

Humanizing the “So-Called Enemy”: Teaching the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye

Do not be too quick to assume your enemy is a savage just because he is your enemy. Perhaps he is your enemy because he thinks you are a savage. Or perhaps he is afraid of you because he feels that you are afraid of him. And perhaps if he believed you are capable of loving him he would no longer be your enemy.

—Thomas Merton (2007/1961, p. 177)

When I first started teaching Naomi Shihab Nye’s *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002) five years ago, the television and news images of Muslims and Middle Easterners were violent, scary, or so very, very foreign. Angry men, waving their fists, jostling for the camera. Angry men, shouting epithets about Americans. Or perhaps men kneeling in prayer—which shouldn’t be an alarming image but was because of the sheer numbers, the huge lines of prostrate men, only men. In the last five years, we have added names to some of these men’s faces: Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden. During the weeks I wrote this article, a Nigerian Jihadist tried to blow up a plane before it landed in Detroit. His face is another frightening image that my students and I now recognize.

Note that we do not have images in our heads of those protesters at the Detroit courthouse, both Nigerians and Arabs from the Middle East, who wanted to make clear to the world that Islam is a peaceful religion. Our local newspapers and media sources did not carry photos of those who want to give Islam another face. True, we know more now about the Middle East than we did five years ago: we have a greater sense of the diversity of the Middle East, recognizing that it includes Afghans and Iranians, Palestinians and Iraqis;

we know more about the Islamic religion, and the sweep of its geography. But in some ways it’s harder now for my students to make sense of the Middle Eastern news because it isn’t just the news media that reinforces negative stereotypes; popular culture does it, too.

Take the video games, the ones that invite players to simulate war. Some of my students play video war games like *Kuma\War*, *Army of Two*, and *Conflict:Desert Storm*—games that are often set in a vague location that sometimes looks urban, sometimes desert-like, often Middle Eastern, usually with terrorists and snipers, fast action and violence. Publicly objecting to the violence that includes the killing of civilians, a British MP complained that the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* “contains such scenes of brutality that even the manufacturers have put in warnings within the game” (Emery, 2009). Clearly the games are produced with consumers in mind and reflect their expectations and tastes, but beyond accommodating people’s desire for action and amusement, these video games promote stereotypes of the bad guys—bad guys who seem to be increasingly portrayed as Middle Eastern.

Vit Sisler, a researcher in the field of game studies, states, “When you play a game, you tend to

identify yourself not only with its main character, but with the whole system—with its rules and underlying logic” (Haenni, 2009). It is important, he points out, that we study how Arab and Muslim characters are represented. In some games where the point of view of the game player is that of an American or coalition shooter, “the enemy is represented by visual signifiers referring to Arabs or Muslims, like head cover, loose clothes and dark skin color. Most of these games exhibit strong cultural bias when schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies in the narrative framework of fundamentalism and international terrorism.” Sisler argues that the players’ “only interaction possible with the Arab/Muslim characters is to fight them,” these stereotyped, flat characters who “fight in an undisciplined way, [and] laugh mockingly after they kill someone or wave AK-47s above their heads.”

In a parallel way, a Syrian company has remade American videogames by substituting men of Hezbollah or Arab Muslim soldiers as the protagonists and the Americans and Israelis as the bad guys (“Middle East Online”). Governmental agencies are not above using games for their political purposes. Reporting on this phenomenon, Sisler notes, “We have the Army Games Project, within which a first-person shooter game, *America’s Army*, was developed and distributed freely to help the US Army’s recruitment campaign; the Iranian National Institute of Computer Games, which supports games designed in accordance with Islamic and Iranian values; and the Central Internet Bureau of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement, which produces a series of games about the struggle with Israel” (Haenni, 2009). Thus the propagation of stereotypes and demonization in the various games are manipulated to serve the creator’s perspective. Anyone who studies the effect of video gaming on youth—American youth as well as Middle Eastern youth—needs to consider the pernicious effect of these clichés. If Sisler is right in saying that “games are the new semiotic language of today’s youth” (cited in Haenni, 2009), my game-playing students are exposed to a world of influence that is at least as polarizing, if not more so, than Fox news.

