



Decolonization through Spoken Word Poetry: A Postcolonial Analysis of Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo's poetry

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Abstract— *Hip Hop has been a cultural wave creating and modifying the revolution started in the 1970s by Black people against systemic oppression, and while it manifests itself as a commodified narrativization against racism, sexism and other equally troublesome oppressive ideologies, it becomes a site for change through ethnographic performativity. Spoken Word poets have used this tool to bring marginal narratives to the center and challenge the heteropatriarchal lens, misogynoir and racist practices all around the world. Spoken word poetry has not been researched analytically or theoretically much previously, and even when it was, the research and statistics were limited to the technical aspects of performance. This paper deals with the idea of culture being a site for performance, and simultaneously performance being the action that precedes stereotypes and false representations of marginalized cultures throughout the global north. The spoken word poets use the stage as a liminal space for a multiplicity of cultures to thrive, and challenge the oppressive tools, including that of language, clothing, and voice used by mainstream cultures to oppress the said communities, and normalize their own traditions and morals. The paper reveals the performative tactics used by spoken word poets in order to deinstitutionalize systems of power, and establish a counter narrative of their own as a form of revolution.*

Keywords— *Culture, Decolonisation, Language, Liminal space, Performance, Spoken Word.*

I. INTRODUCTION

“What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.”

- Sarah Richards

Richards extends her comparison between the map and the story to cater to the “transgressive travel between two different domains of knowledge: one official, objective, and abstract - the map; the other one practical, embodied, and popular - the story” (Conquergood 2002). The Hip Hop discourse began somewhat around 1973, as a medium of celebration of the Black culture, and a revolution brought about by artistic, performative and intellectual resistance to racism, colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. This paper divulges into the subgenre of spoken word poetry within the larger domain of Hip Hop literature, and a thorough study on the same with reference to postcolonial studies, feminist

studies, performance studies and cultural studies, which further narrow down in terms of feminist studies and performance studies to offer more specific areas like that of the performativity in Black Islamic feminism. Hip Hop as an academic discipline aims to bring the narratives of the margins to the light, and initiate a discussion to critique and analyze the need for the same. The topic of research for this paper is the visual narrativization of people of color through a thorough analysis of spoken word poetry, the stage technicalities and how the poems either give in or defy the male gaze through the ethnographic performativity of the poets. This is used to destabilize the established power structure and introduce performativity in literary practices to further necessitate the layers of identities that affect the overall narrative of a community.

Anthony Keith Jr. and Crystal Leigh Endsley explore the scope in Hip Hop Literature in their essay *Knowledge of Self: Possibilities for Spoken Word Poetry, Hip Hop Pedagogy, and "Blackout Poetic Transcription" in Critical Qualitative Research*. The essay builds on an argument necessary to understand the areas of study of this dissertation, wherein spoken word poetry functions as an anti-racist and decolonizing research method that disrupts mainstream, traditional pedagogies and methodologies (Keith 2020). This paper aims at analyzing spoken word poets through their manipulation of language, gestures and images to assert a discourse with a purpose of the destabilization of power through the voices raised by minorities. As a consequence, the relationship between spoken word poetry and Hip Hop culture is brought to the forefront, which revolves around the historical evolutions of the same. Spoken word poetry is a sub-branch of emceeing, which is one of the five branches of Hip Hop along with graffiti writing, deejaying, break dancing and knowledge, insinuating the presence of people of color who are both, producing and consuming knowledge.

Another significant topic of study is the role of spoken word poetry in virtual spaces as is discussed by Durham, Cooper and Morris in their essay *The Stage Hip Hop Feminism Built - A New Directions Essay*, wherein they elaborate on the practical supplementation of hip-hop feminism in virtual spaces like YouTube, Instagram and other mainstream or conspicuous sites that offer a space to artists. According to the essay, this digital presence proves the relevance of Hip Hop culture, while also democratizing the creation and promoting open dialogues about issues that pertain to people of color (Durham 2003). Hip Hop Literature has been discussed and researched time and again, however it lacks a thorough study into the politics of and created by spoken word poetry, an art form that does not offer the commodification of Hip Hop as much as the other elements.

1.1 Primary Texts

The research is based on two Sudanese American spoken word artists who also identify as women of color, and three of each of their works are taken up to understand how hip hop culture in general is a mode of revolution. The spoken word poets and the specific texts chosen are discussed below:

1. Emi Mahmoud - Emtithal 'Emi' Mahmoud is a Sudanese-American slam poet who vicariously raises her voice and works towards issues concerning feminism, refugees and cultural oppression on various levels.
 - a. *The Bride* by Emi Mahmoud is a strongly narrativized poem that discusses issues

like dowry exchange, child marriage and the legalities of the institution of marriage. It is a third person narrative which substantially focuses on presenting a narrative but not overstepping the invisible line between the victim and the narrator.

- b. *For Anyone who Feels Alone out there* by Emi Mahmoud is a spoken word poem about her culture's death at the cost of westernization. She uses metaphors to emphasize on the current changing scenario in so many third world countries, wherein people intentionally choose western products over the cultural artifacts in the pretense of civilization, development and power hierarchies.
 - c. *How to Translate a Joke?* by Emi Mahmoud is the dissection of a sexist joke that puts into words the experiences of being a woman of color, which connotes the revolution that the hip hop culture seeks through new age literary practices like that of stand ups or spoken words. Emi Mahmoud uses her voice to enunciate the issue of violence as a universal problem instead of a third world issue for women who feel equally unsafe in the global north as they do in the global south.
2. Safia Elhillo - Safia Elhillo is yet another Sudanese-American spoken word artist who has performed concerning issues like that of race and patriarchy. She is also a woman of color and her subjectivity towards the same offers a first person perspective of decolonization through literary devices.
 - a. *Alien Suite* by Safia Elhillo begins with a recital in Arabic and her translation emphasizes on the duality of language, on the ambiguity that accompanies translation. She uses language, here Arabic and English, to discuss the unfortunate events, or more accurately hate crimes committed against minorities, in her case the Sudanese diaspora.
 - b. *Self Portrait with a Yellow Sundress* by Safia Elhillo is a powerful piece on what it means to be living in a country that never entirely accepts her, a country that offers her people more funerals than

moments she felt alive. She brings in the binaries of colors to elaborate on life and death, and she does so by using colors like black and yellow, and her own miniscule revolt of wearing yellow in a country that couldn't care less if she died.

- c. *To Make Use of Water* by Safia Elhillo is yet another example of a spoken word poem that discusses language for people who immigrate to the USA, turning the narrative into a 'before' and 'after'. She uses this to emphasize on the recognition of home and on the act of leaving behind a culture to accept a new one, an exile that one carries within themselves as a consequence of migration.

1.2 Thesis Statement

Women of color in spoken word poetry challenge and transform power structures and cultural practices outside of a heteropatriarchal lens by challenging misogyny, respectability politics and mandated heterosexuality in literary works. The narratives thus, aim at decolonizing the minds of the producer as well as the consumer of the text through the manipulation of language, voice, gestures and the overall performance of the spoken word artist.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are

1. To have a thorough understanding of the relationship between performative acts and the cultural innuendos they portray through the costumes, body language and gestures, elements unseen in written texts,
2. To understand the academization of the Hip Hop culture without appropriating or necessitating commodification in any way, and
3. To be able to understand the dialogic relationship between Hip Hop and feminism as constitutive categories, therefore leading to an analysis based on creative and intellectual approaches toward Hip Hop culture.

