

AE07215 - 7ABA0120

by Yeihn Ji

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Module Title:	Global modernity and the Horn of Africa
Module Code: (e.g. 5AABC123)	7ABA0120

Assignment: (may be abbreviated)	Learning journal with ten entries
Assignment tutor/group:	Dr. Sara Marzagora
Deadline:	4PM, 17 th May 2024 (Mitigating Circumstance Submission)
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Learning Journal W1

The Hatata, Eurocentrism and the Enlightenment I:

Critique of Max Weber

In his introduction to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber praises European cultures as the pinnacles of human civilisation:

"A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value¹."

According to Weber, European intellectuals, as masters of "empirical knowledge²," have the exclusive ability to construct the "universal significance and value³." To convey such Eurocentric ideologies, Weber vehemently denounces non-European cultures and knowledge as insubstantial, incomplete, and fragmented. To specify, Weber implies that African and Asian scholarships are inferior to the intellectual integrity of Europe, which (supposedly) has its roots in Hellenistic and Renaissance rationality. Throughout his writing, Weber portrays Europe as the sole cultural hub that incorporates, elevates, and substitutes all cultures. This explicit Eurocentrism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* reminded me of Christina Britzolakis' analysis of the interconnection between World Fairs and imperialism.

In *'This Way to the Exhibition'*, Britzolakis characterises the World Fair as a political means of mediating the imperial anxiety surrounding the tumultuous distance between the Empire and the Colonies. To specify, she argues that World Fairs mitigated the European fear of losing economic and political control over the colonies. By displaying African and Asian artefacts, animals, and people in European cities, World Fairs framed the Empire as the unchanging core of the global market, in which people could freely *consume* colonial *commodities*⁴. In addition, as such exhibitions *translocated* colonial landscapes into Europe, they justified Western colonial conquest as a peaceful *synchronisation* of "global and local spaces through an ideology of national and international progress⁵."

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001).

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Cristina Britzolakis, "'This Way to the Exhibition': Genealogies of Urban Spectacle in Jean Rhys's Interwar Fiction", *Textual Practice*, 21:3 (2007).

To a certain extent, Weber's writing reiterates the colonial undertones of World Fairs: He transports non-European arts and philosophies to the realm of European academia, only to judge, consume, willingly misinterpret, distort, and pejoratively reconstruct them in a way that justifies his Eurocentric worldview. In addition, World Fairs and Weber's writing equally lionise Europe as the supreme intellectual leader responsible for rational/scientific development of the entire humankind.

Learning Journal W2

The Hatata, Eurocentrism and the Enlightenment II:

Comparing the political impacts of René Descartes and Zar'a Ya'aqob's philosophies

In his essay, Teodros Kiros refers to René Descartes and Zar'a Ya'aqob as *soul mates*⁶, for both valued Reason as the ultimate key to navigating the world. Nevertheless, the two philosophers interpreted the human body from different viewpoints, proposing theories that resulted in contrasting political consequences.

Descartes claimed that mind and body, as independent entities, exert no influence on each other. Through this separation of the mental from the physical, he provided room for social stratification in Europe. Under the influence of the Cartesian philosophy, post-Enlightenment Europe aggrandised rationality as a sign of "decency, dignity, and social duty"⁷ that delivers humans from the vulgar instincts of the body. Consequently, corporeality became an indicator of weakness and inferiority, while the intellect became the badge of superior fortitude. In a similar vein, the authorities combined mind-body dualism with gender binary to naturalise patriarchy. The patriarchal regime, drawing a polarising distinction between *unruly* women and *rational* men, insisted that men ought to *govern* women for the sake of social harmony. Comparably, the interlinking of Cartesian Rationalism and patriarchy further justified imperialist dominions. To specify, European empires framed colonial and working-class people as the effeminate, sluggish, carnal Other that lacked the intellectual capacity for self-governance. Thus, mind-body dualism secured the social privilege of white, middle-class, imperial male citizens.

On the contrary, Zar'a Ya'aqob proposes a widely dissimilar idea about corporeality. In *Hatata (Inquiry)*, he clarifies that God equally nurtures the "body and soul"⁸ of the human. Whereas post-Enlightenment European philosophers warn about the lowliness of the flesh⁹, Zar'a Ya'aqob praises the body as a divine creation that cannot be impure¹⁰. Such revindication of the body subsequently erases disempowering stigmas on marginalised populations. First, as

⁶ Teodros Kiros, "Zara Yacob: A Seventeenth-Century Ethiopian Founder of Modernity in Africa", in *Explorations in African Political Thought: Identity, Community, Ethics* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2013), p.76.

⁷ Allison Pease, "Questionable Figures: Swinburne's 'Poems and Ballads.'" *Victorian Poetry* 35:1 (1997), p. 44.

⁸ Zar'a Ya'aqob and Walda Heywat, *The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and our Ethical Responsibilities* (De Gruyter: 2023), p. 90.

⁹ Allison Pease, "Questionable Figures: Swinburne's 'Poems and Ballads.'" *Victorian Poetry* 35:1 (1997), p. 44.

¹⁰ *The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and our Ethical Responsibilities*, pp.75–77.

Zar'a Ya'aqob recognises sexual pleasures as the "foundation of life"¹¹, he destabilises the social taboo on menstruation. Many religions regard menstruating women as *impure* beings whose dangerous sexuality can *defile* the masculine social orders. Contrarily, *Hatata* portrays "[the] flow of blood"¹² as a sign of a woman's (sexual) health, which is "essential"¹³ to her life." Such positive illustrations of menstruation challenge the religious customs that quarantine menstruating women. Furthermore, Zar'a Ya'aqob's valuation of corporeality coincides with his critique of slavery. He, who believes that God ordains humans to protect their bodies from illness and defilement, emphasises that slavery is a violent assault against the orders and creations of God.

To conclude, the philosophy of Zar'a Ya'aqob offers readers a critical insight into the correlation between body politics and social discrimination. In post-Enlightenment Europe, the Cartesian dualism catalysed the systemic oppression of women and colonial individuals. Contrarily, as Zar'a Ya'aqob integrates the body and the mind, he tackles various kinds of socio-political separatism.

