

“Self-Wrought Homemaking”: Revisiting the Concept of the “Home” in the Poetry of Naomi Shihab Nye and Lisa Suhair Majaj”

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate the changing perception of what constitutes the home in a number of selected poems by the Palestinian-American poets Naomi Shihab Nye and Lisa Suhair Majaj. As the home is constructed as a literary space rather than a physical place in their poetry, the traditionally established notion of the home as a “safe place” that can exist unchanged by shifts of time or space¹ is refuted and is constructed as a “fertile site of contradictions demanding constant renegotiation and reconstruction.”² The fixed perception of the home as a lost object in some of their poems, as well as the more realistic perception of the home as a substitute for the lost object in other poems are eventually replaced with a self-motivated realization of the need to free their perception from the essentialist categories of old and new, lost and retrieved through language. This realization on the part of the two poets is clarified by tracing, comparing and contrasting the change in the two poets’ perception of the home in a selection of their poems.

KEYWORDS

Palestinian-American poetry, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, home, substitute, process, loss, homemaking

“But everywhere can be home the moment you unpack, make a tiny space that feels agreeable.”³

Introduction

In an article tracing the origins and developments of Arab-American literature, Palestinian-American poet Lisa Suhair Majaj⁴ (2008) reflects on the humanistic approach of her contemporary Naomi Shihab Nye,⁵ another Palestinian-American poet, regarding the crucial question of belongingness. With more than one home to belong to, connecting to the ‘home’ is no longer perceived as a fixed state of being, but as “another way of being human.”⁶ Whether the native home or the current one, each contributes to forming a unique perception of the home that is not only found here or there, but across a space of contestation where the “disparate experiences and cultural contexts”⁷ of feeling at home are nurtured.

1 Catherine Willey & Fiona R. Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* (London: Garland Publishing Inc.), XV.

2 Willey & Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

3 Kate Long, “Roots: On Language and Heritage: A Conversation with Naomi Shihab Nye.” *World Literature Today* 83, no. 6 (2009): 32.

4 Lisa Suhair Majaj (1960–) is the daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother. She was born in Hawardens, Iowa and spent her early years in Jordan before moving to live in the USA. In 2001, she moved to live in Nicosia, Cyprus.

5 Naomi Shihab Nye (1952–) is the daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother. She was born in St. Louis, Missouri and spent her early years moving between Palestine and the USA.

6 Lisa Suhair Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” *American Studies Journal* 52, (2008): 6.

7 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 6.

Sharing a similar cultural background, with Palestinian fathers and Midwestern German American mothers, Nye and Majaj embrace an identity which is characterized by cultural plurality and transnational fluidity. To both authors, the idea of belonging to a ‘home’ is not a fixed one and should, therefore, not be defined merely in relation to the lost home or the current one. In the introduction to their jointly-edited 1996 book *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes stress this point by arguing that in such an assimilationist context as the American one there can never be a single concept of the ‘home’. Therefore, it is no solution to romanticize the loss of the ‘home’ since doing so is sure to result in a decontextualized view of it.⁸ But, with the multiple “points of intersection”⁹ one is exposed to in such a context, essentialist notions become slippery, necessitating the need for a periodic change in the perception of what constitutes them. A traditionally essentialist notion such as the ‘home’ is, therefore, not perceived as fixed, but is grounded in the disjunctions extending over a space, which Majaj describes at the end of her 2008 article as one filled “with infinite possibilities.”¹⁰

The present study aims to investigate the changing perception of what constitutes the ‘home’ in a number of selected poems by the Palestinian-American poets Nye and Majaj. With more than one home to belong to, making oneself at home becomes a feeling forever sought “yet paradoxically more difficult to attain,”¹¹ especially as the ‘home’ is constructed as a ‘literary space’ rather than a physical place in their poetry. To demonstrate this, the study adopts a poststructuralist approach, which, by stressing the fluid nature of notions such as the home, helps question the traditionally established notion of the ‘home’ as a “‘safe place’ that can exist unchanged by shifts of time or space”¹² and reconstructs it as a “fertile site of contradictions demanding constant renegotiation and reconstruction,”¹³ by analysing the perceptions of the ‘home’ in their poetry and sorting them into three different representations, each with common features.¹⁴

Home as the ‘Lost’ Object of Desire

It is no doubt that loss creates a gap and a subsequent need for compensation. To lose a home is to lose a dwelling, memories, security and more. Finding an alternative, therefore, is not as simple looking for another home to make up for the loss. A new home is not the old home replaced. The process of replacement results in another implicit form of loss that is even more ravishing. And

8 Wiley & Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* (London: Garland Publishing Inc.), XV-XVII.

9 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 12.

10 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 18.

11 Wiley & Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

12 Wiley & Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

13 Wiley and Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

14 The poetry of Nye and Majaj revolves around several themes, among which are identity, the home, cross-cultural interaction, subversion of fixed cultural representations and the acceptance of cultural differences. The poems in this study are selected based on their relevance to theme of the ‘home’, which is the focal point of this study. Moreover, the date of publication is taken into consideration in the selection of poems. Most of the poems selected for analysis in this study are taken from recently published poetry collections by Nye and Majaj.

by time, loss acquires a new, repetitive nature, making the gap among the old and the new, newer and newest unbridgeable.