1.4 Significance of the study

The use of performance theories to look into the primary texts chosen, texts written by women of color, is but an efficacious intersectional strategy which helps in necessitating complex identities across academic disciplines. Even though various scholars and researchers have discussed spoken word poetry and hip hop culture at length, there seems to be a dearth of research based on the performative aspect of spoken word. In that sense, spoken

word poetry has three elements that have not been discussed together even though they complement each other, and are sometimes a consequence of each other. The most relevant of these is the fact that it is 'spoken' out loud, which offers a variation of voice alterations, like the words in the poem do for literary theories and the performance can be looked at as a visual narrative. This helps understand a three fold revolution based on what a person has to say, how they say it, and where they say it.

1.5 Limitations of the study

The research is significant in India especially because while most Indian spoken word artists took over the space, the literary practice is still mocked and is subjected to hate on various digital platforms. The study aims at spreading awareness about the literary art form and creating a space where it is given as much importance as any other form of text, along with probing it to become an art form for the mainstream culture where narratives from the margins are performed, celebrated and accessed by a live audience, and millions of people around the world through a digital platform.

1.6 Methodology

Performance studies is a recent but vast academic discipline, discussions regarding which span across theater, movies, music videos, slam poetry and performative acts in everyday life. The discipline intersects with gender, capitalism, caste, race and ethnic performances creating an ever larger scope for research and analysis. The performance theory by Dwight Conquergood in his paper *Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research* offers a lens through which spoken word poetry is critically analyzed as both, a dialogic relationship between various cultures and an ethnographic performance that offers liminality to the narrative within the American audience. The "local context" in such experiments "expands to encompass the historical, dynamic, often traumatic, movements of people, ideas, images, commodities, and capital" (Conquergood 2002). This offers a sense of exile to performers that belong to a certain diaspora because there lacks a sense of belonging to the culture they were born in, and the one they were raised in, and in that sense of the word it becomes necessary to analyze the socio-cultural performance they put up on a digital stage.

Conquergood raises the question of credibility that is often associated with written text as an extension of the ideologies of the Western imperialism, and therefore brings to the center subjugated knowledges from the margins that have had but one medium of keeping traditions alive and cultures growing, and that is through orature. These discredited narratives were othered by the Western knowledge because that helped negate, exclude and refuse

to recognize the depressed communities, and that was embarked upon through legitimizing scriptocentricism in all colonies. The written texts controlled the narratives and were sanctioned by the state, and further neglected lived experiences of the marginalized communities by excluding spaces of agency and struggle, thereby failing to credit the clothing, architecture, body languages and silence as a credible source of insight into cultures. The performance theory exhibits "performance as a lens that illuminates the constructed creative, contingent, collaborative dimensions of human communication; knowledge that comes from contemplation and comparison; concentrated attention and contextualization as a way of knowing" (Conquergood 2002).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cultural Hybridization in Media

The paper *Media Communication and Cultural Hybridization of Digital Society* discusses the use of digital media in constantly refashioning culture, and cultural identities, while simultaneously providing a safe space for the practitioners to express, reinvent and communicate their biases. The ideas Plenković and Mustić present in the paper offer a subversive understanding of a universal shift in the cultural paradigm through media hybridization and globalization. The digital culture derives new contexts of socio-cultural powers by enabling communication through shapes, colors, movements and depths of the visual messages, which in turn amplify the number of interpretations and lends the audience a larger role to play in the critique of the same (Plenković and Mustić 2020). The paper dissects the aspects of visual communication even further by emphasizing the various components that influence the meaning making of the message; the terms being information, communication, media, communication science and public.

The primary texts, even though are performed for a live audience, are picked from an over the top (OTT) platform that is Youtube, and thus with the help of a digital medium, create a social dichotomy, if not a hierarchy. The digital medium offers a space for the migrant Sudanese American poets, Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo to narrativize their experiences, to relocate their cultural roots in a space beyond transnational borders, and to advocate for the decentralization of cultural norms through audio-visual reiteration of their socio-political experiences. These visual dimensions are also discussed in Richard Brock's paper *Framing Theory: Toward an Ekphrastic Postcolonial Methodology*, where arguments based on the spatiality and the temporality of an event diversify the scholarship within postcolonial studies. The area of study is anatomized

through the very basic element of any visual experience which is the frame. The frame, which the author also refers to as the frozen moment within a series of frames in motion that amount to a narrative, is in itself a complete and interpretable organization of elements that further connect with similar other frames to establish a temporal sequence.

This frame is what Brock calls an isolated spatially constituted entity that functions in a temporal arena. He brings in the ideas of Bhabha to explain how both modernity and postmodernity are created from the loci instead of the center of any cultural perspective, thereby creating a cultural space from outside the already existing binary with borderline experiences (Brock 2011). The authors in these spaces exhibit their sociopolitical norms, material conditions, customs, practices and discourses through borders and spaces that are both subversive and yet, culturally specific to their hybrid identities. Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo are poets who have migrated from the Global South to one of the superpowers in the world, and while they drew cultural roots from Sudan, they also inculcated values from the culture of the host country that is America. They are neither entirely Sudanese, nor American, but are placed in America within a temporal realm that pushes them towards the margins of the society.

While speaking of cultural modification as a product of hybridization, it might be useful to consider the ideas presented in the paper *The World in Dress: Anthropological Perspectives on Clothing, Fashion, and Culture* by Karen Tranberg Hansen, where the author redirects the notion of culture being the societal interpretations of events and patches to culture being created through agency, practice and performance. The idea is to draw experiences and agency from the margins instead of the stereotypical center of any cultural practice or expression, in order to understand visual spaces as cultural representations of a borderless world. These ideas are brought up time and again to insinuate that culture is more than celebratory practices, the food eaten and the collective discourse that is often discussed; culture is the agential celebration of identities via isolated choices made by individuals. While agency is brought to the forefront, one of the most important aspects of any cultural expression becomes the choice in clothes, or the fashion a person chooses to exhibit.

Dresses have always been constantly modified as and when they were introduced to contradictory cultures, thereby interacting with Western ideals of beauty and the commercial fashion system. Among other things, hyper communication via digital spaces and visual consumption of media have broken conventional fashion boundaries, and expressed a concern towards the individualistic celebration

of bodily expression. The reason why fashion is so widely discussed is because clothes participate in a dual function of both touching the body, and still being presented to the outside world, which is why they are closely associated with identities because they are the social skins people consciously decide to wear. This is why Emi Mahmoud's choice to wear Hijab transcends her identity as a Sudanese American Muslim woman, and Safia Elhillo's Western clothing does not disqualify her religious beliefs, and nor does it mean the erasure of her African roots.

While Hijab has been and is still a topic of discussion and debate for privileged men all across the globe, a deeper understanding of the anthropological fashion choices suggest that it is now seen as an object and symbol of Islamic consciousness and activism, where the veiling does not necessarily mean oppression. The act of veiling expands the critical distance between the practices people took part in in the past and the ones that happened in the present, so as to allow women to refashion their images and ideologies regarding modern Islamic womanhood (Hansen 2004). However, the world is yet to recover from the Western colonialism of fashion that succumbs the growth of any creative aspirations and renders no value to subversions from the traditional clothing of women. *Fashion: Style, Identity and Meaning* by Fiona Anderson navigates the trajectory of this collective Western fashion consciousness, and draws parallels between fashion and cultural inhibitions of the Global South.

Fashion is constantly engaging with intersectional identities like that of class, caste, gender, race, sexuality, age and nationality, while simultaneously, on a more individual level expressing personal moods, and emotions. While people collectively associate clothing with a culture through social adaptation, it is also viewed on an individual level where differences within a common fashion article is what sets one apart from the crowd. Fashion allows the consumer to not only mark the margins, but to cross over to the other side of the periphery where dichotomies and stereotypes are discarded; for example unisex clothes like t-shirts, jeans, caps and trainers are worn by people of all genders. The only unsettling creative deliberation in this case is the reassertion of gender binaries through hairstyles, makeup and jewelry. Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo have both relocated to the center of any production from the margins, and therefore, their individuality and cultural expression is dependent on their fashion choices.