Learning Journal W3

Against Diffusionism? Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas I*

Close reading of *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*

While reading *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, I was intrigued by the scene in which Rasselas leaves the rationalist philosopher who has become irrational due to grief for his dead daughter:

"The prince, whose humanity would not suffer him to insult misery with reproof, went away, convinced of the rhetorical sound, and the inefficacy of polished periods and studied sentences"¹⁴.

During our seminar, my fellow student Nacquia described how Western empires have labelled people of colour as "subhuman" for centuries. Considering such a historical context, I believe that the sheer mention of an Abyssinian individual's "humanity" could have been unconventional in the era of European imperialism. To support my claim, I will cite T. B. Macaulay's aggressive review of *The History of Rasselas* in his 1856 article:

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 46.

"But Johnson, not content with turning filthy savages, ignorant of their letters and gorged with raw steaks cut from living cows, into philosophers as eloquent and enlightened as himself or his friend Burke, and into ladies as highly accomplished as Mrs. Lennox or Mrs. Sheridan, transferred the whole domestic system of England to Egypt¹⁵."

In contrast to Macaulay's racist statement that "filthy savages" are incomparable to enlightened European philosophers, Rasselas performs a highly intellectual task of reasoning the limitations of rationalist philosophy. Moreover, in opposition to the imperialist denunciation of African people as *ineloquent* beings, the prince of Abyssinia feels a sophisticated emotion of pity towards a person in distress. To a certain extent, Rasselas' high intellectual capacity and complex emotions destabilise the hierarchical divide between the masculine/white/imperial rationality and the feminine/non-white/colonial irrationality, which European empires created to justify colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy.

Learning Journal W4

Against Diffusionism? Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* II

Hateful graffiti in Wrocław and "The Image of the Orient in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759)" by Abdulhafeth Ali Khrisat

While critiquing Islamophobia in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, Abdulhafeth Ali Khrisat remarks that negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in European literature encapsulate the Western attempts to "deliver convincing evidence of the superiority of Christianity to Islam¹⁶." However, after spending ten years in Poland, I came to think of Islamophobia as sheer racism masquerading in a religious costume. To support my argument, I will briefly analyse a series of hateful graffiti in the Polish city of Wrocław.

In February 2019, I saw an extremely offensive, anti-Islam graffiti (Figure 1) while passing under a bridge. In this part of Wrocław, a person using the pseudonym "Dihez/Dihezowy" vandalised multiple public properties with similar hateful messages. If Dihez wanted to express his bigoted religious ideology, his graffiti would have attacked the doctrines of non-Christian religions, which are in tension with Polish Catholic communities. However, near the hate message in Figure 1, Dihez left another graffiti specifically demeaning people of colour (Figure 2) regardless of their faiths.

¹⁵ Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Samuel Johnson" in *Selected Writings*, ed. John Clive and Thomas Pinney (University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 145.

¹⁶ Abdulhafeth Ali Khrisat, "The Image of the Orient in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*", in *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2-5 (2012).



Figure 1. Islamophobic graffiti found in Tadeusza Zielińskiego street, Wrocław. (2019)

The graffiti in Figure 2 marked the coordinates “37° N, 27.15° E¹⁷”, pointing at a location in the Aegean Sea, where seventeen Syrian refugees drowned while passing from Bodrum, Turkey, to Italy¹⁸. Correspondingly, near this abhorrent scribble, Dihez wrote “Lipiec 2017 (July 2017),” alluding to the moment when the Polish government decided to accept refugees. Such despicable content of the graffiti hinted that Dihez had a motive other than religious warmongering: He attempted to establish a discriminatory hierarchy between his Polish home and the unstable, threatened country from which the Syrian refugees had to flee.

¹⁷ <https://www.google.com/maps/place/37%C2%B000'00.0%22N+27%C2%B009'00.0%22E/>

¹⁸ *Migrant crisis: 17 people drown after boat sinks off Turkish coast*, BBC, 2015, [online] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34373161>



Figure 2. Anti-refugee graffiti found in Grabiszyńska street, Wrocław. (2019)

I do not believe that Dihez demeaned Syria solely due to the country's Islamic faith. According to my observation, his offensive messages overlap with other xenophobic and racist graffiti in the region, including Swastika signs (Figure 3) and Celtic Crosses (Figure 4: Used as white supremacist symbols).



Figure 3. Swastika sign on the wall of an elementary school building in Wrocław. (2019)



Figure 4. Celtic Crosses near my old apartment building in Gwiaździsta street, Wrocław. (2019)

After acquiring my bachelor's degree at King's College London in 2022, I returned to Wrocław, only to find the most horrific public hate message (Figure 5). This graffiti reads

“POLSKA TYLKO DLA BIAŁYCH”, meaning “POLAND ONLY FOR THE WHITE PEOPLE.” Therefore, it points to the shared roots of neo-Nazism, racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in Poland: The conservatives intend to consolidate their national identity by bashing the racial, ethno-national, and cultural Other. From such a mentality, one can find explicit traces of Orientalism, *reinventing* the West via the Orient/Occident dichotomy.



Figure 5. A graffiti saying “POLSKA TYLKO DLA BIAŁYCH (POLAND ONLY FOR THE WHITE PEOPLE)”, found near *Generala Józefa Hallera street, Wrocław (2023)*.

Thus, unlike Abdulhafeth Ali Khrisat, I claim that Islamophobia in Europe has closer connections to racism and xenophobia than to actual religious tensions. For example, in Wrocław, some citizens *used* Islamophobia to harass non-European people with darker complexion, irrespective of their religious beliefs. Recalling my past years in the city, I uploaded two rage-posts on my Instagram account (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6. In this post, I wanted to criticise how some Polish individuals sympathise with Nazism, although Nazis viciously terrorised their country and its people.