Consider as well the influence of popular movies on our students’ understanding of the Middle East. Anti-Arab film *Delta Force* (Golan, 1986) may be an old movie to them, but it has had a long shelf life. They all grew up with *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker,

1992), and most of them remember the infamous line about the Middle East as a place “where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face.” Shaheen, author of *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), makes the case that Hollywood’s images of Middle Easterners, and especially Arabs, have always been reductive and insulting. Women are portrayed as belly dancers. Men are repulsive oil sheikhs or perhaps religious fanatics. He references several films in the past seventy years in which characters refer to Arabs as dressed in sheets or all looking the same, and concludes, “In Hollywood films, they certainly do” (p. 2).

My college students, unlike those from more urban or sophisticated areas around the country, are likely to know the news from and the videogames and movies about the Middle East, but are not likely to have firsthand experiences with Middle Easterners. Many walk in the door with little understanding of Arab Americans or Muslims or Palestinians. They are ready to move on from their unconsidered stereotyping, but they need new images to replace the old. I teach a course in international literature for children and young adults to these future elementary and secondary teachers, future librarians, and eager literature students, a course that invites them to read outside of the body of literature with which they are familiar. I ask them to learn about the literature that others grew up reading or that describes others’ realities. My students read *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (2002), a collection of poems that will be familiar to many readers of *ALAN Review*; Nye’s work has been written about in these pages before. Her neglected essay, “Lights in the Window,” published in this journal in 1995, is a perfect complement to *Gazelle*. These two texts are timely this year, this month, when fear is rampant and prejudice is increasing. Teaching them provides students with a powerful, emotional counterweight against today’s media images.

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Naomi Shihab Nye's father left Jerusalem as college student, going to study in Kansas. Her mother was a Midwesterner from Ohio. Nye has embraced both parts of her heritage and has labored to present a new point of view to Americans who are locked into images of violence. Because she believes in the power of words, she wrote a daily letter to the President (N. S. Nye, personal communication, February 1, 2010) over several stretches during the George W. Bush administration. *Gazelle* is another record of her thoughts. Her poems tell stories of family in the States—Arab American immigrants longing for home—as well as her family and friends living in the Middle East, unwillingly caught up in violence and political realities not of their doing.

A prose introduction speaks of her politics immediately: "Perhaps Arab-Americans must say, twice as clearly as anyone else, that we deplore the unbelievable, senseless sorrow caused by people from the Middle East" (Nye, 2002, p. xvi). The impetus for the collection was her grandmother's voice, haunting her at night, nudging her after 9/11 to "Speak for me too. Say how much I hate it. Say this is not who we are" (p. xviii).

Nye's broad take on the Middle East includes poems on the devastating earthquake in Iran, a message from Saudi women, an account of a visit to Abu Dhabi and to the island of Bahrain. However, her book is grounded in her depiction of Palestinian anguish, her willingness to see Israelis as individuals, her recognition that both sides are perpetuating violence, and her call for change.

No one was right.
Everyone was wrong.
What if they'd get together
And say that? . . .
Jewish and Arab women
Standing silently together.

Generations of black.

Are people the only holy land? (pp. 135–136)

Nye's method of creating empathy is to celebrate the small quirky details that help us see that Arabs do not all look alike. She helps us notice men "who had been shepherds so long they walked like sheep" and women who carry buckets of water on their heads and tease Nye, because they know she can't balance a bucket herself. We glimpse her elderly grandmother,

baking bread, waiting by the oven. We read about "young ones" who seemingly roll their eyes at the constant praying of their elders and tell the "old ones" not to waste their time. My students tip their heads up in sudden recognition.

