

## Naomi Shihab Nye's Sitti's Secrets: Poetics of Homeland

### سردية الوطن في «اسرار ستي» لنعمومي شهاب ناي

Dr. Lama Al-Mahadin  
University of Bahrain

#### Abstract

*Sitti's Secrets (SS) was published in 1994, one year after the Oslo Accords, which saw the Palestinians sign peace agreements with Israel. The Accords, which led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority, an interim entity to govern the West Bank and Gaza, "promised much, though in reality delivered very little that was tangible" (Hastedt & Lybeck, 2014, p. 71). But Nye was writing at a time when the Accords still exercised a hold on the global imagination with the promise of lasting peace in the region. This paper seeks to examine the story as an affective articulation of Nye's vision of the past and the future of her father's homeland. Nye uses the story to create an affective-discursive landscape that enunciates an essentialist, one might even argue reductionist, vision of Palestine, but such essentialism is deployed strategically to serve a political message about Palestinian rights, history and rootedness, and the hope for peace.*

**Keywords:** Children's Literature; Ecocriticism; Identity; Palestine; Shihab-Nye.

## المخلص

نشرت قصة «أسرار سיתי» في عام ١٩٩٤ بعد مرور عام على توقيع اتفاقيات أوسلو والتي شهدت لأول مرة توقيع الفلسطينيين على اتفاقيات السلام مع إسرائيل، وكانت تلك الاتفاقيات والتي أدت إلى إنشاء السلطة الفلسطينية، ككيان مؤقت لحكم الضفة الغربية وقطاع غزة قد «وعدت بتحقيق الكثير ولكنها على أرض الواقع لم تحقق أي شيء ملموس» (هاستد ولايبك ٢٠١٤:٧١). ولكن كاتبة القصة ألفت قصتها في الوقت الذي كان لا يزال فيه تلك الاتفاقيات تؤثر بشكل كبير على الخيال العالمي ووعود تحقيق سلام دائم في المنطقة. يسعى هذا البحث إلى دراسة القصة باعتبارها التعبير العاطفي عن رؤية المؤلفة شهاب ناي لماضي وحاضر وطن والدها الفلسطيني الاصل، وتنعكس سردية شهاب ناي بنية خطابية/عاطفية جوهريّة او حتى اختزالية وظفت بشكل استراتيجي لخدمة رسالة سياسية عن حقوق الفلسطينيين وتاريخهم وارتباطهم بالأرض والأمل في تحقيق السلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نعومي شهاب ناي، الهوية الفلسطينية، ادب الطفل، تحليل الخطاب.

## Introduction:

Naomi Shihab-Nye is a Palestinian-American poet and novelist born in 1952 in the United States to a Palestinian journalist, who had immigrated from Jerusalem, and an American mother. She started writing at a very young age and is the author of many poetry books, short stories, and children's fiction.

At the age of fourteen, Shihab-Nye visited her Palestinian grandmother for the first time and a strong bond was formed between the two (Barenblat, 1999). This visit has greatly influenced the messages reflected in her collections of poetry and prose; it was "an experience that filled her with a deep sense of belonging, thereby, displacement" (Gomez-Vega 2001,p.246). Lisa Suheir Majaj (1996, p. 282) explains that in her attempt to document the differences as well as the similarities between two divergent people, Shihab-Nye in her work "explores the markers of cross-cultural complexity, moving between her Palestinian and American Heritage."

In the mid-1990s, hopes for peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis

developed briefly and brought with it, almost for the first time, a more positive emphasis on the portrayal of Palestinians in children's literary works. In an "exhaustive survey of U.S.-published books for young readers about the contemporary Middle East and North Africa," Marston (2004a) explains that most stories written for children and young readers before the 1990s either focused entirely on the Jewish settlers, ignoring altogether the Palestinians who used to live there as if the land was completely empty, referred to the Palestinians as "a nameless, faceless, purpose-less threat" or just described the Palestinians very briefly in a degrading manner. Hopes for peace in the mid-1990s brought a paradigm shift with the appearance of some books for young readers focusing on Palestinians directly, "not just as a sidelight," for example: *Sitti and the Cats* by Sally Bahous (1993), *Snow in Jerusalem* by Deborah da Coast (2001), *Habibi* by Naomi Shihab Nye (1997), *Running on Eggs* by Anna Levine (1999), *A Stone in My Hand* by Cathryn Clinton (2002) and *The Boy and the Wall* by Amahl Bishara (2006).