Figure 7. The story of my adolescent years

Learning Journal W5

A Black philosopher in 18th century Europe - Anton Wilhelm Amo I:

Creating an erasure poem to celebrate African artistic/philosophical histories

One of the most fascinating elements in Anton Wilhelm Amo's dissertation *On the Impassivity of the Human Mind* is that "The Rector and Council of the University of Wittenberg" illustrate Africa as the land of philosophy, which has "brought forth a great many very eminent

men, by whose natural aptitude and devotion divine as much as human wisdom has been taught." This statement, challenging the racist dehumanisation of Africans as "filthy savages, ignorant of their letters (Macaulay, 1865)", reminded me of a meaningful question that my fellow student Nacquia posed during our seminar: "If (as imperialists argue) Africa does not have valuable cultures or philosophies, why do Western empires keep plundering the continent?" Coherently, when Wittenburg University affirms that European academia "owe[s] a debt" to African letters, they effectively destabilise the modern canonisation of European diffusionism.

To commemorate African contribution to transnational/trans-continental modernity, I transformed Wittenburg University's letter (Figure 1) into a piece of erasure poetry¹⁹ (Figure 2).

Africa in the past had great honor, whether with regard to its [fertility in human] natural aptitude, devotion to letters, or religious teaching. For it brought forth a great many very eminent men, by whose natural aptitude and devotion divine as much as human wisdom has been taught. Nothing either in former times or in our own memory has been judged more sage in matters of social life, nor more refined in manners, than [the sayings of] Terence of Carthage. Plato himself seems to have lived again in the Socratic discourses of Apuleius of Madaura, in centuries past so well regarded that the learned were divided into factions, and there were Apuleians, who dared to contend with the Ciceronians for primacy in eloquence. And in Christian teaching, how many men came forth in Africa! It is enough to mention the greatest of them, Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Optatus of Milevis, Augustine, in [all of] whom sanctity of mind vies with learning of every kind. Their memorials, records, martyrdoms, councils, all proclaim the fidelity and constancy with which the African doctors labored to preserve the integrity of the religion. For those who say that the African church had always compromised itself do it an injustice.²⁰ And even though the great force of the Arabs, spread throughout Africa, brought great change, it is far from true that their dominion extinguished all the light either of natural aptitude or of letters. For in the teaching of this people, to whom letters seem to have been transferred, liberal learning was cultivated, and when the Moors crossed from Africa into Spain, the ancient writers whom they brought over with them gave much assistance to the cultivation of letters, which was then beginning to emerge from the darkness.

Thus from such ancient times letters have owed a debt to Africa. In our own memory, indeed, this part of the earth²¹ has been reputed more fertile in other things than in learning, but that it is by no means depleted in natural aptitude let the most eminent Master of wisdom [i.e. of philosophy] and of the liberal arts,

Figure 8. A Letter written by the University of Wittenberg (1734), trans. Stephen Menn and Justin E.H. Smith

¹⁹ A form of poetry wherein the poet erases words from a pre-existing text to create a new piece of writing.



Figure 9. My erasure Poem: "African devotion to letters brought forth in our memory once again / in centuries past, memorials, records, councils, African doctors, African church cultivated fertile learnings of wisdom and arts."

Then, I merged the poem with a collage of photographs I took in an art exhibition: "The Missing Thread: Untold Stories of Black British Fashion", curated in The Courtauld Gallery between September 2023 and January 2024. I consciously referred to this specific exhibition, because it taught me about the integral role of traditional African crafts and garment-making practices in the birth of contemporary fashion.

A Black philosopher in 18th century Europe - Anton Wilhelm Amo II:

Using the theories of Kwasi Wiredu to analyse Afro-Christian motifs in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*

Although slavery dislocated Anton Wilhelm Amo from Ghana to Germany at the age of four, Ghanaian scholar Kwasi Wiredu suggests a possibility of reintegrating Amo with African philosophical studies. While making such endeavours, Wiredu outlines different conditions that may qualify an academic work as *African* despite its non-native origin. Primarily, a text may have "African cultural traces"²⁰ or "African concerns"²¹ connecting it directly to the continent. Nevertheless, even if such elements are absent, contemporary African philosophers may modify non-African studies in correspondence with their interests. Through this *assimilation*, a foreign work may become a part of African intellectual tradition. In such a context, Wiredu meaningfully expands the category "African" by suggesting that one may even *Africanise* the philosophies of extraterrestrials²². His acknowledgement of cultural reconfiguration reminded me of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984). In this play, Wilson transforms Western Christianity into a socio-cultural vehicle that articulates the lived experiences of African American people.

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson portrays two religions prospering in Black communities in the early 20th Century U.S.: African folk religion and Christianity. Whereas the former has characteristic "African cultural traces," the latter has infamous connections to forced conversion, white supremacy, and imperialism. However, the play emphasises how Black creativity adds distinctly African tastes to Christianity. For example, instead of going to Church on Sunday, the characters perform the Juba dance. During this ritual, the practitioners express their belief in "the Holy Ghost"²³ through the dance that is "reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves"²⁴. Such cultural syncretism positions African Americans as the owners of their faith, independent from "missionar[ies] spreading [imperialist ideologies] all around [the world]"²⁵. Moreover, since Wilson encourages the actors to *improvise* the Juba, he allows them to apply ever-evolving African "concerns" and aesthetics to their performance.

In addition, the Juba dance gives birth to another Afro-Christian imagery. Herald Loomis, a freedman whose family disintegrated due to enslavement, starts hallucinating while watching the Juba. In a trance-like state, Loomis sees *bone-people* marching on "water (...) bigger than the whole world"²⁶. After sinking underwater, the skeletons resurface onshore, gain flesh, and then walk towards different directions²⁷. Loomis' enigmatic vision combines three dissimilar motifs: Jesus walking on water, the Passion and resurrection of Christ, and the Middle Passage during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. By amalgamating these Biblical and historical imageries, Wilson proposes a possibility of regarding diasporic experiences as

²⁰ Kwasi Wiredu, "Amo's Critique of Descartes' Philosophy of Mind", in *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing: 2005), p. 205-206.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 69.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, pp. 56-57.

²⁶ *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, pp. 70-71.

