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Faculty of Arts & Humanities  
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Module Title:	Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali Literatures in Global Intellectual History
Module Code: (e.g. 5AABC123 )	6ABA0013
Assignment: (may be abbreviated)	Learning journal with ten entries
Assignment tutor/group:	Dr Sara Marzagora
Deadline:	9 January 2024 by 4pm
Date Submitted:	8 December 2023
Word Count:	16946

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YES  NO

# LEARNING JOURNAL

DECEMBER 2023



ETHIOPIAN,  
ERITREAN AND  
SOMALI  
LITERATURES  
IN GLOBAL  
INTELLECTUAL  
HISTORY

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# WEEK ONE

## AN AFRICAN ENLIGHTENMENT?

ZARA YACOB, HATATA (1667)

*"I said to my master Habtu: "Give me this woman [Hirut] as a wife." My master Habtu agreed and told me: "Hereafter she is not my maidservant, but yours." But I replied: "I do not wish her to be my maidservant, but my wife; husband and wife are equal in marriage; we should not call them master and maidservant; for they are one flesh and one life."*

(Zara Yacob, *Hatata*, p. 20-21)

### **A new academic year of course means new modules...**

but that is not to say I won't be making my very first learning journal entry with reference to my previous study of Ethiopian literature, particularly in relation to last year's 'Medieval and Modern African Literatures' module, which I find to be a pertinent point of departure for Week One.

I have selected the above

quote from Zara Yacob's *Hatata*, as it neatly illustrates the preoccupations I have had with Ethiopian literature to date, as well as those I have continued to engage with during the course of this week's reading. To elaborate, while reading I was continually impressed (and at times surprised) by the engagement of the *Hatata* with what may be considered largely protofeminist discourse. In the quote above, for example, Zara Yacob argues that husband and wife should be seen as equal, as they are "one


flesh and one life", which deviates from the typically patriarchal religious doctrines present within Ethiopian society - which Zara Yacob also denounces.

### **1. THE ENTANGLEMENT OF PATRIARCHY, CAPITALISM AND CLASS VIS-A-VIS ETHIOPIAN WOMEN**

My first line of enquiry involves situating Zara Yacob's meditations on women alongside two heroines from the Ethiopian canon who I

have previously studied, and who are both immersed in Ethiopia's particularly volatile religious landscape and all it signifies in relation to womanhood: Walatta Petros, and Queen Makeda.

I am first intrigued by the notion of Ethiopian protofeminist attitudes in specific relation to wealth and status, which is where I will return to Zara Yacob's *Hatata*. Although Walatta Petros and the Queen of Sheba are not exactly able to escape patriarchal constructs and the dogma surrounding them,



they command and are afforded a certain amount of respect and attention due to their particular status as aristocratic or royal - this is particularly evident at the beginning of both of their tales, in which Walatta Petros has the agency to abandon her domestic life, and Queen Makeda leads a respectable reign as she has not yet been sexually assaulted by Solomon (causing her to lose her political power).

With all this in mind, I now turn to another passage of the *Hatata*, found on page 24, in which Zara Yacob searches for a suitable wife for his son: "I began searching for a wife and after a time I found a beautiful girl named Madhanit; she was the daughter of the chieftain of herdsmen, from a place called Lamgye. My son loved her; the father gave this daughter fifteen heads of cattle and clothes, she became the wife of my son and we lived together in love".

This passage intrigues me, as it is seemingly of particular note to Zara Yacob that "the father gave this daughter fifteen heads of cattle and clothes". As the daughter of a chieftain, it is clear she has wealth and status;

- and I am most interested by the fact that this status is framed between two assertions of domestic love and respect: "My son loved her", and "she became the wife of my son and we lived together in love".

This has prompted me to wonder, in conjunction with our recent seminar discussion, if this respect and love would extend to this daughter even if she was not the daughter of a chieftain, and did not have cattle or clothes to give. This, if true, would be a truly "protofeminist" approach. My thoughts can be summarised as follows, which I have separated and stylised as bullet points for ease of following the separate threads:

1. It is natural that wealth and status would afford women more social mobility, but as with Walatta Petros and Queen Makeda, it does not truly give them enough to escape the typical optics of patriarchal religion in 16th century Ethiopia - which means Zara Yacob's respect for women operates regardless of, and beyond, typical notions of patriarchy and class.