Most of the 60 poems show us pictures of Arabs, bits of their lives spent in villages with one cow, or in refugee camps, or in self-imposed exile elsewhere, but still longing for home. As we look at the details, we see individuals suffering. We see an Iranian man holding his limp child after an earthquake. We see Palestinian girls, "with huge dark moons under their eyes," stand in line for bread for seven hours. We see students gathering for their last day of the school year, but then the school door is blown off, and we see

Empty chairs where laughter used to sit.
Laughter lived here
Jingling its pocket of thin coins
And now it is in hiding. (p. 60)

The penultimate poem, "Blood," considers how, in our post-9/11 world, a *true* Arab behaves. Nye slides into the topic obliquely, proposing various answers. Is it through the small habits or customs that mark a person as "Arab"? Is it through a mindset, a perspective that reveals an Arab philosophy? Is there a flag that unites Arabs? Nye's father identified her childlike wonder at the world, her open-heartedness, as being truly Arab. Or, does it mean that to be Arab means living with grief and violence, with a "tragedy with a terrible root [that] is too big for us" (p. 136)? And so, after another horrific headline, Nye and her father talk "around the news," because his pain is so deep and raw that "neither of his two languages can reach it" (p. 136).

Like the shepherds of the first poem, Nye herself goes to the countryside in this last poem. She "plead[s], with the air," and, like those shepherds, looks for a place to store her pain. But now there is no settling down to good food, to those simple pleasures of being alive in order to balance the despair. We've come too far and have seen too much. Now there are only anguished cries: "What does a true Arab do now?" (p. 137).

How far this is from the images I see when I turn on CBS news. How far it is from the quick, menacing figures on video games or in the movies. My students need help with, as Judith Langer (1998) says, moving through this literature and examining what they know

because of it, and they need to make connections with other texts and to make readjustments because of previously held stereotypes. But mostly they need to settle in and look at Nye's images, listen to her words, and ponder.

Lens for Nye

I teach Nye's *Gazelle* and her essay through reader response and sociocultural lenses, urging my students to make lots of connections to other texts. Before they begin reading, I ask them what they know about the Middle East and find that the depth of their answers varies widely. (Thankfully, their answers have deepened since the first time I asked this question, when I received several papers that used the term Israelites for Israelis.) I assign an interactive geography website (*Map Quiz*) to help them learn the names and locations of Middle Eastern countries. "I don't mean to treat you like fourth-graders," I say, "but American students are not known for their geographical knowledge." They often thank me. "I surprised my dad," one says, "when I proved to him I could identify more Middle Eastern countries than he could."

For two poems, one of my choosing and one of theirs, I assign them a Reader Response exercise (*Bleich's Heuristic*, 2009). They pick important words and concepts and analyze how the poem triggered their thoughts and emotions. I ask them to analyze how the book is structured and why. Then we do the same for the title poem. They begin to see how the book works, how Nye has put it together. They are surprised because they didn't know a book of poetry was more than private whimsy, that it has structure as plumbable as a person's DNA. They like that I don't want them to explicate every line, that, like them, I'm not sure of why she writes:

Soldiers stalk a pharmacy:
Big guns, little pills. (p. 93)

I tell them my story of surprise at seeing armed soldiers parked outside a pharmacy in Guatemala City, proposing a guess at why they might be stationed there; they tell me their theories, and we puzzle together.

I bring in a picturebook of the comic figure Goha (Johnson-Davies, 2005), which helps them understand a few of her references. Some of them see the Palestinian film "The Lemon Tree" (Riklis, 2009). They

also individually choose other texts that deepen their understanding of *Gazelle*: Nye's picturebook paean to her grandmother, *Sitti's Secrets* (1997), or her young adult novel *Habibi* (1999). Some choose to study Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine* (2001); some read Valerie Zenatti's *When I Was a Soldier* (2005), the memoir of a young Israeli woman, while others read Carter's *The Shepherd's Granddaughter* (2008). A great favorite is Satrapi's graphic novel *Persepolis* (2004), which is not Arab but Iranian, and helps expand their understanding of Islam.