Fashion in this case is integral to the understanding of constructs like that of gender, race, class and age, and therefore when people beyond the margins declutter already existing notions to break free from such stereotypes, a decolonization of sorts is inevitable. Emi

Mahmoud, as is reiterated time and again, uses Hijab in contradiction to the primary ideas discussed in this essay, wherein Hijab, a veil does not necessarily cover her face, instead it deliberates her construction of the self in accordance with and simultaneously against the conventional Islamic way of draping the cloth. While it seems like a subconscious, or even a mindless decision, it speaks volumes about the ideologies that fuel her performances, the didactic insinuations and the informal shift to ethnic dialects which may or may not incur the same response as its English translation.

2.2 The Politics of Language

Benjamin Bailey has researched on the implications and the influence of audio-video message delivery through digital spaces in the paper *Interactional Sociolinguistics*. Interactional sociolinguistics, as the term suggests, is the discourse analysis of interactions in order to establish a socio-cultural context through previously recorded videos, while critically analyzing inferences, detonations and syntax contributed in the given communicative process. The idea is to interpret or make meaning of the use of dialects by members of different ethnic groups in the process of social differentiation through a thorough examination of words, prosody, register shifts and bodily orientations (Bailey 2008). Interactional sociolinguistics seeks for contextualization cues, wherein the semantic content of a text is understood through the relationship between any sentence and the one that precedes it to pave the way for a smooth flow of a thought, and while that makes up for the meaning, it also depends on the sociocultural context of the utterance. While many ethnic groups use the same language for communication, the ways in which they define the metacommunicative moment may differ and thereby, result in intercultural miscommunication (Bailey 2008).

Identity is defined as the social positioning of the individual, or the self in contrast with the other, and this allows the reader or the audience to understand meaning through the words and the performance simultaneously. So, while the words do establish social and cultural identities, there could be other ways for people to perform their gender, ethnicity, or their socioeconomic status. This paper offers a new perspective and a new analytic lens on both, the primary texts, and the performances through which the primary texts are delivered to the audience. Safia Elhillo's poetry uses more sociocultural insinuations through linguistic tools, while also delivering a performance for a set of a presumably monolingual audience. However, the utterances before and after these Arabic terms situate the said term in a clear trajectory of their understanding, thereby reducing the distance between the author, the text and the audience in question. Emi Mahmoud, on the other hand,

resorts to English as the only language. However, her performance allows for a deeper understanding of her gender conformity, ethnic identity and largely so, of her being an Islamic woman narrating the story of almost every girl in Islamic countries.

Safia Elhillo's use and contextualization of two languages for an audience that largely only understands one of them draws inspiration from the power of languages which is also discussed in the paper, *Bicultural Identity, Bilingualism, and Psychological Adjustment in Multicultural Societies: Immigration-based and Globalization based Acculturation*. The idea is to understand acculturation attitudes as assimilation, integration, separation or marginalization. However, all of this leads to thriving bilinguals in a host country, wherein all bilinguals for that matter do not have similar relationships to the country, and therefore their relationship with the host country's language can differ with respect to that. There could be bilinguals who have permanently relocated themselves from one cultural context to another, so these are the people who would have a strong hold over both languages; there could be people who have moved in search for better educational or occupational opportunities for a certain timeframe, and while they would learn the language, their knowledge would be limited to the need of their usage; and there would be people who have another community relocated into their country, so these people would hardly know anything about the language of the immigrants because then it would not be a need but a luxury (Chen, et. al 2008)

Both Safia Elhillo and Emi Mahmoud are bilinguals who identify with and are involved in both the cultures at the same time. While this paper discusses acculturation through assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization, both the poets have integrated both cultures into their lifestyles such that they can pass for both an indigenous person from America and Sudan in terms of their cultural inhibitions. While they participate in the mainstream culture, they simultaneously celebrate their roots, which is also very evident in their poems that use the English language instead of Arabic to suit the target audience, but they discuss issues pertaining to women from the global south or people of color in general. While this paper discusses bilingualism and its causes, *Ethnic Identity and Bilingualism Attitudes* by Hurtado and Gurin takes into consideration the consequences of the linguistic power structure that exists in any country with immigrants or a linguistic diversity. The ability to integrate languages into one's life depends upon their social psychological influences that include structural integration, childhood socialization, and ethnic identity of the said person.

However, political consciousness plays a big role in the adaptation and acculturation abilities of a person, wherein in case of power discontent a relative lack of power of both the Arabic language, in this case, and the influence of Sudanese culture along with the rejection of the legitimacy of their culture results in structural constraints that demand a collective socio-political dissent. Since language paves way for social and class mobility in a political scenario, the Sudanese-American poets or people in general find it restrictive to employ their native language because of the lack of mediums in educational institutions, forming a linguistic barrier between the indigenous people and the immigrants; and considering it is America that is in question, it is a country with a diverse range of immigrants making it almost impossible to focus on any one language in particular. People who knew more than one language hardly attained higher income or more schooling, which implies that it neither promotes nor demotes any ethno-political identity. However, these ideas promote a certain sense of political consciousness in which attitudes pertaining to bilingualism are embedded. The primary texts are not entirely in English paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of the workings of a bilingual intellect in both academic and performative spaces.

Arabic is the native language of both the poets, but even so Safia Elhillo dives deeper into the discussion of how languages and the linguistic power structure affect the overall meaning and influence the meaning making process of the audience. The performances also allow for a structural reading into the gestures, body language, and accessorization that help understand the words in a language that one may have never encountered before. Since the poets are situated in an American socio-political context, the use of English to draw attention to Sudanese issues, or that of colonization and political wars, seems like an exceptional decision. The use of Arabic, or the lack thereof in all the primary texts, is to instill a sense of proximity between the American audience and the people who suffer in the global south through a collective sense of humanity and ethical ideologies, while simultaneously distancing the two putting the audience in a conflicting position, wherein they can acknowledge the damage they as the citizens of the global north do to women in the global south, but they are not in a position to make substantial changes either.

Social Exiles and Language Refugees: The case of Postcolonial Authors by Guerrero-Strachan is another paper that discusses the power structure language creates in a country with people with more than one language of use. The author emphasizes upon the relevance of the English language as the language of colonization, wherein the compulsory enforcement of the same lends a sense of social displacement that further allows people from an ethnicity

and a language to investigate their cultural shifts in their socio-political paradigm. Colonization was accompanied by a foreign cultural system into countries that were absolutely unaware of the Western culture, and within that alien cultural system was a language completely new to the people. Literature and literary figures have time and again used the idea of cultural exile due to the introduction of a foreign culture into a colonized country to understand and emphasize on what was lost instead of what the colonizers had in store for them. The author situates the migration resulting from such a situation as not merely physical, but also metaphorical wherein the person is an exile no matter where he chooses to live; an exile at home because of how fast the culture is integrating and accommodating the Western culture, and abroad because of the physical distance from home (Guerrero-Strachan 2005).

