and from the tragic background of his people’s struggle. Turki feels, growing up Palestinian,

is something that, constantly addresses every impulse in our lives. The oppressive kinship that Israeli Jews have created with Palestinian Arabs is so drastic that it pervades even our dreams. It would be hard to find a single Palestinian today who could express human feelings or define the intimate centre of their identity, without reference to Zionism. (“A Soul in Exile” 1)

Turki like his Arab American predecessors and contemporaries, addresses communal concerns than their personal ones. As a whole, works of Arab-American writers prove that they are greatly influenced by the mother country and its culture, tensions and truly depict the anxieties, pressure left by the Arab diaspora. In fact, Arab-American identity is principally a transplanted identity, “turning upon a preservation of Arab culture, maintenance of the Arab language, involvement in Middle Eastern politics and a primary relationship to the Arab world” (Majaj, Hyphenated Author 1).

Approaches to the Middle Eastern imbriglio are various in thematic concerns among the Arab American writers. In the case of Turki, he is fixated by injustices melted out to Palestinian. Tel Zaatar was the Hill of Thyme is one such poem, where the anger and frustration are lashed out. “I leave the child to grow up by itself as a beggar from the hilling zone ... Heaven is full of children who died in September” (1-4).

Further, a secondary view of the Arab American identity is that,

Arab American identity is intrinsically American and should be understood in relation to the American context and American framework of assimilation and multiculturalism. From this perspective,
the process of ethnogenesis, the creation of something new and different cut of the conjunction of Arab American culture, is central to Arab American identity. (Majaj, Hyphenated Author 1).

Turki’s poem, Being a Good *Americani*, is inspired by his life in the United States. He moved to the US in 1973, after the publication of his first book.

Soon the sun had set

on Arlington, Virginia,

where I have lived with

my American family for a decade,

trying,

desperately,

to be a good a *Americani*. (24-30)

Like many Arab Americans, Turki is engaged in political activism on Arab issues while at the same time, seeking integration in to the American context. The poem reveals his American life with a touch of unmistakable sarcasm between the lines.

Last Sunday was a fine day

for me to be a good *Americani*.

I painted the kitchen table

and talked to my next door neighbor

while he washed his car...

I scolded my son ....

ate french fries,

fought with my wife ...
I hopped in the car
and bought sliced salami,
toilet paper
and a six pack of beer
at 7-Eleven...
I watched TV for three hours
and then went into bed. (1-32)

His life appears ordinary, or as he says figured out. However the memories of old
country, tension and anxiety, struggle for identity keep him awake.

I wake up in the middle of the night ... which is a safe time to think
about Palestine and olive trees,
and I pity myself

and the place I came from. (45-53)

The Palestine tragedy, the hidden grief associated with the old country, is
never far away. The unspeakable pain has transformed into an indivisible part of the
poet's tragic life. Turki belongs to a generation of Palestinians living in exile for over
40 years. For the Palestine diaspora born and brought up in the distant countries, the
concept of homeland is nearly incompressible. They are constantly affected by their
dream for a normal statehood, an unendurable search for a place to escape the terrors
of history.

Our destiny has forced us to come to terms with the idea that
homelessness is the homeland. Like an essential thirst we keep our
shared moral and cultural nation of "Palestinianess" even as we have
wondered the globe all these years wearing our sense of "otherness".
Being stateless is the only state we belong to and we have long since
developed an aboriginal sense about how to live in this peculiar
condition. (Turki, “A Soul in Exile” 3)

The Palestine experience is different from that of others. A Palestine refugee
camp is a transplanted Palestine city complete with its own idiom, metaphor and
ambience. Turki’s father who lived in the refugee camps of Borj el Barjni in Beirut
had been called an alien. Turki witnessed his father’s transformation from a self-
sufficient, proud Palestinian living in his own homeland to a desperate, helpless
nonentity. Generation of Palestinians, from his presents to his own and that of the
intifada, have left a legacy that living free in their homeland “is the one tangible pivot
of our identity” (“A Soul in Exile” 3). Turki’s prose, though lyrical, does not detract
from the essential questions. “Why us alone?”, “When will we have an identity?” He
lives in a world where there are many enemies, few friends and fewer who understand
his and his people’s aloneness. As a poet, he carries the dual burden of both response
and responsibility. As he writes,

traditionally in Palestine society, it is the poet, rather than the
ideologue or the theoretician, whose work is taken by the people as
starting point for their pragmatic and metaphoric conjunctions on
meaning. Hence the role of the poet is both response and
responsibility. He internalizes his society’s malaise – at this time, its
national struggle and projects it outwardly to the people in his work.
(Orfalea, Elmusa 196)

As an Arab-American writer his work is devoted, heart and soul, to the
Palestinian cause. His commitment to the cause of his people is awe-inspiring and
must be applauded. For him and his people, suffering has not come to an end, yet
there is hope. They ardently believe in the establishment of the state of Palestine and
wait to rejoice in the resurrection of their national existence. Once Turki wrote, “No
one realizes how formidably exquisite a thought it is to a Palestinian writer like
myself, raised in a refugee camp, stateless all his life, to be able to dram life thus” (“A
Soul in Exile” 4).
There, by the rail, my mother at seventeen
pale, her thin white arm
raised, as in salute
to a seagull
trailing the ship, Homeric,
September, nineteen twenty-two.

(Rest in Love 13)

Among Arab-American women writers in English, D. H. Melhem is
deemed as a pioneering figure. Her collection of poetry, titled Notes on the
94th Street published in 1972, is one of the first recorded publications
alongside Etel Adnan’s Moonshot. In the wake of Melhem and Adnan, many
others followed their footsteps.

Born in 1926 in Brooklyn to Lebanese immigrant parents, she has
published books of poetry, numerous essays, a novel, critical works and also
produced a musical drama during her career, spanning three decades. Her
books of poetry include Children on the House Afire: More Notes on 94th
However she is best known for her much acclaimed elegy for her mother, Rest
in Love (1975). Her poems have been published in major anthologies, such as
Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry and Poetry of Arab
American Women. D. H. Melhem is a distinguished scholar as well as a
celebrated poet.