2. It could also be said that the initial extract,

involving Zara Yacob's choice of his master's maidservant to be his own wife, would entirely disprove the notion that his amiability towards women depends on class structures.

3. Equally, we could also argue here that patriarchy as we know it is a modern invention which was disseminated along with the rise of colonialism and capitalism (as I expound upon in the below section) - in which case, patriarchy in Ethiopia would not meaningfully interact with the predominantly capitalist notions of wealth and status before the integration of capitalism into Ethiopian society.

These three tenets appear to establish Zara Yacob's protofeminist approach as not just applicable in abstraction, but as able to meaningfully negotiate the immediate and complex social network of patriarchy and capitalism to produce a truly transcendental form of protofeminist thinking. Isn't it amazing what spending two years in a cave can do? I am sure some modern philosophers could stand to do the same, if it results in such a rational approach to women's rights. Which leads me, as it happens, to my second line of enquiry for this week.

## 2. IS ZARA YACOB'S PROTOFEMINIST APPROACH REALLY "PROTO"?

It is indeed the case that Zara Yacob also expresses further lines of protofeminist enquiry which are strikingly modern for the apparent age of the text, if we do not believe the forgery argument made by Italian scholars in relation to the *Hatata*. Other arguments of his include that sexual contact between men and women is not sinful as long as it is done with the intent of procreation; that women should not be considered impure while on their menstrual period; and that men would be worse than wild animals if they were to wilfully abandon their wives and families.

That being said, I have equally been considering that instead of this line of thinking being modern, it is in fact more likely retrograde. The seminar discussion brought up key points about the development (or rather, degradation) of women's roles in the public sector in Ethiopian history - which was not really even distinguished as its own individual "sector".

To elaborate: I have learnt that changes to the conception of gender in Ethiopia occurred during the rise of capitalism,

before which there was no distinction between private and public life. Women were very involved in labour and production (which could equally refer to childbirth as it could working on farms, for example). The witch-hunts of the late modern period marked the start of the rise of capitalism, and hence the forced conformity of women, on the back of colonialist expansion throughout and around Ethiopia.

As such, perhaps it is the case that a protofeminist viewpoint which advocates for gender equality between the sexes (as depicted in the maidservant/master passage), women's agency with regard to both sexual and non-sexual (re)production, and the responsibility of men to provide for their household just as much as women, all reflect past ideas about the blended role of women in Ethiopian society - all of which are only just beginning to re-emerge following the grip of capitalism and colonialism over Ethiopia in the modern period. This would also explain why Orthodox Christianity still abides by the arguably misogynistic tenets which Zara Yacob criticises,

such as not allowing women to go to church while on their menstrual period - a question which intrigued me during the seminar as someone from an Orthodox Christian background myself.

It is exactly this which I think the secondary reading by Teodros Kiros touches upon when it discusses how Zara Yacob "indigenized reason and simultaneously gave it a regional and international color". In this module I would like to be attentive to my own standpoint as a "Western" contemporary reader. Maybe it is that Zara Yacob manages to articulate an indigenous protofeminist sensibility which the Western world continues to stray further away from under the pretense of modernity, still lingering as we are within the dark age of capitalism and colonialism. Maybe Zara Yacob's views are not actually "modern" at all, and in some respects that, in the context of Ethiopia's cultural history, could be taken as a good thing.

# WEEK TWO

# THE FIRST NOVEL IN AMHARIC

**AFÄWÄRQ GÄBRÄ-IYYÄSUS, LƏBB  
WÄLLÄD TARIK ("STORY OF THE  
HEART") / "TOBBYA" (1908)**

*“Mälk’e is a form of religious poetry specifically composed in reverence to Jesus, Mary, the angels and saints. For instance, the poetry to venerate Mary is called mälk’a-Maryam (literally, “the appearance of Mary”). As the word itself suggests, the poetry describes the physical appearance of the “subject” beginning with the hair and going all the way down to the toes, endowing each part with a sacred attribute or some life-giving force. Afework Gabrayasus’ description of T’obbiya’s physical beauty draws upon this tradition and compares her hair, for instance, to the lush grain just before harvest time”.*

(Yonas Admassu, "The First-born of Amharic Fiction", p. 112, footnote 7.)

