Fractured Borders and Diasporic Memory in Safia Elhillo's *The January Children*

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Abstract This paper examines the convergence of diasporic identity and postcolonial memory in Safia Elhillo's *The January Children*. This poetry collection navigates the emotional and linguistic dislocation of Sudanese identity in transnational contexts. Elhillo interrogates the legacies of colonial rule and forced migration through poetic strategies that foreground the instability of language, the fluidity of belonging, and the persistent search for a sense of home. Drawing on postcolonial and memory studies, the analysis highlights how the poet disrupts dominant cultural narratives through fragmented voices, multilingual expression, and autobiographical elements. Linguistic alienation emerges as both symptom and resistance, reflecting the poet's negotiation of Arabic and English as sites of identity formation and erasure. The paper argues that Elhillo's work constructs a poetics of fractured belonging that challenges fixed notions of self, nation, and history. Her verse becomes a space where memory is neither linear nor complete, but iterative and haunted by loss. By foregrounding affective dissonance and cultural hybridity, *The January Children* expands the discourse on diasporic memory, offering critical insights into the politics of voice, language, and exile.

Keywords Diaspora; postcolonial memory; linguistic alienation; fractured belonging; Sudanese poetry

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Introduction

Sudan's colonial and postcolonial history is marked by a complex entanglement of conquest, cultural disruption, and fragmented national identity. Being a former Anglo-Egyptian colony, Sudan was shaped by a dual imperial project that not only created administrative divisions but also left enduring mental and linguistic scars (Toprak Sakiz 32). Intricately linked to its colonial past, the country's postcolonial trajectory has been troubled with internal conflict, border disputes, and civil war that repeatedly displace people and disrupt the fabric of national belonging (Elmukashfi 14). During these disruptions, language has been central in forming and excluding identity. In a postcolonial context where Arabic serves as a unifying medium while English bears the spectral imprint of colonial modernity, language has also operated as a tool of Arabisation, marginalising non-Arab ethnicities. These dynamics have fragmented subsequent identity formations, as the violence of colonial rule and the exclusivist politics of postcolonial nationalism have produced a cultural landscape in which belonging is often contested and conditional (Mbembe 145).

Diasporic trauma, therefore, arises both from the physical act of migration as well as that of the psychic dislocation that follows it (Anake et al 3). Diasporic trauma includes the psychological and emotional effects of forced or voluntary displacement from a homeland, as the experience of having to create a solid identity in unfamiliar terrain exacerbates it (Sahakian 23). For diasporic subjects, home is

often an imagined or unattainable space, reimagined through memory, nostalgia, and language (Baubock, Rainer & Thomas Faist 20). Cultural exile, a state in which people are alienated from both their place and the cultural, linguistic, and affective frameworks that once held them together, compounds this dislocation (Claassen 88). Cultural exile, however, interrupts the continuity of self and community, and the processes of identity formation are always contradictory and always marked by loss. They are shared in literature through fragmented narratives, altered linguistic registries, and a mood that pervades the narrative, one of wanting to return to a place now absent from memory (Onwuka, Uba & Fortress 13).

The January Children by Safia Elhillo is located on the exact anthemic crux of historical rupture and diasporic longing. As a Sudanese American poet, Elhillo writes from a place of cultural displacement and its poetics, which question both national and diasporic essentialism. Her poetry navigates the registers of Arabic and English, as well as the realms of memory and forgetting, presence and absence. It provokes a conversation on how linguistic alienation and postcolonial memory shape the contours of experiences of identity and belonging for all those who live at the nation's margins. Through reclaiming poetic voice as a form of cultural resistance and historical testimony, Elhillo creates a poetic work of art that critically assesses history. Her work decommunalizes a previously assumed understanding of 'belonging' in a postcolonial and transnational world for those who are not easily defined by static definitions of geographical and linguistic borders.

From the dual lenses of diaspora theory and trauma studies, *The January Children* can be thought of as an intersection of diasporic identity and postcolonial memory. Paul Gilroy's idea of the Black Atlantic is an excellent model for thinking about diaspora, not as a lack of geographical rootedness. Palmer (28) has defined diaspora as a cultural and political formation based upon histories of slavery, colonialism and migrations forced by masters. Rootedness does not define it, but rather movement, hybridity, and alternative affiliations that transcend borders (Ilogho et al 32). Diasporic identity, in this view, is not a settled, origin-based identity, but rather an ongoing narrative of living with memory and cultural inheritance, as well as lived dislocation. Elhillo's poetry conveys a sense of transnational belonging that is devoid of a stable narrative of homeland. Whereas her work works between linguistic, geographical, and emotional spaces to produce a voice as concatenated as it is connected.