*Sitti's Secrets*, which won the Jane

Addams Children's Book Award in 1995, is considered one of the earlier books to be published following the peace agreement between Palestinians and Israel in 1993. An example of an attempt to combine Shihab-Nye's personal family experience with global conflicts and cross-cultural concerns, it is not only a carefully-woven narrative about a personal journey, but also a canvas for public discourse about peace, belonging, rootedness, and collective memory. While Marston's survey is concerned with the depiction of Palestinians in literature written for young readers, this paper moves beyond these representations to focus instead on how nationalist dynamics were negotiated in *Sitti's Secrets*. Drawing upon insights from discourse analysis, Affect Studies, and Ecocriticism, among others, this paper will demonstrate that Nye's romanticised representations of a Palestinian idyll, which exclude any reference to the conflict, or indeed Israel itself, is fraught with ideology and underpinned by very specific nationalist sentiments.

*Sitti's Secrets* centres on Mona (an Arabic name meaning unattainable wishes), a five-year-old Palestinian-American child on a journey with her father to visit her grandmother who "lives on the other side of the earth" (SS, p. 2). Mona feels an immediate bond with her grandmother whom she is meeting for the first time, despite the fact that neither understands the other's language - Monas speaks only English while her grandmother speaks only Arabic. Mona is introduced to a way of life completely different from the one she is used to in the USA. Throughout the narrative, paradoxically enough, Mona intimately explores how Palestinians used to live before their country was occupied.

The grandmother, illustrated wearing a traditional, embroidered Palestinian dress, takes Mona to watch the men, also dressed in traditional peasant clothes with the long shirt and head cover, picking lentils. The next stop is by a family that sells fresh cow milk. Despite the fact that very few women bake bread at home anymore, the grandmother is involved in an elaborate ritual of kneading the dough and making bread. According to Mona's father, "She has been baking that bread for a hundred years" (SS, p. 14). Mona and her grandmother are shown under a Lemon tree drinking lemonade with mint, and eating apricots and almonds. Mona is fascinated by the variation in colour of her grandmother's hair which peaks from under her traditional head cover, and asks if she could brush it. She describes the act of finding out how her grandmother's hair was striped as if she "knew a secret" (SS, p.18). In the evening, Mona climbs the stairs to the roof of her grandmother's house to enjoy the air, look at the sky and take down the laundry. She spots the village women walking back from the spring with jugs of water on their heads, a ritual which her father says the women like to do because "it is something from the old days they don't want to forget." (SS,p. 20). The trip to Palestine ends with a very emotional farewell and gifts from her cousins (a sack of almonds) and from her grandmother (a hand-made purse with a picture of her lemon tree) (SS, p.21). Mona's journey back home is spent reminiscing on her grandmother and her old green trunk in which she keeps, among other things, her husband's rings, a photo of Mona's father before he went to the USA, and a picture of Mona when she was a baby. When Mona arrives home, she writes a letter to the

President of the United States about her grandmothers, her lemon and fig trees, and Mona's hopes for peace. "Mr. President, I wish you my good luck in your hard job. I vote for peace. My grandmother votes for me" (SS, p.26). Mona concludes the narrative by imagining the world as a huge body tumbling in space, "all curled up like a child sleeping. People are far apart, but connected" (SS, p 28).

### The Liminality of *Sitti's Secrets*

The barred Nation It/ Self, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference. (Bhabha 1994,p. 147)

Shihab-Nye's narrative, although woven in English, depicts a world inhabited by Arab characters living on "the other side of the earth." She appropriates a context of events (her grandmother's life in Palestine) and creates a text aimed at an audience that is quite foreign to the context of interpretation of that text. By virtue of her cultural membership -American and Palestinian- she straddles two worlds and writes from the *liminal* space where the two realities intersect. She is neither Palestinian nor American but rather an amalgam of the two. One of the most striking aspects of the narrative is the lack of direct mention of Palestine. Instead, references to Palestine can be located within paralinguistic elements such as the author's dedication, author's biography, and the story's blurb. One can only assume that the decision not to include Palestine within the body of the text itself is intentional and reflects a preoccupation with

the audience to whom the story is addressed. The story itself carries with it the weight of a politically controversial message; the Palestinians' right to their own homeland. With a young Western audience in mind, Shihab-Nye seems to be weaving a narrative that aims to avoid alienating both the young audience and whoever might be reading that story to such an audience. The political overtones of the story were played down so as not to alienate or offend a western reader who, more often than not, is more exposed to the Israeli point of view regarding the situation in the occupied lands of Palestine. She completely avoids any mention of occupation or colonisation and presents her story in an insulated framework, thus the reader is simply presented with a portrait of a life that seems untouched by sadness, suffering, and misery. As Marston (2010, 9) explains:

if a story shows characters confronted with a dreadful situation over which they have little or no control, there's a danger that the dreadful situation itself may set up a psychological barrier for the reader. It may be too big, too alien, and too difficult to incorporate into the world that the young reader can deal with. A deeper, more intense and lasting response may arise when the reader can identify with the people in the story.