To constantly seek an alternative for the lost home is not to fill the gap caused by it. It only procrastinates facing the truth about that loss by saving the individual temporarily from the feelings of disappointment and lack stemming from that loss. Whether it is a memory, a person or a new place intended to substitute the loss of one's home, an instant feeling of relief and fulfilment absorbs the painful loss, but a moment later, a more bitter feeling of the loss of a different constitution is sure to result. In Lacanian terms,¹⁵ the lost object of desire (the lost home) creates a gap that ultimately cannot be fulfilled. The longing for feelings of safety, oneness and wholeness which the lost object gives is never overcome nor is ever repressed; it keeps surfacing with the smallest thought, making the need for the lost object "ever more attractive and yet paradoxically more difficult to attain."¹⁶

Fearing the moment of disappointment, the individual suffering loss chooses to look for what can help him survive for the longest period of time. The more substitutes he is able to find for the lost home, the more time he has to avoid that ravishing reality of loss. But, as the cycle of loss, substitution, temporary replacement and repeated loss and disappointment is repeated, the individual starts to doubt whether procrastinating the moment of truth is the right option to take.

How then could such a loss be made up for when an endless row of substitutes could not? To do so is to realize that the perception of what constitutes the 'home' succumbs to change. A fixed perception of the 'home' is what pushes the individual into looking for an endless cycle of substitutes, leaving him frustrated every time he seeks another. But, as he realizes that what constitutes the new 'home' is as volatile as the lost home, he ceases to consider 'home' as a decontextualized stable entity that can be replaced when lost. In their discussion of the makings of the 'home' in the works of women writers, Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes touch on this point, warning against romanticizing the loss of home by seeking multiple substitutes: "Indeed, real homelessness should not be romanticized,"¹⁷ for if so, the process of substitution results in decontextualization.

In this sense, retrieving the lost home entails forming a new perception of the 'home'; one which requires constant construction and reconstruction, not of the lost home itself but of what constitutes the 'home'. In the words of Wiley and Barnes, the lost home is retrieved by negotiating the "tensions between definitions of home as a material space and home as an ideal place,"¹⁸ and this prevents the process of constructing a new home from becoming romanticised. Yet, developing a new perception of the 'home' as a space of "contestation and contradiction"¹⁹ is not as simple as saying, "I am no longer seeking a substitute for the lost home." Just as changing one's perception of what constitutes the 'home' is a process grounded in a self-realization stemming from failed attempts, withdrawing oneself out of a self-destructive cycle of substitution and fake fulfilment

15 The entry of the father at the age of language acquisition severs the child from the first source of identification (the mother). This separation leaves the child in a state of loss and repression, since he is forced to sacrifice the mother who, for him, is the source of safety, wholeness and fulfilment. At this level, the child is introduced to *desire*, which stems from the fact that his need for the lost mother is constantly deferred but is never repressed. For more information, read Lacan's "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Ecrits: A Selection* (1958).

16 Wiley and Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

17 Wiley and Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XVI.

18 Wiley and Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XIX.

19 Wiley and Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XIX.

is also. To do so, one has to realize that those substitutes are causing to distance him all the more from the lost home and are at the same time turning the process of constructing a new home into an abstract (decontextualized) one.

To approach the construction of the ‘home’ in the poetry of Nye and Majaj in this context is to see their portrayal of the home as an ongoing process that challenges fixity. What constitutes the home in some of their poetry is not what constitutes it in other poems. A change in perception is evident as the poems are read together, making it clear to the reader that each poet attempts to locate the lost home in several substitutes before coming to the realization that their attempts at retrieving the lost home have not only been of no avail, but have caused the subject to romanticize the loss and make it all the more irretrievable. The change in their view becomes clear in later poems, where the concept of the ‘home’ is freed from the previous reductive/essentialist approach and is more realistically established as a space of “contestation and contradiction,”²⁰ a space where no home replaces another and where no home is old or new.

Home in the Poetry of Nye and Majaj

In her 2008 article on the origins and developments of Arab-American literature, Majaj calls for a “self-wrought homemaking”²¹ which grounds the search for the lost home not only in “dislocation but also in language.”²² In poetry, the ‘home’ is constructed as a literary space rather than as a physical place, and this fosters a sense of engagement rather than disengagement. This point is likewise emphasized in her earlier article “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” (1999) in which Majaj draws on Nye’s works as an example.

Nye’s writing is undergirded by a consistency of approach best described as a stance of engagement with the world [...]. Nye forges connections across boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class. Although these connections are most often personal rather than communal, they provide the basis for linkages that have taken metaphorical resonance.²³

Like Nye, Majaj believes that the true perception of what constitutes the ‘home’ should be based on a movement “not only backward and inward, but also forward and outward.”²⁴ To limit the (re-) construction of the ‘home’ to a movement back in time to where the physical home was present is to doom the current attempt at retrieval to failure, especially in the multi-cultural transnational community Nye and Majaj live in, where experiencing what it means to belong to a home is better articulated through building connections, rather than through breaking them.