In contrast, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory provides an understanding of how diasporic memory works with rupture and belatedness. Trauma, according to Trigg, is not a story about past suffering, but an unclaimed experience which returns in

fragments, sometimes in the form of repetition, sometimes as disorientation (87). However, traumatic memory resists a linear time and logical coherence; it comes at us in its psychic disruption. Elhillo's poetry enacts this belated return through the use of silence, temporal shifts, and elliptical language. Beyond the individual trauma that she explores, she also stresses the collective traumatic aspects of this condition of diasporic severance from home, land, language and cultural certainty. The fragmented syntax and unrelinquished narratives in the poet's poems effectively embody the very nature of diasporic trauma, which inherently resists the representation of histories that remain unspoken and unresolved.

Given the central role that language plays in postcolonial identity formation, an understanding of Elhillo's work is irreducible from that of the aesthetic and political stakes of language. Tondi and Fredericks regard colonial languages as instrumental to cultural domination, determined through consciousness conditioning and dislodging indigenous peoples from their own epistemologies (20). The call for decolonisation of language is important in highlighting the role of linguistics in postcolonial literature. This tension is embodied by Elhillo, who writes in English while employing code-switching and transliteration to incorporate Arabic. Between the colonial language of English and the culturally inherited, but politically fraught language of Arabic, her poetry navigates. As such, this linguistic duality is not unique to her personal history but rather illustrates the dilemma faced by postcolonial subjects in delineating their identity through the languages of oppression and heritage.

This line of discussion draws on Gayatri Spivak's foundational argument in "Can the Subaltern Speak?", where she shows how colonial and postcolonial systems restrict the capacity of marginalised subjects to be heard within dominant discourses. Building on Spivak's framework, Zecchini examines how these constraints continue to operate in Dalit literatures and broader postcolonial contexts, noting how power structures shape who is recognised as a speaking subject (65). In this study, Spivak provides the primary theoretical basis for understanding silencing. At the same time, Zecchini's work serves as a secondary commentary that helps extend Spivak's insights to broader debates on voice and representation. Elhillo's poetry reflects this struggle for recognition, as the speaker attempts to articulate a diasporic voice that transcends both Arabic and English linguistic worlds (69).

Against this background, this study asks two central questions that guide the analysis. First, how does *The January Children* construct a poetics of fractured belonging that differs from established readings of diaspora poetry built on return, coherence, or cultural restoration? Second, to what extent does Elhillo's use of

codeswitching, transliteration, and fragmentary form operate as a distinctive mode of diasporic archival practice that preserves memory through disruption rather than synthesis? These questions help sharpen the argument that Elhillo does more than represent displacement. She offers a model of diasporic memory that emphasises fragmentation, partial recall, and linguistic tension as generative rather than defective. The paper, therefore, positions *The January Children* as an important intervention in current discussions of diaspora, language, and memory by shifting attention from idealised return to the work of assembling an archive from scattered cultural traces. This framing highlights the article's contribution to debates on postcolonial identity by demonstrating how Elhillo reimagines belonging through aesthetic strategies that foreground the value of incompleteness in the construction of diasporic history.

Language, Codeswitching and the Poetics of Fracture

Linguistic dislocation is staged as a form of poetics and a living manifestation of diasporic trauma in *The January Children*. The collection presents a speaking voice that moves between Arabic and English, creating a style shaped by this dual positioning. The poems convey a sense of being suspended between linguistic worlds, which parallels the psychological and cultural uncertainty that often accompanies diasporic identity. This tension is bilingual, not an embellishment of style: it is a deliberate fracturing of belonging. At once a source of intimacy and estrangement, Arabic, traditionally the language of family, heritage, and spiritual memory, shifts into a location of transgression. This is a distinctly modern limitation of language in accounting for the vocabulary of diasporic existence, in the gaps left by the loss of the mother tongue and the anglicisation of the diaspora. Although it can articulate extremely complex emotional and political experiences, English is burdened by the imposition of colonialism and cultural displacement. Neither of these linguistic terrains is a complete home for the speaker to navigate.