To begin this week’s journal entry, I will first outline the reason why I have selected this quote as my starting point today: namely, it raises the two themes I am interested in with regards to *Tobbya*. I will demarcate these below, and explore them accordingly.

### **1. TOBBYA’S RELATIONSHIP TO, AND COMPLICATION OF, GENDER**

This point will be briefer than the others, but I still find it worth mentioning. I find the notion of the “swapping” of *Tobbya* and *Wahid* within the text very intriguing; it is not something I have seen before in any other work. Although *Afawarq* states that *Tobbya* “always had the delicacy and sweetness of the woman in her”, while *Wahid* expressed the “dashing” characteristics of boyhood, these qualities were clearly not distinct

enough for anyone to adequately take notice of them - to the point that the two could be swapped without notice.

Thus far I have been fascinated by the way that Ethiopian Orthodox Christian literature has complicated and explored ideas of gender, from as far back as the 16th century all the way to the 20th. The fact that the King expresses such an affinity for *Tobbya* even before she exposes herself as a girl may warrant an examination into the nature of this affection - the constant mentions of her “heavenly beauty” and “sweet personality” surely do not only warrant only the platonic “admiration” of the King; though I imagine that even if it was to be translated as love at this stage, it would likely be neatly excused by the aforementioned notion that she always seemed to express the sensibilities of a woman.

I am also drawn to the paradox of the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of women in Ethiopian literature, and particularly in *Tobbya*. *Tobbya* is regarded as exceedingly beautiful, to the point it almost gives away her true gender - which remains masked for the vast majority of the story. She is a major character within the story, which is (re)named after her, and the narrative largely focuses and relies on her as it progresses - in this way she is undeniably ‘visible’, in the same way as other Ethiopian Orthodox Christian heroines have had their own tales dedicated to them. The stories of these women are being told - narratively and allegorically they are made visible - but much of these stories involve the complication, manipulation, or total obscuration of their gender in its material form.

They are only truly “visible” to us, the readers of these tales, which is an interesting thought.

A final point on gender I am interested in is the proverb *Afawarq* references: “A man who spends most of his time with a woman is almost a woman himself.” Of course, there seem to be misogynistic undertones peeking through this sentence - but as you watch the former general cry in selfless fear for his daughter, who he is willing to sacrifice his own life to protect; and as you watch *Tobbya* bravely assert herself, not shying away from the multifarious conflicts she is confronted with throughout the narrative - yet another complication arises before the modern reader’s eyes. I, for one, have begun to wonder what “being a woman” means in this context, and if it is really so bad.



On a related note, I was intrigued by Yonas Admassu's pointing-out of the comparisons between Tobbya's physical form and the natural world (such as her hair being like the lush grain before harvest) - of course, it has been very common throughout history to compare women's bodies with the natural world. It has been especially common following the joint legacies of colonialism and capitalism, which have often taken advantage of female labour and demarcated the female body as yet another "territory" to colonise and claim ownership of.

To expand my knowledge on this area, I went to an exhibition currently showing at the Barbican, called 'Re/Sisters' (a play on the suffix 'Re', such as in (ecological) renewal,

and the words 'Sisters' and 'Resisters' - intended to reflect women's fight for representation of, and within, the natural environments they inhabit). To make the most of my visit, I wrote a review of it for KCL's arts and culture magazine as well (the Strand Magazine). In this review, I found myself arguing that despite the intention of the exhibition, women were somehow not visually represented for half of the exhibition - the only thing which united some of the pieces were the fact that women made them. I wonder if, then, the issue of female narrative vs. material (in)visibility is one which we still have to grapple with, even in this day and age.

I went to the media view, so wasn't able to take pictures of any of the

installations, but below is one I took of the title card to brighten up the page!

## 2. MĀLK'Ē POETRY AND RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY

This is the line of enquiry I am most fascinated by for this week, as someone who is particularly interested in conceptions of gender within a religious context.

I tried quite extensively to find examples of the *Mālk'ē* poetry form to analyse, but was disappointed to find no examples which had been translated into English. The most I found were three scholarly articles written in French, and some YouTube videos in Amharic without subtitles. The thought was there, but the execution was difficult!

However! I was excited to find one essay, by Kay Kaufman Shelemay (1982), on *Zema* - a sacred musical form in Ethiopia, and the primary form of liturgical music there, practiced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Having focused much of my study on written religious texts thus far, I looked forward to finally exploring other forms of religious art, including iconography (which I have wanted to look into for some time now) and music (which is one of my personal interests, as well as the industry I work in - although I doubt I will meet a Zema singer in my line of work any time soon, as much as I would like to).

