

Gönderim Tarihi: 28.02.2016 Kabul Tarihi: 23.03.2016

WORDS UNDER THE WORDS: MAPPING NAOMI SHIHAB NYE'S POETRY

Özlem GÖREY*

KELİMELEİN ALTINDAKİ KELİMELE: NAOMI SHIHAB NYE ŞİİRLERİNİN HARİTASI

Öz

Diaspora kimliğine sahip yazarların sürekli bir oluş ve değişim içerisinde oldukları söylenebilir. Aynı zamanda hem 'orali', hem de 'buralı' olmak, kimlik oluşturulmasında birden fazla referans noktası olması demektir. Kadın yazar için böyle bir farkındalık, kendisine yapıcı olasılıklar sunan 'üçüncü bir alan' yaratmaktadır. Naomi Shihab Nye şiirlerinde diaspora mirasından etkilenir. 1952 yılında Filistinli bir baba ve Amerikalı bir annenin çocuğu olarak dünyaya gelen Shihab Nye, adı geçen üçüncü alanı potansiyel bir iyileşme / tedavi alanı olarak kullanır. Sınırları grupları birbirinden ayıran çizgiler olarak değil, aksine birbiri ardına gelen temas noktaları olarak görmeyi tercih eder. Böylece, kültürlerarasında farklılık yerine benzerlik esasına dayanan ilişkiler kurulabilmesi için alternatif yollar önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Diaspora, sınırlar, Amerikan edebiyatı, etnik edebiyat, şiir, Naomi Shihab Nye

Abstract

Authors with diasporic identities can be thought of being in a constant state of becoming. Being both from 'there' and from 'here' simultaneously requires having more than one reference point in construction of identity. Such awareness allows for a 'third space' with its constructive possibilities for the woman writer. Naomi Shihab Nye is a poet who draws upon her heritage of diaspora in her work. Born in 1952 to a Palestinian father and an American mother, she employs the 'third space' as a potential location of healing. She chooses to see borders not as a line of separation, but rather a series of contact points. By doing so she proposes alternative ways of forming relationships across cultures based not on difference, but sameness.

Keywords: Diaspora, borders, American literature, ethnicity, poetry, Naomi Shihab Nye

* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü, e-posta: gorey@boun.edu.tr

1. Introduction

The world we live in has evolved into a place in which we have come to accept the loss of stable communities. Whether it is physical or metaphorical, exile has become an inevitable reality. Within such geography, maps that divide and order our existence have become more and more blurred and permeable. Rapidly changing cultural global landscapes, cultural definitions, as well as national borders result in a less rigid understanding of what separates human beings from one another. Many terms emerge in this rapidly changing cultural terrain such as exilic, ethnic, migrant, nomadic, hybrid and diasporic. They aim to contain meanings that are extremely elusive by their nature.

No matter which term one chooses to use, there are certain themes and metaphors that run through the poetry of diasporic writers. Cartographies, maps, borders, travel, and food are some of these extended metaphors that are used by the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye, who could come under the umbrella term of diasporic writers. Her poetry, however, goes one step further and explores borders as points of contact, instead of separation.

2. Shihab Nye and Borders

Either all or none of these terms could refer to the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab's Nye's work. Imagining that her poetry would ask for a much wider sense, they are all endowed with the widest sense possible. The aim is to try to capture the experiences of the individuals who have formed communities outside the lands they were born in, and who have had to adapt to and be adopted by the new traditions they live in. For such 'diasporic' people, the idea of a motherland is invested with a different sense that simply cannot be circumscribed by geographical and/or cultural boundaries. Similarly, the idea of being stuck between a long gone past and a present in which they cannot be completely understood results in the sense of living in a no man's land. Hence, it is not surprising that the sense of being rootless and metaphoric use of plant imagery appear often in migrant narratives. Being uprooted and transplanted elsewhere works well within their context as the roots of the term 'diaspora' comes from the Greek word *speiro* meaning to sow or to disperse (Cohen 1997: xiv).

In the 1970s, pioneering feminist Adrienne Rich was writing about "cartographies of silence" in her poetry. Her poetry almost works like a

warning as she declares: “Silence can be a plan rigorously executed / the blueprint of a life. / It is a presence / it has history, a form / Do not confuse it / with any kind of absence” (Rich 2002: 139-140). In this influential poem written almost 50 years ago Rich mapped silence through the conversation of two lovers. Their conversation is given a visual form with the use of the metaphor of maps and mapping. In the traditional binary thought, on one side there is articulation and presence, on the other silence and absence. Almost like a border that divides two countries silence is deemed to be the opposite of speech.