Safia Elhillo's *The January Children* presents language as a volatile space in which selfhood is constantly shaped, unsettled, and rebuilt. In "*Self Portrait with No Flag*," the visual field of the poem is part of its meaning. The lines descend in short units, creating a falling movement on the page, and the consistent use of lowercase removes the authority usually attached to personal or national identifiers. Her choice of irregular spacing produces pauses that interrupt the reader's flow, mirroring the speaker's uneasy relationship with inherited vocabulary. When the speaker says, "i do not know the Arabic for / diaspora / or / safe space / or / depression" (Elhillo, 12) Elhillo turns poetic form into a method for reclaiming language as a space),

the fractured lineation makes each term appear isolated, like items in a list of emotional experiences that cannot be carried into her ancestral tongue. The spacing carves visual gaps that echo the linguistic gaps she confronts. This structure enacts fragmentation rather than simply describing it.

Elhillo's use of Arabic within Latin script intensifies this experience. The Arabic phrases appear inside English stanzas in ways that disrupt the rhythm of the poem. These intrusions are not decorative bilingual gestures. They break the sound pattern, interrupt the reader's expectations, and force a shift in attention. Because they carry sonic textures that English cannot reproduce, their appearance unsettles the poem's tone. They remind the reader that the speaker's voice is never entirely at home in either language. The shifts between Arabic phrases and English expressions produce a kind of stutter in the poem's rhythm, reflecting a self that speaks through multiple cultural memories but cannot merge them into a smooth discourse.

This tension becomes even more pronounced when examined through the lens of linguistic consciousness. Phyak's idea that language holds culture and consciousness helps illuminate why the absence of equivalents for "diaspora" or "depression" is not a minor lexical inconvenience (327). These missing words indicate the absence of cultural frameworks that shape the speaker's emotional life. Arabic here carries memory and ancestry, yet it cannot encompass the psychological vocabulary required for a diasporic experience. English provides a vocabulary of modern identity, mental health, and migration, but cannot reproduce the cultural resonance of the speaker's origins. The poem, therefore, stages a situation where neither language is sufficient. Identity becomes an ongoing negotiation, shaped by conflicts that are linguistic, historical, and emotional in nature.

This dynamic continues across *The January Children*. Elhillo turns codeswitching into a poetic strategy that enacts the instability of diasporic life. Her shifts between Arabic and English rarely feel seamless. Instead, they produce tension. The reader moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and from clarity to opacity, in quick succession. This movement replicates the speaker's inner condition, where memories tied to one language collide with lived realities expressed in another. The transliterated Arabic phrases stand at the border of comprehension for many readers, creating a sensation of partial understanding. That sensation is vital because it mirrors the speaker's own partial belonging. The poems show that the hybrid speaker does not simply celebrate linguistic mixture. She experiences it as a space where meanings remain unsettled, and where identity is both restored and fractured.

The silence between lines also carries meaning. Many of Elhillo's poems use

short lines, wide spacing, or isolated words. These choices mirror the way traumatic memory emerges in pieces rather than in a smooth narrative. The poems resist linear progression. Instead, they move through images, sounds, and fragments of language that return and vanish in irregular patterns. This structure echoes the experience of displacement, where one's sense of home, body, and language is continually interrupted. The poems provide no clear resolutions. Their power lies in their refusal of closure. Through this form, Elhillo renders trauma as a lived condition that shapes voice, rhythm, and memory.

In *"Self Portrait with No Flag*", this refusal reaches a powerful expression. The poem's voice rejects the stabilising symbol of a national flag. However, the rejection is not declared in abstract terms. It is performed through the poem's texture. The repeated use of "I" without capitalisation weakens the conventional authority of the speaking self. It positions the speaker as someone who cannot anchor identity in the usual markers of nationality. Pronouns shift in subtle ways, creating distance between the self that speaks and the self being described. The address turns inward and outward in alternating movements, further destabilising the sense of a fixed identity. The poem enacts statelessness by shaping the page in ways that resist unity.

By refusing to conform to the expectation of linguistic coherence, Elhillo asserts the legitimacy of a voice that holds multiple histories simultaneously. This voice is built through tension, conflict, and stylistic fragmentation. Rather than smoothing over these fractures, the poems highlight them as the conditions through which new possibilities for identity can be formed. The fragments, silences, and bilingual shifts shape a record of selfhood that remains faithful to the ruptures of diasporic experience. Her refusal of linguistic coherence becomes part of her aesthetic approach. The poems speak in a voice that carries multiple histories simultaneously, a voice shaped by tension, conflict, and stylistic fracture. Instead of smoothing over these breaks, the poems treat them as openings where new forms of identity can take shape.