The full citation of Shelemay's essay, which I shall paraphrase below, is as follows:



*Shelemay, Kay Kaufman, "Zēmā: A Concept of Sacred Music in Ethiopia", The World of Music, 24:3, Sacred Music (1982), pp. 52-67.*

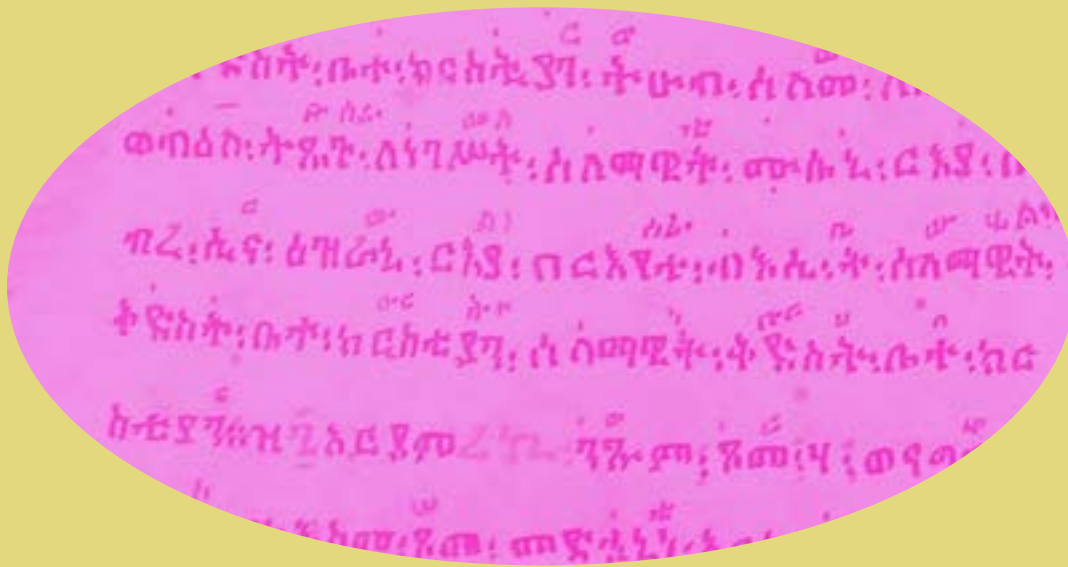


Image: 'Meleket' musical notation, from Sewasew website ([en.sewasew.com](http://en.sewasew.com))

From reading this article, I learnt that zema is performed exclusively by highly trained male musicians, who are known as *dabtaroč*. Alongside their musical function, they usually practice as healers, where they are considered “superior to other healers because of [their] sacral status and [their] association with *ganen*, “spirits” or “demons””.

More intriguing to me was the description of how the oral tradition has developed, and how it takes place in practice. The music is divided into “two sides” and performed in antiphonal style - which I found especially interesting, as the Greek Orthodox tradition I am used to does the same; I had never had a word for it before now. It was equally interesting to find out that “melodies are never sung without text”,

and “the close association of melody and text has given rise to a text-based system of musical notation, called Meleket - which is the “only indigenous system of musical notation in Africa”, according to a Sewasew article on the form.

Once they have mastered the basics, *dabtaroč* move on to incorporate dance and musical instruments, including kettledrums, sistrums, and prayer staffs. In Ethiopian Jewish tradition, the credit for the invention of musical instruments goes to one of the priests from the *Kebrā Nagast*, Azarius.

Finally, the *dabtaroč* attend a third school, where they learn to improvise two Ethiopian Orthodox poetic forms: *gene*, and the aforementioned *malk'e*, which brings us back

full circle to the beginning of my enquiry.

For good measure, I listened to a few of the chants on YouTube to get a feel for the form. It felt familiar, but not actually in relation to my own familiarity with Greek Orthodoxy at all - the dancing and instruments made it feel much more cheerful. I was surprised to find it shared more similarities with the classical Indian music I am also used to - I had never before noticed their (relative) closeness on the world map, but I wonder if that may be something worth exploring more closely in a later week.