The audience is quite central in cross-cultural stories which attempt to be sensitive to readers' expectations, sensibilities and schemata of knowledge. Indeed, Shihab-Nye's formulation of Palestinian life appears almost insulated, sanitised, idealised and paradise-like. The story is not about Palestinian suffering, but rather a portrait of a Palestinian life, rights, history,

and traditions. Shihab-Nye did without the ugliness to find hope, colour and joy in an otherwise miserable existence under occupation. Had she chosen to emphasise armed struggle, it might have alienated her western readers and most probably provoked accusations of advocating violence and murder due to the great sympathy the West feels towards Israel and the wide-spread distrust and suspicion of anything and anyone Muslim (See Marston 2004b).

Bhabha's quotation above refers to the classic position the *Self* finds itself in when confronted with membership in two, often contending, cultural identities. This situation is further complicated when such memberships are located within an assemblage of coloniser/colonised. Although Shihab-Nye as both Arab and American does not place her strictly under the rubric of coloniser/colonised, nevertheless the situatedness of the Palestinian cause within western discourse is one where sympathy leans towards the Israelis. As such, Shihab-Nye finds herself in the all familiar positionality of having to continually negotiate her history/heritage as a Palestinian within an American context that is, all too often, hostile to the plight of these Palestinians. In Sitti's Secret, only one national constituency is presented, that of the Palestinians, but without the concomitant reference to the fact that Palestine is a country under occupation. Shihab-Nye's knowledge of both American/Arab cultures, inspired her to shift the focus from one of opposition to the occupation to a chronicle about rootedness, belonging, and ritual. Such a shift would not have been possible without the liminality that furnishes her (hybrid) Self with schemata of knowledge about two cultures and how

best to explore the Palestinian perspective without alienating the Western one.

If Palestine is not represented as a 'colonised space', it is even more striking that it is not mentioned at all within the body of the text itself. Mona refers to Palestine and the US as "the other side of the earth" (SS, p. 2). This semantic ambiguity is meant to emphasise to the reader the vast physical space that separates the two countries. Mona begins by saying that her "grandmother lives on the other side of the earth. When I have daylight, she has night. When our sky grows dark, the sun is peeking through her window and brushing the bright lemons on her lemon tree. Your turn, I say." For the little girl, there is a sense of continuity between her and her grandmother embodied by the chain of day and night that connects them. But that continuity/connection is not without obstacles as Mona demonstrates when she continues, «between us are fish, cities, buses and fields, and presidents, and clotheslines, and trucks and stop signs and DO NOT ENTER and families and deserts and million trees." Thus, Palestine and the US are connected through the old woman and granddaughter but the physical space itself is interspersed with material entities such as cars, trees, shops, presidents and, of course, stop signs and DO NOT ENTER. It is not quite clear what is meant by the last two but a number of interpretations are possible. They could, for example, be references to interdictions to entry imposed at country borders, or possibly an allusion to the realities of occupation which do not allow Palestinians access to their own lands. The last page of the story repeats the reference to her grandmother living on the other side of the earth and the centrality of lemons in her grandmothers' life (see below

for an analysis of the symbolism of lemons). The juxtaposition between the connection that exists between her and her grandmother and the distance that separates them is meant to establish Mona's relatedness to Palestine despite the physical space that exists between them, a relatedness created by history, memory, and the persona of her grandmother who stands for such collective points of convergence, which as will become evident in the following section, transcends language.