This fractured position becomes a creative site rather than a limitation. Elhillo does not attempt to ease the tension between English and Arabic. She heightens it. Her work pushes the two languages into collision, and that collision generates new poetic possibilities. The insertion of untranslated Arabic within mainly English poems introduces semantic uncertainty and a sound pattern unfamiliar to readers not fluent in Arabic. These moments unsettle the dominance of English and interrupt the poem's fluency. Each shift requires readers to confront linguistic differences directly. This is a purposeful refusal of assimilation, a deliberate choice that utilises code-switching as a form of resistance. The poems make visible the presence of a cultural

world that cannot be absorbed into English without loss.

This friction between languages echoes what Bhabha describes as a third space, a site where meanings are revised, transformed, or rearticulated through cultural encounter. Elhillo's bilingual poetics create such a space (12). The tension is not treated as a source of confusion. It becomes a generative condition. Her poems do not obey the expectation that the speaker must choose one language over the other, or one identity at the expense of another. They move within the liminal space in between. The poetic voice that emerges is both fractured and complete, rooted in heritage yet unmoored in geography, searching and steady at the same time. Through this voice, Elhillo demonstrates that the instability of language can become a form of agency, a way of shaping identity in the midst of displacement.

Furthermore, whilst Elhillo's code-switching needs to be understood as an aesthetic technique or linguistic novelty, it cannot be. At a broader level, it fits into a framework of memory work and cultural reclamation. Her presence permeates the entire collection, particularly in her recurring references to Abdelhalim Hafez. Introducing Hafez as a cultural touchstone, Elhillo does not present him as a distant celebrity but as an intimate presence carried in the emotional memory of the speaker. This relationship becomes most evident in a poem like "Asmarani," where Hafez's influence is directly apparent in the poem's structure. The name "Hafez" recurs throughout the poem, often placed at the end of a line or isolated within a brief phrase. This repeated invocation operates like a refrain in a song. Each return of his name calls back the mood of his music, creating an echo that shapes the rhythm of the poem. The line "ya asmar ya asmarani," borrowed from the popular love song associated with Hafez, appears and reappears with small shifts. It works the way a chorus does, grounding the poem in a sonic memory that predates the speaker's displacement.

The poem also borrows the looping cadence of a song. Lines repeat with slight variations in tone or emphasis, imitating the way musical phrases cycle back with emotional intensification. This musical repetition enables the poem to convey conflicting feelings simultaneously: a desire for home, the weight of nostalgia, and the ache of distance. The structure creates a rhythm that sways between presence and absence, much like the emotional register of Hafez's performances. These musical elements serve a deeper purpose. They create a space where the speaker can enter into an imagined conversation with Hafez. The voice sometimes slips into direct address, speaking to him as if he were a confidant rather than a historical figure. This moment of address softens the boundary between past and present, as well as between private memory and collective cultural heritage. Hafez becomes

a bridge to a linguistic and emotional world the speaker feels cut off from. His presence in the poem offers a kind of surrogate intimacy, a way to touch the cultural ground that displacement has rendered distant.

In Elhillo's case, the engagement with Arabic and English is not only representative of the reality of her diasporic experience, but it is also an act of anti-hegemonic reclamation of linguistic agency. By disrupting the reader's expectations and resisting linguistic transparency, she asserts the legitimacy of a hybrid identity that refuses to conform to the logic of monolingual nationalism or colonial linguistic hierarchies. Although Elhillo writes primarily in English, she decolonises her poetic practice through rhythm, phonetic variation, and the unapologetic presence of Arabic. Her refusal to translate some of these words into English also validates the importance of these words within their original cultural context, asking the reader to resist the process of 'eating without chewing' as they engage with something different.

Elhillo's poems turn linguistic hybridity into a reclamation act in their poetry. Code-switching is now a conscious, culturally charged aesthetic, rather than a symptom of cultural fragmentation. It allows her to create a voice which speaks of loss without giving up on silence. Elhillo's poetics of cultural resilience comprises bilingual layering, intertextual reference, and formal innovation. Her work explores the truth of the lives of many diasporic people who are caught between languages and cannot fully inhabit either one. However, instead of conceiving of this space as a void, Elhillo gives it sound, memory, and meaning. In this way, she asserts that fragmented language can still convey wholeness and that poetic hybridity may provide a strong platform for healing and historical continuity.

