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CODE MIXING IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB-AMERICAN POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that code mixing which is a key concept of sociolinguistics is highly implemented in contemporary Arab-American poetry as a mechanism of representing identity. It focuses on the innovative use of original codes within the dominant one and examining the poetic expressions that produce mixing in the poetry of contemporary poets with dual identities namely, Suhier Hammad, Safia Elhillo, and Ziad Shlah. This qualitative paper uses textual and analytical methods and is based on concepts such as heteroglossia and hybrid identity. It tackles identity through analysis of selected poems in the collections entitled as *Breaking Poems* (2008), *The January Children* (2022) and *Taqsim* (2006). It contends that, despite the diverse backgrounds and poetic styles such as rap, narrative, and metaphor besides, the poets achieve the similar target which is the negotiation of identities in order to accept the difference and integration with other cultures.

Keywords: code mixing, dialogue, diaspora, heteroglossia, hybrid identity.

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الامتزاج اللغوي في الشعر العربي الأمريكي المعاصر

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المستخلص

تُقدّم الورقة البحثية حجة تقول بأن الامتزاج اللغوي، الذي يُعدّ مفهوماً رئيسياً في علم اللغة الاجتماعي، يُطبّق بشكل كبير في الشعر العربي الأمريكي المعاصر كآلية لتمثيل الهوية. وتركز على الاستخدام المبتكر للرموز الأصلية داخل الرمز السائد وتفحص التعبيرات الشعرية التي تُنتج الامتزاج بشكل خاص في شعر الشعراء معاصرين ذوي هويات ثقافية مزدوجة وهم سهير حماد وصافية الحلو وزيد صلاح. الورقة البحثية النوعية تستخدم الأساليب النصية والتحليلية، وتستند إلى مفاهيم مثل الامتزاج اللغوي والهوية الهجينة. كما يتناول البحث الهوية من خلال تحليل قصائد مختارة من مجموعاتهم الشعرية التي تحمل عناوين كسر القوائد (2008)، أطفال كانون الثاني (2022)، وتقسيم (2006). ويستنتج البحث أن الشعراء، على الرغم من الخلفيات المتنوعة والأساليب الشعرية مثل الراب والسرد والاستعارة، يحققون هدفاً مماثلاً، وهو التفاوض على الهويات من أجل تقبل الاختلاف والاندماج مع الثقافات الأخرى.

الكلمات الدالة: الامتزاج اللغوي، الحوار، الشتات، الهوية الهجينة.

1.INTRODUCTION

Code mixing is one of the discursive strategies and is thought of as a performative interaction in a society characterized by linguistic diversity. It serves as a self-reflexive schema that recognizes minorities groups from others. The phenomenon means the intentional integration of bi-linguistic systems within a single utterance. Code mixing is pervasive in bicultural communities, contributing to the blending of cultures, considering language as a medium for expressing identity.

In recent contemporary years, language mixing has become active in Arab American literature, particularly in poetry, in response to the question of identity and belonging resulting from the significant social factor of immigration, which has caused dispersion. The events of 9/11 specifically the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in the United States, brought Arab identity into the spotlight, leaving individuals of Arab descent shattered in this dispersion, particularly the second generation who has developed dual identities. Consequently, these events have influenced the thoughts and concepts of writers, authors, and poets in expressing their identity and the state of being stuck between two identities. Original code considers a significant force that reflects Arabic culture and its existence in Western culture.

Based on the premise, that Arab-American poetry can be considered as a tool for expressing experiences, the research addresses the concept of language mixing in this type of poetry and investigates the poetics used to produce mixing in selected poems by the poets Suheir Hammad, Safia Elhillo, and Zaid Shlah. Additionally, it explores the differences in the styles they use to signify their identities, given their belonging to assorted periods, as well as variations in their Arab origins and dialects. Furthermore, it illuminates the determination of whether integration or assimilation is supported in their poetry.