Moving away from a fixed perception of the ‘home’ as a lost object in some of their poems to a more realistic but rather short-lived perception of the ‘home’ as a substitute for the lost object in other poems is eventually replaced with a self-motivated realization of the need to free their

20 Wiley and Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XXI.

21 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 12.

22 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 12.

23 Lisa Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. Michael Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 327.

24 Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations. Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” 327.

perception of what constitutes the 'home' from the essentialist categories of old and new, lost and retrieved through language. This realization on the part of the two poets will become clear in the discussion below by tracing, comparing and contrasting the change in their perception of the 'home' in a selection of their poems.

Bemoaning an Insurmountable Loss

For both poets, identifying with the Palestinian side of their identity creates feelings of loss and embitterment. The lost home stands for the lost homeland, the lost past, the lost childhood memories, and even though they have not experienced that loss first-hand, it has had an overwhelming impact on them. A 'home' signifying safety, firmness and belongingness being no more present and all connections with it being severed leave a ravishing sense of absence, lack and insecurity. These intensified feelings of loss are what steer the two poets' perception of the 'home' at this level, for they both see it necessary to bereave the loss of their native home. In "Everything in Our World Did Not Seem to Fit," (2011)²⁵ Nye compares the loss of a Palestinian home to an act of ravishment. The speaker explains that homes in Palestine are taken by force by the Israelis; "It wasn't a bargain or deal or even a real war,"²⁶ but a theft that has engendered a devouring loss that is hard to compensate. Experiencing this loss, the subject is unable to overcome it or to see beyond its effects; he is too immersed in it not to even consider looking for a substitute as a future option. He extends his suffering to a point which causes him to isolate it from any similar experience: "You don't think what a little plot of land means/ till someone takes it and you can't go back."²⁷ Here, the speaker, which may be Nye herself, falls into the pit of forming a decontextualized perception of the home which Majaj (1999) warns against as one causing to sever connections rather than to build them.

A romanticized view of the lost home can also be seen in Majaj's long poem "Country," (2009) where the here and there opposition the speaker describes does not help in relieving the state of insecurity he lives in. As distance is bridged and unbridged repeatedly, the feeling of loss is brought back to life, leaving the speaker in a state of denial as he bemoans the loss of his home: "country of agony/ country if fear."²⁸ Loss is even intensified into a form of absence which is forever "borne/ by the living who indulge in grimed anguish/ flapping in the rain."²⁹ Like the speaker in Nye's poem, the speaker in this poem romanticizes his loss by isolating it from other similar experiences. Rather than foster connections and overcome this loss, he chooses to see it "like the fragments of a broken bowl"³⁰ with pieces found in different countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan

25 Most of the selected poems by Nye in this article are taken from *Transfer* (2011), a poetry collection Nye has written in memory of her deceased father. Some of the poems are taken from an earlier poetry collection, *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (1995).

26 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Everything in Our World Did Not Seem to Fit," in *Transfer* (New York: Boa Editions, LTD., 2011), 29.

27 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Everything in Our World Did Not Seem to Fit," 29.

28 Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Country," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge* VII Special issue (2009): 58.

29 Lisa Majaj, "Country," 59.

30 Majaj, "Country," 61.

and even the “dark of America.”³¹ Unfortunately, loss in “Country” repeats itself; it self-reproduces in an endless cycle where every other day “another home demolition”³² takes place adding to the “entire villages”³³ which are already “demolished, flushed out, cleansed.”³⁴ As that loss repeats itself, feelings of anguish and hatred get mixed inside the speaker to the extent that he starts seeing belonging to the ‘home’ as a burdening “responsibility.”³⁵

Viewing belonging to one’s home as a heavy burden is evident in another poem by Nye, “The Only Democracy in the Middle East” (2011). With tongue in cheek, the speaker plays on the hidden meaning of the term democracy as the pretext the Israelis use to explain why Palestinian homes are ravished and Palestinian land is taken by force. As in “Country,” loss in this poem reproduces itself, but in reversed terms. The Israelis, who claim to have lost a home in the past on the same land, are now trying to make up for that loss by calling Palestine their home. Whatever feelings of loss and frustration the Israelis have felt in the past are too deeply rooted inside them, so that in the present they insist on romanticizing that loss by not connecting it with other similar experiences. As a result, belonging to that home turns into a burdening responsibility that is needed as a justification for their imperial project; simply, the Israelis “have suffered too much”³⁶ and should not be given “any trouble”³⁷ relocating to a new home.