### **The Politics of Language in *Sitti's Secrets***

*"Contemporary Thought has been haunted by the idea of Language"*

(Shochat & Stam, 1985, p. 35)

Language has long been privileged as the tool of culture making *par excellence*, a logocentrism that owes much to a number of intellectual legacies that emerged since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. And while language has seen been dismantled as a transparent tool of meaning construction, its centrality to Western thought has remained relatively uncontested for a very long time (Stahl, 2002). Thinkers such as Saussure (1999), Barthes (1967), Bakhtin (1981), Foucault (1972), Heidegger (1962), and Bourdieu (1977) catapulted language into the heart of postmodernism by exploring its decisive role in constructing reality, shaping consciousness, regulating relations within a social order and creating networks of power - what could be described as a discursive approach to language. The 'fetization' of language relegated other components of meaning construction to second place, especially the role of affect/emotions in investing objects with meaning. In *Sitti's Secrets*, the young girl and her

grandmother are not merely separated by physical distances but language barriers as well - Mona speaks only English and her grandmother only Arabic. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, a bond is formed between the girl and her grandmother, and her homeland, in a manner that seems to have transcended the limitations imposed by the lack of common language. Deprivileging language in *Sitti's Secrets* created an economy of emotions grounded in affective rather than discursive communication.

Michel Foucault is the French theorist most associated with the notion of discourse and discursive practices/formations, which he recognizes as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972, p. 49). In essence, the way we talk about things constructs not only our perspective of them but the objects themselves. This revolutionary approach to language redefined the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as it became gradually recognized that "discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity" (Mills, 1997, p.15). But, as Whetherell (2012) demonstrates in her overview of new approaches to affect, language is not sufficient to explain our perception of objects that make up our reality. She argues that new trends in social research aim to infuse "social analysis with what could be called psychosocial texture" (2012, p. 2). The turn to affect is an attempt to create a paradigm shift where language is dethroned and supplemented with an emphasis on the emotional investment of social interactions. Whetherell's book represents a recent exploration of a discursive-affective turn in social research; an approach that combines language with emotional intensities in meaning construction. She argues that

“affective-discursive patterns are crucial in part because they are the material from which people select and build more global subjective feelings of interactional and relational direction and thrust” and adds that “recognitions and anticipations of normative sequences build sense of the evaluative and moral tone of an interaction” (2012, p. 84).

An engagement solely with the discursive in *Sitti's Secrets* would mask the power of affect in shaping connections, creating bonds and situating Selfhood within the boundaries of the physical space that is Mona's homeland. The chief question that emerges is; how does Mona become emotionally caught up in a culture that is not only alien to her own but speaks a language so different from English. Mona speaks of how she and her grandmother overcame the language barrier by inventing a language of their own (SS, p. 9). Mona also played marbles with her cousins, and concludes, almost philosophically, “We did not need words to play marbles” (SS, p. 12). Yet, the girl experiences a profound shift in her ‘affective flow’ without necessarily sharing a common language, emerging from the experience. How was this possible? If Mona's subjectivity could be perceived as a site of converge, then clearly language is one element of the forces that impose themselves onto her psyche. She was equally shaped by the smells, tastes, shadows, colors and humans she came to perceive as her “own people”. These sensory intensities, in addition to the rituals of play, tea-making, lentil-picking, bread-baking, lemonade-squeezing, etc, featured more prominently than Arabic, which she did not speak, as the affective/intensive modalities that imprinted themselves on her ‘experience’ of Palestine. It is not surprising then that

her emerging selfhood as a Palestinian relegated language to second place as the narrative exploded with colors, smells, tastes, rituals and intensities, confirming Whetherell's argument that “discourse can be defined exceptionally broadly to include social meaning-making, or signification, in all its modes including visual, tactile, aural, and other sensory modalities” (2012,p. 87).

If as Deleuze & Guattari announced “flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibres, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentations, microperceptions, have replaced the world of the subject” (1987,p. 162), what processes, forces and expressions of change did Mona encounter in her visit to Palestine, ones that transcended language to create what Colman (2010:11) refers to as an “incredible, wondrous, tragic painful, destructive configurations of things and bodies as temporally mediated, continuous events.”

The following section will draw upon insights from Ecocriticisms to formulate some possible answers to this question.

### **Contested Nature in Sitti's Secrets**

Ecocriticism is concerned with exploring the nexus between nature and representation, more specifically “the relationship between literature and physical environment” (Glotfelty xxvii, 1996). Ecocritical approaches, which share the contention that human beings are connected with nature and both affect and are affected by it, view the physical environment as a political space instrumentalised for the purpose of achieving certain ends. Ecocriticism itself is a wide field and limitations of space do not allow for a full

account of the various thrusts that have shaped its approaches, so the arguments that follow will focus on how (various) representations of nature in literature serve a political agenda within a colonial context.