A graduate from the New York University, she completed her PhD at
City University of New York. As a scholar, her comprehensive biocritical
study of the Poet Gwendolyn Brooks, titled Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and
Heroic Voice (1987) and the anthology of black poets, Heroism in the New
Black Poetry (1990) have earned her critical acclaim. Her most recent publication is a collection of poems dedicated to the city of New York, New York Poems (2005). Many of her poetry collections have been inspired by her life in the US. As a long time resident of New York’s Upper West Side, Melhem has written two collections based on her life in the neighborhood, Notes on the 94th Street and Children in the House Afire.

Though her work is American in essence, her themes are universal. She talks about love, nature, war, travel, marriage and death. As an Arab-American poet, her work explores the ethnic values of Middle Eastern forbearers, family, universe and Arab-American heritage. In her poems, she travels back to her past to the ambiguities of identity and she writes without inhibitions. Intermingling with the past and the present, memory and perception, is a refreshing aspect that shows, Arab-Americans are optimistic about the future. She writes, “If, however, poets cannot shape their concern into good poetry, they may acknowledge their relation to society in other ways. And if they can write effectively let them wield their poems like cedar branches, bury discrimination and injustice in leaves and olive boughs” (Orfalea, Elmsa 104).

She believes poetry can be used to raise cultural, economical and political issues. Her collection Rest in Love which is a book-length elegy to her mother, traces her mother’s life and immigration from Lebanon to US. By way of describing her mother’s experience, she focuses on fear and conflict encountered by many immigrants.

say french:

who knows what lebanese is?

or syrian? (serbian? siberian?)

protectorate is close to

protector (24)

During the early phase of Arab immigration to US, they were classified as Turks or Ottomans. Americans treated with pity, disdain and at time with total rejection. “They were considered an inconvenience at best and a threat to the
purity of the white race and US moral and public order at worst” (Suleiman, Arab Americans and the Political Process 40).

Her mother’s experience is proof that immigrants from East were looked down upon by Americans.

but

immigration officials

and neighbors

employers

perplexed by exotics

non-anglo-saxon

non-westeuropean-nontoxic

attest

the best are

types here

longer

the immigration officials

said to me,

syrian?

what’s

that? (Rest in Love 24)

Melhem as a student has attracted attention because she spoke English with an Arabic accent. She writes about her own experiences in the poems.

your teacher accused

arabic spoken

at home:
"you have an accent"
though fearing strangers
at the foreign school
I went
showed my self...
people don't mean
to be mean
nevertheless
better say
french (24-25)

Among Arab-American women poets, their first concern and preoccupation had been marginalization, oppression, unjust degradation, today they stand far from where they originated. They write daringly about struggle for identity, their preoccupation with biculturality, biporality, themes that have been exclusively male dominated for a long period of time. Women poets like their male counterparts, contribute in equal measure to eradicate stereotypes of Arabs, both men and women. The need to improve their distorted image is felt by all from first settlers to Arab-Americans of second and third generations. Negative publicity has been and is still built around ordinary US citizens and implanted in their minds, especially by US media and other cultural institutions.

Most, if not all, Arab-American women poets do write about their identity which is itself a powerful statement. It is very much part of Melhem's poetry. As a daughter of Lebanese immigrants, she oversees the issue of identity and proudly claims that of Lebanese. As Lebanon Dies is a case in point.

my background is lebanese
and peaceful, I said
proud of redundance
As Nathalie Handal explains the "nation of our origins is a principal element in defining who we are" (Handal 44). As Handal explains, Arab-American women poets "have gone back to their culture of origin and tried to understand it, be part of it, nourish it and expand it into their lives and beings, while remaining in an American context or background" (44).

Arab-American identity is to be understood in terms of safeguarding Arab culture, language and allegiance to the Middle East politics, while simultaneously assimilating into American culture. Most Arab-Americans speak for Arab cause, especially in the case of Palestine struggle against Zionism. Conflicts in the Arab world, be it the 1967 Israel–Arab war, Israel–Palestine conflict or Lebanese war, to a great extent, played an important role in solidifying Arab-American identity. Melhem, unexceptionally, expresses her concern regarding Palestine tragedy and her loyalty to the old country in Some Notes on Origin.

My maternal grandmother was born in Beirut. I began to see myself in the context of an anguished reality that overwhelmed benign past echoes. The Palestinians seemed terribly wronged; peaceable Lebanon had again become the battleground for conflicting foreign interest. The 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila that shock the world filled me with grief and rage. My kaffiyeh given me by a Palestinian on the September Washington march, became my emblem. (Orfalea, Elmus 104)

Her poem Those Policemen are Sleeping: A Call to the Children of Israel and Palestine is an out cry against war and violence.

In the dereliction of the death, they cannot guard

Ramallah, or Arafat, or anything or anyone.

They cannot guard children or mothers or old men.
Their blood, no longer confined, dances freely out the doorway
toward blasted olive groves and rubble of bulldozed homes
and shows its sad triumph in the street (3-7)

Israel-Palestine conflict has killed many, including innocent civilians on both sides. The unending violence makes her question her faith. "And faith? What of faith?" (34)
Further, she writes,

War is insatiable
it has a stomach for youth (29-30)

In her opinion the best advice is to "cure yourself of the past" (50). Violence in the past has resulted only in bloodshed, death and destruction. Peace still remains a distant reality. Melhem's work, similar to that of other Arab-American writers, depicts the anxiety of Arab American community living in US. The politics of Middle East, its political instability, tension are much exploited by many, in order to speak out against injustice to support the Arab cause and to put pressure on US administration. Voices of Arab Americans raised and expressed through literature is a powerful statement of Arab solidarity and unity.

Arab-Americans living across different states, yearn for their ancestral homes in the Arab world. Their poetry exhibits a sense of homesickness, expressed by way of describing food, music, dance and gardens. Melhem's mother who left Lebanon at the age of 17, verbalizes the emotions of most immigrants.

*I miss my friends*

*the nuns at St. Joseph de l'Apparition*

*my flowers*

*the oleander*

*fig trees*

*the orange grove*

*everything receding in to sea form*
Homesickness must not be interpreted as mere nostalgia. It is a conscious effort to impose native culture in their present lives. Writing helps them to keep their memories alive.