Their final task is to place *Gazelle* alongside her essay "Lights in the Window" (1995). My students are intrigued by images of Middle Easterners as rapt fans of poetry readings and as a people proud of their culture and their history. They see what Nye was hoping her readers would see as we visualized our way through her 60 poems. We read about her decision during the first Gulf War to go into classrooms with the poems of Iraqis, so that readers had a sense of just who the "so-called enemy" was, so that she could help people move beyond media images. Nye believes that the *job* of poetry is "to give us a sense of others' lives close up" (p. 5), and that poetry allows us to listen to the intimate poetic voices of citizens of other countries. She asks, "Isn't this where empathy begins?" (p. 5).

I ask my students to keep a dual entry notebook as they read this essay, so that they slow down and ponder what she proposes and why. Their task is to jot down a few words from Nye on the left side of the paper—perhaps a statement, perhaps a beautiful phrase—and an explanation for that choice, a question, or a connection to other ideas and texts on the right side of the paper. Invariably, they mention her similes and metaphors and beautiful language. And invariably, they make connections between their experiences while reading *Gazelle* and reading her beliefs about what poetry is and can make possible in "Lights in the Window."

Responding to Nye

After they've digested *Gazelle* and "Lights in the Window" and the other texts or movies of their choosing, I ask them to tell me what they have learned from Nye. Many of them mention that they have moved beyond the stereotyping. Here are a few of their thoughts:

- In *19 Varieties*, the American audience can get a sense of Palestinians as people, not just “Palestinians.” It is easy to mistake the governmental leaders of a country for the average citizen of a country, but it is important not to do so. One way of getting out of this habit is to read international literature and critically examine yourself and the stereotypes and assumptions you hold about others, a challenge Nye’s work seems to offer.
- When we actually listen to each other, we learn things about each other that we can’t learn from the news—and listening to someone is essentially what we do when we read poetry. Nye is suggesting that by listening to people from perspectives that are different from or even opposing our own, we are able to empathize with them rather than make judgments. . . . Many people might consider people of her background an “enemy” but she seeks in her work to portray all people as people, setting aside already formed ideas that people have about each other in favor of encouraging people to listen to each other.

From Nye, my students learn to see individuals. They grasp that the Middle East is filled with many, many people who desperately want peace. At least to a limited extent, they identify with Nye’s family and friends, and in some of their responses, use the term *we*.

- Nye wants the world to know that not all Middle Easterners are what is portrayed in the media. We are all human beings and we all search for peace.
- Nye’s book acknowledges the senselessness of war, especially in her poem “Jerusalem.” The war or killing goes on and on. We blame the other guy when in fact the wings of the bird lie across both Israeli and Palestinian roofs.

In “Lights in the Window,” when Nye describes carrying Iraqi poems into American classrooms, she wanted students to remember that real people live in Iraq, with real hopes and fears, who wear shoes and eat bread just like we do (p. 6). She, more than any poet I know, wants readers to develop their abilities to empathize with the people of the Middle East. And that is what happens to my students: they develop their powers of empathy. Many, if not most, replace the ugly stereotype with new images for the term *Arab*.

But there are limits. Not every student reads slowly enough to engage well. Even if students do replace a disturbing, shadowy menace with an image of Nye’s grieving father, gaining new insight does not ensure that students will be moved to political action, will boycott the latest Arab movie, or will complain to the creators of video games. In fact, some of my students’ responses to Nye distress me. Several of them tell me these lines are ones they are grateful for, that speak to and for them.

I’m not interested in
who suffered the most.
I’m interested in
People getting over it. (p. 92)

The students who claim these lines as their favorites are willing to open their minds to her ideas, but at the same time do not want to disrupt their perspectives too much. They are afraid of having an emotional response, afraid that they’ll be called upon to do something they don’t want to or can’t do. I can see that they would prefer to move on now to happier books.