Nostalgia, Mourning and the Unreachable Homeland

In *The January Children*, Safia Elhillo constructs Sudan not as a fixed geographic reality but as a shifting emotional and mythic space, shaped by memory, longing, and displacement. Rather than offering a concrete portrayal of the homeland, her poetry foregrounds a Sudan that exists primarily in fragments, constructed from ancestral stories, family photographs, popular culture, and inherited sorrow. The homeland emerges not as a site of return but as a conceptual terrain that remains just out of reach. In the poem "*The January Children*," the speaker says, "when I say home / I mean a country that / no longer exists" (Elhillo, 19). The three-line structure is deliberately broken into short, pared-down units that slow the reader's movement and create a sense of hesitation. Each line carries only a fragment of the thought, and the pause produced by the phrase break holds the weight of loss in the

space between lines. The poem returns to the word "home," but the minimalism surrounding it strips the term of certainty. Its placement at the beginning of the line isolates it visually and suggests both longing and distance. The sparse layout reinforces the idea that home is no longer a stable point. It is not only unreachable in a geographical sense but also unsettled in time and emotion, shaped by historical shifts that have erased the country the speaker remembers. Through these choices, the poem enacts the impossibility of return and turns the page itself into a field of disappearance.

This treatment of homeland aligns with the theorisation of diaspora as a space of cultural recombination, not of origin. For Topraz Sakiz (23), diasporic identities are not defined by essential ties to a homeland but by the continuous negotiation of cultural memory, movement, and transformation. Elhillo's Sudan is not the nationalist construct celebrated in textbooks or maps. It is a place shaped by what remains and by what has been lost. Her poetry rejects nostalgic idealisation and instead portrays longing as a complicated, often painful engagement with partial memory and cultural alienation. The speaker does not merely mourn an unreachable place. She mourns the inability to fully know that place, to enter it without the distortions of time, distance, and trauma.

Through the poet's intertextual and archival references to Abdelhalim Hafez and other cultural icons whose legacies span Sudanese and Arab diasporans of various generations, the poet reinforces this ambivalence. The speaker can therefore connect with an idea of Sudan beyond the present, and these figures are used as emotional anchors for that. These references themselves remind the speaker, however, of what has been changed or has disappeared. Memories of the homeland become a collage of incomplete memories, cultural echoes and imaginative reconstruction. Formally, the poems enact a collage-like movement, looping between images and themes with slight shifts each time. This repetition does not settle the speaker's feelings. It reinforces a sense of uncertainty and recurrence. A clear example appears in the poem "Passport," where the speaker repeats variations of the phrase "I carry my country" across several lines. The line reappears with different qualifiers, including "I carry my country in my name," "I carry my country in my mouth," and "I carry my country in my papers." Each return shifts the focus from identity documents to voice and then to the intimate space of the body. These repeated images of the passport, the name, and the mouth create a cycle in which identity is neither fully claimed nor fully released. Instead, the images circle back, refusing closure.

This looping pattern mirrors the movement of trauma, as Banhazi (35)

notes, traumatic memory does not move in a straight line. It recurs in uneven and involuntary ways, resurfacing as disruption. Elhillo's lines capture this process. The repeated references to borders, papers, and the body echo like a refrain that keeps returning even when the speaker tries to speak beyond it. The memory of homeland appears through these rhythmic repetitions, not as a stable recollection but as a repeated disturbance. The poem does not organise these moments into a resolved narrative. It lets them return in fragments, echoing the unpredictable ways displacement shapes consciousness.

Thus, the loss Elhillo articulates is both spatial and temporal, as well as narrative. There is no way to retrieve the past, just as there is no way to retrieve one's homeland. It is this: the conceptual instability that makes her poetry affective. Instead of inhabited, the homeland is imagined; instead of being reclaimed, it is mourned. Still, this imagined Sudan remains important. It opens as a space for the poet to think diasporic dislocation, assert cultural memory, and refuse forgetting. In *The January Children*, nostalgia is not destiny, and one need not hunker into a perfect past. Exile is a mode of poetic engagement that underscores the emotional and historical complexity of the exile experience.

An unrequited grief for a cohesive self, fragmented by migration, lost language, and cultural dislocation, constitutes the emotional and structural centre of Safia Elhillo's *The January Children*. This gives the speaker a subjectivity fractured by dissonance between cultural expectations and personal experience lived. Instead of telling a unified or redemptive narrative of identity, Elhillo builds a lyrical space that not only acknowledges loss but performs such loss aesthetically. Her work is not merely a mourning of lost people or places. However, it also extends to more abstract forms of absence, such as the loss of linguistic fluency, national belonging, and stable identity categories. The question for feminism is one of how these losses are not simply emotions but epistemology. The impossibility of reconciling multiple, often contradictory, affiliations within the categories of a coherent self-concept is reflected.