To wrap up my research into Ethiopian Orthodox religious art forms, I found it only appropriate to look into Ethiopian iconography, particularly after recalling the comment made during the

lecture and seminar that Ethiopia has often been depicted through images of women, and that Ethiopia has a rich history of iconography and illustrated manuscripts. (Which I have found have been a source of much interest by tourists - I wonder if there's something to be said here about the ethics of reproducing holy images. Does the image remain sacred even once it has been reproduced? What makes an image sacred? These are some of the more conceptual questions I have always been fascinated by, but which I think lie outside the scope of this entry, or indeed this module.)

I found it easiest to approach Ethiopian Orthodox iconography by once again comparing it to Greek Orthodox iconography, which once again added a personal dimension to my learning.

Greek Orthodox icons are not meant to be realistic; instead they are intended to be a reflection of the spiritual world. Faces are much more detailed, and shimmering gold is a very common colour in such icons; the varied and cheerfully colourful palette of Ethiopian manuscript drawings is much rarer to find.

A few blogs remarked on the “innocence and child-like features”, and the “joy-filled and peaceful faces of the saints” which characterise many icons within Coptic iconographic art, which Ethiopian art subsequently developed from. Use of colour and lines is simplistic. Saints depicted look at each other, or past the viewer; rarely directly at them. Aside from illustrated manuscripts, some of the art produced was made smaller so as to even be wearable. Perhaps my interest in iconography does exceed that of the average person - I soon fell down the rabbit hole of how to go about drawing an Orthodox icon, to which I found a 9-chapter guide on how to do so.

I decided to bookmark this and leave my musings on it for another time. To digress for now, here is an example of Ethiopian iconographic art, for the sake of illustrating these points, and indeed as a pleasant way to wrap up this week’s learning.



Image: *Virgin Enthroned III*  
Unknown Ethiopian Artist  
Tempera/gouache on leather  
22.5 x 16 cm.

# WEEK THREE

## THE FIRST NOVEL IN TIGRINYA

GEBREYESUS HAILU, *THE CONSCRIPT*  
(WRITTEN 1927, PUBLISHED 1950)

“[In *The Conscript*,] the use of indigenous oral tradition [is] effectively employ[ed] as a vehicle to tell lived and imagined experiences.”

(Ghirmai Negash, "Native Intellectuals in the Contact Zone: African Responses to Italian Colonialism in Tigrinya Literature", p. 76)

Ghirmai Negash's above observations provide the point of departure for this week's analysis of *The Conscript*. This week, I was intrigued by the use of oral tradition in Gebreyesus Hailu's novel and how it is able to track and respond to the political situation of the narrative at various points. To incorporate Ghirmai's later observations into this point, the use of oral tradition to articulate contemporary colonial politics is a particularly effective way of negotiating - and even narratively influencing - complex and "asymmetrical relations of power [...] between the forces and agents of colonization and the colonized in an intensely contested political and cultural space".

The fact that *The Conscript* was written during colonial occupation in 1927, but was originally unable to be published due to Italian restrictions over the production of literature, during which time they also restricted the access of the colonised Ethiopian/Eritrean population to education, commands even further attention to be paid to its use of language: both as rebellion and as a reconstruction of traditions and cultures which had long been withheld from the colonised population.

It is thus interesting to analyse the progression of *The Conscript's* oral elements (chant, song, poem/dirge, anthem), in light of this specific political climate.

I equally want to look at how the "tradition" element of the aforementioned "oral tradition" comes into play here. A close reading of the text based on these two conjoined points will be the focus of this learning journal entry.

It could be argued that all of the most important parts of *The Conscript* are heralded with an oral element accordingly. The story begins by explaining how Tuquabo got his name: "his mother insisted that he be named Tuquabo Medhaniye Alem (God's gift) for receiving a great blessing from her God. And so they named him". The notion of the importance of names is emphasised by the further note that "his father was called Habte-Mikael, and his mother, Tek'a",

and the fact that Tuquabo's father would be pleased when Tuquabo would "lear[n] the name of his ancestors from him [...] his father would play with him by testing if he knew his pedigree, and ask him "Who is your father," to which Tuquabo would answer, "I am Habte-Mikael's son," to the father's expectant joy. His father would add more to the list, each time teaching him more. "Habte-Mikael is the son of Hidru; Hidru was the son of Red'ai...". This is not only limited to people - later on, the narrator also quips that "An Ethiopian has respect for places named in the Bible".