For some, it is to write poetry which means to not forget. And for the Arab American poet this also means inevitably relishing of fruits and gardens. They bound in these poems and a sun both oppressive and life-giving. Green have always been some what miraculous to the Arabs as if the world were assumed to be more sand than water. (Orfalea, Elmusa xxiv)

Grapes, pistachios, mint leaves, apricots, okra and figs can be found abundantly in Arab American poetry. Olives, bread, thyme, yogurt, grape leaves and mint have become emblems of Arab life that recur in Arab American experience. It also focuses the attention on the desire of Arab-American to continue their cultural contacts with their roots. Melham skillfully captures, in Rest in Love the warmth of her grand mother’s kitchen in New York and the aroma of home cooked Arab food.

My mother, my grandmother sit at the white enamel kitchen table, kneading dough, shelling peas, measuring pine nuts into the chopped lamb and onions, soaking the crushed wheat for kibbeh, filling dozens of meat pies, stuffing chicken and squash and green peppers and eggplant, rolling stuffed grape leaves and stuffed cabbage like cigars making dumplings for yoghurt soup among cans of sesame oil and boiled butter roast chicken, boiling rice, browning rice and onions, adding rice and tomatoes to large pots of marrow – bone vegetable soup… (17)

This is an excellent description combining family love and warmth with preparation of Arabic food. It presents a picture perfect moment in their lives in US.
For Melhem who has been born and brought up in the US, Arabic food is often a reminder of her childhood spent with her grandmother and mother. After the death of her mother, she ponders on her memories. Her mother represented her association with her Arab origin, language and food.

Tonight I ate from my childhood
lamb and chicken peas and yoghurt
gulping it hot
as I sat along in the kitchen...

Nobody came back. Not one word
of Arabic. (100)

Arab-American poetry is bustling with people as it is full of food and trees. Apart from family, number of uncles and cousins, it contains ordinary people like grocers, shop helpers, various other people and their foibles. Arab-American poetry is rich with people and family a vital structure in constructing their identity.

The primacy of family to the poet’s selfhood is omnipresent. In fact one might not be exaggerated to say that for poets of Arab heritage family is self...The sometimes extreme familial closeness has led to poems of a kind of super empathy where identity blurs. Rest in Love by Melhem is a book-length example, a salute to an immigrant mother which ends with a poem of that mother, a hymn to Ellis Island. (Orfalea, Elmusa xix)

Rest in Love, her book of poems describes a loving relationship, its terrible loss, anger, and at the end, healing. The bond between mother and daughter has been set forth so well and lovingly.

I am the life my mother wanted
I feel her in my womb
that wise child...
face in my hands
longs for her lap

even her apron

loved me (97)

thinking of you new

sorrow its cog

grades my life tenderly

my feet weep my body weep (64)

Although Rest in Love is devoted to her mother, there are number of poems in which she remembers her family relations, especially beloved grandmother who has been portrayed as a larger than life figure, seen through the eyes of the poet.

Children crowded around her, my grandmother

stood, taking the sun, a tall shade plant

in a garden. (19)

One of Melhem's cherished memories is her mother and grandmother preparing food in the kitchen.

grandmother always working peeling potatoes

my mother also peeling potatoes

as I sit in a corner between you listening (18)

Grandfather: Frailty is not the Story is a poem written in memory of her Lebanese grandfather.

Remember your grandfather tall and straight....

Remember his stories of exile and travel

and immigrant dreams....

I remember him on stepladders in the Depression
or holding my hand on the way to school

me proud of him in his overalls…

And I remember discussions, the argument over politics

how he taught me to reason, to wield logic

as he has done when captain of the debating team

in Tripoli Boys School, Lebanon

and the photos of him there, where he was becoming

the tallest and handsomest man in the town. (1-28)

She remembers her paternal grandfather with love and affection, a Lebanese immigrant who came to US with dreams of a better life. Melhem speaks proudly of him, a courageous individual, who along with thousands of his fellow country men left their home country. Immigrants faced many difficulties including cultural metamorphosis. However, it was them, who laid the foundation to the thriving Arab-American community of nearly five to six million today. Unfortunately, she never met her maternal grandfather who fell victim to political conspiracy and disappeared in Turkey.

Thinking of him-

of you, grandfather ever unknown to me,

your watch lying on a

hotel room night table

and your wallet beside it:

a political act? (Rest in Love 13)

Uncles, aunts and cousins they have all found a place in Melhem’s poems.

around the dinning room table

arranged in meticulous order

uncle george at the head

to his right
Family is at the heart of Arab-American writers. It is a representation of themselves, their traditions and their customs. Describing parents, grandparents, family relations enable them to feel part of their native world, through the memory of their forefathers.

Memory is thus a vital vehicle in the construction and affirmation of selfhood and culture. Much of these poets' heritage is acquired through oral tradition, passed on from one generation to the other. The self rejection and powerful images of the relationship between their women poets and different family members play an important role in their work. After all the "family is the basic unit of social organization in traditional and contemporary Arab (and Arab American) society". (Handal 46-47)

Melhem's work is an avowal that highlights the importance of family kept alive among Arab Americans. In one of her poems, she describes a telephone conversation in which she discusses the welfare of her family members scattered around the world. It is a celebration of being connected.

what george said
or grandmother did
jenny's romance
or olga's regrets....
a letter from alexandra, the eldest
widowed in Argentina
the Florida cousins....
Gabriel, ideal younger brother
who died of pneumonia
As I mentioned earlier, many of Melhem’s works are inspired by her life in the United States. She has written much about her beloved New York’s Upper West Side, where she has been a long-time resident. Though she is of Arab origin and proudly so, she remains decidedly loyal to her adopted country. “I believed and still do, with Socrates and Tom Paine, that one is ultimately a citizen of the world. Yet America lives for me and my family, past and present, in Lincoln’s vision: “the last best hope of earth” (Orfalea, Elmusa 104).

*Country: An Organic Poem*, her collections of poems, has been called an American epic by critics. It explores the surface and the substance of the national soil and soul. *Country* contains poems written about various US cities. Detroit, San Francisco, Chicago, Seattle, San Diego, to name a few.

Niles, Michigan: your name below

a river of sky.

Trees rest in wake of
dread wind. (90)

Horses

and cows in a circle

settle

the noon sun.

This is Wisconsin.

Dog on the porch.
Corn field.