In the poem "Application for Asylum," the speaker reflects, "the homeland / named me / refugee / before I could pronounce it" (Elhillo, 27). This line captures the early imposition of political identity, where the speaker is inscribed into a discourse of displacement before she has the linguistic capacity to name it. The term "refugee" arrives not through personal reflection but as a label assigned by national and institutional frameworks. This preemptive categorisation reveals a traumatic condition in which the subject is denied the opportunity to define herself. She mourns a self that might have been formed through continuity and cultural

rootedness, but that is instead constructed within the fractures of exile. The sense of loss Elhillo explores is therefore both anticipatory and retrospective. It is the mourning of a self that never had the chance to become whole.

The form of Elhillo's poetry mirrors the speaker's internal fragmentation, and this is especially visible in a poem like "asmarani," where spacing becomes part of the emotional logic of the text. The lines drift across the page in uneven stretches, leaving wide pockets of white space. These blank areas work like withheld speech. They slow the reader's rhythm and create the sense that the poem is thinking its way through memory rather than presenting a finished account. In one sequence, a single word sits alone on the far right side of the page while the rest of the line remains empty. That distance gives the word an isolated presence, as if it stands apart from the rest of the speaker's linguistic world. The spacing marks a hesitation that feels almost physical, a pause shaped by emotion rather than grammar.

This arrangement does more than ornament the poem. It recreates the experience of a fractured identity. The absence of punctuation allows thoughts to spill out in uneven breath patterns, and the abrupt line breaks sever ideas before they can settle. Solinski (2022) explains that trauma communicates through fragments and delays rather than clear recollection. Elhillo's form demonstrates this principle. The speaker's voice appears in scattered pieces, stretched across silences, with meaning emerging in the gaps as much as in the printed words. The spacing turns the page into a field of broken memory, where the movement between lines reflects a consciousness interrupted by history, displacement, and the strain of what cannot be spoken directly.

Zhang provides a helpful framework to understand the emotional texture of Elhillo's verse (132). He differentiates mourning, which permits subjects to work through trauma and progress toward reintegration, from melancholia, a pathological attachment to loss that prevents recovery.' Elhillo's poetry resides somewhere between two places. Her poems do not try to close a wound. They do not work out the tension between past and present, self and other, home and exile. Instead, they carry these tensions in suspension, giving one the space to speak to the pain of being dislocated without being pacified. In this sense, the poetry does not tell the story of the cure, but instead is a lyrical account of irredeemable loss. Her polyphonic poetic voice further deepens the complexity of her speaker. The poems consistently shift between allusions to collective memory and historical references, to intertextual dialogue, and to personal pronouns. The multiplicity destabilises the supposition of a singular, stable self. Instead, their influence and absences meld to create the speaker. Sometimes she speaks as a displaced individual herself. At

other times, however, her voice becomes interwoven with other diasporic subjects, popular cultural figures or examples of colonisation and migration. This suggests that identity in *The January Children* is not possessed; rather, it is inhabited. It is mediated through inherited trauma, cultural silence, and the necessity of continuous reconstruction.

The speaker is both the subject and the object of mourning. She is the one who mourns, but also the one who is mourned. The self she evokes is not static or cohesive, but one that must be remembered and reassembled through language. The poetic act becomes one of invocation, where each poem functions like a ritual for recalling fragments of a self that remains elusive. These acts of mourning do not signify narrative failure. Instead, they assert the poet's refusal to conform to fixed models of identity, whether national, diasporic, or gendered. Elhillo resists the pressure to synthesise her identity into a digestible form. Her poetry insists on the validity of contradiction, silence, and fragmentation as modes of existence. In foregrounding mourning as a central affective and structural element, Elhillo positions poetry as a space of both witness and resistance. Her work does not aim to offer comfort or resolution. Instead, it gives form to the emotional and psychological contours of life shaped by exile and unbelonging. By embracing fragmentation, she challenges dominant narratives that equate coherence with authenticity or stability with truth. In *The January Children*, the fragmented self is not a deficit; rather, it is a means of coping. It is a truthful representation of what it means to live across cultural, linguistic, and historical divides. Through mourning, Elhillo does not seek to recover what has been lost. She seeks to name it, honour it, and allow it to live again in the broken beauty of her verse.