As such, the notion of tradition, especially within a spoken framework (such as Tuquabo listing names aloud), is established very early on.

The story soon expands outward to include other aural snippets - on page 7, Tuquabo hears the youth of Eritrea singing "He is a woman who refuses to go to Libya". This fundamentally threatens his sense of masculinity; as the narrator elaborates, "for someone born at this period of time, it happened gradually that all the songs and information were stamped on his heart [...] he resolved to go to Libya to fight as a hero and gain fame. [...] His ambition may also have been influenced by those Habesha chiefs who said they hated to sit idle after a brief break from going to war. They begged, "Lord, don't let us be dormant, please bring us war." Their eagerness was evident in their boastful saying that the exercise might help trim their fattened bodies."

From here onwards, oral tradition - in this case, song and spoken sayings - directly influences the narrative. Tuquabo goes to war specifically because these acts of speech have fired him up; the songs threaten his nascent masculinity, while the very paradigms/role models of masculinity in his society, the Habesha chiefs, express their desire for war as directly conducive to their maintaining their desirability as men, while also playing down the severity of war to make it

seem equally desirable to the onlooker: "the exercise might help trim their fattened bodies".

When the train first arrives to take the conscripts away, the "women s[ing] together a melancholy song, "The train comes smoking and your mother's daughter is crying". Not only is this particular refrain interesting for the fact that it returns cyclically at the end of the narrative, once Tuquabo returns from the war; it also calls to mind once again the tradition aspect of oral tradition, in which the phrase "mother's daughter" recalls notions of heritage (and indeed how this heritage is affected and disrupted by war).

This point is further pressed later on, when the narrator discusses the futility of war and cultural "grudges" specifically through reference to oral tradition and how it is inherited across generations: "There may be some who think that fighting the Arabs on behalf of the Italians and exterminating them from the face of the earth was forgivable considering that the Arabs and black Africans were historically enemies. But what was being done would one day lead to one's fall. If one day they come led by a Frenchman or an Italian to fight, didn't the Habesha know that the Arabs were going to pay

back with vengeance? Don't they know that they would tell their children, generation after generation, that whatever they might forget, they should not forget the blood of Habesha? And that this bloodletting would go on forever?".

To return to the women's lament at the sight of the train, it is also notable that strong emotions within the text are always expressed through song. When the Habesha are assigned to shifts as night guards, "their lament was expressed in the refrain they sang: "Libya, Libya, Libya, running during daytime, and guarding at night." During his shift as a night guard, Tuquabo becomes so depressed that he "[finds] himself singing. "You are drying up in the empty field, thrown in a place you know not, neither for your father's nor your mother's sake."" And on the topic of his mother, as she becomes increasingly overwhelmed by grief, she is described as "sometimes spending the whole day calling her son's name, like a person who has gone insane".

Sometimes the narrator also muses on the creation and dissemination of words themselves. The soldiers invent the word "marching" in Tigrinya to specifically describe their exhausting experience, which "walking" is no longer adequate for.

And when they all return to Eritrea, the narrator mentions the "heartrending" feeling of "watch[ing] the Habesha agents in authority there, who were proudly shouting "Pronto" answering the phone in Italian, but who either simply ignored or disdainfully looked down on their inquiring country fellows" - a feeling so heartrending, in fact, that it must also be captured in another vocal refrain: "It was then also to mark moments such as this that the people sang, "God save us from your wrath, the Habesha clerk has turned against his own.""

On this note, also interesting are the parallels between Habesha oral tradition and Italian contemporary literature (by 'contemporary', I refer to the period of time in which Gebreyesus Hailu was writing). On page 15, the narrator references a traditional Eritrean song which denounces those who fight wars for other countries, like the askari: "Go ahead, / Leave your family and country behind / For someone else's expanse / That you don't want. / Feel like a stranger / Until you're dead."