The author then goes on to view this physical and metaphorical distance as something that creates a third space, which was as a term coined and used by Homi Bhabha to mean hybridization that makes culture in itself a place of exile. The meanings and symbols have no validity on their own and lose their cultural fixity due to the inhibition of a third space made by the amalgamation of and the rejection of both the cultures in question. This marked the need for a language that helps escape this permanent sense of exile and narrativize the incidents of immigrants in a way that not only is it accurate and culturally appropriate, but also in a way that it exceeded the horizons of mimicry because this new language was supposed to be more than just that. This language makes oral culture, is remodeled in a fashion that suits the colonized more than the oppressors and is deemed fit to settle on its own idea of inflection. While the third space seems like a cultural accommodation, it rather is a fusion where none of these cultures exist on their own and become a new third culture that also does not imply the deletion of the original cultures; it only means a modification to adjust the two such that it becomes a culture of its own.

Safia Elhillo and Emi Mahmoud become the residents of this third space that is neither Sudanese, nor American, which is to imply that while their content largely discusses Sudanese issues, that does not erase their American roots at all. It can only be seen as a fusion of the English language and the Arabic language to narrativize a story that uses the lens of an American resident to tell the history and the condition of Sudan. The creative liberties that the two poets have used in these texts rely primarily on the use of language which is discussed in *Stylistics and Linguistic Variation in Poetry* by Elena Semino on a superficial level. The paper discusses poetry and its use in performance, wherein the author provides a major difference between the strict and liberal use of language.

These uses differ to an extent on which they might even need a close conformity to various stylistic and linguistic conventions to offer any originality or creativity (Semino 2002). Safia Elhillo and Emi Mahmoud use various slangs, gestures and liberties in their fashion choices to make up for the liberal use of language; and use the linguistic variations, figures of speeches, comparisons and follow the performative rules as strict use of a language, the language being more than the verbal and written form.

2.3 Decolonization through Spoken Word Poetry

Candice M. Jenkins in her paper *Introduction: Reading Hip Hop Discourse in the Twenty-first Century* elaborates upon hip hop as a cultural phenomenon, and simultaneously as a verbally constructed space that encapsulates a performance such that a literary analysis of the same becomes necessary to decode any discourse around it. As an epistemological understanding of the same, hip hop draws upon institutionalized sexism, racism and misogyny which further offers a language for visualizing Black American consciousness (Jenkins 2013). Jenkins lays emphasis on the idea of the voice, being conceptualized for both, maintaining verbal communication with the audience, and to assert agency over his literal and figurative position in the world through a dialogue with the audience. Hip Hop offers not just the means to present a meaning to the voice, but to voice the meaning that the spoken word artist encompasses within their lyrical poetry. Spoken Word poetry not only has scope for decolonization through the form and structure of the poem, or the narrative content, but it also extends to the writing, the voice, the gestures, the cultural frameworks and the interaction between the script and the audience.

Emi Mahmoud presents narratives that are particular to women in the global south, or Sudan specifically, and to present a culturally and socially accurate description of their condition, she has to use her voice to neither dehumanize the narrative by using the lens of pity, nor hyper visualize it making it feel unreal. Her costume, her intonations, the anger in her voice have a lot more scope for interpretation and a diverse reading than a written narrative would have achieved. Safia Elhillo, on the other hand, constructs a narrative through language in a sense that through her voice modulation and contextualization cues, one can understand the denotative, and sometimes even connotative meaning of the poems. These subversions from a generic use of language, or dressing, or voice expresses cultural resentment and an interplay between the text and the context respectively.

While Jenkins presents an overview of the direction spoken word poetry has taken up recently, Raphael D'abdon and Natalia Molebatsi situate women in the center of the discussion in their paper *Behind the Scenes: An*

Exploration of the Process of Creation, Self Production and Performance in the all Female Spoken Word Poetry show Body of Words. While there is no dearth of female scribes in the field, ranging from performers to publishers, to editor, to educators, and sometimes a combination of the same, women poets from South Africa have not found a safe environment to create art and render their voices valuable in terms of the canon or the literary and cultural movements of the contemporary world. The authors have noted that a lot many South Africans spoken word poets use their bodies as a tool to symbolize the shame that is first imposed on their bodies, and then on to them through their bodies, thereby assigning the body a deeper and a more involved role than merely the performance.

Emi Mahmoud uses a diverse range of rhythmic interweavings in order to shift the focus on to the female body as a means to propagate and situate violence, abuse, inferiority and insignificance. How she uses her body to create more than just poetry is what draws South African poets apart from the rest of the world, because no matter the growth in the discourse, Hip Hop continues to exist as the narrative from the marginalized communities. Safia Elhillo does not necessarily draw attention to her body as a medium of storytelling, however, her attire, her accessories and her body language is one to reclaim agency over a culture that has long forgotten the immigrants that moved to America. The bodies in all these primary texts become a tool to voice narratives from the margin and to keep these narratives interactive and the audiences alert, it is necessary for rhythm and an interactive body language to be thoroughly inculcated into the artform. Javon Johnson in his essay *This is the Slam, Everybody* from the book *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities* brings the Black community to the center of an art form associated primarily with the revolution of Hip Hop they began in the 1970s.

The author discusses various issues pertaining to the negation of an entire community from the artform in a way where white people have a separate stage and black people have another. These separatist practices affect a primary issue that is discussed through the primary texts, which is of space and borders, wherein reclaiming the stage as a space is not enough when Black poets in Chicago are separated from the White ones through a pin code or even more (Johnson 2017). Slam poetry arose during the cultural revolution of the late twentieth century and resurfaced on a large scale after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, making it a means to deal with complex emotions and about finding a space, a common ground to come together and find emotions that the human race was collectively going through.

Johnson also reiterates the ideas of Bell Hooks, who asserted that boys of color needed a performative stage to develop into men, because this way not only will they mature into adults well equipped to deal with emotions, but it can also offer an outlet for them to express ideas that may have otherwise been pushed under the rug. On a similar note, when women of color, like Mahmoud and Elhillo, use spoken word poetry to narrativize issues that may, on their behalf, need an emotional outlet, they also find a space within the stage and the range of audience to feel emotions that may otherwise feel distant. Since they have migrated to America, their issues as former residents, or the children of people who were former residents of Sudan might get negated because in that given moment, they do not necessarily go through any of it. While Mahmoud's work focuses on Sudanese women and their struggles, Elhillo uses her work to understand struggles faced by immigrants in fitting into a new culture.

Along similar lines of drawing attention to the margins, Rudiger Lohlker's paper *Hip Hop and Islam: An Exploration into Music, Technology, Religion, and Marginality* discusses the premises of the doubly oppressed Islamic Black community. The author highlights the importance of hip hop culture in context with the lack of western influence and any homogenization that occurs when western cultures seek to take over the local heritages. Hip Hop has been confined to the communities in the margins, and that is one reason why the relationship between Islamic Black women and spoken word poetry is necessary to navigate, because it always evolves from the "shunned expressions of disposable people" (Lohlker 2014). The narratives are brought to light through an amalgamation of audio, visual and networks.

According to the author, Islam as a religion lies on the peripheries of the American culture, and therefore is also understood as a religion of resistance, where Black muslim women find it especially hard to become agents of diversifying academic research, delegate issues pertaining to Islamic faith and move to the center of power structures within the hip hop culture. The said power structures and the representation of Black muslim women defines Black muslim womanhood, and therefore experiences of particular groups of women are entirely ignored to situate Black muslim women on the intersection of overly sexualised Black women and the religiously conservative muslim women. Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo are Black women who follow Islam as their primary religion, thereby standing at the conjuncture of a rather complex subject and narrativization.

This is better explained in Tariq Jazeel's paper *Postcolonial Spaces and Identities* wherein one can not

explain Black muslim womanhood without taking into context their postcolonial identities. While the world is divided into the West vs the East, the global north vs the global south, the colonizers vs the colonies, hybrid subjectivities have emerged within imprecise borders and spaces of global culture. The production of geographical knowledge was primary to British imperialism because once the borders were established, it became easier to confine people within fences and shut them out through the same means. When these colonial subjects started migrating to the conformed West, issues like racism and intersectional discrimination came to the front wherein people like Mahmoud and Elhillo were not only from an oppressed gender but an entirely different race too.