Barley, gold, and summer swathes
against blue Barboo hills. (91)

In Union Square, San Francisco,
on a Saturday, at noon,
Jesus is Lord, they are singing
psalms upward to receive the sun. (109)

Her travel across the states is a celebration of American culture and the
American way of life. Melhem shares the journey, the experience with the
reader, exhibiting her love and appreciation for the adopted country.

I with my suitcase traveling
these mils ahead cross-country
with interview tapes take them
westward to plant in the park
of the glacier black blossoms (93)

Her journey has brought her to the doorstep of people from different walks of
life, farmers, forest rangers, industrial workers and many more. Her poems
together bring out the beauty of landscape, river, lakes and mountains.

At Logan Pass
the Continental Divide
feeds water east and west
through Alpine buttercup
and bear grass. White heather
lanceleaf spring beauty, red monkey flower,
mountain laurel, painted cup-
scarlet, white, yellow, orange, pink
lambstongue, glacier lily...

Needlelike leaves of
red mountain heath hold water
by small surface. (98)

Places in the poems vary from dirt roads, small towns to Ford automatic plant in Dearborn, and various other places she passed through. The cross country journal is a courageous effort to bring out the uniqueness of the states. As Walt Whitman wrote, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (Melham, Country 83). Apart from her poems on the cross country journey, she has written others on Fourth of July: On the Hudson, another about Eleanor Roosevelt, Ezra Pound and many more about popular American culture. These poems place her work deep in American context.

Last night we road into the Bronx
your cop's badge on the floor of your Firebird
gold goblet filled with California chablis
you at the wheel over Bruckner Boulevard
and the south Bronx... (63)

Notes on the 94th Street and Children on the House Afire are two collections that reveal the beauty and the pathos of Melhem's beloved Manhattan West Side, neighborhood. The world she describes in This Tourist, Resident in Notes on the 94th Street is not a pretty one.

This tourist, resident
cruises Broadway's exotic islands
sees
toilet paper in the trees
where
bench to bench
communities oppose their rows of misery cross street. (16)

Her voice is filled with anger and disappointment, but what's remarkable is the sense of dignity that emerges from the anger. The intensity of her emotions is poured out without restrictions. Her poems explore banalities of life, economic hardships, parent-children relationship. She writes passionately about people in her neighborhood.

mister manager, this marketing grows bitter meatless dinners now and fishless we'll be eating grits and gruel before you're through shall I blame the system only are you wicked too? (Supermarket 11-18)

Ordinary people like a doorman, cleaning lady or a dog walker that cross our lives everyday are incorporated into her work. Cleaning Lady is one such poem

she cleans my window from inside I know she is thorough, honest, appears every Thursday before nine. I ask how she's been and she tells me. (1-7)
Her poems on the 94th street of Manhattan’s west side throw light on her life, past and present—hers and her children. She too is part of this world, in to which she has successfully assimilated.

under my bed

by the wall

I hide from my mother

she is holding

my sister’s shoes

mine are at drago’s

not ready (Schoolday 1-7)

The second floor is colloquy.

My room extends the street.

I can call down to quiet,

answer police

alarm, rebuke all anguish

and all singing

at inappropriate times. (From the Second Floor 1-7)

we’re here, after the movie

for a ritual slice

with soda wine, stand

in a light without grace

at the formica counter

pizzaman (Pizza 1-6)
As a resident who has lived in West Side almost all her life, she is all too aware of the negative issues. She doesn't hesitate to criticize the negative realities of life in her neighborhood. **Capitalism** is one such example in her collection *Children on the House Afire*.

The girls and there are young and scared
stand tall on platform shoes
their pimps at the corner in phone booths
watching...
the junkies must find pushers
and the drunk disgorge their anger (1-9)

Another of her collections, *Conversations with a Stonemason* reveals her multiethnic interests. She celebrates her Lebanese background and love of family and expresses her concern for war's destination, while introducing her West Side neighborhood, social sensibilities and her devotion to literature. Literature, as she sees is a part of culture. Culture in turn is directly connected to a person's origins-parents, grandparents, music, poetry etc. Multiethnicity or hybridity involves more than one culture. The poet believes there is great pleasure in diversity, which she tries to integrate into her work.

*Conversations with a Stonemason* also contains a major cycle of poems about the 9/11 – New York Trade Center bombing. Her upcoming publication *New York Poems* is dedicated to the city of New York. She examines her beloved city from the World Trade Center tragedy to the present to the city's future. *Niagara Falls after Ground Zero* is one such poem from *Conversation with a Stonemason*.

On Goat Island,
below the spray
I close my eyes,
try to absorb the falling and rising
into my skin,
into my spirit
where the smoke of Ground Zero
hovers and whispers...
in the rhythms of blood
meeting
the healing mist of Nature (32-44)

D. H. Melhem, in more than 30 years as a published poet, has contributed immensely to Arab-American literature as a pioneering poet. Along with Etel Adnan and Samuel Hazo, they “distinguished themselves initially as writers independent of ethnic categorization who later donned the cloak of Arab American identity” Abinader, Children of Al-Mhajar 3). She paved the way for the current generation of Arab-American women writers and she is still very much part of it. In addition, she has helped mainstream Arab American literature by organizing the first Arab-American poetry reading at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1984. She herself has read poetry across the country, in venues ranging from the Library of Congress and New York’s town hall to libraries, universities, schools and cafes.

As a poet, her voice continues to raise issues concerning the Arab-American community. Along with the rest of Arab-American women poets, she persists in affirming Arab-American identity, challenging stereotypes, negative image and solidifying Arab-American history, culture and literature. It is equally important to understand as a poet, the boundaries of the society and strive to transcend them while remaining an active participant in the society. Melhem’s voice will be remembered in the genre of Arab-American writing as a literary giant who built a bridge not only between two generations of Arab-American poets but also between Arab-American writing and American literary canon.
As I sit here in Texas, pickup truck in the drive way, tortilla factory down the block, my grandmother’s West Bank village keeps returning to me. We were there two weeks ago, with almond trees in fragile while blossom and unswerving dignity of all those eyes.

Naomi Shihab Nye
(Orfalea, Elmusa 266)

Poetry of Palestine American poet Naomi Shihab Nye is a celebration of her bicultural identity, an outstanding testimony to her cultural and political allegiance to Middle East, and confirmation of successful assimilation into American culture. Presently, Nye is the most well-known Arab American poet and is considered one of America’s finest and most successful. Born in 1952 to a Palestinian father and an American mother of German descent, at St. Louis, Missouri, she was introduced to the world of writing at an early age. Her father was one of the few Arab-Americans working in a major daily newspaper as an editor. Nye grew up in St. Antonio, Texas, where she graduated from Trinity University.