²⁷ *ibid.*

cultural revivals, spreading African cultures throughout numerous nations. Such a vindicating portrayal of cultural dispersal echoes Wiredu's call to *expand and develop* African traditions²⁸. Furthermore, Bynum, the spiritual counsellor who tells Loomis to break away from his past and *walk his path* like the bone-people²⁹, conveys a message resembling that of Wiredu. He, like Wiredu, regards that the "optimal flourishing of [African] tradition"³⁰ requires the protection of miscellaneous individual identities.

To conclude, the "Africanisation" of Christianity in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* challenges the imperialist and racist fantasy of erasing African identities through religious conversion. Instead, the syncretism in Afro-Christianity demonstrates limitless, multitextured expressions of African cultures and spirits. Coherently, Wilson, who rejects the fixed and stereotypical notion of "Africanness", anticipates the following statement by Wiredu: "The multiplicity of criteria of [African] belonging underlies the possibility and also, indeed, the desirability"³¹.

W7 – Reading Week

Learning Journal W8

Feminist and Queer Readings: The Hagiography of Wälättä Petros I:

Thoughts on Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner's edition of *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä Petros*

As a queer person of colour, I felt ambivalent about Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner's translation and edition of *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä Petros*.

Initially, I found the following segment particularly compelling: "I saw some young nuns pressing against each other and being lustful with each other, each with a female companion"³². Such intimate interactions within a nunnery reminded me of how homosocial institutions often become the breeding ground of homoeroticism in artworks as well as in real life. For example, John Addington Symonds, a cultural historian of 19th Century England, notes that heteronormativity loses its power in *men-only* spaces. According to his observation, no authoritarian rule can stop the members of "public schools, barracks, prisons, convents, [and] ships"³³ from enjoying same-sex unions. Moreover, even if a single-gender institution belongs to homophobic authorities, queer people may enjoy the catharsis of transgression by engaging

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *Amo's Critique of Descartes' Philosophy of Mind*, p. 206.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² Gülawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä Petros, 1672* (trans. and ed. Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner, 2015), p. 255.

³³ John Addington Symonds, *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891)

in homoerotic interactions in such heavily policed spaces. Coherently, for me, the “lustful nuns” in the hagiography (gädl) of Wälättä Petros conjured the image of *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999). In this film, director Jamie Babbit cheerfully illustrates the *lesbian love triangle* revolving around the protagonist in a conversion therapy camp.

However, our seminar convenor Sara taught us that “the lustful nuns” are likely the products of Belcher and Kleiner’s exaggerative *mistranslation* of the original text. Though disappointing, this news is not surprising, for the footnotes by Belcher and Kleiner allude to their disengagement with Ge’ez. When Gälawdewos published the hagiography of Wälättä Petros in 1672, he collected oral accounts of the people in the saint’s community. Despite such a historical background of the manuscripts, Belcher and Kleiner do not give sufficient recognition to the authorship of local speakers. Instead, the two scholars constantly compare their translations to those of the Italian scholars Conti Rossini and Lanfranco Ricci. Even when Belcher and Kleiner justify their sexualising interpretation of the nuns’ activities, they merely presume that Ricci and Rossini may have “attempt[ed] to sanitise the original text about same-sex desire³⁴.” Their simplifying explanation shows no intention of interrogating how *Ethiopian locals* would have perceived the story. In addition, Belcher’s disinterest in the local reception corresponds to her characterisation of Ethiopia as an intrinsically homophobic nation, where people treat homosexuality as a Western vice³⁵.

The dangerous tension between queer representation and the white saviour complex made me contemplate the precarious social position of LGBTQ+ people of colour. In our conversation, my fellow student Pratishta and I agreed that society generally regards “queerness” as a white value. Moreover, we said that such misconception, to a certain extent, has its roots in the explicit Anglicism in queer terminology. For instance, my South Korean family does not know about my gender identity because they do not know what “non-binary” means. To make the problem worse, nationalism in previously colonised countries promotes heteronormative ideologies, arguing that citizens must produce more offsprings to make the nation stronger.

To express my frustration, I wrote the following rage-poem. This work alludes to the story of Philomel in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. When Philomel, the princess of Athens, fights against her aggressor, he cuts her tongue with a sword. The severed tongue of the princess “wriggles as the tail cut off a snake wriggles, (...) [trying] to reach its mistress’ feet³⁶.”

APPROACHING STILL

my severed tongue
intends to offer
no blow-job

³⁴ Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä Petros, 1672* (trans. and ed. Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner, 2015), p. 255.

³⁵ Wendy Belcher, “Same-Sex Intimacies in the Early African Text Gädlä Wälättä Petros (1672): Queer Reading an Ethiopian Woman Saint.” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2016, pp. 20–45.

³⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 179.

to the order of
body non-autonomy

burrowing
in the dark sewer water
my tongue
bright and painful
schemes
diligently
licking its way out

one day
it will emerge
as a serpent
with nine heads
spurting yellow blood
like vitriol vena cava

Learning Journal W9

Feminist and Queer Readings: The Hagiography of Wälättä Petros II:

Proposing another way of "queering" the gädl of Wälättä Petros

When Wendy Belcher translates the gädl of Wälättä Petros from a *queer perspective*, she aggrandises her project as a remarkable step in empowering LGBTQ+ people of Africa by uncovering early written records on their sexualities. Nevertheless, Serwait Debele, along with many other Ethiopian scholars, critiques that Belcher's Eurocentric approach to the gädl robs queer Africans of their agency and autonomy. Most notably, Debele emphasises that Belcher's attempt to "discover Africans through [their] sexual desires"³⁷ causes readers to perceive African people and their relationships through the distortive and condescending Western lens. Belcher's disinterest in the "historic and geographic specificities"³⁸ of Ethiopian scripts results

³⁷ Serawit Debele, "The Politics of 'Queer Reading' an Ethiopian Saint and Discovering Precolonial Queer Africans", *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 34:1 (2021), pp.1-8.