The importance lies in its contribution to the understanding of code mixing in Arab-American poetry to ensure the multiple voices in poetry in addition to shedding light on the complexities of identity representation and cultural expression within the context of Arab-American literature. It contributes to understand the interconnected concepts and the correlation between codes and cultures. Acknowledging the utilization of Arabic vernacular inside texts by postmodernist and metamodernist poets, thus, it adds a distinct experience in the field of contemporary poetry.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is an extremely important issue in the current era, and in fact, it is eternal, having garnered the attention of numerous researchers to shed light on it in various aspects. The poetry of Suheir Hammad reflects identity through distinct aspects as examined by the researchers for instance, in her thesis "Dislocating Culture, Relocating Identity: Literary Formations of the Multiplied Self in the Works of Roberto Bolaño, Ben Okri, and Suheir Hammad" (2013) Soraya Abuelhiga examines the role of language, nationality, and ethnicity in shaping individual and collective identities in the works of cross-cultural and transnational authors, including Suheir Hammad. The study aims to understand the way that authors reinforce cultural identities through their artistic expression, addressing questions of nationalism and belonging. In the same year, Birgit M. Bauridl in "Rowing for Palestine", *Performing the Other: Suheir Hammad, Mark Gerban and Multiple Consciousness* states that Hammad challenges traditional notions of identity and belonging by embracing multiple cultural heritages and rejecting the hierarchy in the host country. Concluding that through their writing, the poets demonstrate the possibility of holding multiple identities and perspectives simultaneously and the way that multiplicity represents the source of strength and creativity.

In distinct manner, Mohammad S. A. Sharaf and Gibreel S. Alaghbary examined identity through a feminist perspective. Sharaf, in his research paper, "Palestinian Diaspora and Feminine Identity in Suheir Hammad's Poetry as Reflected in the Conflict between Alienation and Integration" (2015), explored the conflict between alienation and integration experienced by Hammad as a Palestinian-American woman. He highlighted that Hammad expressed the conflict through her feminist poetry, particularly in the poem "Born Palestinian, Born Black," which reflected the integration of the poet into the African American community and the resulting alienation she experienced. Sharaf contended that her poetry underscored the complexities of identity and suffering, particularly for Palestinian-American women. Alaghbary, in the research paper "Construction of Identity in Suheir Hammad's What I Will" (2019), delved into the exploration of textual identity in the poem through a feminist stylistic lens by Sara Mills. The focus was on the linguistic choices at the lexical, lexico-grammatical, and discourse

levels to identify the constructed identity and its relation to her cultural heritage and ethnic origin. He summarized that the poem created a dichotomy through personal pronouns, emphasizing the oppositional relationship between the speaker and her aggressor.

Ziyad A.M. Albajjari distinctly viewed identity in “the Search for Ethnic Identity in Suheir Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black with Reference to Translation*” (2020), focusing on the experiences of Arab-American exile poet Suheir Hammad, who used rap poetry as a means of resisting discrimination in American society. The study aimed to highlight the problem of ethnic identity and the way it was reflected in translation. The study ended with the search for identity, particularly ethnic identity as it was manifested in *Born Palestinian, Born Black* at three levels: lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical.

The poetry of Hammad resembles the poetry of Safia Elhillo due to their affiliation with Hip-Hop culture. The poetry of Elhillo is considered metamodern poetry which is a contemporary poetic that blends between modern and postmodern poetics and it characterized by oscillation between sincerity and irony in addition to provide a meta-awareness through holding multiple identities accordingly, two researchers tackled her poetry. Dr. Roopali Gupta, in his paper “Being vs Becoming - The Search for Identity in Safia Elhillo’s *Alien Suite*” (2021), aimed to analyze the themes and narrative style present in her performance of *Alien Suite*, which included 14 of her poems. The performance was part of button poetry, a platform for performance poetry. Connecting the performance to the self-actualization of an identity of Elhillo that sought to encompass and harmonize the various aspects of her cultural, linguistic, and ethnic history. Meanwhile, Riya Sohini, in her paper “Decolonization through Spoken Word Poetry: A Postcolonial Analysis of Emi Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo’s Poetry” (2022), provided a compelling argument about the role of spoken word poetry, particularly in the context of hip hop culture, as a means of challenging and disrupting traditional power structures. It emphasized the way that spoken word poetry served as an anti-racist and decolonizing medium, providing a platform for marginalized voices to assert their narratives and destabilize existing power dynamics. It viewed spoken word poetry as a platform for cultural resistance and change.