Nye’s recognition as a poet came in the 1980s. Over the years she has published number of poetry collections, edited anthologies and written a novel Habibi (1997) for young adults. Her work has been praised and acknowledged by leading literary and educational institutions, and has earned many awards and fellowships. They include four Pushcart Prizes, I. B. Lavan Award from the Academy of American poets, Launan Foundation Fellowship, the Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress to name a few. Naomi Shihab is a frequently invited speaker and a well known folksinger in the southwest with two record albums to her name. Among her publications, Hugging the Juke Box (1982), Yellow Glove (1986), Red Suitcase (1994), Words under the Wood (1998), Fuel (1999), Space between our Footsteps (1998) are worth mentioning. Increasingly her books of poetry for children,
including a well-loved picture book *Sitti’s Secrets* (1994) and *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from around the World* (1992) have earned her critical acclaim. Nye is currently a Visiting Professor of writing at the University of Texas.

To Nye, poetry is “a house with thousands of glittering lights. Our words and images, land to land, era to era, shed light on one another” (*Lights in the Windows* 1). Words and images help dissolve old enmities and pave way for better understanding. “If poetry comes out of the deepest places in the human soul and experience, shouldn’t it be as important to learn about one another’s poetry, country to country, as one another’s weather or gross national products? It seems critical to me” (*Lights in the Windows* 1). Poetry enables us to see beyond our locked doors and cities and feel the world again and most importantly feel connected. Poetry needs no passport to cross borders. It travels everywhere. In one of her poems *Cross That Line*, she writes,

He sang into Canada.

His voice left the USA

when his body was not allowed

to cross that line. (7-10)

As an Arab American, a bicultural person, she understands the importance of knowing one another. She knows that failing to do so, comes with a heavy price. As a daughter of a Palestinian immigrant, she was brought up in a world of old country folktales. As an adult, she has realized that it’s vital to read Israeli-Jewish writers, to know, in her own words “how many links we had” (*Lights in the Window* 2). Nye’s poetry is about connections, human relationships, places and of course, biculture, a theme cherished by the poet. She is perfectly at ease writing about the old world and the new world, Jerusalem and Texas, her Palestinian grandmother in West Bank and her life in St. Antonio. Nye is a poet who has her feet firmly anchored on both cultures. Yet, her poems in which the subject matter extends to Palestinian identity, exile, Arabness, demand much consideration and importance. Affirmation of ethnic origin is a powerful statement, vital to the Arab-American identity. “Most, if not all the Arab American poets... have gone back to their culture of origin and tried to understand it, be part of it, nourish it and expand it into their lives and beings, while remaining in an American context or background. Indeed a notion of our origin is a principal element in defining who we are” (Handal 44).
Nye refers constantly to her Arabic roots. Olives, palm trees, camels, her attachment to the bigger family living in Palestine, folktales place her poetry deep in the Arabic context. As a Palestinian, she raises her voice on political issues, affirming loyalty to the Arab cause. She considers herself political. Further, she strongly believes politics is about people and as a poet, engrosses herself in personal ramifications of everything for everyone. A poet cannot distance his or herself from his or her people.

Among her political poems Blood, Negotiations with a Volcano, Lunch in the Nablus City Park, For the 500th dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh and Jerusalem stand out. The poem For the 500th dead Palestinian, Ibtisam Bozieh, was inspired by a true incident which took place during the intifada. Ibtisam was a thirteen year old girl who lived in the neighborhood of Nye’s grandmother. She was shot dead by an Israeli soldier, while looking out of the window of her home.

Dead at 13, for staring through
the window into a gun barrel
which did not know you wanted to be
a doctor...

Had I stayed in your land,
I might have been dead too,
for something simple like staring (4-11)

The death of the “little sister Ibtisam” has clearly shaken the poet. The poem highlights the vulnerability and the sense of uncertainty and insecurity that prevail over their lives. The poem was banned and was not allowed to be published by Israeli censors. Nye writes at length about the entire incident, in an essay titled Banned.

Most Arab American poets write about the Israeli-Palestine conflict to express their anger and disappointment at the US government and its policies. They raise their voices vehemently for the Palestinian struggle against Zionism and its strategic support by their adopted country. Nye declares solidarity with her fellow Arabs in Middle East, shares their concerns, and mourns the death of loved ones in the poem Negotiations with a Volcano.

How can we live like this?
We need to wake and find our shelves intact,
our children slumbering in their quilts. (22-24)

For Palestinians, each day is a struggle to survive. Years of war, and political uncertainty have left them wearied and disillusioned. They long for just peace and return to their ancestral land. Nye's poetry is proof of how the lives of Palestinians have been destroyed by ongoing violence. Palestinians Have Given Up Parties is a powerful, thought-provoking poem. The beginning of the poem is an idyllic setting.

Once singing would rise
in sweet sirens over the hills
and even if you were working
with your trees or books
or cooking something simple
for your own family (1-6)

This peaceful life has become a distant reality for many who have become refugees.

Where does fighting
come in to the story? (22-23)

Peace, serenity, and laughter have disappeared from their lives.
Now when the student gather quietly
inside their own classroom
do celebrate the last day of school,
the door to the building
gets blasted off.
Empty chairs where laughter used to sit.
Laughter lived here....

and now its hiding. (26-34)

Her simple, but carefully chosen words, paint a picture of a disturbed life where not even the children are spared. She captures the cruelty of violence, and poses questions that every Arab wants to ask 'how can we stand it, if it goes on and
on?' Her efforts to unearth the untold stories must be applauded. Such efforts involve risks. For an Arab American, to criticize the policies of their adopted country puts her under enormous pressure. Her poem Blood was an angry outburst, written in reaction to the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps. Nye asks simply "What does a true Arab do now?"

Today the headlines clot in my blood.
A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.
Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root
is too big for us....
I call my father, we talk around the news.
It is too much for him,
neither of his two languages can reach it....
Who calls anyone civilized?
Where can the crying heart graze?
What does a true Arab do now? (16-29)

As a poet, she tries to give a voice to her people. As she writes in her poem, Palestinian Have Given Up Parties,
They will not see, he says slowly,
the story behind the story,
they are always looking for the story after the story
which means they will never understand the story...