Hybridity in these spaces called for a mixture of classes, races, and people with various ethnicities, but a prerequisite for hybridization was the assumption that there was the preexistence of some pure and authentic ethnicities which then mixed to form a third space. This subtle insinuation of hybrid spaces being impure and a culturally new phenomenon pushed people to the margins, wherein targeting spatiality in order to feel superior to other cultures and identities. Through spoken word poetry, Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo are both a part of a hybrid space, and are simultaneously creating a third space for their poetry and narratives to thrive and reach an audience from outside the loci of the circle.

III. CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

In recent years, a universal shift in the cultural paradigm has brought attention to the influence of digital spaces in refashioning culture and cultural identities. While this allows for mobility of ideas, cultures and narratives without any physical movement, it also simultaneously creates a liminal space for cultural hybridization. The digital medium undoubtedly provides accessibility to facts, theories, history, and the scope for the future, and while that is necessary for the human mind to evolve and grow, it must at the same time be introduced to art and autobiographical sketches to evoke a sense of empathy for communities that one cannot physically reach out to. The digital space offers a platform for all communities to come together individually and collectively, to mime their cultural inhibitions and subvert stereotypes associated with them due to a lack of personal intervention; along with that digital media also offers a safe space for the oppressed and colonized to narrativize their experiences in a way not influenced by the state or the authority (Plenković 2020). The liminal spaces created within the larger algorithm of the internet are spaces where counter narratives are born, promoted and accessed by people it is for, people it is

against, and people not entirely a part of the narrative to demarcate the transnational and socio-cultural boundaries.

Safia Elhillo and Emi Mahmoud are Sudanese American spoken word artists who currently advocate for the rights of Sudanese people, and work towards creating awareness about the Sudanese culture and the current political scenario through their art among the people from the Global North. The poets belong to the Sudanese diaspora, and therefore, a majority of their work accentuates the ideas of migration, nationality and the place of women in such a context. Since the Sudanese revolution began in December 2019, both the poets have widely spoken about the said issue and have contextualized a memory for the women in Sudan along with the world wide Sudanese diaspora. The digital spaces, in such a scenario, offer a medium for revolutionary ideas, unfiltered thoughts, firsthand experiences, latest news for Sudanese people not in the country at present, and for art that encapsulates the lives of Sudanese people. While Emi Mahmoud brings to light isolated events that include a set of people, Safia Elhillo emphasizes on the collective memory of a nation, its people and a language in the primary texts chosen for this paper. While the digital medium helps the narrative reach the privileged section of the world that is equipped with technological gadgets and internet, the live performances aimed at the American audience allows for an empathetic attitude to exist for the people of third world countries.

The poets explore cultural politics and transform power structures outside of heteropatriarchal lens through an expression of gender and ethnic identity by their cultural clothing, or the lack of it. The spoken word poems create a third space within the constitutive limitation of a place and its confining boundaries to offer not two cultures, namely the one in their host country and one in their native country but a peaceful fusion of the two within the poets as subjects, and their art. The digital space in itself acts as a liminal space where even though cultural hegemony exists because of who regulates it, and how it is regulated, it also simultaneously advocates for unheard cultural voices from the margins to take the center stage and voice out their concerns and experiences for the digital world; and one of the greatest advantages of this type of a medium is that not only is it easily accessible to everyone with an access to the internet, but that it is also almost impossible to take down something from the internet ever. Once a narrative goes online, it will exist in one form or another in some corner of the digital world, and that is why it is both a bane and boon to human existence.

3.1 Digital Spaces and Culture

With Sudan still struggling as a developing and a politically conflicting ground, a lot of people migrated to the

developed West that had a lot more opportunities to offer them. These opportunities that came as a consequence of migration were not isolated, they accompanied discrimination, racial crimes and alienation; an alienation that was motivated by a political and cultural exile from both, the home and abroad (Guerrero-Strachan 2005). Bhabha calls this the third space where existing signs are appropriated, translated, re-historicized, and read new, thereby making culture in itself a place of exile (Bhabha 36). On a similar note, Dwight Conquergood has redefined liminality in the context of performance studies, wherein it manifests itself in its strongest form as a struggle to live “betwixt and between theory and theatricality, paradigms and practices, critical reflection and creative accomplishment (Conquergood 2002). The idea of digital space as a third space offers another set of liminality between the performer and the consumer, the narrativized culture and the critical reception, and the narrative as a cultural byproduct and English as the medium language.

Emi Mahmoud uses English as the sole language for her spoken word poetry, and while that is the colonizer's language, she raises questions about this ‘borrowed language’ that is force fed to the immigrants through her poem *For Anyone who Feels Alone out there*. She directs many of her questions towards the then president of the United States of America to reiterate the distance she feels to her country, and also to the one where she lived then.

The narrative is set in a morgue where she goes to identify a body, and through the idea of identity and death, she remembers her country which she only recognizes in photographs, which is another digital medium to keep the culture and identity alive. Contrary to her own country which she migrated from years ago, there is America where people of color are discriminated against; she focuses on the idea of ‘families being documented’ to identify the need for written proof. This compulsory need for written text to be considered legal and authentic stands as a binary to spoken word, or verbal ideas that were considered subjugated knowledge, the low Other of science (Conquergood 2002).

Emi Mahmoud defines cultural exile in terms of her poetry, wherein her people had to ‘escape genocide only to be gunned down in your own home’, insinuating that neither her homeland or the land where her home is accepts or welcomes her into the community because she will always be a person of color, an immigrant, a woman, and therefore, the other. The poem also calls out the hypocrisy in American socio-political approach where Mahmoud questions why it is called ‘the land of the free when even the dead can't leave’, subsequently asserting that transnational boundaries are synonymous to prisons for the migrants. She focuses largely on the discrimination that people of color have to face in the host country, the cultural

bifercations that situate subjects in a social hierarchy, and the need to address the issue in a borrowed language that shifts from being the colonizer's language to the language colonized use to escape oppression by voicing their narratives in a globally accepted language.

Emi Mahmoud's *The Bride* questions and challenges the heteropatriarchal lens that is used to objectify and push women from the third world countries to the absolute margins. The subject in the poem is a seventeen year old bride who is not aware of who her husband will be, or the English language to better communicate her resistance to matrimony. Mahmoud points out how young girls are denied from climbing trees or playing because they could break their hymen which is considered the same as losing virginity, and while women in America may even have kids before marriage, women in the Global South are killed, abused, and banished from the society for not being virgins until their marriage. The construct of virginity, and associating it with purity is a gendered idea that only puts women on spot without biologically understanding the workings of a female body, and when unaware men make decisions about the female body, women are subjected to gendered hate crimes.

The groom is looking for a woman who can ‘feed the kids, while he raises them’, reducing womanhood to nurturing, being mothers, and having no agency at all. That is also implied when no one in the ceremony knows her name, and Mahmoud calls it ‘his wedding’ instead of a collective union, which also insinuates that the woman is merely an object of male desire that is used for the progression and betterment of the male lives. Mahmoud also suggests that these practices are what ‘fathers taught us through our mother's mouth’, implying that while patriarchy benefits men, it is in many situations, if not all, propagated by women because of internalized misogyny, conditioning, and in this case misogynoir. She questions the respectability politics and the heteropatriarchal idea of the institution of marriage in general. She uses the digital space to challenge the culture of her homeland, the socio-cultural ranking of women, and the ignorance of the people towards the Black female consciousness.