In “Arabic Coffee,” (1995) another poem by Nye, the same idea is underscored. Arabic coffee, the symbol the poem employs to refer to the Palestinian home that is lost, becomes a symbol of the burdening responsibility that a romanticised perception of the ‘home’ results in. As the coffee is let to “boil to the top, and down again,”³⁸ “Two times,”³⁹ with “No sugar in his pot”⁴⁰ to “make it blacker [...]”⁴¹ and “thick in the bottom,”⁴² it loses its special taste in the multicultural context it is served in. (After all, not everyone enjoys thick, sugar free coffee.) The “hundred disappointments”⁴³ the speaker talks about as the coffee is tasted proves that it is only for him and his people that the coffee “was never too strong.”⁴⁴

It is true that Nye and Majaj indulge in feelings of loss in a number of their poems and that they have shown a tendency towards romanticizing that loss by not forging “connections across boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class.”⁴⁵ But that disconnection is shown not to

31 Majaj, “Country,” 61.

32 Majaj, “Country,” 62.

33 Majaj, “Country,” 63.

34 Majaj, “Country,” 63.

35 Majaj, “Country,” 64.

36 Naomi Shihab Nye, “The Only Democracy in the Middle East,” in *Transfer* (New York: Boa Editions, LTD., 2011), 48.

37 Nye, “The Only Democracy in the Middle East,” 48.

38 Naomi Shihab Nye, “Arabic Coffee,” in *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 38.

39 Nye, “Arabic Coffee,” 38.

40 Nye, “Arabic Coffee,” 38.

41 Nye, “Arabic Coffee,” 38.

42 Nye, “Arabic Coffee,” 38.

43 Nye, “Arabic Coffee,” 38.

44 Nye, “Arabic Coffee,” 38.

45 Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” 327.

last forever. As their later poems show, both poets choose to step outside that loss, determining to overcome the feelings of fragmentation, lack and embitterment it has caused. Looking for another home to replace the lost one becomes their means of survival after the dense period of bereavement is over. The hope to find a substitute is what keeps them, as well as their speakers, going on at this point.

Consecutive Substitutes for the Lost Home

The absence caused by the loss of the 'home' creates an urgent need for filling the gap by looking for an alternative. This process of substitution is evident in several poems by Nye and Majaj in which feelings of grief and anguish are no longer what drive the speakers as in the poems discussed in Part I. The speakers in these works try to relieve those feelings instead of indulging themselves helplessly in them. By now, they realise well that the loss of a dear home results in an emptiness, which, if not filled by another home, is sure to become self-destructive.

A case in point is Nye's poem "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is a Mix of Fact and Fiction," (2011), which introduces the idea of seeking a new home as a replacement for the lost one as a means of survival. The speaker in the poem defends himself against the charge of seeking a new home as a need which "No one should hold [...] against you."⁴⁶ Loss creates absence, but absence needs to get filled or else it keeps one in an inactive state of bereavement. He even compares the process of looking for a new home to a productive act of storytelling; he is telling the same old story of belonging to a home, but he is telling it differently, producing a new version of the story "in different clothes/ with other things emphasized."⁴⁷ And although the speaker's mother seems to be blaming him for telling "a story differently,"⁴⁸ the speaker does not see substituting a new version for the old one as an act of betrayal. For the bereaved person he is, every new version of the same old story he comes up with keeps him alive. Even if he has to spend his whole life telling different versions of the same "skinny story"⁴⁹ by "adding wings and a tail,"⁵⁰ those alternative stories will remain the "memory oxygen breathed out and in."⁵¹

The pursuit of a replacement for the lost home is likewise embraced in Nye's "Real Estate" (2011). Here the speaker's father is looking for a new home which the speaker describes as a place "to get away to."⁵² Like the speaker in the previous poem who tries to construct a new home through telling a different story each time, the speaker in this poem seems never to grow tired from looking for a substitute. Building on the words of a dying friend of his, he even claims that "putting on another house"⁵³ is sure to lead to happiness. He realises well that loss creates absence

46 Naomi Shihab Nye, "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is A Mix of Fact and Fiction," in *Transfer*, 36.

47 Naomi Shihab Nye, "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is A Mix of Fact and Fiction," 36.

48 Nye, "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is A Mix of Fact and Fiction," 36.

49 Nye, "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is A Mix of Fact and Fiction," 36.

50 Nye, "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is A Mix of Fact and Fiction," 36.

51 Nye, "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is A Mix of Fact and Fiction," 36.

52 Naomi Shihab Nye, "Real Estate," in *Transfer*, 55.

53 Nye, "Real Estate," 55.

and that absence necessitates looking for a substitute to relieve the pain it causes. The only aspect of the situation that this speaker seems to differ with the speaker about in the above poem is the touch of regret which the last lines of this poem disclose.

Even in the last months when all the blood
From the heaven if his olive-skinned body
Cycled through a filtering matching every two days
He was thinking hilltop-view- could he see all the way
Across the ocean from there, the wrought-iron staircase,
The red-tiled roof?⁵⁴

As the lines above illustrate, the speaker’s search for a new home has not yet met the expectations he has set at the beginning. After all, finding a new home to replace the old one does not always create a happily-ever-after ending; the memory of the lost home keeps lurking inside his thoughts, digging its place too deep to be resisted. At the end, after finding a substitute, we see him still clinging to the old memories “thinking hilltop-view”⁵⁵ yearning for the “wrought-iron staircase,/ the red-tiled roof”⁵⁶ of the old home.