But Nye is bigger than that, I tell them. Why not put her lines (above) in balance with the old taxi driver’s words from “The Palestinians 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.

Which means it will go on and on. (p. 61)

Why not take one more step in your thinking, I ask them. Why not take stock of what you’ve learned and wipe out those old prejudices? Why not think about what you know of our own country’s policies and actions and reconfigure your political stance? Why not replace those shadowy, ominous figures of the videogames with those of Nye’s family, and while we do so, take a hard look at our own culpability in their suffering? I know that my students will resist anything that smacks of guilt. I know that they do not want to feel guilty about what they or their parents do, did, or didn’t do, and that their resistance will put up a wall between them and Nye. But the culpability of privilege—that we have been given a lot and therefore a lot can be expected from us—is an argument that they can digest.

In critiquing the teaching of social justice literature, Nance (2006) argues that it is not enough to urge students only to connect and identify with less fortunate “others” (p. 10). Her comments are helpful in seeing that teaching for empathy does not always yield the kinds of responses that a teacher would prefer, and she implies that many teachers teach social justice literature badly. I agree with her that it is possible for students to read about injustice but not feel or hear any call to action as a result of that encounter, but I believe that there is a web of responsibility. If, as Nye says, “it is the *job* [stet] of poems to give us a sense of others’ lives close up” (p. 5), then it is my job to pick great literature and to guide my students in reading well. I need to help my students read in such a way that they banish stereotypes and recognize another’s existence and suffering. What follows next is the students’ job, their task of taking those images and “sense of others’ lives” to their hearts and minds. I believe that an emotional recognition that someone is suffering is the first step to action. I ask the students what we can and should do, after being moved by Nye, and with them, I suggest some pathways to action. But we all do our parts—Nye, me, and the students.

I tell my students that our privilege makes action possible. We can’t all be Gandhi, but we can all speak out against demonization of other people. We can point out to our friends how a movie tries to manipulate us, and we can stop enjoying certain kinds of video games. When our news only shows us scary terrorists, we can remember Ibtisam Bozieh, the 13-year-old girl who wanted to be a doctor, but instead, way back in 1989, was the 500th Palestinian to die (Nye, 2002, p. 53). We can tell people that Nye’s haunting poem about this child was banned by Israeli censors. We can vote differently. We can ask critical questions. We may not all become global political activists, but we can all act locally.

Some of my students write about their new attitudes towards the media, demonstrating how they’ve changed because of their reading of Nye.

- I don’t like to be judged by things Americans do, so I should think more before I stereotype an entire culture.
- I’m Jewish, and I hope that all people see that this fighting is stupid. There are humans on both sides.

Nye helps me understand that people I should “hate” are human just like me.

One student emailed me a semester after our class to say this:

- I just saw the film version of *Reel Bad Arabs*, showing how America’s political decision to side with Israel has influenced our access to anti-Palestinian media in movies and books. It was really a great movie and I learned a lot about how Palestinian people (including the children!) have been demonized by media. Promise me that you’ll never stop teaching *19 Varieties of Gazelle!*

And so Nye leads us to a new place and makes it possible for us to begin a conversation that starts like this: why do some Middle Easterners hate America and what should we do about it? How can we stop perpetuating hate—theirs of us and ours of them?

In “Lights in the Window,” Nye (1995) writes, “we need to know one another. It is an imperative, not a luxury” (p. 6). William Greider (2001), a national correspondent for *The Nation*, asks if we are capable of rising above the ugly stereotypes perpetuated by the film industry (p. viii). My answer is that we *must* be capable of moving beyond stereotype. We must learn to see each other. Voices like Nye’s will help us find our way.

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Note

1. Here are representative and important writers who support the potential of creating emotional connections with literature and teaching to build empathy: Jeffrey Berman, 2004; Jerome Bruner, 1987; Robert Coles, 1989; Azar Nafisi, 2008; Nel Noddings, 2002.

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