³⁸ *ibid.*

in her distortion of the text: She downplays specific elements in the *gädl*, which do not coincide with European queer theories. Debele, citing Sandra Soto, remarks that such a homogenising definition of “queerness” is reductive. According to them, the most fruitful, counter-hegemonic function of queer reading is to undermine the “taken-for-grantedness³⁹” of heteronormativity by “exploring the contradictory, complex and dynamic ways in which desire and intimacy unfold in the said time⁴⁰.” I fully agree with the arguments of Debele and Soto, hence will propose a different way of *queering* the *gädl* of Wälättä Petros. Rather than hyper-valourising sexual desires, I will focus on how the saint challenges the conventional Christian understandings of gender roles and family structures.

In *Hatata*, Zar’a Ya’aqob opposes the widespread analogy likening a married couple to “[the] master and [the] servant⁴¹.” The nobleman in the text, who imagines conjugal relationships as fundamentally hierarchical, reflects patriarchal gender roles permeating Christian doctrines. The Bible “permit[s] no woman to teach or to have authority over a man⁴²” because “the husband is the head of his wife⁴³.” Such sexist statements in the scripture offered the state an easy opportunity to naturalise the female subjugation to males. Nonetheless, in her *gädl*, Wälättä Petros refuses to reunite with her converted spouse. Instead of revering the husband as her *head*, the saint fearlessly leaves the marital home to pursue a monastic life. This woman, who discontinues marriage to deliver the message of God, subverts the Christian idealisation of *silent submission* as the supreme female virtue. In addition, the *gädl* does not condemn Wälättä Petros’ unconventional action as *unnatural*. Conversely, it depicts how her departure from the sexual, and social norm deeply “pleased God⁴⁴.” In such a context, the text’s praisal of monastic female celibacy destabilises the heteronormative over-valuation of marriage. Furthermore, it encourages readers to question whether God necessitates women to become obedient servants to their husbands.

Moreover, I would like to answer Serawit Debele’s question about the possibility of *queering* filial intimacies⁴⁵. As Debele points out, Belcher overlooks how Eheta Kristos refers to Wälättä Petros as her “mother.” However, such a filial denomination has the queer potential of denaturalising the heteronormative family model. For instance, Elaine Scarry theorises that the “opening and closing of wombs⁴⁶” are the driving forces of Biblical narratives, endlessly re-enacting the initial creation of humanity. To paraphrase, God “substantiates⁴⁷” the faith of his mortal believers via his interference in every childbirth. Correspondingly, even Zar’a Ya’aqob, who works to dismantle misogynist religious doctrines, claims that God demands all humans to “conceive and give birth to children⁴⁸.” As sexuality becomes a Divine mission of humanity, Christianity leaves no room for queer familial bonds. Yet, the *gädl* of Wälättä Petros

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Zar’a Ya’aqob and Walda Heywat, *The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and our Ethical Responsibilities* (De Gruyter: 2023), pp. 99–100.

⁴² *Revised Standard Version*, 1 Tim. 2:12,15.

⁴³ 1 Cor. 11:7.

⁴⁴ Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Wälättä Petros, 1672* (trans. and ed. Wendy Belcher and Michael Kleiner, 2015), p. 96.

⁴⁵ *The Politics of ‘Queer Reading’ an Ethiopian Saint and Discovering Precolonial Queer Africans*

⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 208–215.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and our Ethical Responsibilities*, p. 75.

illustrates how the monastic community allows women to have biologically unrelated *non-kins* as their *mothers* and *sisters*. The spiritually endearing bonds between the nuns recall Elizabeth Freeman's *queer* re-definition of kinship as "a social and not a biological fact, a matter of culture rather than nature"⁴⁹.

In conclusion, if Belcher heard the actual voices of Ethiopian women instead of forcibly Westernising them, she could have found more meaningful ways of interconnecting African and queer studies. Unfortunately, her cultural colonialism is in opposition to LGBTQ+ empowerment since "queer" is not a homogenous category to exploit. The true power of "queerness" fortifies when the "open mesh of possibilities"⁵⁰ resists monolithic signification. Coherently, any scholar investigating queer theories must avoid the temptation of flattening singularisation. To quote Audre Lorde, "to queer" means to use interpersonal differences as "springboard[s] of creative [and socio-political] changes"⁵¹.

Learning Journal W10

Diffusionism, Eurocentrism, and World Literature: The First Amharic Novel I

Interrogating the unstable heterosexuality of *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik*

In her writings, Wendy Belcher problematically characterises Ethiopia as a country unable to represent its queer concern without Western interventions⁵². In contrast to this Eurocentric prejudice, Afäwäṛḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus fills *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* with interesting motifs of gender and sexual transgressions. In the text, Tobbya, the heroine dressing as a man to evade persecution, engages in intimate relationships with the King and his female cousin, the Princess. Her crossdressing not only destabilises the polarising gender dichotomy but also undermines the hegemonic naturalisation of opposite-sex attraction. Nevertheless, Afäwäṛḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus ultimately reinforces heteronormative social order, for his text denounces same-sex desire as love that is "useless"⁵³. Therefore, the author makes two implications to deny the validity of homoromantic union. First, Tobbya must retain and restore her female identity to marry the King. Second, the Princess must *straighten* her non-normative desire and shift her interest to Tobbya's twin brother.

Such tight roping between heteronormativity and non-heterosexual fantasy reminded me of many South Korean dramas, of which the "queer baiting" provokes divided responses from viewers throughout several decades. For example, during my childhood in South Korea, I felt irrepressible irritation towards a drama of national fame: *커피 프린스 1호점* (*Coffee Prince*, 2007). The plot of this drama is rather stereotypical, resembling miscellaneous

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Freeman et al, *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies* (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 299.

⁵⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick et al, *Tendencies* (United States: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 8.

⁵¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited, 2019), pp. 127–128.

⁵² Wendy Belcher, "Same-Sex Intimacies in the Early African Text Gädlä Wällättä Petros (1672): Queer Reading an Ethiopian Woman Saint." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2016, pp. 20–45.

⁵³ Afäwäṛḳ Gäbrä-Iyyäsus 1908, *Ləbb Wälläd Tarik* ("Story of the Heart"). Trans. Tadesse Tamrat 1964, "Tobbya". *Ethiopian Observer*, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 262.

romances involving *normative* gender transgression. Eunchan (은찬), the heroine cross-dressing to secure a job in a man-only workplace, develops mutual intimacy with her male boss. The boss, who becomes attracted to Eunchan while perceiving her as a boy, makes a statement that sounds queer on the surface:

“I like you. I no longer care whether you’re a man, a woman, or an alien. I can’t possibly give you up, so let’s just get to the end. Let’s go as far as we can get.