Despite the existing research on Suheir Hammad and Safia Elhillo, there is a lack of scholarly attention to the poetry of Zaid Shlah, furthermore, despite various contributions to the issue of identity, the concept of code mixing as a means of expressing identity and the use of the mother tongue within poetry has not been addressed. The paper sheds light on the analysis of code mixing in the selected poems of Zaid Shlah, Suheir Hammad, and Safia Elhillo.

3.METHODOLOGY

To elucidate the concept of code mixing in Arab-American poetry, the research paper employs a qualitative approach with using analytical and textual methods. The data consists of selected poems from three collections are *Breaking Poems* by Suheir Hammad, *The January Children* by Safia Elhillo, and *Taqsim* by Zaid Shlah. It focuses on the way that original codes implement in the texts and explores the literary techniques that manifest code mixing. Additionally, an examination of the styles of the poets is conducted, considering that they are from different periods and cultures. The theoretical concepts emphasized include a series of concepts such as heteroglossia, hybrid identity,

and diaspora. The sources utilized include books, articles, research papers, and electronic sources related to all aspects of the research, to enhance the representation of identity.

4. LITERARY DIMENSIONS OF CODE MIXING

Code mixing is closely linked to literature and is considered one of the effective tools in literary discourse. It is evident from the perspective of the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who addressed the ideology of diversity, including double and multiple voices, adding a magical touch to literary texts. According to Bakhtin, dialogism is “any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances” (Bakhtin, 1986 as cited in Hall, et al., 2005, p.72). Diversity and multiplicity are inherent in language, a concept elucidated by the Bakhtinian notion of 'Heteroglossia' which is defined as “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way (...) it serves two (...) different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (Scanlon, 2014, p.141). By employing dual or multiple languages in their writing, authors utilize the voices within the text to convey their true intentions and the intended meanings that arise from the interaction between these voices or languages. Communicative strategy that fosters a dialogue between the author and the reader is represented by form and content through the text. Accordingly, Bakhtin illuminates the binary opposition between form and content through his notions of centripetal and centrifugal forces which “create the kind of space we call texts” (Holloquist, 2003, p.68). Centripetal force determined by the forms in the texts that authors are possessed to convey the multiple perspectives via utilizing metalanguages which is the centrifugal force of creation meaning.

Using codes of shaping identity is a significant aspect within bi/multicultural communities. Accordingly, identity is dynamic and intersects with language or codes as clarified by Homi K. Bhabha through presenting the process of hybridization as “a destructive, enunciatory, cultural, subjective (...) social process” (Bresler, 2011, p.206). Highlighting the mixing of varied cultural elements, a process that entails intricate negotiations of power dynamics and the reconfiguration of cultural norms; it transcends personal preference to absorb the collective experience. Bhabha asserts the presence of mixed codes in texts and argues that language is “a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking (...) neither the one nor the other” (Huddart, 2006, p.17). It sheds light on the fluid nature of language, which is shaped by mixed cultures and identities. Bhabha represents code mixing in mimicry notion which is defined as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same” (p.40) which is delivered as magnified of copying of original language that recognizes the homeland identity in addition to the process of replication that marks diversity despite the identical original language.

The act of hyphenation, self-awareness, and the interrogation of identity arise from the displacement encountered by minority individuals within a predominantly majority society, in other words, 'diaspora'. Robin Cohen (2022) illuminates diaspora as a “metaphoric designation” (p.1) that indicates the utilization of metaphors to designate political refugees. Cohen alludes to the Safran process of diasporas as “expatriate minority community” (p.6) by means the minority group upholds a shared vision of their ancestral origins, even in the absence of acceptance by the dominant country,

acknowledging the displacement of their ancestors from their homeland. As a result, minority groups perceive their homeland as a place of eventual return and are dedicated to its restoration through their collective consciousness and solidarity. The definition of diaspora by Cohen as a metaphor visualized by the insertion codes as “language does not refer only to spoken formal language, but to the metaphorical basis of communication” (Kalra et al., 2005, p.43). Accordingly, the original image of diaspora is copied in the literary text via utilizing cues such as the dialects that operate the interaction between the split identities.