Emi Mahmoud claims that ‘humor transcends all boundaries’, that ‘laughter is a language that knows no border’ in her poem *How to Translate a Joke?* She suggests that people often use ‘offensive’ to cover for ‘dangerous’; is the racist joke, or the casteist joke, or the sexist joke offensive because it hurts someone's feelings or is it dangerous because it puts down the lives of Black people, Dalit people and women, confining them to a fate full of hate and fear. She claims that these jokes that objectify women leave hardly any room for the victims, because not

only are they only meant to be looked at from the oppressor's or the male gaze, but they are also always spoken using the voice of an abuser. She points out through her reflection of the joke that women have been killed for objecting to men approaching them, there are instances where when a woman threatened a man by law, she was jailed for treason. Through the digital space that she uses as a third space, she puts forth the idea of violence as a universal language to shut women down, because people in America, including her live audience and the digital audience, believe that violence is a third world problem.

However, no matter how many languages she translates the joke into, men always laugh because violence is not confined within boundaries, violence too, like laughter, is a language that knows no borders. She mentions that there are four women in the joke, and none of them speaks, which implies that there is a lack of agency, there is objectification of women, and the joke views women as nothing more than sexual objects that must be courted through persuasion or maybe, force. The digital screen here is focused entirely on Emi Mahmoud, allowing her the space to voice the concerns she has regarding the concerned patriarchal institutions, a space where she is free of performing womanhood, where she speaks 'of' women as victims of humor, a liminal space which she uses to view the offense and reflect upon it, while simultaneously allowing the audience to feel her fear, her anger and her helplessness through her tone, words, and body language.

The digital spaces hone the cultural perceptions, delimit the institutionalized narratives, and challenge the textual knowledge by providing alternative cultural embodiments that speak for themselves, but digital media also allows fake knowledge, and corrupt facts to affect our reception of the same. It is as easy for fake narratives to thrive and influence the audience as for Mahmoud to narrativize the situation of women in third world countries, and these falsified testimonies reduce the credibility of digital spaces, the real facts and the authors presenting them. The poets account for credible sources only and only because of where they perform, and what organization they perform for, and both Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo are associated with Button Poetry, the UN, and have published written text prior to performing these pieces, thereby making their take on their culture appropriate and factual.

3.2 Costumes and the idea of veiling

The primary reason why textual transferring of ideas and knowledge is harmful over a verbal approach is because they do not "excavate space of agency and struggle from everyday performance practices - clothing, gardening, healing, trading, worshiping, architecture and homemaking - to reveal an impressive repertoire of conscious, creative,

critical, contrapuntal responses to the imperialist project that exceeded the verbal" (Conquergood 2002). The major focus, therefore, in these poems is not merely the textual analysis but a thorough reading into their performance of the poem, their gender, and their ethnic or religious identity. Culture is created through agency, practice and performance, and is as a result processual which keeps changing as and when it interacts with another culture. The clothing is of dire importance because it acts like the 'social skin' of a person, which faces the world but while touching the body, and therefore is a reflection of Islamic consciousness of the poets in question (Hansen 2004). Fashion requires a certain uniformity wherein one must wear an acceptable piece of clothing, and yet it must be different for the person to stand out, perform their class, race, gender and other forms of identities (Anderson 2022).

The relationship between studying and doing a performance is integral to understanding how choices in fashion narrate a story in itself too. Emi Mahmoud, in *How to Translate a Joke and For Anyone who Feels Alone out there* is wearing the same clothes and accessories, because she performed the pieces and the videos were recorded on the same day. Her headscarf is unlike any other form of veiling seen with Hijab, if at all it can be considered veiling, because only her hair and the head is covered under the cloth. The modern forms of veiling are a symbol of a new found Islamic consciousness and womanhood within the Sudanese diaspora here. The headscarf is accessorized with a golden headpiece that covers her entire forehead, and her black top and gray shrug cover her body on the screen almost entirely, which can be read as an extended metaphor for veiling in the Islamic religion.

On another occasion where Emi Mahmoud recites *The Bride*, she is wearing a black blazer, trousers and a dark colored top with a black hijab that covers her head but not the face. The narrative revolves around the female agency, or the lack of it for women from Sudan who are brought to America to marry unknown men who are twice their age, and therefore it only fits right for her to first, choose how she wants to veil, if she wants to veil at all, and second, give a face and a voice to the said women. Her western outfit and her Islamic traditional veiling create a third space for both the cultures to exist, and fuse in a way, where she is simultaneously performing both, while her narrative questions the ethics of both. This can be read as a political choice made to assert her relation to both the cultures, wherein she can seem progressive as the West defines it, and traditional as her Sudanese roots would want.

Safia Elhillo, on the other hand, was born and brought up in America which reflects in her Western clothing during her performances. Her poem, *Self Portrait*

with a Yellow Dress is one of her early works, where she is young and new to the arena of spoken word poetry. She wore a black collared dress with a neck piece and open hair put to one side of the head. Her posture, gestures and body language clearly indicate that she is nervous, and new to this, while her tone, words and the narrative assert agency and power. One cannot look at her clothing and assume her religion or culture because of her clothing that is inclined to the Western formal style of performance, which also seems like a connection the poet is trying to draw to her American audience. She looks and dresses like one of them, and performs the West in the most visible ways as possible, and yet in her mind, her poem talks about the drastic events taking place in Sudan, reaffirming that migration does not mean replacing a culture, but creating liminality through a fusion of the two cultures.

Alien Suite and *To Make Use of Water* are performed and recorded on the same day when Elhillo wore a white jumpsuit, a black jacket, big hoops in her ears, and a dark black shade of lipstick. Her choice of monochromatic dressing brings seriousness to her narrative, and the rare choice of a black colored lipstick makes her seem bold, assertive and different; a difference in a way where Elhillo breaks the code of uniformity in fashion by standing out. While her Western clothes again make her a part of the larger crowd in the room, her solid colored bold clothing makes her stand out, because in all reality even though she was born in America, she still is Sudanese. The clothing gives the audience a sense of uniformity and her makeup allows for people to see how she does not belong to the crowd, how being courageous and independent is compulsorily enforced on women from the first world countries while third world women are considered fragile and in need of protection.

As previously mentioned, clothes become the social skin of a person and have a dual function of meaning something to the skin it touches, and the eyes that see it. Having said that, the limitations of analyzing clothes and accessories is that while a researcher can analyze the colors, clothes, accessories, and makeup individually and as a collective form of expression, one can never really figure out what these fashion choices meant to the person whose skin these clothes were touching, thereby making the analysis based on assumptions and theories rather than the truth or the motive. However, any form of analysis must leave the author out of it, because what is important is not the motive but the impact on the many consumers who read a book or watched a movie or witnessed a spoken word poetry; as Roland Barthes explains in *The Death of the Author* that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes 2001).

IV. DECOLONIZATION THROUGH SPOKEN WORD POETRY

Spoken word poetry, which comes under the larger domain of Hip Hop Literature, belongs to the margins, and even though it has been used by people not necessarily oppressed, the verbal performances have always been used to impart subjugated knowledge of discrimination, colonization and oppression. These narratives are responsible for providing and necessitating a medium for "conceptualizing Black American subjectivity" along with consciousness associated with colonization (Jenkins 2013). Spoken word poetry aims to bring "hybrid subjectivities, imprecise borders and spaces of global culture" to the front by performing a narrative coming from the margins through a verbal performance, which includes expression through intonations, gestures, body language, and silence (Jazeel 2012). Apart from these the field of spoken word also has scope for decolonization through the form and the structure of the poem, the narrative content, the cultural frameworks, and the dialogue between the script and the audience. The subversions that the poet uses from the academic or formal use of language expresses socio-cultural resentment, and offer a contextual reading into the emotions of the individual rather than of a collective community.