This paper suggests that Naomi Shihab Nye, following her predecessor Adrienne Rich, proposes an alternative way to imagine silence as well as maps and borders. The idea of a rootless and migrant identity presupposes a crossing of a frontier/ border and travelling through a map. Therefore, such a stance represents both a critique and a celebration in the work of the poet since a border on a map always presupposes two sides. Instead of regarding the border as an entity that separates, it is possible to imagine it as a point of contact. The border is loaded with possible points of connection and exchange. Like the points of contact, the experiences of the diasporic subject are more than one, be it historical, geographical, and linguistic. Defining the border as a space of contact in between, the poet enables her readers to imagine culture as a state of constant change and becoming through contact with other cultures, both diasporic and rooted. Susan Stanford Friedman also regards this issue of borders in a similar way as she posits that borders have a dual function, “a way of insisting on separation at the same time as they acknowledge connection”. By using the metaphor of a bridge, she underlines the sense and “possibility of passing over. They also mark the fact of separation and the distance that has to be crossed.” (Friedman 1998:3). I believe the articulation and understanding of metaphors in a way that works more towards connection instead of separation is extremely important for the way Naomi Shihab Nye establishes a connection between herself, her readers and her poetry, both in particular and in general. This stance becomes more important when we learn that her main target audience is young adults who come from and live in culturally heterogeneous societies. According to Friedman:

Borders between individuals, genders, groups
and nations erect categorical and material
walls between identities. Identity is in fact
unthinkable without some sort of imagined or
literal boundary. But borders also specify the

liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange. Borders enforce silence, miscommunication, misrecognition. They also invite transgression, dissolution, reconciliation and mixing.” (Friedman 1998:3)

Hence, borders stand as the perfect metaphor - a link rather than a locked door. Adrienne Rich once wrote a poem entitled ‘Prospective Immigrants Please Note’ in which her persona was trying to make predictions about the two sides of the door. She was asking questions to herself about whether to remain where she was or cross to the other side. She concludes the poem as such: “The poem itself / makes no promises / It is only a door” (Rich 1995:188). Once the reader finds the courage to touch, form a contact, and open the door then the border assumes a role loaded with possibility. Azade Seyhan quotes Teresa McKenna’s words with reference to borders. For her the border becomes: “an area that stands geographically as well as politically and culturally as figure and metaphor for the transition between nations, ... a metaphor that underscores the dialectical tension between cultures” (Seyhan 2001:19).

With these ideas in mind, I turn to the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye and her volume of selected poems titled *Words under the Words*. She was born in 1952 as the daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother. Throughout her life she has been a part of both the eastern and western culture, trying to compromise both. Her work seems to work as the hyphen in Palestinian-American, that space which simultaneously separates and connects. She is highly acclaimed and regarded as one of her generation’s most exciting and accessible poets.

In her poetry she draws on her Palestinian-American heritage, as well as the diverse cultures of Southwest America where she lives. Her poetry is further colored with her vivid impressions of her travels to the Middle East and the people she has met all around the world.

What makes her work interesting is the way she has an almost romantic sensibility in her approach to life around her. She has a way of making us see everyday life through different lenses. Her voice is familiar yet fresh at the same time. Identifying herself with a loose leaf, she writes poems that appeal to our shared humanity. For a poet with such sensibilities, the border as a point of contact works perfectly.

3. Shihab Nye's Poems in Discussion

The first poem to be taken into account in this sense is titled 'The Whole Self' (Nye 1995:8-9). It takes its title from the children's song 'The Hokey Pokey' which goes "You put your whole self in / You put your whole self out / Whole self in and you shake it all about". By giving the original song as the subtitle she directs her readers to their childhood memories. It has been mentioned above that Nye's poetry is particularly aimed at young readers of culturally different backgrounds. Hence, it makes great sense to start the poem with a reference point which is recognizable to all of them since they play the game together and are familiar with the music. The poem reads:

When I think of the long history of the self
on its journey to becoming the whole self, I get tired.
It was the kind of trip you keep making.

Over and over again, the bag you pack and repack so often
the shirts start folding themselves the minute
you take them off.

...

I could tell you what I was wearing. How suddenly
the face of the harried waitress *made sense*. I gave my order
in a new voice. Spoke the word *vegetables* like a precious
code.

