

**BEINGH VS BECONMING - THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN SAFIA
ELHILLO'S ALIEN SUITE**

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Abstract

Over the past few years there has been increasing international interest in African Literature. SafiaElhillo is a significant new voice in African as well as Diasporic Poetry. She has written prolifically and performed her poems as slam poetry all over the world. This paper attempts to understand the themes and narrative style of Elhillo's performance of Alien Suite (constituting 14 of her poems), performed as part of Button poetry (a platform for Performance Poetry), and to relate this performance to her self-actualization of an identity that attempts to embrace and integrate all the different aspects of her cultural, linguistic, and ethnic history.

Keywords

SafiaElhillo, postcolonial, Diasporic, African literature

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SafiaElhillo is a Sudanese-American poet / spoken word artist. She has become increasingly popular as a rising star of contemporary African poetry. Having written prolifically, she has won several prestigious awards, and has performed her poems as slam poetry all around the world. Kwame Dawes asserts that Elhillo's voice is "the sound of what will be a remarkable noise in African poetry."¹ Currently Elhillo is a Wallace Stegner fellow of Poetry at Stanford University. Her full-length works include *The January Children*² and *Home is Not a Country*.³

There are several 'labels' that can be ascribed to Elhillo's poetry - African, Post-colonial, Diasporic, Arabic, American, and Minority, to list a few. Belonging as she does to the African diaspora and navigating life as a woman of Arabic ethnicity as well as being a first-generation American offspring of refugee parents, it is not surprising that many of Elhillo's poems tend to grapple with the search for identity, focus on loss and grief, and bear the scars of psychological wounds that go back generations. Her 2016 performance of *Alien Suite* under the banner of Button Poetry⁴ is an expression of this angst, nostalgia, Saudade, and the search for belonging.

In regard to Elhillo's art, it is noteworthy that she was a spoken word artist before she was a published poet; noteworthy because writing poetry and 'performing' it are two quite different genres, owing to the fact that although the words remain the same in both written and spoken verse, the impact of a multi-dimensional performance is undeniably more powerful than just the uni-dimensional written word. *Alien Suite* is one such performance of 14 of Elhillo's poems. These poems are:

vocabulary
an inheritance
a brief history of silence/the last time Marvin Gaye was heard in the
Sudan
the lovers
aghani
date night with Abdel Halim Hafez
whati learned in the fire
the excuse
elisar
second quarantine with Abdel Halim Hafez
republic of the Sudan/ministry of interior/passport and immigration general
directoriate/alien from Sudanese origin passcard
alternate ending

self-portrait as a map

self-portrait with yellow dress

These are all poems that merge seamlessly and flow into one another, and are interconnected by the use of recurring words/phrases/ideas. The entire performance is somewhat reminiscent of the subliminal effect achieved in *The Wasteland*⁵ where the whole ultimately becomes quantumly more powerful than the sum of its parts. A similar effect is achieved by Elhillo in the course of this performance, as she leaves the audience stunned by the strength of her narrative style. The performance is multidimensional not only because it draws upon both verbal as well as nonverbal cues but also because it draws upon different linguistic traditions, cultures, and literatures. In this respect Ruth Wenske observes that “the excessive emphasis on repetition also hints at the literary tradition that Elhillo draws on . . . that of oral poetry, widespread both in the Arab world and in Africa more broadly. Of importance here is the recognition of oral tradition as a multi-layered web of sensibilities that includes not only metric rhythm and prosody, but also temporality and culture.”⁶