Hip Hop is in itself a culture that stands for revolution, and subversions from the Eurocentric or colonial way of performing arts. Graffiti, rapping, break dancing, and spoken word poetry are cultural interventions to the performative arts, wherein through the visual messages and the performance, the performers aim at redefining history through the voice of the colonized instead of the colonizer. There is a conscious recognition that within a colonized society, women have faced double oppression, if not more because of the intersections of their class, caste or sexuality. Black Muslim women constitute one such category that has been erased or negated from the academic circles, and simultaneously from the Hip Hop discourse, and by having a platform through spoken word poetry, poets like Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo represent and redefine the Black Islamic womanhood (Lohlker 2014). These poets target institutionalized misogyny, racism and sexism through their works, challenging the heteropatriarchal lens used previously to analyze performative arts. Apart from performing as an artist, they also perform their ethnic identities, their religion, their gender and their biases through an audio visual medium.

4.1 Visual Messages and Verbal Performance

Visual Messages or signals overpower any other form of transmission of meaning primarily because the time they take to reach the audience is less, and the colors, positioning, and movement can drastically change the

meaning of the narrative entirely. The basic components of meaning making through visual media include “information, communication, visual communication”, and the audience (Plenkovic 2020). While visual messages have scope for contradicting meanings to exist, verbal performances are revolutionary in their own sense. The idea of scriptocentricism is derived from the Western imperialism, wherein they largely focused on “conscious, creative, critical, contrapuntal responses to the imperialist project that exceeded the verbal”, while simultaneously denying any power to meanings excavated from other spaces of agency and struggle, like the visual or verbal performances (Conquergood 2002).

Emi Mahmoud uses a combination of intonations and body language in her performative piece *How to Translate a Joke*, wherein for the first half she has a smile on her face, and her tone is joyous, even flirtatious while telling the joke. However, she shifts her tone to a more serious one once she calls for attention to how “we call women cows in every language,” and beyond that her tone remains resentful, scared and loud to emphasize on the depth of the narrative. She uses more hand gestures, and she points more fingers in the latter half of the poem, while simultaneously increasing the pace of her performance to draw attention to the urgentness of the issue. She repeats a phrase “she literally dies” towards the end of the poem, and while in the beginning she is coy and shy while saying it suggesting there is a connotative meaning associated to the words, towards the end she says it with a straight face and fear in her tone, making sure the audience knows that there is no symbolic meaning attached to the phrase, instead it means exactly what she says. The verbal performance challenges misogynoir through manipulation of language, voice and gestures of the poet.

In *For Anyone who Feels Alone Out There*, Emi Mahmoud uses more visual messages than she does in any other poem, wherein through the first half of the poem, the poem is fast paced, and filled with a lot of hand gestures. The body language, tone and intonations suggest a lot of resentment towards the condition of immigrants in America, specifically people of color who are othered, legally targeted, and committed hate crimes against. She uses the same anger to narrate her story, acting every line through her hands until she asks, “if you hate it so much, then why are you here?” and the shift in tone is so sudden, that it suggests being interrupted during a rant. After asking the question, she shifts back to her train of thought, but in a suggestive and answering tone, and towards the end when she is talking to the President of America in her poem, she steps back from the mic while saying “Mr. President.” She uses a tone that is begging for answers, one that feels helpless to the audience. The idea of this poem is to narrate

the story of the margin; while the population believes the narrative of the state about refugees and immigrants in America, Mahmoud uses her verbal performance and visual messages to draw attention to the counter narrative that offers a reiteration of the fear and exclusion that people of color live in.

Safia Elhillo's narration in *Self Portrait of a Yellow Dress* is nostalgic, and calm; her tone remains almost constant with rising intonations around the words “die”, “dead in the grounds”, “missing fathers”, “funerals” and words that call for a collective attention from the American listeners to empathize with the Sudanese diaspora in the country. The visual messages and verbal performance in this specific poem bring the audience's attention towards the interplay between text and context, between the script and performance, thereby denying the written word the entire responsibility of meaning making. While she suggests that she is wearing a yellow dress within her poem unlike a black one that she would rather do for a funeral, she is seen wearing a black dress for the performance after all, implying that it is in fact a funeral. The shots have been taken from the diagonal south, bringing her side profile to the front of the screen while the light falls on her hair like sunshine. This holds importance with reference to her poem where she associates yellow with laughter and sunshine, making her the subject of both pain and happiness, making her as human a subject as possible, which contradicts another one of her statements where she calls herself a hole left behind by her ancestors.

In another one of her poems, Safia Elhillo talks of leaving a country, a culture and a language behind and adapting into a new one, but because she is both Sudanese and American, she often forgets the English words for some Sudanese words and vice versa. Throughout the performance, there are there different camera angles used upon her; in the first angle, she is placed the left of the screen, and the rule of two thirds is applied in the visual medium wherein the subject is understood through the absence in the two thirds of the screen, the second angle is a close up which is used for more serious lines like “Safia, Atlantic got your tongue”, or “your blue American passports”, suggesting a distance between the subject and both of the countries she identifies with, and the third shot is the camera zooming in on Safia while she talks about crossing the ocean for safety. When she says the word “safety”, the camera is so far away that she seems really tiny and alone on a huge stage, creating a sense of helplessness, and seriousness in the narrative.

The verbal performances in spoken word poetry bring forward the voices of the oppressed class, and that is not just to narrate their isolated experiences, but to ask for

justice by asking for empathy towards their situation. While written texts offer a collective narrative of a community, the verbal and visual performances can be specific to one person, that is the person who is performing, and the narrative has no moral obligation to be performed in an academic language to be taken seriously. These hybrid spaces that are responsible for creating cultural meanings for the colonizer and the colonized, are accompanied with the preconceived notion that all cultures, races and ethnicities are pure to begin with, and only with hybridization do they fuse with another culture. However, the spoken word artists in question, perform a conflicting ground, wherein they previously do not belong to one culture alone, and the very act of entering this liminal space is an act of decolonization for them, not from the colonizer's but all cultures they let grow inside themselves. This third space exists only for their isolated individual experiences that are derived from the fusion of both cultures, and yet are not confined to any one in particular.

4.2 Orature and Performative Ethnography

The oral tradition is central to the conceptualization of spoken word poetry, and the reason why orature, that was primarily used to transmit subjugated knowledge or the 'other' knowledge, gained momentum is because it became the articulation of a consciousness that belonged to the colonized sections of the world. As a way to deny the Western means to restore rich cultural histories, and reclaim the socio political narratives in the present, the world sensed a need to "shift from informative to performative ethnography," wherein the colonizer's language was localized through the embodiment of silences, body language and gestures in the verbal performances (Conquergood 2002). Garifuna people differentiated between the intellectual and the others through their choice of words they used to refer to them; gapencillitin for 'people with pencil,' and mapencillitin for 'people without pencil,' wherein pencil is symbolic to the political economy of knowledge, literacy and in turn, power (Conquergood 2002). Orature was not only looked down upon but any information transmitted verbally was discredited by the socially privileged people, however people from the margins used this form of performative art to destabilize power structures and bring their cultures towards the center.