The ecology of colonization brings together issues related to social and environmental dominance through exploring the “complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories” (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 144). The “imperial underpinnings of environmental practices in both colonizing and colonized societies of the present and the past” (Huggan and Tiffin 2010:3) relate to both how landscapes are reshaped by the experience of colonization and the discursive representations of these controversial changes. *Sitti's Secrets* is a vivid example of how Palestinians have sought to lay claim to their lands by utilizing certain types of trees, rituals, and foods as primary discursive sites for rejecting the epistemic violence of Israeli colonization. Palestinian national resistance to occupation has been accompanied by the reconfiguration of cultural imagery centered on symbols such as olive, lemon and orange trees, poppies, cacti, lentils, rituals such as bread baking, olive picking, olive pressing, and other practices that express both rootedness and historical traditions (Abufarha, 2008; Swedenburg, 1990).

*Sitti's Secrets* is a celebration of Palestinian land, rather than an account of individuals. The Palestinian diaspora or dispersal (known in Arabic as *Shatat*), hope of returning one day to the homes they were forced to leave (known in Arabic as *Hadq al-aAwdah*) - especially after the 1948 *Nakba* - and the disappearance of this hope

with the continuous failure of peace talks with Israel have resulted in the formation of what has been called by Lindholm Schulz (2003, p. 2) “a homeland discourse, a process of remembering what has been lost.” This homeland discourse has, in turn, resulted in the treatment of Palestinians living in exile as peasants or “*Fallaheen*”. Swedenburg (1990) explains that the peasant or “*Fallah*” has become a unifying national signifier in the Palestinians’ struggle against occupation to such an extent that it covers all significant cultural and social diversities among Palestinians. Abufarha (2008, p. 345) also points out that such “representations transcend space and class, bonding refugees and rural, urban, and diasporic Palestinian communities.”

To emphasise that there were people living there and that their life was deeply connected to the soil, the idea of the peasant came into existence as a reflection of memories and traditions. In fact, it legitimates to Palestinians and to the outside world the reality of their right to their own land.

the overwhelming cultural presence of the fallah flows from the endangered status of the Palestinian nation. It is a nation imagined but unrealized, a people whose relation to their territory has been severed again and again, whose identity is tenuous and constantly under threat. The figure of the peasant serves as a crucial ideological weapon in the Palestinian confrontation with Israeli colonial policies. (Swedenburg, 1990, p.19)

What strengthened the attachment to the soil and the creation of a unified nationality is that “the Palestinians were

seen by the colonialists' eyes as Arab shepherds, part of the landscape frame but not necessarily having any conscious relationship to it" (Abufarha, 2008, p.356). The Palestinian identity has become intertwined with the land and cultivation to the extent that the land has become the primary site through which Palestine of the *Nakba* and afterwards has been kept alive in the Palestinian memory and imagination. Poetry was written about the Palestinian peasant, political speeches were delivered celebrating the Palestinian peasant, and paintings portraying the Palestinian landscape and its *fellaheen* were drawn. It is as if with the *Nakba*, time has stopped there and then.

In *Sitti's Secrets*, Shihab-Nye emphasises this standstill point of history. As a Palestinian-American herself, she may have never felt as a refugee. However, she was born to the first generation of the exodus, whose memories of their lost land and living in exile were very vivid. Her statement "My father's entire life was shadowed by grief over loss of his home in Palestine in 1948," left a strong impact on the way she handled the whole Palestinian issue in *Sitti's Secrets*. Shihab-Nye's father was no different from any other Palestinian who lived in exile. He mourned his lost land by remembering trees. For him, the fig tree, for example, does not invoke the same memories as it would do for a western reader. In her poem, "My Father and the Fig Tree" Shihab-Nye (1992, p. 356) writes:

For other fruits, my father was indifferent.  
He'd point at the cherry trees and say,  
"See those? I wish they were figs."  
In the evening he sat by my bed  
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.

They always involved a figtree.

Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in.

Once Joha was walking down the road  
and he saw a fig tree.

Or, he tied his camel to a fig tree and went  
to sleep.

Or, later when they caught and arrested him,  
his pockets were full of figs.

In *Sitti's Secrets*, Shihab-Nye sheds a light on this very important aspect of the Palestinian life, though, for the most part, it no longer exists. She draws a romantic picture by going back to the time before the *Nakba*, the time, which over the years, has become idealised and paradise-like. It may be argued that Shihab-Nye has opted to create such a romanticaised idyll because of the nature of picture books which always try to insulate children from war-related issues, but that would be reductionist. Celebrating the lost Palestine had to be done by reflecting how life used to be and not how life is at the moment: "Remembrance and longing imply a fixation of the land; the homeland in the mind remains forever as it was. There is no change" (Lindholm Schulz, 2003, p.99), a strategy which Bardenstein (1998:148) reveals has been adopted by both Palestinians and Israelis for whom "trees figure prominently and conspicuously as loaded and hypersaturated cultural symbols in the construction of collective memory."