너 좋아해. 네가 남자든 외계인이든 이전 상관 안 해. 정리하면 더 힘들어서 못 해먹겠으니까, 가 보자. 갈 때까지, 한번 가 보자.”

Yet, the drama, like *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, approves of the love between the two characters only after revealing Eunchan’s “true gender” to the boss. Such heteronormative *repairing* of their relationship reflects prevalent homophobia in South Korean society, which attempts to *fix* non-normative desires. Following the national success of *Coffee Prince*, the media industry produced multiple dramas of similar narrative structures, most centring on cross-dressing female heroines. South Korean media critic Hwang Jin Mi (황진미) points out that such pseudo-queer narratives aestheticise gay romance while ultimately suturing the quasi-“homosexual” relationship as “heterosexual”⁵⁴. For this reason, many LGBTQ+ individuals in South Korea deeply despise such drama. However, I recently found an article by film critic Cho Hye Young (조혜영), which proposes the possibility of queering these romances in flimsy heterosexual garments. Cho argues that the repeated gender transitions of the cross-dressing heroines (female-to-male-to-female) ironically expose the fundamental *constructedness* and *performativity* of genders⁵⁵. Comparably, I will analyse how the *straightening* of non-heterosexual relationships in *Labb Wälläd Tarik* unintentionally denaturalises heteronormativity.

It is odd how Afāwārķ Gābrā-Iyyūsus clarifies that the King’s “admiration⁵⁶” for Tobbya “changed into real love⁵⁷” when he knew her *true identity*. This statement does not contribute to the development of the plot, nor does it extra-authenticate the King’s love for Tobbya. Instead, it exposes an anxiety that (male) homosexuality may threaten the social order of the kingdom. Even before the dramatic gender reveal, the *worrisome familiarity*⁵⁸ grows

⁵⁴ 황진미 (Hwang Jin Mi), “맨”과 “맨”이 어때서: ‘브로맨스’ 시지미 때까지 알고 귀여는 귀여의 것으로 (Whatever happens between “Man” and “Man”: ‘Bromance’, a sanitising label that appropriates queerness), 한겨레 21 (The Hankyoreh 21), May 2020 [online] < https://h21.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture_general/43518.htm >

⁵⁵ 조혜영 (Cho Hye Young), 서로를 모사하고 조월하는 젠더의 얼굴: 내 것이 더 좋아 (The faces of genders that imitate and exceed each other: I like mine better), 한국 영화 데이터베이스 (KMDb), October 2023 [online] < <https://www.kmdb.or.kr/story/717/7591> >

⁵⁶ *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, p. 262.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, p. 258-259.

between the King and Tobbya-in-men's-attire. Thus, the following invitation from the King to Tobbya bears homoromantic/homoerotic nuances:

"Listen young boy. Wouldn't you like to live with me? Wouldn't you like me to make you one of my intimate courtiers, (...) and confer upon you (...) illustrious decorations?"⁵⁹

If Afäwäṛk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus does not frame the King's feelings for Tobbya as "an innocent admiration"⁶⁰, the relationship between the two characters may draw a dangerous parallel between political and sexual customs: The King's recruitment of his *intimate* male couriers, and the "pagan" convention of "possessing every woman (...) as his wife"⁶¹. This interlinking of the court and male homoeroticism dismantles the patriarchal configurations of sexuality. For instance, it may allow a courier like Tobbya to "satisfy"⁶² other men with his "sweet smile"⁶³.

To prevent the complete dissolution of gender and sexual norms, Afäwäṛk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus repeatedly highlights how Tobbya's *true* feminine beauty shines out through her "false" masculine disguise. Yet, the emphasis on Tobbya's femininity results in another queer narrative. To specify, the Princess falls in love with Tobbya, who "regain[s] her real [feminine] self and [grows] more and more beautiful every day."⁶⁴ At this point of the story, Tobbya "[is] of medium suture such as would become a perfect lady"⁶⁵ and has "fingers (...) as smooth and tender as Amelmalo"⁶⁶. Nonetheless, the Princess becomes drawn to our heroine's physical attributes, "always star[ing] at Tobbya whenever she saw him"⁶⁷. Such overlapping of homo- and heterosexual attractions implies that the "delicacy and sweetness of the woman"⁶⁸ in Tobbya, which differentiates her from her "dashing"⁶⁹ brother, may have captivated the Princess. In addition, the interaction between the two female characters undermines the glorification of heterosexuality as the only "real love"⁷⁰. Since Tobbya finds comfort in speaking with a girl, she talks "more freely and willingly with the princess than with the king or his courtiers"⁷¹. Consequently, the King perceives this *friendship* as a sign of romantic reciprocation⁷². Thus, such dramatic *mis*interpretation reveals the unstable, porous border between homosocial intimacy and homoromantic/homoerotic attraction.

Unfortunately, I do not have sufficient knowledge about queerness in Ethiopian literature to produce a convincing conclusion for my literary analysis. However, the unstable *heterosexuality* in *Labb Wälläd Tarik* reminded me of the impact of gender ambiguity in different cultures. First, Ancient Romans showed profound interest in the dual-sexed deity

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, pp. 260–263.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*

Hermaphroditus, who fell into all four categories of Greco-Roman sexualities: Female, male, passive, and active. Second, in *Transgender History*, Susan Stryker details how the dissolution of the gender binary complicates the conventional system of classifying erotic desires. When one cannot discern the *sameness* and *differences* between genders, labels such as homo- or heterosexuality lose their monolithic integrity⁷³. Additionally, speaking from my cultural conscience, gender ambiguity has been a central theme running through the K-POP industry for decades. K-POP, which started as a youth-oriented subculture in the 1990s, was always in a close relationship with queer aesthetics and cultures. In particular, gender-transgressing male artists have always gained notable attention from the queer and (presumably) heterosexual public (Figure 1). The nation's fascination with *feminine masculinity* intrigues me for two reasons. First, the South Korean public shows less attention and empathy towards female artists defying gender norms. In my opinion, this double standard indicates that the country imposes stricter gender roles upon populations assigned female at birth (AFAB). Furthermore, like the Princess in *Labb Wällād Tarik*, many AFAB individuals feel attracted to "androgynous" male artists. Coherently, various Korean scholars attempted to track the roots of *the female fascination with androgynous men*. Nevertheless, I have not encountered any writing truly encompassing the unending variety of non-normative gender identities and sexual desires triggering such a socio-cultural phenomenon.