This is not a headline
in your country or mine.
No one hears the tiny sobbing
of the velvet in the drawers. (50-64)

Lunch in Nablus City Park, and Those Whom We Do Not Know are two political poems where she brings to focus the destiny of her people.
Because our country has entered
into war, we can have
go pleasant pauses anymore...
but utterly particular
voices of the dead
of trees, fish, children...
so beloved in the Middle East,
bleeding from the skull (1-13)

Nye used striking imagery to convey her message;

Where do the souls of hills hide
when there is shooting in the valleys?
What makes a man with a gun seem bigger
than a man with almonds?(32-35)

Arab American poets like Nye take advantage of their work to voice themselves. On one hand, they demonstrate solidarity among themselves, and on the other hand consider the presence of their nation.

Describing the land is a way to express where their roots rest, especially among the Palestinian and Palestine. American women poets; and it is a way to demonstrate love of their country or express resistance. They describe the land and its elements and while doing so assert their belonging. Their poetry is filled with dates, oranges, lemons, figs, almonds, and olives and their beautiful trees. (Handal 46)

Nye’s poetry is no exception. Land and its elements are carefully woven in to her poems. Some poems are enriched with “buckets of lemons” “taste of cantaloupe” smell of fresh mint leaves and my stomach was a melon split wide inside my skin” are examples of her use of imagery drawn from the elements of the land. Her memory recalls, “mountains of pumpkin by the road side, or watermelons, a hill of autumn gourds piled lavishly on crates”, “blessed hills” of her country and the swirl of palm trees. We may quote few more lines from two other poems; “Thanks to the grapes / we have more than one story to tell!” (Muchas Gracias por Todo 11-12), “What better
blessing than to move without hurry / under trees?” (Last August Hours Before the Year 2000 4-5).

In the poem Jerusalem land and trees are used to make a powerful political statement.

A man builds a house and says,

“I am a native now.”

A woman speaks to a tree in place

of her son. (18-21)

Further, these lines from the poem Voices summarize the situation most Palestinians experience.

Sometimes I think of the land
you loved, gone to seed now,
gone to someone else’s name… (18-20)

Another line from the poem Palestinians Have Given Up Parties comes to mind; “No one hears the soldiers come at night / to pluck the olive tree from its cool sleep” (59-60). Speaking of her beloved grandmother in Holy Land, she fondly recalls,

She who could not leave town

while her lemon tree held fruit,

nor while it dreamed of fruit. (23-25)

She expresses a sense of insecurity through the image of the lemon tree.

Naomi Shihab Nye has written many poems about the Middle East and especially regarding the Palestinian tragedy. Some, she devotes to the theme of biculturality, synchronizing Arab heritage and American experience. Her poems reflect partly Arab culture and part American culture. They echo the words of another Palestinian American writer, Lisa Majaj. It is a “process of ethno genesis, the creation of something new and different out of the conjunction of Arab and American culture” (Arab-American identity 1, Hyphenated Author 1) which is pivotal to Arab American identity. For example, we may look at few lines from her poem, Darling, “All day the sky in Texas which has seen no rain since June / is raining Lebanese mountains, Lebanese trees.” (9-10)
Since her childhood, she has been conscious of her dual worlds. She explains biculturality in her own words.

Being bicultural has always been important to me: even as a child I knew there was more than one way to dress, to eat, to speak or to think. I felt lucky to have this dual perspectives as well (...) May be cultural writers who are actively conscious of or interested in heritage, build another kind of bridge as well, this one between worlds. But it’s not like a bridge; really - it’s closer like a pulse. (Orfalea, Elmusa 266)

These two worlds are very closely intertwined. “This pulse” is a lifeline, which the poet believes, helps them, the bicultural writes to identify themselves. Her poem My Father and the Fig Tree is a case in point.

“I am telling about a fig straight from the earth –
gift of Allah! - on a branch so heavy it touches the ground.

I am talking about picking the largest, fattest, sweetest fig
in the world and putting it in mouth.”

(Here he’d stop and close his eyes.) (14-18)

She places the fig tree with the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the middle of Dallas, Texas. And alongside an exultant father, singing a fig tree song in Arabic. Similarly, in Trade she writes about her sitti (grandmother) aged 105, in Jerusalem; “And my sitti eating praline from Texas said in Arabic, “Do you think she would trade places with me?”(13-15).

Though Nye is settled in St. Antonio, where she lives with her family, she believes the sense of connection to her big family in Middle East crucial to her existence. As she writes in Gravities of Ancestry, her mind wonders to West Bank to her grandmother while she sits in Texas. However, in an American context where definition of culture begins with ethnicity, society associates bicultural writers with their ethnic group. For example, Arab-American ethnic group will be identified as Arab. “Therefore, in a society like America that forces one to think of color, origin and religion, one is driven back to his / her culture or ethnic group. Apart from this social reality which directly or indirectly forces the nation of ethnicity as a means of self-definition, these poets voluntarily, claim their Arab identity” (Handal 43). However, contrary to this belief, many writers, including the Iraqi writer Kanan
Makiya argues, identity does not mean language, ethnicity, nationality, nor geographical location. What creates identity is one's claim and profound sentiment, or what one feels inside. (Handal 43)

Nonetheless Naomi Shihab Nye's identity as an Arab is strongly visible in her poems. Food and family along with mountains and trees represent Arab culture. Arabic food has become a focal point not only in literary works, but also in the lives of Arab-Americans. The importance of food has been emphasized by the fact that, two Arab American anthologies have “food” for their titles. Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry (edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa) and Food for Our Grandmothers (edited by Joanna Kadi).

The reader is treated to a variety of Arabic food in Nye's poetry – watermelon, cantaloupe, olives, almonds, and many more. As Nathalie Handal explains, “In the United States, Arab food has found a place and is probably one of the most authentic aspects of Arabic culture found in America today” (46). These lines from Nye's poems, Half-and-Half, further prove this point.