(Nye 1995:8)

The whole self that the persona is not putting her whole self in and out of a circle like in the children's song. This time what she goes in and out is a suitcase. It is important to notice that she is not packing a part of herself for a journey with the intention to come back. Wherever she goes, she has to take everything, literally and metaphorically, since there is no turning back. In a more general sense, the poem deals with the idea of carrying diasporic identity through history and geography. The persona of the poem rearranges and adapts herself according to a new environment. On the surface it works fine, as she begins to make sense of everyday acts like ordering in a restaurant. This hopeful stance will not last for very long. Everything is not well, as we read:

Give me back my villages, I moaned,
The ability to touch and remove the hand

without losing anything.

Take me off this mountain where six counties are visible at once.

I want to remember what it felt like, loving by inches.

You put in the whole self – I'll keep the toe. (Nye 1995:8)

Written in unrhymed triplets, the poem searches for a way of making her confused life more ordered. In the above extract, it can be seen that for her it is very difficult to embrace the whole picture without grasping the importance of the details of her body and identity. That is the reason why she wants to hang on to the toe instead of conceding the whole self. She already feels geographically alienated in the mountainous area as it is very much different from the desert landscape. Hanging on to her toe stands as an act of hanging on to what was left behind and the desire to keep a part of that lost identity alive.

Once she establishes that she will keep something and not let go of her roots completely, then she manages to mention the possibility of keeping her identity as a whole, albeit in a transformed way. Her self will be the one to see her off from the homeland. It will also be her own self to welcome her in the new lands she will come to call her new home. Using the metaphor of a journey, which has always been a favourite of the poet in her depiction of the quest for identity, the poem ends in the following words, as we read:

Dance! The whole self was a current, a fragile cargo,
a raft someone was padding through the jungle,
and I was there, waving, and I would be there at the other
end.

(Nye 1995:9)

In a later poem titled 'You Know Who You Are', the poet once again uses the metaphor of travelling on a raft. This time the raft which allows the speaker to travel through alternate selves is identified as poetry. She writes:

Suddenly I felt the precise body of your poems beneath me,
like a raft, I felt words as something portable again,
a cup, a newspaper, a pin.
Everything happening had a light around it,

not the light of Catholic miracles,
the blunt light of a Saturday afternoon.
Light in a world that rushes forward with us or without us.
I wanted to stop and gather up the blocks behind me
in this light, but it doesn't work.
You keep walking, lifting one foot, then the other,
saying "This is what I need to remember"
and then hoping you can. (Nye 1995:2)

The speaker who is forced to leave her home and life behind makes one more move to be able to take physical remnants of her home, the blocks of her house in order to be able to build her new home using some of those blocks. What she can manage, however, is to carry her memories with her. Her fear of forgetfulness is very real as she knows that human memory is diluted in time. She only hopes that she will be able to remember.

It is important to note that Nye's personas are always on the move. They are in a constant act of becoming and changing. In an interview the poet herself refers to this when she says: "I suggest that blood be bigger than what we're born with, that blood keep growing and growing as we live; otherwise how will we become true citizens of the world?" (Long 2009:32) As a poet Shihab Nye chooses to see borders a site of liberty and opts to ignore the prescriptions that come with those borders. She was quoted in an interview saying "to live without roads seems one way not to get lost" (Hilal 2002:7). Taking chances on the road and believing the power of the word of poetry are recurrent themes in her poetry. Static existence is not for her. This does not mean, however, that she is rootless. Rather, she carries her roots with her everywhere she goes. In 'At Portales, New Mexico' she writes:

You never know how far your voices would travel
once you let a word out,
felt that curled stem shrinking in your throat
and the thousand directions it could
or could not go. (Nye 1995:87)

The act of becoming through journey is always an important part of her work. She couples this metaphor with the idea of sameness. Instead of concentrating on the idea of difference and individual characteristics, Shihab Nye proposes to centralize sameness and common traits. Critics have already drawn attention to the under-representation of sameness in

Western cultural thought. Susan Stanford Friedman in her influential *Mappings*, Henrietta Moore in *A Passion for Difference* have already drawn attention to the idea of sameness as a possible site of reconciliation and healing. Human beings long for a common thread with other human beings in order to belong to a group. Identification with others requires a common element through which we could bond. Despite the fact that difference and individuality is the main subject of enquiry of our times, sameness is inevitably linked to these terms. In order to be able to grasp difference one must also relate to sameness. The contradictory and double nature of our existence is highlighted here. On the one hand, we have the need to be different to assert our subjectivity. There has to be something unique in all of us individually. On the other hand, however, we also have the need to belong to a group and recognize common characteristics between ourselves and the members of that group. Shihab Nye operates from within the latter position and her poetry deals with qualities common to either side of cultural borders. The poem 'Kindness' is a good example of such exploration.

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,

...

What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

...

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

...