Figure 10. Gender-transgressing male K-POP artists over the past decades: Top left – 오종혁 (Oh Jong Huk, debuted in 1999) / Top Right – 태민 (Taemin, debuted in 2008) / Bottom Left – Felix (debuted in 2018) / Bottom Right – 윈빈 (Wonbin, debuted in 2023).

⁷³ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution, Second Edition* (London: Hachette UK, 2017), p. 16.

I, a non-binary South Korean expatriate whose queer identity inevitably intersects with the K-POP subculture, can only speak from my personal experience. Correspondingly, I argue that the studies of non-Western, hence under-represented queer cultures require sufficient representation of the first-person voices of local LGBTQ+ folks. Hoping society understands better queer desires that are not entirely hetero- or homosexual (like the Princess' love for Tobbya), I will attach my self-insert fan-poetry starring a gender-transgressing K-POP artist Wonbin (원빈, image in Figure 1). Am I allowed to do this in my learning journal? I don't think so! But I don't have any well-defined literary work to articulate my messy, un-academic feelings!

Love in March

Their curveless, flat chest
Resembles the Polish desert looking towards the Baltic Sea
Desolation shines bright in white sunlight
As gender sets off to the sky like sand grains

When Wonbin lays his head on *Them*,
Surface tension of a supernatural sort blooms
Between bodies overlaying like bread and butter

As a twinkling thread links one fish to another,
As lush lands link one river to another,
A laid-back nation links the Second and the Fourth of March

At the late hour when the bolt loosens,
One at last can love the shouldn't-be-loved

Their long fingers run through Wonbin's hairs

This affectionate gesture is motherlike, fatherly,
Infatuating, quasi-everlasting, gently perfumed
With a secret hidden under the pillow

(The original Korean version of this poem is uploaded to my personal website:
<https://m00nside.postype.com/post/16397660>)

Learning Journal W11

Diffusionism, Eurocentrism, and World Literature: The First Amharic Novel II

Critique of European Diffusionism

In her essay, Sara Marzagora criticises how European diffusionism functions as a self-serving mechanism, essentialising the Occident's politico-cultural domination over the Orient⁷⁴. For example, she critiques Franco Moretti, who characterises the modern novel as a *Western invention* influencing all literary cultures. From the Morettian perspective, world literature is “one and equal⁷⁵,” for non-Western writers must emulate “Western formal influence⁷⁶” to create modern literary pieces. In such a context, Fikre Tolossa argues that *Labb Wälläd Tarik* is not a “world novel” but a “failed” attempt of Afäwäṛk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus to assimilate Western narrative features. Opposing such interlinking of Europeanism and literary modernity, Marzagora implies that *Westernisation* is not the ultimate, solitary doorway to internationality. According to her, *Labb Wälläd Tarik* is a uniquely global text dismantling the Morettian definition of world literature. Whereas Moretti understands non-Western literature as the local *reconfiguration* of Western literary forms, the narrative and format of *Labb Wälläd Tarik* chiefly respond to the intercultural interactions within Ethiopia. Therefore, a closer interrogation of Afäwäṛk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus’ work reveals multilayered and intersecting *worlds* within his nation, which the universalist world model overlooks.

In support of Marzagora, I will explore the “located globality” of *Labb Wälläd Tarik* by applying our seminar discussion to the text. First, during our seminar, Sara taught us that the continued political centralisation of modern Ethiopia caused people of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds to co-reside in the same nation. Moreover, she mentioned that such intermingling of various population groups resulted in significant tensions between languages. Correspondingly, in *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, Afäwäṛk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus repeatedly depicts the difficulties of communicating with different communities. For instance, when Wahid is sold into slavery in a region where he “cannot understand the language of the people around him⁷⁷,” he should assess the situation solely by “look[ing] around and guess[ing] what they meant.” In addition, the king suggests that the God, who “listens to the prayers of all people in their various languages⁷⁸,” may promote unity in a *multilingual* country. Such frictions surrounding multilingualism testifies to the following statement by Marzagora: The dissolution of the singular *Ethiopian national reality* inspired Afäwäṛk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus to develop a new literary form, the *imaginary story from the heart*⁷⁹.

Furthermore, as multilingualism complicates verbal conversations between characters, *Labb Wälläd Tarik* focuses heavily on social meanings inscribed on bodies. Most notably, as Tobbya cross-dresses and *performs* masculinity, she breaks away from the stereotypical roles allotted to individuals with *female bodies*. Yet, the text calls attention to other somatic schemas, which it assumes to be intrinsic and/or unconcealable. For instance, “[the fingers of Tobbya’s father], used only to holding glass bottles [easily develop] hard scales as a result of daily work with the axe and similar impediments⁸⁰.” Accordingly, his “tender body⁸¹” is an effective

⁷⁴ Sara Marzagora, “The first Ethiopian novel in Amharic (1908) and the world: Critical and theoretical legacies”, in *African Literature as World Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

⁷⁵ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review*, 1 (Jan/Feb 2000)

<<https://newleftreview.org/issues/11/articles/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>> [accessed 16 March 2024]

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Afäwäṛk Gäbrä-Iyyäsus 1908, *Labb Wälläd Tarik* (“Story of the Heart”). Trans. Tadesse Tamrat 1964, “Tobbya”, *Ethiopian Observer*, vol. 8, no. 3, p. 250.

⁷⁸ *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, p. 256.

⁷⁹ *The first Ethiopian novel in Amharic (1908) and the world: Critical and theoretical legacies*, p. 7.