Throughout the performance of *Alien Suite*, there runs an undercurrent of the realization of being the ‘other’, and the idea that the subaltern finally has a voice whereas her mother’s generation had none is highlighted over and over as Elhillo compares and contrasts her life in America - the proverbial land of plenty, to her native land (Sudan, in Africa), where censorship and violence have denied her mother and father the luxury of being young persons in love, or of living a carefree existence. For instance, in the poem *a brief history of silence*, she writes:

at the musician’s club in Omdurman

at the musician’s club in Omdurman

a singer is stabbed to death for playing

secular music the month before a violinist

on his way home is beaten by police his instrument

smashed to matchwood all the bars in Khartoum

are closed down all the alcohol in Khartoum poured

into the Nile, a new law forbids women from dancing

in the presence of men another bans song lyrics

that mention women’s bodies

that mention women’s bodies

This censorship has been limited to her parents’ generation, yet Elhillo keenly feels and expresses the subdued rage and helplessness that all oppressed persons

feel. The very title of her debut collection of poems (*The January Children*) is a testament to these feelings, because as she explains, “The January Children are the generation born in Sudan under British occupation, where children were assigned birth years by height, all given the birth date January 1.”⁷ The forceful appropriation of a person’s self-identity is by itself an act of violation of Human Rights, and this violation, that has been perpetuated throughout history on the oppressed, is poignantly brought to light in Elhillo’s poems. In the foreword to *The January | Children* Kwame Dawes remarks that these ‘January’ children “mark the transition from two traumas—that of colonialism and that of the postcolonial struggle for a sense of identity and place.”⁸

The manner in which *Alien Suite* is performed is noteworthy in itself, chiefly because there is no attempt on Elhillo’s part at the kind of banter that tries to engage with the audience prior to the performance, in order to break the ice. There is just the recitation of the poems and little else - a brave rendition that can sometimes feel quite awkward, but in this case is actually very empowering to the narrative, highlighting as it does the seriousness of the underlying themes and emotions that the narrator is grappling with and attempting to vocalize. The poetry is left to speak for itself perhaps because other things seem not to really matter when the subject matter is love and loss. The stark style and the matter-of-factness of the words imbue the narration of the poem/poems with a tension and an aura of suppressed energy that is waiting to explode like a bomb and blow the existence of both narrators and narratee (the audience) apart. It is as if Elhillo is subliminally communicating that what she has to say is too important – that she bears the responsibility of expressing not just her own voice but the unheard, suppressed, censored voices of all the generations of women in her family - her mother’s and her mother’s mother before her and so on, and this performance is too serious to make jokes or to pause or to even breathe. In this manner, whether consciously or not, she manages to subvert the expectations of the audience, leaving it stunned with the rawness of the style and of the depth of the emotions being dealt with.

The style that Elhillo uses in all these poems is the colloquial style, and the language used is English interspersed with Arabic words, a sort of in-between language that Elhillo seems to be comfortable speaking. For instance, the poem with which *Alien Suite* opens - *vocabulary* - goes thus:

VOCABULARY

fact:

the arabic word هواء /hawwa/ means wind

the arabic word هوى /hawwa/ means love

test: [multiple choice]

abdelhalim said *you left me holding wind in my hands*

or

abdelhalim said *you left me holding love in my hands*

abdelhalim was left empty

or

abdelhalim was left full

fairouz said *o wind take me to my country*

or

fairouz said *o love take me to my country*

fairouz is looking for vehicle

or

fairouz is looking for fuel

oum kalthoum said *where the wind stops her ships we stop ours*

or

oum kalthoum said *where love stops her ships we stop ours*

oum kalthoum is stuck

or

oum kalthoum is home

This hybrid language, that Elhillo uses comfortably as well as completely unselfconsciously, situates her firmly within a particular community – Arabic speaking diaspora. In this regard, Elhillo states that “I was trying to write poems that sort of cut out that tedious process of translation and just write poems that come as close to what it sounds like in my head.”⁹ Ruth Wenske also points out that “Elhillo’s poetry is characterized by its transitions between English and Arabic, which are foregrounded through an emphasis – in both form and content – on translatability and untranslatability.”¹⁰