The lost home is also replaced by a person strongly associated with it in the poetry of Nye and Majaj. In “The Words Under the Words,” (1995) a poem dedicated by Nye to her Palestinian grandmother, Sitti Khadra, the lost home is sought in the figure of the grandmother. The speaker compares the grandmother’s hands to the land’s grapes, indicating that the grandmother will come to symbolise the lost home by the end of the poem. The grandmother also resembles the lost home in being the source of security; she is always watching for “a strange car/ circle the streets”⁵⁷ as she bakes the day’s bread. Nothing, not even the shotgun, can surprise her, for, as the speaker explains, “She knows the spaces we travel through.”⁵⁸ What is more, the grandmother’s repeated references to God’s omnipresence in the land lends her more credibility as a replacement for the lost home. Whether she talks of Palestine’s orchards, olives or Joha’s stories, it is her “words under the words”⁵⁹ that can only relieve feelings of loss and frustration.

The same idea is echoed in Majaj’s 2009 poem “Tata Bahiyeh,” in which the speaker seeks the lost home in the figure of his old-aged grandmother. As in Nye’s grandmother poem, the grandmother is compared to the land. Her touch resembles jasmine and she loves “apricots, sun’s fruit,”⁶⁰ and longs for “earth and the light/ off *Al-Aqsa*, olive trees rooted in hills.”⁶¹ Here again, the grandmother’s figure is a source of life. Just as Nye’s grandmother has kept her deceased husband’s seeds to plant later, Majaj’s grandmother has done also:

54 Nye, “Real Estate,” 55.

55 Nye, “Real Estate,” 55.

56 Nye, “Real Estate,” 55.

57 Naomi Shihab Nye, “The Words Under the Words,” in *19 Varieties of Gazelle* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 15.

58 Nye, “The Words Under the Words,” 14.

59 Nye, “The Words Under the Words,” 15.

60 Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Tata Bahiyeh,” in *Geographies of Light* (Washington DC: Del Sol Press, 2009), 59.

61 Majaj, “Tata Bahiyeh,” 59.

...tucked packets
 Of tissue-wrapped seeds
 ...
 In drawers, behind
 Clocks, on shelves:
 To plant in the better time,
*Insha' Allah.*⁶²

The only difference between the two is that Majaj's optimistic view of her grandmother as a substitute for the lost home is cut short by a sudden dark death. As the grandmother dies, "the soldiers dumped her body/ without ceremony"⁶³ expecting to find "contraband,/ money, munitions,/ anything but death."⁶⁴ Could a dead body dumped without ceremony bring back the lost home?

A more steadfast answer to this question is given by Majaj in another of her poems. "No" (2006) is a short poem tackling the theme of repeated loss. Could loss be compensated? Apparently, as the title shows, 'No'. Could loss be relieved? Once again 'No'. The speaker in this poem is unlike the speakers in "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is a Mix of Fact and Fiction" and "Real Estate" in that he refuses to remain naively optimistic about finding a new home. Attempts at looking for another home are there, but most of these are thwarted, as a 'No' is given for an answer every time the hope of finding another is kindled. In the last lines of the poem, the speaker borrows the image of a thorny cactus "springing up around destroyed villages"⁶⁵ to describe how deep the memory of the lost home has dug inside him. Apparently, loss and all feelings of lack, anguish and incompleteness it fosters cannot be easily repressed. No matter how hard his attempts are in making up for that loss, the memory is young enough to bring the thought of the lost home back to one's mind. Regardless of whether a new home is constructed in a narrated story as in "When One Is So Far From Home, Life Is a Mix of Fact and Fiction," in looking for a new estate to own as in "Real Estate," or in the figure of a dear person as in "The Words Under the Words" and "Tata Bahiyeh," the lost home is forever absent:

You can bulldoze houses, evict or kill the inhabitants,
 But the thorns of memory can't be eliminated.
 No is steadfast. It knows what it's like
 To have nothing in its hands but dignity.⁶⁶

Language and Loss: Inexhaustible Compensation

If retrieving the lost home is not achieved by looking for another, is there a possibility of ever having one? Esra Oztarhan (2015) explains that this possibility is still there. A lost home cannot be substituted, but one's perception of the concept of the 'home' can be changed to help relieve

62 Majaj, "Tata Bahiyeh," 60.

63 Majaj, "Tata Bahiyeh," 60.

64 Majaj, "Tata Bahiyeh," 60.

65 Lisa Suhair Majaj, "No," *Nerve: Linking Artists, Activists, Poets, Thinkers, Creative Folks and Community* 1, (2006): 68.