While narrating the events of the story, Shihab-Nye talks about going with her grandmother to watch farmers picking lentils and buying fresh cow milk from a family who kept a "spotted cow". She also mentions different types of trees with a strong focus on the grandmother's lemon tree which was planted in the backyard of her house. This lemon tree is mentioned in

many parts of the story. Every morning, the sun would brush the bright lemons on her lemon tree; in the afternoons, she and her grandmother would sit under her lemon tree drinking lemonade with mint in it. When Mona sends the president of the United States a letter after she returns home, it is obvious that her grandmother is mentioned in her relation to the lemon tree: "My grandmother on the other side of the world has a lemon tree that whispers secrets. She talks to it and gives it water from her own drinking glass. She guesses the branch where lemons will grow next." On the last page of the story, Mona also says "The first thing she does every day is say good morning to her lemons. All day the leafy shadow of her tree will grow and change on her courtyard wall. She will move with its shade" (SS, p.29)

At first glance, the choice of the lemon tree may seem like an innocent one; an old woman looking after her tree. Yet, this tree is rich with symbolism and stands for the grandmother's rooted attachment to the land and the disputed earth on which this tree grows. It may even be argued that the emphasis on the lemon tree throughout the story is thought-provoking. Shihab-Nye offers no reference to the ancient struggles of ownership in the West Bank, nor does she discuss the lives of individuals this struggle continues to disrupt. However, she sheds a tender humane light on the life of a kind-hearted Palestinian old woman in a subtle and thoughtful manner without turning the story into a parable. Through a bond with a tree that cannot be severed, a sense of ownership, a sense of country and identity, and home is portrayed in the way the grandmother is attached to her tree, hence the description "she will move with its

shade" (SS, p.29) In other words, this lemon tree brings meaning to the grandmother's life. It is noteworthy that it takes a few years for a lemon tree to bear fruits, so looking after her lemon tree also reflects an act of faith and patience.

The lemon tree serves as a metonymy for citrus trees which the Palestinians have always farmed and planted generation after generation. Hundreds of trees have been cut down or uprooted by the Israeli government and settlers over the years. Whether olive, lemon or orange trees have existed for many years is deemed irrelevant by the Israeli government. Thus, trees have become part of the Palestinians struggle and fight for their land.

The lemon tree, in particular, has featured in a lot of Western literary works concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In Sandy Tolan's non-fiction book *The Lemon Tree: An Arab, a Jew and the Heart of the Middle East* (2008) both sides of the conflict were equally reflected. The book does so by telling the true story of two families who occupied and loved the same house and the same lemon tree in the Palestinian city of Ramla: the Palestinian Khairis who built it and lived in it up until 1948 and the Bulgarian Jewish Eshkenazis who lived in it from 1948 until 1984. Dalia Eshkenazis grows up in Bashir Khairi's former home and one day Bashir appears at her front door, wishing to see the home he had grown up in and fled as a child and the lemon tree his father planted. He takes a lemon from the backyard lemon tree to his father in Ramallah as a memento of the home they have lost. It may be considered the perfect metaphor for the extremely complicated problem of two people who

argue to have historical claims to the same piece of land.

Dalia says:

Ever since I met you, the feeling has been growing in me that that home was not just my home. The lemon tree which yielded so much fruit and gave us so much delight lived in other people's hearts too. (2008, p. 301)

Bashir says:

We were exiled by force of arms. We were exiled on foot .... We were exiled but we left our souls, our hopes and our childhood in Palestine. We left our joys and sorrows. We left them in every corner on every grain of sand in Palestine. We left them with each lemon fruit, with each olive. We left them in the flowering tree that stands with pride at the entrance to our house in al-Ramla. We left them in the remains of our fathers and ancestors. We left them as witnesses and history. We left them hoping to return. (2008, pp.325-326)

The lemon tree chronicles their lives throughout four decades, which encompassed many of the major changes and complexities in the conflict. It also gives the reader hope that humanity can triumph over hatred and violence. It sheds light on the Palestinians' passionate desire to return to their homeland. This book offers no solutions to the conflict but, like *Sitti's Secrets*, seems to argue that peace is definitely possible.