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,

...

only kindness that raises its head
from the world of the crowd to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend. (Nye 1995:42)

In another poem called 'Arriving at Fish', the border between sameness and difference is blurred and the persona connects with an animal from a different medium. The fisherman in the poem catches a great bass and is

shocked at the arrival of the fish and hesitantly takes the fish home. The poem reads:

And later it was you and it was not you
who carries the bass on the strong yellow line
and showed him to the neighbors,
a photo snapped in a bright room.
Inside, your own gills were opening and closing
like remnants of an early life,
when this hadn't happened yet
and you were travelling through water,
dodging anything that suggested an end. (Nye 1995:23)

It is no surprise that such a connection can take place in a liquid and maternal environment where the mother and the baby can exist without borders as two separate organisms. The poet also seems to advocate a closer link with nature as the volume is loaded with plant imagery, and particularly images of humans becoming one with fruit, such as the grandmother with grapes, father and the figs, some of the fruits mostly identified with femininity. The relationship is placed on a religious pedestal as we read:

We must bless ourselves with peaches.
Pray to the eggplant, silent among her sisters,
that the seeds will not be bitter on the tongue.
Confess our dears to the flesh of tomato:
we too go forward only halfway ripened
dreaming of the deeper red. (Nye 1995:83)

Similarly, a migrant woman in a foreign land can connect with the new world around her through fruit when she says:

If she were to have anything to do with the world,
these would be her translators,
through these she would learn secrets of dying,
how to do it gracefully as the peach,
softening in silence,
or the mango, finely tuned to its own skin. (Nye 1995:17)

Food is an important component in Nye's poetry in her emphasis on sameness. In the discussion about sameness and common thread food for

her is invaluable as she says: “There was nothing obscure about the melons, / nothing involved about the yams / If she were to have anything to with the world / these would be her translators” (Nye 1995:17). So she places food in that intersection point which is the borderland that does not alienate, rather connects.

Shihab Nye regards young adults as her most precious audience. For her, our hope for the future lies with young people from different backgrounds who live in common territories. She explains her interest and trust in young people as follows:

I don't think there is a strong border between childhood and adulthood, but I used to worry that there might be. The things we love of childhood –the wonderment, the playfulness- if we're lucky- may be retained. It is true that some people who live in Borderland situations feel at home in neither place, but it is also true that some of us end up feeling at home everywhere. I loved the ways these contrasts, or frictions, were described by the canny young writers. They are wise as well as wondering. And I hope many people out there will listen to them for inspiration and uplift and perhaps find their words triggering more of their own. (Blasingame 2010:67)

Naomi Shihab Nye refers to her own face as “a map to another continent” in the poem ‘The Passport Photo’ (Nye 1995:65). There are indeed certain themes that run through the cartography of her poems. The journey towards selfhood, communication and healing through the natural world, her trust in the wisdom of young adults, and most importantly the vital role of literature, poetry in particular, in the exploration of borders as contact zones all inform her writing. Her belief in the actual power of poetry not only to inspire but also to transform lives makes her poetry extremely relevant.

A final word is left to a favorite, yet perhaps old-fashioned poem titled ‘Hidden’ on love and communication, the ultimate sources of power for Naomi Shihab Nye.

If you place a fern
under a stone

the next day it will be
nearly invisible
as if the stone has swallowed it.

If you tuck the name of a loved one
under your tongue too long
without speaking it
it becomes blood
sigh
the little sucked-in breath of air
hiding everywhere
beneath your words.
No one sees
the fuel that feeds you. (Nye 1998:37)

4. Conclusion

Naomi Shihab Nye, a poet of deep diasporic sensibility, has the gift of presenting everyday realities to her readers from a fresh perspective. By using the metaphors of maps and borders in alternative ways, she rewrites them as sites of connection and healing instead of separation and alienation.

References

- Blasingame, James (2010). 'Interview with Naomi Shihab Nye'. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 54 (1): 66-67.
- Cohen, Robin (1997). *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford (1998). *Mappings: Feminism and the Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hilal, Deema (2002). "Bordering on the Borderless". *Aljadid* 8 (39) :7-17.
- Long, Kate (2009). "Roots: On Language and Heritage, a Conversation with Naomi Shihab Nye". *World Literature Today November-December*: 31-34.
- Moore, Henrietta L. (1994). *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*. Blooming: Indiana University Press.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab (1995). *Words under the Words*. Portland, Oregon: The Eighth Mountain Press.
- Nye, Naomi Shihab (1998) *Fuel*. Rochester, New York: Boa Editions Ltd.

- Rich, Adrienne (1995). *Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970*. London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Rich, Adrienne (2002). *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Seyhan, Azade (2001). *Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.