⁸⁰ *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, p. 243.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

marker of his noble origin. Additionally, as the author illustrates the horror of slavery, he specifically notes that the slave merchant was “as black as Satan himself⁸².” In this manner, Afäwärf Gäbrä-Iyyäsus portrays skin colours as indicators of one’s intrinsic *vices* and *virtues*. Such classed and racialised descriptions of the bodies reminded me of another conversation we had during the seminar. During our discussion, we briefly touched upon how skin colour became the social signifier in post-19th century Ethiopia: It represented the ethno-racial, cultural, class, and economic backgrounds of citizens.

In conclusion, *Labb Wälläd Tarik* demonstrates complex and multilayered interactions between different languages, cultures, religions, and bodies in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, European academia does not show sufficient interest in such *local concerns* of the non-West. This lack of interest likely stems from the Occidental perception of the Orient as a homogenous unit, sharing one trait in common: Their non-European Otherness.

My frustration with such Eurocentric indifference is growing rapidly, especially concerning King’s College London’s silence about the ongoing genocide in Palestine. To elaborate, on the 13th of May 2024, “KCL Students for Justice in Palestine (KCL.SJP)” urged the university to “boycott Israeli academic institutions (Figure 1)” responsible for the apartheid and ethnic cleansing in Palestine. Correspondingly, earlier on the 5th of May, “KCL Palestine Action group” demanded the university to “establish links with Palestinian universities and end “Israeli” educational ties (Figure 2).” After reading the words of these two organisations, I realised an unpleasant bias in my higher education programmes. During my undergraduate and postgraduate studies at King’s College London, the professors made me read publications from “Israeli” universities and taught me about antisemitism in Europe. However, I have never read publications from any institution relating to Palestine, nor have I formally learnt about anti-Palestinian violence and genocides. Although this might be far-fetched, I want to pose a question about the Euro-American condonation of Israeli attacks on Palestine: *Are Western authorities less sympathetic to Palestine because they consider the country the irrelevant Other, completely unrelated to the West?* To cite Abdulhafeth Ali Khrisat, Europe constantly produced demeaning caricatures of Arabs and Muslims to clearly separate the Christian and Occidental “us” from the pagan and Oriental “them⁸³.” Moreover, in my analysis of the offensive graffiti in Wrocław, I argued that the hate towards *the coloured Other* is the driving force of Islamophobia in Europe. Coherently, I suspect that the tight collusion of Eurocentrism, racism, and Islamophobia causes the West to condone or perpetrate violence against the people of colour in Islamic nations.

⁸² *Labb Wälläd Tarik*, p. 250.

⁸³ Abdulhafeth Ali Khrisat, “The Image of the Orient in Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*”, in *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2-5 (2012).



Figure 11. Instagram Post by "KCL Students for Justice in Palestine"

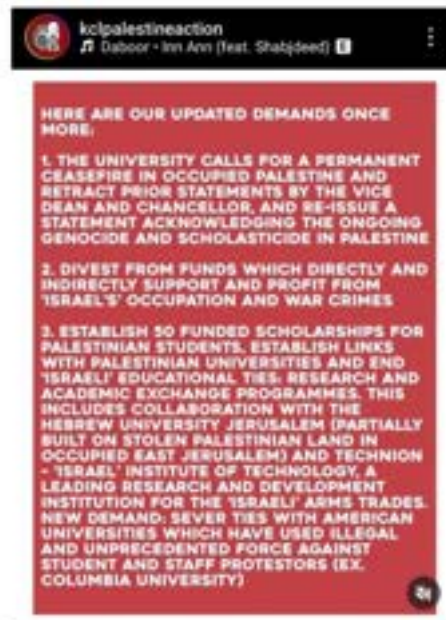


Figure 12. Instagram Post by "KCL Palestine Action group"

In addition, the hierarchical divide between the Occidental "us" and the Oriental "them" leads to another problem. Reflecting on my lived experience as a Korean expatriate, I will claim that the West regards "East Asian" as quasi-synonymous with "Japanese." Euro-American *representations* of Asian cultures excessively focus on exoticising/fetishising Japan, and "East Asian literary studies" in Western institutions often revolve around Japanese literature. As a person from a former Japanese colony, I found such bias unsettling. Yet, I had

to accept it regardless of my personal feelings, for being *colonial* requires you to conform to social orders that belittle you. However, my attitude towards *Japonisme* took a sharp turn as I attended an art exhibition: "Cute", curated in The Courtauld Gallery between January and April 2024. Since I familiarised myself with Asian and African studies in my Comparative Literature MA programme, I found the homogenous Whiteness of the Japanese manga (cartoon) characters eerie (Figure 3). I thought: *Was the Japanese import of European aesthetics a byproduct of the country's emulation of Western imperialism?* The Courtauld Gallery's explanations for the artworks soon confirmed my suspicion as they provided the following description of Taishō Roman (大正ロマン):

A highly influential modern art movement in Japan, in which the artists actively employed European aesthetics, adding Japanese twists to the Art Nouveau style.

During the Taishō period (大正時代, 1912–1926), Japan viciously colonised its neighbouring nations, stealing lands, crops, natural resources, craftsmen, artworks, workers, and women from the colonies. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the Japanese Empire modelled itself after Western imperial regimes, translating European imperialism as "kokutairon (国体論)": The political ideology regarding Japan as a unified family led by the emperor (天皇, Tennō). Thus, it is impossible to separate the Europeanism of Taishō Roman from Japanese imperial conquests. Nonetheless, The Courtauld Gallery, like any other Western institution *introducing* Asia to Europe, offered no information about the colonial legacy of Japanese arts. Consequently, the artworks' affinity to European aestheticism acted as a mirror, reflecting the *Japanified* faces of Western imperialism to British viewers. To paraphrase, the West *selectively* represents specific non-Western cultures that adhere to their social, political, and cultural interests. Therefore, it is undoubtedly meaningful to ask this question about the current landscapes of international politics: *What does it mean that Europe shows significantly greater sympathy towards Israel, one of few non-European countries participating in Eurovision?*



Figure 13. Mangas of the "Cute" exhibition