The writing technique that Elhillo uses is narrative, and it moves sporadically between the past and the present, using emotive and metaphorical language to express and explore her emotions. The words used to conjure up images of dissolution, of merging, of transmutation, and throughout all the poems that constitute *Alien Suite*, there is an underlying theme of loss and marginalization that unites the disparate parts into a whole. So, she feels 'alien' because she isn't at home in America and is 'abroad' while she is visiting Sudan. It is noteworthy here that Elhillo does not try to be what she is not. As evinced by her poetry, she does not feel fully American (even though she was born in America and holds the 'blue' American passport), because as she says, 'I am a girl without a country' - American by birth but Sudanese by ties of blood, yet not identifying fully with either. She embraces this fact and does not try to dismiss the nuances of her identity or her linguistic history. So she says: that she and other young women like her - daughters of first-generation immigrants - all have fathers whose daughters are 'full of all the wrong language.' As Dawes points out - "Elhillo reminds us that she is negotiating cultures, geographies, and languages, and these negotiations define her relationship to the idea of exile and the idea of home. For her, separation by wind and by love become one and the same because of the peculiar nature of Arabic, and yet there are sonic contradictions, where "home" and "stuck" are one and the same and yet profoundly separate."¹¹ For Elhillo home is a place in time, a non-physical space that no longer exists, and its loss has left deep wounds that cannot be healed by space or time. So she says, 'I am not from here. I'm not from anywhere.' Her 'alienness', the 'black' of her body is very apparent to her, because even though where she lives is supposed to be her homeland, she is thought of as 'other', with people assuming that she is a foreigner because of the color of her skin, and she is often complimented on her 'good' English. As she says, 'I have an accent in every language.'

Spatially, Elhillo's narrative moves back and forth between Sudan and America, between 'a land that will drink up all its children and a land where she is free to wear short skirts and dance to music on a summers evening, where she is free to love - but as she says, 'Where I'm from is where I'm from and not where I was put.' Regarding this tone of defiance and resentment Dawes remarks that "For Elhillo, Sudan is an invention, and yet it remains quite real, quite whole. It is a place to mourn as one mourns a lost place, and yet it is a place she can visit and a place that she is still able to call home. It is a place of memory, of history, and yet it is a place where the traumas continue in the present."¹² Therefore, she resents the fact that she and others like her are 'inheritors of a country wracked by war,' 'carriers of an ancient loss,' where 'love is something to do until the war starts.' She mourns for

a country that is lost to her generation. So, in her new country, where she speaks ‘fast’ English, listens to hip-hop, and is not romantic or considerate like her mother’s people, she nevertheless feels displaced, swept up by the ocean from her native land and deposited on foreign shores, ostensibly free but weighed down by all the unspoken baggage of loss and despair that her mother and father carry in their souls and have passed on to her. The ocean becomes a metaphor for everything that dissolves her world like sand, flooding away her foundations, her sense of community, of culture, of freedom, of belonging. She is educated in a free country but has difficulty in finding words that are sufficient to articulate her helplessness, the unspeakable sensation of drowning/choking, because she has seen her mother silence her songs and leave her summer dresses behind in a war-torn country and adjust to life in a land where she no longer understands even her own children - children who have adopted a foreign culture and have little patience for their mother and her needs. All these feelings - loss, guilt, rage, nostalgia, the feeling of being unseen and unheard, being identified only by the color of her skin - all these have resulted in the poems that constitute *Alien Suite* - the articulation of the experience of living and navigating life as a Sudanese-American Diasporic writer. In this ‘suite’ of poems Elhillo explores her multiple identities - as an African, as an Arabian, as an American, and the friction that arises as she wrestles to formulate and come to terms with this hyphenated identity. She voices all the unspoken torment in her mind through a narrative that is poignant yet defiant, tender, yet strong as steel. As she asks her audience, ‘What is a country but the drawing of a line?’ Elhillo ostensibly seeks to reimagine borders, no longer willing to leave her ‘other’ self behind, the subaltern self that was hitherto voiceless but now stands before us as the powerful narrator of *Alien Suite*.

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