Poetic Form as Transnational Archive

Elhillo's form of poetry also serves as a mnemonic and reconstructive device, extending beyond vocabulary and grammar. Memory, especially among diasporas, is not linear or cohesive. It is broken up, embodied, and made of presence and absence. This instability of memory is reflected in Elhillo's poems. Often, there is little punctuation, disjointed syntax and silence as a meaningful structural component. Formal choices replicate the rhythms of memory, particularly memory that navigates the waters of trauma. A poem like "Application for Asylum" demonstrates how Elhillo utilises silence and disordered syntax as structural tools that shape emotional meaning. The lines move forward with almost no punctuation, which causes thoughts to spill into each other without clear boundaries. This absence of stops creates a breathless tone, as if the speaker is attempting to narrate

a memory that keeps slipping out of grasp. The disjointed syntax reinforces this sensation. Clauses begin but do not complete themselves. Verbs appear without clear subjects. Some phrases are separated from the rest of the line by wide spaces that produce visible gaps in the text. These gaps serve as moments of quiet, where the speaker's voice recedes. The silence is not empty. It holds tension, signalling the pressure of unspoken fears and the difficulty of articulating displacement.

Within these pauses, recurring motifs such as "country," "mother tongue," and "passport" recur in altered forms. Each return carries a slightly different emotional weight. When "passport" surfaces early in the poem, it functions as a simple marker of identity. When it resurfaces later, isolated on its own line, it becomes an emblem of uncertainty, a reminder that documentation cannot secure belonging. The motif of "mother tongue" moves similarly, shifting from a reference to heritage to a site of loss when the speaker notes its fading presence. These repetitions create an echo across the poem, a loop that reflects unresolved emotional states. Instead of building toward clarity, the echoes deepen the sense of fragmentation. The poem revisits the same images from new angles, building a network of memory that resists closure.

The use of form by the poet, furthermore, performs the act of recollection and reconstructs identity. The poetry becomes an archive of belonging through the repetition of names, cultural symbols, and ancestral references. She recovers both English and Arabic as sites of cultural memory by manipulating English and invoking Arabic. The power of Elhillo's poetry to (re)construct language and form to tell its stories communicates that healing is not about achieving resolution, but about articulation. Pain is not rubbed out. It is acknowledged, structured and transformed into something legible instead. The poet does not pretend that her word is restoring what has been lost. Instead, she characterises language as a space where cultural and emotional fragments can be worked into a new pattern without distorting or destroying the complexity and contradictions.

The January Children by Safia Elhillo is more than a collection of poems. It serves as a transnational archive of fragments of Sudanese cultural identity within the broader discourse on displacement, exile, and postcolonial belonging. However, her poetry is about preserving cultural memory, but it concretises that memory in order to understand it through a diasporic experience. Lost languages, forgotten figures, and erased histories are gathered in the poems as they are put together, not as static artefacts of an irretrievable past, but as living testimony to emotional, linguistic, and political survival. Elhillo builds a literary space of the mergers of Exile's residue and Home's echo through this archival poetics.

The act of archiving in Elhillo's work is both aesthetic and ideological. Her

verse serves as a record of personal and collective histories that are often excluded from national narratives. In the absence of institutional platforms for remembering Sudanese diasporic experiences, her poetry serves as a repository of stories, emotions, and images that resist erasure. In poems like "Arabic," the poet mourns the loss of fluency in the mother tongue but also inscribes the emotional reality of this loss into the poem itself. "My parents / tell me I used to speak Arabic / as a baby" (Elhillo, 24) is both a recollection and an archival trace. The poem bears witness to what has been lost while transforming it into a cultural presence through verse.

Rather than seeking to restore a mythic homeland, diasporic texts often create new modes of cultural preservation that acknowledge displacement and hybridity. Elhillo's poetry does not seek purity or origin. It documents disruption and survival. Her references to Abdelhalim Hafez, Sudanese geography, Arabized syntax, and untranslated phrases collectively form a dynamic record of a life lived across borders. The poet archives not a fixed identity but the process of becoming, shaped by memory, loss, and resilience. In this context, Elhillo's work exemplifies a mode of postcolonial cosmopolitanism grounded in mobility, plurality, and ethical responsiveness rather than elite detachment. Her poems do not attempt to fashion a single, fixed identity. Instead, they trace a self shaped by multiple cultural pressures that never entirely settle. This cosmopolitan stance is enacted not only through themes but also through close formal choices, especially the shifting pronoun work that appears repeatedly in poems such as "Self Portrait with No Flag." The poem often begins in a confessional "I," but the voice slides into "you" without warning, transforming the address into a layered conversation. At times, the "you" seems directed at the self. In other moments, it seems to speak to an imagined listener, to a homeland, or even to a version of the self that exists elsewhere. The pronoun movement confuses the boundary between speaker and addressee, reflecting a cosmopolitan identity that is relational rather than contained.