Dusting of powdered sugar
across faces of date-stuffed mamool.(10-11)

the way he carried
oranges and falafel
in his pockets… (The Grieving Ring 15-17)

A short man stacks mounds of pita bread
on each end of the table… (Lunch in Nablus City Park 5-6)

In her poetry anthology titled The Space between Our Footsteps: Poems and Paintings from Middle East (1998), Nye recalls her memories from the past, “Our home by day was fragrant with cardamom spice and coffee, pine nuts sizzled in olive oil and delicious cabbage rolls. My girl friends brought iced cup cakes to Girl Scouts for treats, but I brought dates, apricot and almonds” (Hassan, Arab Culture and
Most Arab-Americans believe that the celebration of their culture—whether its their food or the folktales, they owe to their ancestors, themselves and for the next generations. Further, for poets like Nye who are born and bred in the US, Arabic food is a cultural sign which link them to the Arabic heritage.

For Arab-Americans, family is of utmost importance. “In fact, one might not be exaggerating to say that for poets of Arab heritage, family is itself... for Arabs reliance on the network of family was key to survival”; family is seen as an emblem of their selves, culture and identity (Orfalea, Elmusa xix). Nye writes warmly of her family, her grandparents, especially her Palestine grandmother with much affection and nostalgia. When asked in an interview about her grandmother who died at age of 106, she described her as a “splendid wizard of humanity”, who didn’t want to die until everyone she didn’t like died first. “She represents something deep and crucial to me” (Majaj, Talking with 2).

Nye’s adoration of her grandmother is quite evident in her work. She is portrayed as a heroine. The children’s picture book, Sitti’s Secrets is based on her beloved grandmother. In her poem Holy Land, she writes,

Over the beds wearing thick homespun cotton
Sitti the Ageless floated
poking straight pins into sheets
to line our fevered forms
“the magic,” we called it,
her crumpling of syllables,
pitching them up and out,
petals parched by sun,
the names of grace, hope,
in the graveled grandmother tongue...

In a land of priests,
patriarchs, muezzins,
a woman who couldn’t read
drew lines between our pain
and earth (1-30)

Her love and deep respect for her grandmother are evident in the poem. The loss of her grandmother is greatly felt and lovingly recorded in the poem My Grandmother in the Stars.

It is possible we will not meet again
on earth. To think this fills my throat
with dust. Then there is only the sky
tying the universe together. (1-4)

Nye laments in her poem pondering on the memories with nostalgia. She regrets the fact that she was unable to communicate effectively with the old lady who was wise, funny and very verbal. Her grandmother didn’t speak English and Nye’s Arabic was mediocre. Despite the breach in communication, they seemed to understand each other well.

I bow to your rigged feet,
the moth-eaten scarves that knot your hair…

You and I on a roof at sunset,
our two languages adrift,
heart saying. Take this home with you,

*never again*,

and only memory will make us rich. (10-20)

Family relations capture much space in her poems. Apart from her grandmother, her parents, uncles, aunts, and her son have become part of her poems. For Arab American, modern day or traditional, family remains the fundamental unit of the society. A good number of poems written about family members reflect this strong tie to the family. In her poems, the reader comes across one by one her family members. “My mother with ponytail and plaid dress”, her Palestinian father who told wonderful folk tales about distant neighbors, ancient stone streets, desert and camels. No father
could be more magical than her father who sang the “fig song”, in Arabic, in Dallas, Texas.

In her poem, Genetics, she gives thought to what she has inherited from her parents.

From my father I have inherited the ability
to stand in a field and stare...

From my mother, an obsession about the stove and correct spelling. (1-11)

She has written poems about her uncles, and a great aunt among her family relations. In My Uncle’s Favorite Coffee Shop, she speaks of an uncle who came to United States, lived for 23 years before returning to the old country. It is a touching poem, separation from her relative has been difficult but to come to terms with his death after one week had been devastating.

*I cannot tell you – how my heart has settled at last.*

But he followed us to the sidewalk

saying, *Take care, Take care*

as if he could not stand to leave us.

*I cannot tell-

how we felt
to learn that the week he arrived,

he died. (33-40)

*My Uncle Mohammad at Mecca, 1981,* the second poem in which she talks about an uncle, she mourns his death, who died in Mecca.

I hold the birds you sent me,

olivewood clumsily carved.

The only thing I have

that you touched.
Why is it so many singulars
attend your name? You lived on one mountain,
sent one gift. You went on one journey
and I didn’t come home. (5-12)

Her piece written on her maternal great grand father, who ran a drugstore in a
small town in Illinois Mint Snowball and her poem dedicated to great, great aunt
Leonera, aged 95 must be mentioned. In “If God Won’t Take Me, Why Won’t the
Devil?”, she recalls an incident with the great aunt.

On your 90th birthday you caught a fish
in Canyon Lake. We’d had a date –
I paced your porch back home,
fearing you dead inside.

Then you drove up grinning widely,
with the bucket.

“No such luck,” you said.

“The fish is dead, not I.” (10-17)

For Lost and Found Brothers is another notable poem, in which she celebrates
brotherhood. She addresses brothers scattered around the world and generations of
immigrants living in distant countries.

For your brothers.

For the blood rivers invisibly harbored.

For the grandfathers who murmured the same songs.

And for the ways we know each other years before meeting,
how strangely and suddenly, on the lonely porches,
in the sleepless mouth of the night,
the sadness drop away, we move forward,
confident we were born into a large family,
our brothers cover the earth. (19-27)

The poem highlights the importance of the blood connection. As Lila Abu-Lughod says, “blood links people to the past and binds them to the present... As a link to the past, through genealogy, blood is essential to the definition of cultural identity. One can change virtually everything from name to legal status but not one’s blood” (Handal 47). It is with pride that Nye speaks of her lost and found brothers at and the sense of belonging to a bigger family, whose members live miles apart from each other.

Arabic is a special poem where Nye openly acknowledges of her inability to speak Arabic “I admit my shame” She confesses in the poem.

To live on the brink of Arabic, tugging

its rich threads without understanding
how to weave the rug... I have no gift.
The sound but not the sense. (18-21)

In the poem Nye relates an incident took place in Jordan, in 1992.
The man with laughing eyes stopped smiling
to say, “Until we speak Arabic-
-you will not understand pain.”