In the movie *The Lemon Tree* (2008), directed by the Israeli director Eran Riklis, Salma, a lonely woman who has been widowed for ten years, earns a living from a lemon grove on the Green Line separating Israel from the occupied territories of the

West Bank. The grove has been in her family for 50 years. Her life is turned upside down when the Israeli defence minister Israel Navon and his wife Mira, move into a new house opposite the grove. At Once, a watchtower is constructed, and security guards and soldiers begin patrolling the property. Salma receives an official letter informing her that the grove poses a security threat from possible terrorists hiding among the trees; as a military necessity they must be uprooted. The letter ruthlessly offers to compensate her for her loss while mentioning that because of a recent legislation, there is no legal obligation to do so. She weeps at the news and her battle with the Israeli law starts.

Salma is only one person in this fictional film, but as she herself proclaims, "My life is real." The movie questions the logic of the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a touching portrait of one middle-aged woman's plight. Riklis explains that the long struggle over lemon and orange groves has been for 60 odd years part of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. He adds that the lemon grove for this woman symbolises "her livelihood, her history, her connection with her father. It means pride. Once you touch someone's pride then you are in trouble. And this person fights back" (2008).

The Palestinian nature/environment is celebrated throughout *Sitti's Secrets*. Among those examples are:

- Wheat harvesting: She [Mona's Grandmother] bakes the big, flat bread in a round, old oven next to her house. A fire burns in the middle. She pats the dough between her hands and presses it out to bake on a flat black rock in the

centre of the oven. *My father says she has been baking that bread for a hundred years* (emphasis added) (SS, p. 14).

- Water resources: My grandmother likes to unpin the laundry in the evening so she can watch the women of the village walking back from the spring with jugs of water on their head. She used to do that, too. My father says the women don't really need to get water from the spring anymore, but they like to. *It is something from the old days they don't want to forget* (emphasis added) (SS, p.20).

Fauna: I remember the tattoo on my grandmother's hands. They look like birds flying away. *My father says she has had those tattoos for a hundred years* (emphasis added). The references to cows and sheep in the story (SS, p. 23).

- Fruits such as apricots and almonds. Vegetables such as Zucchini, lentils, cucumbers, and mint. Lentil in particular has been harvested in Palestine for thousands of years.

### Secrets

When Kate Long (2009, pp.340-41) asked Shihab-Nye about what secrets meant to her in terms of keeping or telling them and whether they had any function, she replied by saying:

I think we all need more of them. Secrets are fuel. They're strangely energizing. Deciding what to tell when—poetry leans toward hinting and suggestiveness without “explaining,” thank goodness.

Children love secrets (Winston, 2004, p. 6). The inclusion of secrets in the title of the story injects an element of mystery into the narrative by inviting

children to guess what those secrets might be. The grandmother's long, striped curly hair and the green trunk in the corner of her bedroom are two of the old lady's important secrets, and leave Mona's curiosity piqued throughout the story. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 288) turn 'secrets' into an object of philosophical inquiry and remark that a child's secret

combines these elements to marvelous effect: the secret as a content in a box, the secret influence and propagation of the secret, the secret perception of the secret (the child's secret is not composed of miniaturized adult secrets but is necessarily accompanied by a secret perception of the adult secret). A child discovers a secret...

Zizek (1999) speaks of an *objet petit a*, defined as a secret (non-existent) quality to objects that make us desire them. For children, anything kept hidden from them constitutes a secret guaranteed to send their imagination into overdrive. This may be due to the fact that a child's mind does not yet recognise the boundaries that exist between adults which might necessitate certain personal/private matters and things be kept to oneself. Such hiddenness is perceived as a 'secret' which the child invests his/her energy into uncovering.

The grandmother's first secret was, as far as Mona's young mind was concerned, her hair which peeped in two different colours from under her scarf. The choice of hair in itself is not without motivation. In ancient and modern societies, hair in all cultures and throughout history symbolized power, youth, and beauty. Samson never cut his long hair because it gave him power. So, when Delilah (his lover), who was the only

person to know about his secret of power, cut his hair with a knife while he was asleep, he lost all his powers, enabling his enemies to finally capture him. In the ancient Greek society curly hair was the best hair style because it represented an attitude towards life. This could be seen very clearly in their magnificent statues with curly hair.