These shifts continue throughout the poem, as the occasional "we" emerges. This "we" forms briefly, never fully defined, before dissolving back into the solitary "I." The effect creates a kind of flicker in the voice. For a moment, the poem imagines a collective belonging, then retreats into the uncertainty of individual displacement. This movement embodies the lived tension of diasporic cosmopolitanism, where identity stretches across multiple communities without fully anchoring in any single one. The transitions between "i," "you," and "we" create a layered voice that speaks from several positions at once. Instead of adopting a single cultural register, the poem employs overlapping ones that interweave and

then drift apart.

The looseness of grammar and the refusal to establish a stable address intensify this multiplicity. Lines often begin mid-thought, as if the voice enters from different angles. The shifting layers of address turn the poem into a meeting ground of selves rather than a monologic statement. This openness allows the work to accommodate multiple audiences, yet it resists complete assimilation into any linguistic or cultural centre. English becomes a site of subversion rather than straightforward communication, shaped by the influence of Arabic rhythm and memory. The result is a poetic cosmopolitanism rooted in relation, responsibility, and memory rather than rootlessness.

Elhillo's engagement with cultural references, ancestral languages, and diasporic emotion strengthens her role as a poetic archivist. Her poems gather fragments of collective history and return to them across temporal and spatial distances. These returns do not reproduce history as a static record. They reveal how the past continues to whisper through the present, insisting on recognition. This archival work is especially vital for communities whose histories have been distorted or erased through colonial and postcolonial violence. In giving form to these overlapping memories through shifting pronouns, layered voices, and multilingual textures, Elhillo shapes a cosmopolitanism that is not abstract. It is lived, affective, and grounded in the ongoing labour of remembering.

The archive is not static in *The January Children*. It breathes and grieves and remembers. Elhillo's poetry proves that to archive in diaspora is to save, in its fractured form, things that previously had meaning, arranging them in a way that might not create the original, but give meaning to the lost. Her work is about creating a space within which culture survives, not wholly, but as an echo, where identity is not confirmed through stability, but instead because it is continuously being reconstructed. Elhillo employs this transnational archive to affirm the power of poetry to lay resistance to erasure and to imagine modes of belonging yet to come, rooted in memory, multiplicity and voice.

Conclusion

Safia Elhillo's *The January Children* is a profound meditation on the psychic and cultural afterlives of colonialism, displacement, and fractured belonging. Through poetic form, linguistic experimentation, and narrative fragmentation, Elhillo articulates the complexities of diasporic identity as lived, felt, and remembered across generations. Her work explores poetry's capacity to contain inherited trauma while resisting easy resolutions to modern alienation. Oscillating between Arabic

and English, silence and invocation, presence and erasure, the collection reckons with histories that defy conventional archives and national borders. For instance, in "Self Portrait with no flag," irregular spacing and line breaks create visual pauses that disrupt the flow, mirroring linguistic gaps and the speaker's fractured self, as seen in isolated terms like "diaspora" or "depression" that lack Arabic equivalents. Similarly, in "asmarani," wide white spaces and uneven line stretches evoke withheld speech, using absence to enact emotional hesitation and traumatic delay. Elhillo's verse thus enacts trauma's return not merely through content, but through textual mechanics, reclaiming disjointed memories and inhabiting the ambivalences of selfhood.

Rather than positioning the poetry as straightforwardly therapeutic. Elhillo's work is better understood as an act of witnessing, naming, and archiving irredeemable loss. It resides in the space of melancholia, as articulated in Zhang's framework, where attachments to absence persist without progression toward reintegration, holding tensions in suspension as a lyrical account of unresolved grief. What might be termed "healing" here is not restorative but ethical: the deliberate articulation of fragmentation and the remembrance of cultural erasures, allowing fragmented voices to resonate without forced coherence. By affirming contemporary diasporic poetry's role in theorising postcolonial subjectivity, documenting silenced histories, and offering aesthetic strategies for enduring dislocation, *The January Children* complicates notions of homeland, blood, family, and language, ultimately refusing redemption in favour of truthful, ongoing negotiation.

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