Something to do with the back of the head,
an Arab carries sorrow in the back of the head
that only language cracks (1-5)

As an adult, she regrets the fact that she did not learn the language in her childhood. At home, her father hardly spoke in Arabic because her mother could not understand. As she recalls the only time she heard her father speaking in Arabic was during the visits of her relations. Like Nye, children of Arab immigrants, especially the second and third generation Arab-Americans do not converse in Arabic. However Nathalie
Handal argues that culture is not just language, Arabness is understood without the language. “Different linguistic traditions do not necessarily mean different cultural traditions. Also not all Arabs are Muslim, and yet shared sociopolitical, historical and economic experiences from a collective memory that binds the past, present and future across continents” (Handal 42).

Nye’s religious background is multiple as her identity. Father was a non-practicing Muslim and her American mother was non-practicing Lutheran. However in her poetry she writes about both religions with ease. Inside the Riddle is one such poem.

This little house of Mary,
this concrete grotto studded
with seashells or chipped glass,
I would like to be a Catholic
with such a straight faith.

Or a Muslim, fasting and praying-
I would kneel on stones
beside the men of Cairo. (14-21)

In Half-and-Half she points out, identity could be multifaceted.
Half-and-Half
You can’t be says a Palestine Christian
on the first feast after Ramadan.
So, half-and-half and half-and-half. (1-4)

A Palestinian could be a Muslim or a Christian, similarly an Arab-American too could be either a Muslim or a Christian.

As a well traveled poet, Nye gives much importance to places, both in United States and Palestine and the rest of the world. Some poems have Jerusalem, Hebron as titles. Her poems are dotted with names of places associating herself, with not just Palestine but with the rest of the Middle East.
the clear belled voices of first graders

pinned to the map of Lebanon like a shield?

When I visited the camp of the opposition

near the lonely Golan, looking northward toward

Syria and Lebanon, a vine was springing pinkly from a tin can (12-16)

She travels through politically sensitive places in this poem Darling, and the following lines from Palestinians Have Given Up Parties.

The ancient taxi driver

shakes his head back and forth

from Jerusalem to Jericho. (47-49)

She journeys freely from city to city and country to country. From Jerusalem, Cairo to Abu Dhabi: from Palestine, Jordan to Iraq. Her poem Ducks written during the Gulf War reveals a moving story.

She could not call her family in Basra

which had grown farther away than ever

nor could they call her. For nearly a year

she would not know who was alive,

who was dead. (24-28)

Food, landscape, family have become emblems that represent Arab identity. However, Nye is not restricted by her ethnic identity inherited from the old country. As a hyphenated poet, she has merged herself in her adopted country's culture. Many of her poems have been inspired by her American experience: for example Being from St. Louise, Texas the first time, Dallas suburban, Point of Rock, Texas, At the Seven – Mile Ranch, Comstock, Texas and The Endurance of Poth, Texas. Her focus of attention remains, Texas, her state of residence.

Nye seems fascinated by the land, and quite at home in Texas, which she openly expresses in At the Seven-Mile Ranch, Comstock, Texas.
Out here it’s impossible be to lonely.

The land walking beside you is your oldest friend,
pleasantly silent, like already you’ve told the best stories,
and each of you knows how much the other made up. (11-14)

Apart from the Texas terrain, Nye appears to appreciate small American towns, The Endurance of Poth, Texas illustrates this fact;
“... I want towns like Poth and Panna Maria and Skidmore to continue forever in the flush, red-cheeked in love with all the small comings and goings of cotton trucks, haylifts, peaches, squash, the cheerleader’s sleek ankle, the young farmer’s nicked ear.” (7-11)

Further the unmistakable signs of American culture are embedded in her poetry. “You who are training your daughters to check for the words / “Calvin Klein” before they look to see if there are pockets” (2-3), is a case in point taken from Rebellion against the North Side. Hamburgers, hotdogs, cokes, Walt Disney, the all American icons have been inserted in to her poems. Signs and The Urge for Eapasote are set in the heart of American culture.

And the worlds we come to, far from our first ground...

now I live in Texas where the sign offers – T N T BARBEQUE TERRIBLE DELICIOUS – and I whirl by, biting down on this terrible delicious air.” (20-23)

“Visit grocery stores till at last
a small packet of dried in the Tex-Mex market where you
spin a roulette wheel to find out if you get your groceries free.” (6-8)

Different food items, such as macaroni casserole, stuffed cabbage, baked potatoes, stroganoffs are introduced. Her son has become an expert in ordering grilled cheese. New challenges of her life are shared with the reader – for example, changing
airplanes, finding exit off the interstate, charging gas, sending fax etc. Her poems offer a glimpse into her life in US.

Nye’s father was one of the thousands of Arabs who immigrated to the United States. Immigrants from different Arab nations, of different religions left homeland in order to live a better life. Nye feels for those who made the decision to immigrate to the West. “Tears for the men and women / who leave the places that know them.” She mentions her father in her poem Puff:

On another street called Salah Eddin, a shopkeeper
called out, Your father was the most handsome man
in Jerusalem when he left! (42-44)

In My Uncle’s Favorite Coffee Shop, Nye tries to disclose realities of immigrant lives. “Immigrants had double and nothing all at once / Immigrants drove the taxis, sold the beer and Cokes” (20-21). Over the years settlers have struggled to assimilate into the new culture. With the passage of time, as Nye explains in Steps, they have integrated into the American society while preserving their own culture at the same time.

A man letters the sign for his grocery in Arabic and English ....

They have learned the currency of the New World,
carrying wishes for gum and candies shaped like fish (1-7)

As a Palestine or Arab-American poet, Nye has to deal with being hyphenated which places her self between Arab Heritage and American experience. Among Arab-Americans writers particularly among Palestinian-American poets, cultural identification has been a persistent theme. However Nye is seen as a poet, who is at peace with her both selves, a poet who has conquered in-betweens and complexities of her identity, a rare feat among Arab-American writers. Undoubtedly, this wholeness that she has uncovered, has played a key role in her career as a successful poet. Today, Nye is a leading American poet who is well known for her writing about the American Southwest, as well as for her Arab-themed work.

As a poet she is multifaceted: she is a political poet, philosophical poet, and above all a woman poet. She is all of these. Her beautiful imagery and thought provoking poetry have earned her unique place among her contemporaries. Her voice
is authoritative yet passionate. She has been compared to the late William Stafford, as writer who writes with a great heart and a sure hand.