66 Majaj, "No," 68.

that loss. In a recent article analysing the changing notion of the ‘home’ in Arab-American novelist Randa Jarrar’s⁶⁷ first novel *A Map of Home* (2008), Oztarhan argues that homelessness should not create a fixed bundle of emotions for the lost home extending from the past to the present. While homelessness can cause a temporary feeling of nonbelongingness and fuel the need to look for multiple substitutes, identifying home with one specific place that is lost can become restricting. Home, as Oztarhan explains, should be constructed in “fluidity and built as a process rather than a place.”⁶⁸ The same realization is echoed by Majaj in her 2008 article, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” in which she calls for turning towards a “self-wrought homemaking that is grounded in dislocation but also in language.”⁶⁹ Here again, the lost home is not sought as a physical place but as a process constructed through language. Doing so means creating a new perception of the ‘home’ that shares the flexible nature of language, so that homemaking is achieved just as meaning is in the text, i.e. through an ongoing, endless and inexhaustible process.

Explaining Oztarhan’s and Majaj’s views in light of Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist theory⁷⁰ can help clarify how ‘home’ is eventually constructed through language. In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,” (1967) Derrida argues against the fixed centre that is claimed by essentialists to have the holding power in any structure. A stable structure such as what language is traditionally considered to be is no longer a viable one; the centre is decentred breaking the bond between the signifier and the signified and introducing play into it. This severance produces free-floating signifiers which make multiple relations with different signified and produce multiple meanings that are constantly changing. In Derridean terms, this plurality translates into a series of ‘deferred’ meanings so that the ‘home’ that is sought in the poetry of the two poets becomes equivalent *not only* to the physical house, the memory or the alternative home but to all of these in an ongoing process of meaning production.⁷¹

Eventually, it is language that constructs the ‘home’ in the poetry of Nye and Majaj, and this is explicitly shown in a number of their later poems discussed below. The Derridean ‘game of language’ starts an ongoing process where what constitutes the ‘home’ is no longer a fixed ultimate signified, but more than one signified which are continuously produced but never exhausted. Having experienced loss and a cycle of failed substitutes turns the process of ‘home’ construction from a process of substitution to a process of meaning production. In this case, no memory, person or alternative place can make up for the lost home. It is only language that can do so.

67 Randa Jarrar (1978–) is an American writer and translator. In *A Map of Home* (2008), her first novel, the Palestinian teenager protagonist, tells her story of looking for a home as she moves from Kuwait to Egypt to finally settle in Texas in the USA.

68 Esraa Oztarhan, “Home in Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Rwanda Jarar’s *A Map of Love*,” *Pamukkale University Journal of Social Sciences Institute* 20, (2015): 63.

69 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 12.

70 In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,” (1967) Derrida questions the structuralists’ over-dependence on abstract structures. Structures are made up of word ‘events,’ which he defines as ruptures (redoublings of the structure): “The appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about...and this is the very condition of its structural specificity- by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause” (120). He also questions the structuralists’ belief that a structure should have a fixed centre, i.e. the centre exists inside and outside the structure simultaneously. In the absence of a located centre, the bond between the signifier and the signified is broken, initiating play in an endless cycle of meaning.

71 Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences,” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (Essex: Longman group Ltd, 1966), 109–111.

In “Fifty Years Since I Prayed or Thought in Arabic,” (2011) Nye embarks on Majaj’s ‘self-wrought homemaking’. Immediately in the opening line of the poem, the speaker boasts about his “language skills,”⁷² which have made it possible for him to “visit the places news was/ happening, pick it up, put in [his] pocket and/ pass it on.”⁷³ Though the word ‘home’ is not openly mentioned, the poem is indeed about homemaking, but this time not through a series of failed substitutes, as previous speakers of Nye have chosen to do. Here, the speaker is aware that no substitute, not even the BBC, the home of language, could “save (them).”⁷⁴ He realizes as well that redemption can only come through what Majaj (1999) describes as a “stance emphasising connections”⁷⁵ which in this poem takes the form of a “fragment of a story”⁷⁶ told to “forge a link in the chain”⁷⁷ of a “rapturous homecoming.”⁷⁸ As the signifier-signified bond is loosened, a less fixed perception of the ‘home’ is constructed producing a series of those story fragments the speakers comes to see as his home. And though it has been at least fifty years since the speaker has prayed or thought in Arabic, he hears it again “echoing over water, that familiar soft voice”⁷⁹ telling a fragment of the fifty-year-old story not to end it, but rather to add to the “hunger for something better to report.”⁸⁰

In Nye’s “Maximum Security” (2011), the search for the ‘self-wrought homemaking’ in language is more obvious. The speaker is astonished at how powerful in effect vocabularies (language) can be. Just imagining “if we’d known/ these wide words in the streets”⁸¹ makes him wonder what “ways of breaking through”⁸² the loss can create “mysterious comfort”⁸³ and relieve the pain. Obviously, the speaker in this poem is more aware of the possibility of constructing a ‘home’ through language than the speaker in the previous poem. Verbs, adjectives and vocabularies of various syllables contribute to establishing a new perception of the ‘home’ which is not limited to the physical place that has been lost. As the signifier is freed from the fixed bond with the signified, it is given more space to establish multiple relations with more than one signified, thus here to produce a new perception of the ‘home’ which is characterized by “constant renegotiation and reconstruction.”⁸⁴ Experiencing this plurality, he realizes what mistakes he has made trying to compensate for the lost home, and shows signs of regret, recognizing that the “hundred ways we could go wrong/ [...] opened lines/ to climb out of them.”⁸⁵ Instead of falling into the same

72 Naomi Shihab Nye, “Fifty Years Since I Prayed or Thought in Arabic,” in *Transfer*, 39.

73 Nye, “Fifty Years Since I Prayed or Thought in Arabic,” 39.

74 Nye, “Fifty Years Since I Prayed or Thought in Arabic,” 39.

75 Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” 320.