Safia Elhillo's performative ethnography is evident in her spoken word poem *Self Portrait with a Yellow Dress*, wherein her words and her performance have contradictory meaning. She claims to be "housed in a body that's black," and she later mentions that "black is for funerals," and while she is dressed in black for her performance, she states that "today I do not dress for a funeral." If one were to read her poem in the printed form,

the irony of the situation would have very well been missed. The contradiction between orature and performance becomes clearer once she states that she is in fact wearing a yellow dress, which radiates happiness and laughter. However, neither is she laughing, or even smiling during her elocution, nor is she dressed in the warm shade of yellow. The reason why she chose a black costume becomes coherent once she talks about her ancestors leaving behind holes in the shapes of black girls and black boys, a culture that exists primarily through absence and the ghosts of what once was. Safia says "today this is my country," insinuating a cultural and transnational shift in paradigm, because the country in question has not always belonged to people of color, and while people like Safia can claim it in the present, they can not afford to escape the burden of what socio-political discriminations their ancestors have had to face.

Safia Elhillo uses both Arabic and English language in *To Make Use of Water*, and through a bilingual narrativization, she performs various ethnic identities and creates a hybrid space for the fusion of the two. Her orature implies a lack of belonging to either of the countries because in various lines she is caught claiming "I want to go home", suggesting she in a exile from her countries because of transnational borders, and "your blue American passports", insinuating that Americans are not her people, with the second person use of 'your' she distances herself from the rest of the population, creating a cultural exile from the land she is living on. Migration results in exile, in the literal and metaphorical sense, wherein the migrants can possibly not escape cultural alienation from either of the countries, making the migrant an exile at home and abroad (Guerrero-Strachan 2005). The inability to recall translations for words she knows in one language, although common for bilinguals, makes her feel distant from both the American and the Sudanese culture, making her a site for a liminal space to exist and manifest.

Emi Mahmoud uses similar references to being the carrier of the third space within her in her poem *For Anyone who Feels Alone out There*. When she talks about Sudan as her homeland, she claims to remember it only through photographs and while she feels alone in America, Sudan is a land of exile for her too. She claims to have escaped genocide to be gunned down in her own house in America for being a person of color, and through these contextual references to the American culture, she performs her racial, religion and gender identity of being a Black muslim woman. The very image of being gunned down in their own home, and families being documented is a synecdoche to their larger identity of being a person of color. These images strike the audience because racist hate crimes are exceptionally common in America, and have been so for the past century. It is nothing less than an irony that people

travel to America for safety when Mahmoud claims even the dead can not leave the country, making it a prison for the migrants. She also narrates her entire poem in the English language which she states is forced to her and other people who have migrated to America in search of safety, and found nothing but more oppression than what they were trying to escape. When she performs in the English language, she is also performing her identity of an American resident, who seems to belong to the country in the larger context of census, if not anything else.

In another one of her poems, Emi Mahmoud uses the notion of borders to emphasize on violence being recognized as a third world problem while it, like humor and laughter, transcends all borders. Not only that humor also paves way for violence to form roots in all places irrespective of their status as a first, second or third world country, and while violence against women becomes a familiar sight, humor leaves hardly any space for victims. She performs her gender in a way where she is dressed in fear, resentment and betrayal from all ways that men find funny, and are called out for being offensive when they are downright dangerous. The four women in the joke Emi Mahmoud mentions do not utter a single word, and on the contrary Mahmoud has a stage to use her voice to bring their narrative to an audience, thereby making her verbal performance a site of change and hope for women who are subjected to violence and can not afford to challenge the patriarchal institutions of crime around them.

While written text allows for a limited number of meanings to be extracted, orature and visual performances add layers of meaning through the camera angles, costumes, intonations, silences, body language along with the primary narrative. Anthropology categorizes the Western as the home culture and creates the other in the original culture of the poets in question, and performance theories similarly create a hierarchy between the written and the verbal text, wherein credibility is only assigned to written texts, thereby allowing for the Western culture to flourish over traditional art forms and the 'othered' knowledge (Conquergood 2002). Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo create a sense of security and credibility in their narratives by making them as personal as possible, and by basing their narrative on emotional value derived by actual incidents instead of relying entirely on facts. While facts can be debated upon, their emotions are so personal to them, that the audience can acknowledge, empathize and relate to them but can not possibly vouch for their lack of authenticity.

V. CONCLUSION

Hip hop, in the current political scenario, is more than an academic discipline and a site for political discourse. It is a

lifestyle, a choice of living that substantiates the lives of the people from the marginalized communities by offering them a voice, a stage and medium created for revolution and change, all at a time when the impact of the Western culture was at its peak. Spoken Word poetry is a subgenre within one of the genres of hip hop, emerging; and the primary idea of spoken word is to produce the colonizer's language in a way that it benefits the performer, and offers the narrative a global platform through digital media. While people like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o discarded the English language to produce academic papers and research to destabilize the power structures, it is impossible to deny that the English language has in fact become a global phenomenon and a global commodity. English is a language that people in most countries are forced to learn because it is the language of trade, official work and that connects all major powers of the world in terms of nations, and therefore instead of discarding the language because it is the greatest burden of colonization any of the former colonies are carrying, it is necessary to modify the language, and accommodate it in respective native cultures to create a dialogic relationship with the rest of the world, and give the discriminated a voice that will reach both the oppressors, and the oppressed that empathize with the narratives.

The English language is the official site for revolution and change, because it brings all depressed communities together by offering a common language of dissent and a collective voice against the power hierarchies that operate within all discourses. Safia Elhillo and Emi Mahmoud perform their ethnic, gender and racial identities through their language, stage presence, gestures and clothing, and while the paper lays emphasis on how these elements help in the process of decolonization for both, the performer and the audience, the scholarship based on the same has been little to none in the past. While the youth at present consumes content on social media for hours on a daily basis, it is hardly impossible to neglect the impact these spoken word poems have on the socio-cultural and political spaces of the world. Even though the paper helps deconstruct various motifs, images and the language used to decolonize, it is pertinent to note that digital access is only available to the privileged section of the population, therefore even though the narratives of the margins are brought to the center of discourse, the narratives do not necessarily reach the margins, and that offers a scope for future research in topics discussed in the paper.

That being said, accessibility is not the only concern from the peripheries, because the arena of discourse is made by three concentric circles; the center-most circle is made up by the colonized who study English as a first language, the second circle consists of colonies that took up the English language as their second language, and the

outermost circle that makes up the peripheries include countries neither colonized nor involved in colonization, therefore studying English as a foreign language. This third circle does not necessarily rely on English as a necessary language, and therefore the narratives produced in English may or may not reach them, making it exclusive to former colonizers and colonized. Apart from the English language, Safia Elhillo also uses the Arabic language and that becomes almost impossible for the people in the third circle to understand because if they are neither acquainted with English nor Arabic, the narrative becomes alien to them.

Another limitation of the paper includes the agency and representation of the poets considering the researcher is not Black, not Muslim, not from Sudan or America and therefore, can only present as outsider's idea of what spoken word poetry does for the poets in question. However, both Safia Elhillo and Emi Mahmoud use Sudan as a reflection of all third world countries, and their narratives revolve around the agency and struggles of women in these countries, which the researcher relates to and understands personally. Spoken word poetry offers a voice to the unheard voices around the world, and therefore many a times it becomes absolutely impossible to relate to those narratives, but the major idea of Hip Hop is not for people to relate or understand, it is the act of knowing. These narratives were unheard because the state or the authorities never let them seem consequential, and never let their presence be felt, however, to see or hear these narratives is validating the experiences people have gone through. The act of seeing validates presence, and acknowledges a different lifestyle that may be once seen through the lens of pity, but once narrativized by someone from the community, it becomes one of oppression. The idea is to not just sympathize with what many communities went through, it is to question systemic forms of oppression and look at these performers as people like themselves, instilling the fear that if there is not much difference between the performer and the audience, what makes the audience so immune to oppression. It is a way to root questions in the minds of the audience, sow the seeds of imagination and revolt within the minds of communities that may have once discriminated against other communities.

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