The literary dimensions of language mixing become apparent when analyzing some selected poems by the upcoming poets through their distinct styles, perspectives, experiences in the diasporic community, and the complexities that the poets faced which are depicted in the texts in the next part.

5. CODE MIXING IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB-AMERICAN POETRY

Code mixing, as explained, involves the combination of two languages. The original language is a dialect spoken by minority groups in diaspora communities, commonly referred to as vernaculars, which encompass linguistic, cultural, and social aspects of language use within these communities as “mother tongue” (Trask & Stockwell, 2007, p.318) which stands in opposition to matrix language alluding to the Self, L2, dominant, and superior language while, vernaculars indicate to the Other, L1, subordinate, and inferior one.

Arab-American poetry is the principal medium that records the experiences of the Arab minority in the United States. It unveils the Arab heritage, and the related aspects of the Arab hyphen to behold its voice to the American culture and to correct the stereotypical image that the West has formed about Arabs and Muslims as a result, Arab-American poetry proclaims “an identity that is not part Arab and part American but one that simultaneously incorporates the two: the unique cultural identity of Arab-American” (El Said, 2003, p.3). The identity has shattered, leaving behind a negotiation between moieties, as tackled by poets from distinct backgrounds in their poetry.

Suheir Hammad is a Jordanian-American poet for Palestinian refugees and one of the Arab-American Poets who tackles the schism. Hammad utilizes the hip-hop style as a vehicle for articulating dual identity, employing spoken word, song lyrics, and rap music deeply rooted in the African American community. It becomes apparent when Hammad was asked to identify herself via email, she responded “In Hip Hop culture we use the term Afro-Asiatic to define the mix of cultures I consider to form my own identity” (Sharaf, 2015, p.497) accordingly, in *Breaking Poems* collection of poetry can be described as mirroring, in terms of language and style, the suffering caused by the fragmentation of individuals. *Breaking* encompasses both physical harm (e.g., injury, violation, and death) and the shattering of the Self. Hammad suggests that conventional language fails to convey the profound suffering experienced by Palestinians, African Americans, and other marginalized groups.

A new language is required to address the collective experiences and unify both hyphens. It is considered as a third space that severs an integrational medium between cultures. Through the first poem “break”, Hammad writes:

(deheisha) [Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank] /
(khan younis) [Palestinian refugee camp in the southern
Gaza strip] Yamaaaaaaaa [Arabic for mama, mommy]
yamaaaaa (Hammad as cited in Motyl, p.2-3).

Hammad focused on using Arabic words, including the names of Palestinian refugee camps, as a result of the experience of dispersion. It is evident in the form of the poem, using hip-hop techniques to visualize the idea of dispersion. Referring to the Palestinian voice, such as the word *Yamaaaa* with an African spirit, calls for the participation and recognition of the presence of all minorities in the United States. In another poem entitled “*naher el bared*” Hammad writes:

cool river burning [naher el bared is the name of a Palestinian refugee camp in North
Lebanon; the name means cool river]
ana threading wounded knee [ana is Arabic for I]
salt water breaking
[...]
shabab drum face jaded [shabab is Arabic for young people]
stoned eyes domed wa hodded [wa is Arabic for and]
[...]
refugees rewind exile
poem is my body my language my country
wa bas ana closed to tourism [wa: and; bas: stop it!]
ana closed to journalists wa bas
ana closed to translation” (Hammad as cited in Motyle, p.5-6)

As evident in the above poem, the fragmentation of identity is clear in the form of the poem, reflecting the Palestinian diaspora in various countries, including Lebanon. Nahr al-Bared camp, which is a camp in Lebanon that witnessed a civil war in 2007, resulted in casualties from all sides. The flow of words with brackets echoes the rap style of hip-hop culture thus; Hammad utilizes Arabic words such as *naher el bared*, *ana*, *shabab*, and *wa* to convey the experiences of the Palestinian diaspora and the struggles they have endured for centuries to the Western community.