76 Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” 329.

77 Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” 329.

78 Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” 327.

79 Nye, “Fifty Years Since I Prayed or Thought in Arabic,” 39.

80 Nye, “Fifty Years Since I Prayed or Thought in Arabic,” 39.

81 Naomi Shihab Nye, “Maximum Security,” in *Transfer*, 51.

82 Nye, “Maximum Security,” 51.

83 Nye, “Maximum Security,” 51.

84 Wiley & Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

85 Wiley & Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

mistake again, he sees it better to insert “a new phrase or start over entirely”⁸⁶ to establish a self-wrought homemaking in language. Eventually, language is where the speaker finds the “Maximum Security” to belong to a home once again.

The same optimism we find in “Maximum Security” is clear in two of Majaj’s poems about the home. In “Peace” (2009), difference is embraced as a source of continuity and multiplicity. Two children living in different homes, speaking different languages and even planting different seeds are “walking toward each other from/ different sides of a barricade,”⁸⁷ trying, through seed-planting, to construct a new place, a new home, for them to meet at. That home is different from the “shacks they live in with their parents in anger and desperation and loss.”⁸⁸ It is a new space that is immune to loss, resembling the space that Majaj deems apt for starting the ‘self-wrought homemaking’ she calls for. Unlike their parents’ shacks, this space is constantly changing and, therefore, not vulnerable to loss or compensation. In the poem, the speaker describes this ‘shared’ space as one constantly blooming:

...When a bud emerges they laugh out loud. When a
Flower breaks to light, petals silken as sunshine, they go
Home humming a flower song, each in their own
Language.⁸⁹

Apparently, this new space embodies the new home that the children hope for. But it is by no means the ‘substitute’ home that the speakers seek in the previous poems (Part II of the discussion). This ‘home’ is different in the sense that it springs from the “anger and desperation and loss”⁹⁰ that the two children have gone through. Their loss, different from the loss the previous speakers have experienced, is not equivalent to the loss that physical displacement or dislocation causes. Here, loss/absence is linguistic; it is “grounded in [...] language”⁹¹ which is needed to fill the gap resulting from physical displacement or dislocation. The physical home, therefore, is no longer the ultimate signified that is sought; as the bond between the signifier (the notion of the ‘home’) and the signified (the actual home) is broken, restoring the lost home becomes an ongoing process where multiple signifiers and signified engage endlessly.

As they meet every new day, the two children establish a new perception of what constitutes the ‘home’ by seeing it in buds, seeds, digging, communication and tolerance. In this new home, there is no place for the old fixed perception of the ‘home’ which necessitates that each child goes back to the “shacks they live in with their parents in anger and desperation and loss.”⁹² Their shared ‘home’ bridges their differences and establishes a state of inbetweenness which brings them together through language to start the self-wrought homemaking Majaj calls for.

86 Wiley & Barnes, *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

87 Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Peace,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge*, VII Special issue, (2009), 67.

88 Majaj, “Peace,” 67.

89 Majaj, “Peace,” 67.

90 Majaj, “Peace,” 67.

91 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 12.

92 Majaj, “Peace,” 67.

In another of Majaj's poems, "Living in History," (2006) language plays a similar role in establishing a new ongoing perception of the lost home; the difference being the different skin colours that replace the different spoken languages in the previous poem. As the fixed bond between the notion of the 'home' (signifier) and its old fixed representation (signified) is made loose, a new less fixed perception of the 'home' is produced through the 'game of language'. Absence, no doubt, is there, but here again it is a linguistic displacement rather than the physical displacement that we find in the poems in the two previous sections. In a 2009 article titled "The Geography of Poetry: Mahmoud Darwish and Postnational Identity," Erica Mena touches on this point by explaining that at a time in which physical loss may be hard to compensate for, linguistic loss is not always so.

It is not the physical location but the word "Home" that the poet has created, and the word has been created only through the destruction of all words...As words are signifiers for the world, so they symbolize what they represent...But it is only by "dismantling" all the words which is to say the world, that Home (and what it signifies) can be found- as the driving motivation behind all action, and that to which everything returns.⁹³

Mena's words are echoed by Majaj in "Living History". Here, the signifier-signified correlative is replaced by multiple relations bringing together different signifiers and signifieds temporarily. As meaning is produced, the possibility for non-fixed multicultural transnational conceptions of what constitutes the 'home' are given more space. In the poem, we hear the speaker celebrating a plural state of belongingness resembling that in "Peace". The two new homes embrace difference, whether in skin colour or in language, as connective rather than as dispersing.