In *Sitti's Secrets*, Shihab-Nye seems to be making an indirect reference to Samson who had powers because of his long hair and to the Greeks who had an attitude to life because of their curly hair. Mona's grandmother had long striped curly hair and Mona does not get to see it until later in the story. The first time Mona meets her grandmother, she notices that "A few curls of dark hair peeked out of her scarf on one side, and a white curl peeked out on the other side" (SS, p. 7). She "wanted her to take off the scarf so (she) could see if her hair was striped" (SS, p. 7). Later in the story, she says "One day Sitti took off her scarf and shook out her hair. She washed her hair in a tub right there under the sun. Her hair surprised me by being very long. And it was striped! She said it got that way all by itself. I helped her brush it out while it dried. She braided it and pinned the braid up before putting on the scarf again" (SS, p. 17). Mona then says "I felt as if I knew a secret" (SS, p.18). It is only after Mona spends some time with her grandmother does the latter take her scarf off and allow Mona, not only to see it, but also to brush it. This gesture embodies a heightened degree of trust between Mona and her grandmother. More importantly, it symbolizes the passing on of a "secret" as the nature of the grandmother's hair is revealed. One can argue that it is precisely at this point, when the grandmother deems Mona worthy of

trust, a bond between the two is cemented. If the grandmother symbolizes homeland, then opening up to Mona like that and presenting her with a symbol of power - the hair - is tantamount to passing on the torch of identity, tradition and belonging to the granddaughter, hence Mona's statement "I felt as if I knew a secret."

The second important secret in this story is the grandmother's trunk, which is the repository of history. On her way back to the United States, Mona starts to think of her grandmother's trunk. She Says "I think about Sitti's old green trunk in the corner of her room. It has a padlock on it – she wears the key on a green ribbon around her neck. She keeps my grandfather's rings in there, and her gold thread, and needles, and pieces of folded-up blue velvet from old dresses, and two small leather books, and a picture of my father before he came to the United States, and a picture of my parents on their wedding day, and a picture of me when I was a baby, smiling and very fat. Did I really look like that?" (SS, p. 24). In "Secrets" in a collection for children, *Come with Me* (2000:12), Shihab-Nye also says,

One suitcase  
only for secrets—  
tucked in the pouch pocket,  
pressed in the corners,  
one light and liquid suitcase,  
one glittering suitcase  
filled with tiny  
unspoken tales.  
And I will carry it  
to the other side of the ocean.  
I will carry it  
so no one knows  
what I hold.  
Because its cargo

is more precious than socks  
or pyjamas.

Because a secret is a ticket  
and without it  
the trip would be  
too lonely.

The grandmother's trunk is like an archive of her past. It is filled with her "unspoken tales" which "no one knows what [it] hold[s]" and without her trunk of secrets, "the trip would be too lonely." The trunk stores many interesting details of her life including pieces of her old dresses, her husband's rings and pictures of her son and his family. Many of those pieces represent holding on to her family, history and precious things. The grandmother possesses the key to the past she does not want to forget about or get rid of. By having a padlock placed on the trunk and carrying the key on a green ribbon around her neck, she keeps it very close to her heart. The past is presented in the story in a very subtle manner as a five-year old child would think about it. However, there is much more to it. The trunk represents the Grandmother's memories, identity and cultural resistance.

### Conclusions

This paper aimed to examine the poetics of place in Naomi Shihab-Nye's *Sitti's Secrets*, specifically how the author negotiated Palestinian history, identity, and rootedness without reference to the Israeli occupation. By activating Palestinian links to their lands, through the text and visual representations of an ancient Palestine, Shihab-Nye wove a very subtle politically-charged narrative against a rich tapestry of traditions and customs embodied by Mona's grandmothers. The illustrations of *Sitti's Secrets* seem to reflect a world from another

period of time, where Mona is the only character from the present time. Shihab-Nye in this respect is not different from other Palestinians, especially artists, whose paintings always showed Palestinians carrying jugs of water, ploughing and farming their lands.

The story translates a certain experience to the Western child reader. It shows Mona's exploration of her Palestinian culture, something that seems foreign to her at first. A strong bond is created between Mona and her grandmother and culture, even without the need for language. This process also raises a number of questions in the child's mind, such as, why Mona has sent the president of the United States a letter. There are a lot of hidden political messages. It may be argued that despite the familiar setting of this story, there is a degree of foreignisation mainly as a result of the background of Mona, the little girl. The text seems to emphasize the need to expose children to how an Arab child raised in the west feels about Arabs, or more specifically, about the Palestinians. Schliesman explains (1998, p.40) that Shihab-Nye "strives to bridge distances and help young readers know the voices of their extended global family .... In doing so, she always creates opportunities for them to know themselves, to realize they are linked to other lives in ways both profound and comforting."

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