Originating from Sudanese culture, raised in the United States, and influenced by African culture, Safia Elhillo who is a metamodernist poet that tackle the innovative forms and experimental techniques in contemporary poetics and Elhillo is spoken artist as means of talk poetry in other words, slam poetry which performs on stage as storytelling of social issues which is known in hip-hop culture specifically beats poets. *The January Children* has garnered attention for its exploration of themes related to postcolonialism, feminism, and the diasporic experience. The poetry is distinguished by its reflection of her multiple identities, which encompasses her African background and diasporic heritage. Ruth Wenske claims that “Elhillo’s poetry is characterized by its transitions between English and Arabic (...) in both form and content ...” (as cited in Gupta, 2021, p.311) precisely in *The January Children* which grapples with searching for identity and belonging, doubleness, and distinct aspect of diaspora.

In the *Alien Suit* performance, the poet presents the first poem “vocabulary” which addresses the Arabic vocabularies used by *abedilhalim, oum khaltoum, Fairous* to represent the sense of belonging to the home. Elhillo begins with the song of Fairuz which is *nasam alena alhawa min mafraq alwady ya hawa dakhil alhawa khudni alabladi* to say “the arabic words هواء /hawa/ means wind/ the arabic word هوى /hawa/ means love” (p.311). The poet employs a colloquial style that serves as a hybrid language, while integrating two identical homophones in the word *hawa* each with distinct meanings, to underscore the diversity and richness of original linguistic codes. Additionally, Elhillo advocates for the acceptance of differences among individuals coexisting within the same state, emphasizing equality despite varying identities and languages. The call for embracing diversity reflects the nuanced exploration of the complexities inherent in coexisting within a multicultural society. In her “self-portrait with question of race”, Elhillo (2017) types:

عرق /'i·riq/ n. race; vein; sudanese colloquial derogatory

african blood; black blood.

“الله يسود ليلتك زي ما سود وجهك” he as / nights your darken god may”

has darkened your face”

اسمرت: /as·ma·rat/ v. female third person singular past

tense to tan; to get darker.

egyptian comedian mohamed henedi dresses as a sudanese man & sings

“واتحرقت واسمرت بس بطاطا” “she got darker / & burned like a potato”

but your daughter will be fine but keep her out of the sun but do something

with that hair or people will not know she is بنت عرب daughter of arabs (p.xv)

Elhillo points out ethnic identity and doubleness through the intersection of identity and color. the poetess employs Arabic words that allude to the racism experienced by individuals with dark skin in the United States. However, Elhillo portrays the aesthetic beauty of dark skin in her poem by referencing a play by Mohamed Henedy in which he wears Sudanese attire and states *واتحرقت بس بطاطا* as means a smart man. In each of her poems, the poetess employs the narrative technique by depicting everyday events, with a particular focus on aspects of identity, including race. The Black Arab consciousness is one of the most important tools utilized by Arab poets of African descent to signify their origins. Thus, the acceptance of differences is evident in spoken word poetry.

Moreover, the fusion style in Iraqi-American poetry has a distinct character, as presented by Zaid Shlah. Shlah is an Iraqi-Canadian poet whose poetry is praised by a Libyan-American poet in his outstanding anthology of Arab-American poetry, Hayan Charara (2008) as “blend contemporary voices with the ancient traditions of Iraqi and Arabic poetry” (p.297). In his collection titled *Taqsim* Shlah delves into the experiences of war, love, music, and food within his hyphenated identity, employing a blend of formal lyric structure and free-flowing improvisation. In “the Portrait of the Artist as a Young Immigrant Arab”, Shlah presents the experience of immigrant Arabs in the language in which the young are pronounced with reflecting his experience of migration that represents a collective experience by the young men. The poet utilizes descriptive

language in the poem to tell his diary routine from morning into evening. Shlah (2006) writes:

in mornin time I pbud my shoez,
I pbud my brown shoez on,
but first you know, I pbud my banz,
and then I go for work (p.65)