May we all fit together like this: trees, birds, sky,
People, separate elements in a living portrait,
Outlines smoothed by the forgiving wash
Of lingering light. Whatever the skins we live in,
The names we choose, the gods we claim or disavow,
May we be like the grains of sand on the beach at night:
A hundred million separate particles
Creating a single expanse on which to lie back...⁹⁴

Conclusion

A home not only gives the individual somewhere to belong to, but also helps him form his identity in the culturally diverse world of today. To lose a home is to lose a birthplace, dear persons and precious memories, but to solely identify homemaking with the lost home is to produce a decontextualized perception of the home, a fact which both Nye and Majaj have come to understand and reflect in their poetry. This realization, however, has taken different forms in their poetry. In earlier works, a fixed perception of the home as the physical place that is too far away to be retrieved or even sought leaves both poets in a passive state of bereavement. At this level, both authors consider it

⁹³ Erica Mena, "The Geography of Poetry: Mahmoud Darwish and Postnational Identity," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge* VII, (2009): 112.

⁹⁴ Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Living in History," *The Other Voices International Project* 18, (2006): 70.

necessary to stop for a while and indulge in feelings of sorrow and suffering to fathom that loss. In their poetry, this is marked by a strong tendency towards romanticizing the concept of the home, which is evident in their choice to isolate their experience from other similar experiences.

As those feelings become worn out, both poets arrive at the realization which Oztarhan stresses in her 2015 article, i.e. that regardless of how lost and bereaved it leaves the individual, homelessness should not be romanticised, as doing so leads to the formation of a decontextualized perception of the ‘home’. This realization initiates the search for an alternative home to replace the lost one in the poetry of Nye and Majaj. The two poets try to find substitutes in whatever memory, person or place they associate with the lost home. Though those attempts bring some relief to them, this feeling is short-lived. With every substitute, the memory of the lost home is rejuvenated, causing their loss to be intensified rather than to be relieved. Eventually, the poets come to realize that defining homemaking as a process of substitution restricts the perception of the ‘home’ to a limited number of alternatives, none of which can ever free it from fixity. Just as indulging in feelings of loss does not help them to forge connections “across boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class,”⁹⁵ neither does looking for substitutes for the lost home do so.

This realization gives the two poets the impetus to develop a new understanding of what constitutes the ‘home’. As they begin to experience homemaking in a multicultural assimilationist context, they realise that the ‘home’ should not be defined solely in relation to one particular place. The ‘home’ which they start looking for at this point is constructed as a “space with infinite possibilities.”⁹⁶ It defies the fixity with which traditionally essentialist notions are characterized. As this phase (the third phase) is reflected in their poetry, the tendency towards constructing a ‘self-wrought homemaking’ becomes clear. Both Nye and Majaj work to uproot the decontextualized perception of the ‘home’ from their poetry and to replace it with a less fixed perception that is grounded in disjunctions and contradictions.

This “fertile site of contradictions,”⁹⁷ which Wiley and Barnes (1996) associate with the home in their introduction, can only be constructed through language. As homemaking takes on the flexible nature of language, it is freed from the fixity which necessitates that the notion of the ‘home’ (the signifier) be unquestionably tied to one specific place (the ultimate signified). In poststructuralist terms, this severance initiates the search for multiple signifieds (actual homes) with which the signifier (the notion of the ‘home’) can associate. Eventually, multiple perceptions of the ‘home’ are generated, and this plurality paves the way for constructing the ‘home’ as a “space with infinite possibilities.”⁹⁸

Calling for a self-wrought homemaking is what marks Nye’s and Majaj’s poetry in the last phase. Both poets do indeed realize that a human perception of what constitutes the home can never be constructed out of the where and when of the “disparate experiences”⁹⁹ which the individual goes through in an assimilationist context. Through language, they are eventually able to develop a new perception of the home that answers to the multicultural transnational world they

95 Majaj, “Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations,” 327.

96 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 18.

97 Wiley & Barnes. *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, XV.

98 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 18.

99 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 6.

live in. Apparently, and as their “disparate experiences”¹⁰⁰ have made them understand, belonging to a home requires ‘making’ that home first.¹⁰¹

Constructing a ‘home’ in language, therefore, works through changing the perception of what constitutes the ‘home’ from a fixed one into an ever changing one. The ‘self-wrought homemaking’ that Majaj calls for is a process beyond the fixity which characterizes the previous process of substitution. A lost home cannot be retrieved by looking for another or by associating it with a person. But, through language, constructing a new home becomes possible since losing it is no longer a threat of a lack that can result in a state of grief and disappointment. This kind of ‘self-wrought homemaking’ is always in the making, beyond loss, and everlastingly present.

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100 Majaj, “The Origins and Developments of Arab-American Literature,” 6.

101 Towards the end of “Beyond Silence,” an article Majaj wrote to publish in the edited book *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* (1996), she touches upon this point by explaining that the multiple identities she has could have silenced her had she not decided to face up to that fear by fighting off silence and shaping who she is with determination: “When I write or speak, I embark on a complex negotiation with the multiplicity of selves I carry with me, the silence so profoundly engrained in me.” (50)

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