Despite the mispronounced words by Arab immigrants, it is obvious his intention to express his voice. Substituting the silent letter s with the letter z indicates the identity of the speaker, and it is a word used by Arabs in colloquial language, as in the word *shoez*, *banz*, and the verb *pbud* means put which is recurrent in the poem. After finishing work and returning home “put dishdasha for house” (p.66). Dishdasha is the dress used in the Arab world for men and women which represents one of the symbols of folklore. Then, the speaker puts chai which means tea, and listens to music until gets sad and then, tells himself “yewash , yewash”(p.67) which is an Iraqi word that means without pressure. Shlah mixes Iraqi pronunciation with the letters of matrix code to represent Iraqi folklore.

Through “Thirty-Three Beads on a String” poem, the poet demonstrates the Iraqi maqam as a part of folklore. It is divided into thirty-three sectors that align with the title of the poem. The poem begins with waking from a nightmare of “*a gutted maqam*” (Charara, 2008, p. 297) which the voice seems hot breath, and the poet continues to sip his hot tea under the view of dusty noon then, the “*One white dishdadha screams*” (p.298) utilizing *dishdadha* is one of the forms of maqam whose the poet pointed out to the dominant culture to hear the voices with the sparkle of oud in their eyes. The voices that made the poet experience goosebumps were the voices of Al-Gubbenchi heard through the radio who lives in an old “*Medina, its streets adorned with smells from the bazaar*” (p.299). The word *Medina* is an Arabic word that means city and the poet delivers an accurate sense of belonging.

Amidist the poem, Shlah inserted maqam expert which is translated from Arabic into English to convey the meaning that says “*Do not cry for Leila or for Hind*” (p.299) which is a poetic verse by Abu Nawas, sung by Al- Gubbenchi. Shlah addresses the Western culture:

Al-Mutanabbi wrote the
heart of our silken tarab;
what need have we for you (p.301)

Shlah takes pride in Al-Mutanabbi and what he has said in poetry or *tarab*, and the creativity of Al-Mutanabbi suffices. The pronoun *we* mean Iraqi milieu while *you* mean the American milieu. The vision is shifted to the act of war specifically in Abu Ghraib acts and the imprisoned people who “*one man by one man by one man, breathe six*” (p.301). The poet visualizes the strength of people by doubling their breath. In the end, the poem echoes the food as “*za'tar zate over fire-baked bread*” (p.302) which indicate the experience in Alberta, Jordan and the preferences of Arabic food over western food. Nevertheless, each poem presented by the mentioned poets contains of pronouns, words, and connotations related to Arab culture within the context of the prevailing language. Each pronoun, even if singular, expresses the collective meaning of “we” Therefore, the

dialogue between cultures is evident through language, as it is the unique medium for expressing identity. In fact, the mimicking words are a replication of original ones.

6. CONCLUSION

Language mixing is prevalent in contemporary Arab-American poetry, as evidenced by the analysis of selected poems by Suhair Hammad, Safia Elhillo, and Zaid Shlah, each employing distinct styles to express linguistic fusion and hybrid identity. For instance, both Suhair Hammad and Safia Elhillo exhibit a leaning towards contemporary hip-hop culture, albeit within different periods and utilizing diverse poetic styles. Hammad, a postmodern poet, incorporates rap music style through rhythmic language and Arabic words to convey the discourse of identity and the Palestinian diaspora experience, under the umbrella of political poetry. Conversely, Elhillo, belonging to the metamodern period, employs the narrative technique utilized by African-American poets, known as slam poetry, to express the hyphenated identity and the Sudanese diaspora experience in the United States, embracing diversity. On the other hand, Zaid Shlah, a poet straddling both the postmodern and metamodern periods, utilizes the metaphorical style to express Iraqi identity through Iraqi folklore. To sum up, the diverse styles in these texts illustrate code mixing as a tool for expressing identity and facilitating dialogue between cultures in a multilingual and multicultural countries.

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