A few pages later, he quotes another poem with the same theme: "He who fights on a foreign soil another man's war / Not for his family or his country's honour /

And, when he lies dying,  
hit by a deadly blow /  
From an angry firearm /  
But cannot say, "Oh! My  
beloved country / Here is  
the life you gave me, I  
come back to you" / Dies  
twice, reduced to eternal  
wretchedness". It is  
especially worth noting  
here that the narrator  
begins this chapter with  
the poem first, and only  
then explains the origin of  
the poem: it "was written  
by [Giacomo] Leopardi, a  
famous Italian poet," he  
says, but "It could have  
been written for the  
Habesha conscripts". Not  
only does this perhaps  
subvert the reader's  
expectation for the poem  
to have been another  
traditional Eritrean song,  
given its similarity to the  
previous one, but it is also  
surprising for its refusal to  
homogenise "Italian  
culture" as nothing but the  
"colonising" culture.

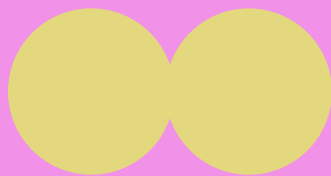
Gebreyesus Hailu takes a  
far more nuanced  
approach by instead  
pointing out the  
similarities between  
Leopardi's views and  
those of the Habesha  
conscripts, which further  
invites the reader -  
whether in the modern  
age, like myself now, or  
the Tigrinya-speaking  
Habesha reader in 20th-  
century Ethiopia - to  
rethink their own cultural  
and historical biases.

This is even further  
unpacked during the  
excerpt of the story in  
which the narrator  
evaluates the Arab troops,  
specifically by comparing  
them to stereotypical  
sayings "passed along by  
the Italians" and Italian  
propagandistic stories  
about them ("Again here  
were some stereotypical  
stories and slurs about  
them, which I copied from

a book, in fact a book  
written in Italian"). He  
considers the folktales and  
quips which have always  
portrayed the Arabs as  
untrustworthy,  
disrespectful and lazy -  
one story involves an Arab  
carpenter failing to make  
a bed for 21 years.  
Nevertheless, this excerpt  
ends with the narrator  
deconstructing these  
biases in light of the  
actual, concrete situation  
of war: "This is what was  
said about the character of  
Arabs. But seeing now  
how they were arming  
themselves to fight [...] no  
one can believe that  
supposed laziness after  
all".

As the final branch of this  
exploration, I want to  
hone in on this topic of  
Italian propaganda. It is  
touched upon repeatedly  
within the text, as in the  
sayings about the Arabs

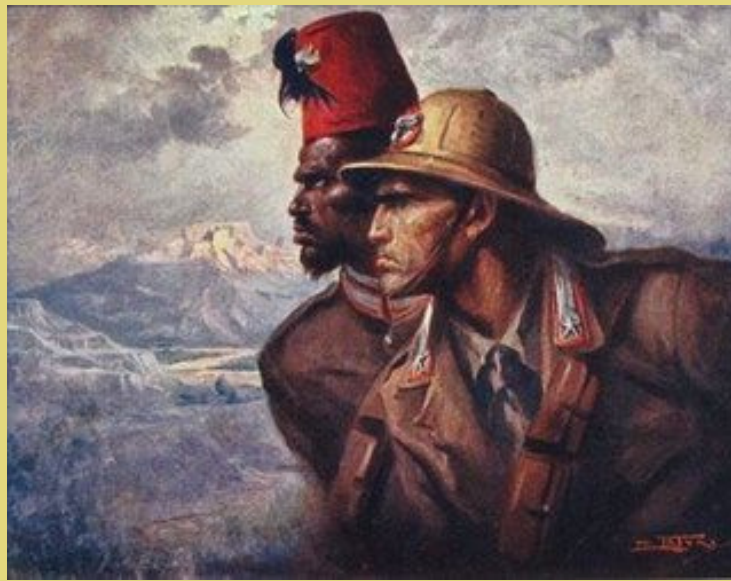
above, but is perhaps most  
neatly summed up with  
the following assertion  
midway through the  
narrative: "You should feel  
gratified and privileged  
for fighting under the  
Italian banner. We, the  
Italian government, are  
great; we have ships,  
trains, guns, rifles, and  
airplanes. For this reason  
you should fight well for  
us." The suggestion that  
Eritrea needed Italy's  
scientific progress as a  
crutch to move forward  
their culturally  
"backward" society is not  
a new one, and was of  
course regularly used by  
colonial powers to justify  
their invasion and  
occupation of colonised  
lands. That being said,  
what is innovative here is  
the way in which  
Gebreyesus Hailu, and  
indeed the Habesha  
troops, also refuse to take  
this as a given fact:



***"Seeing now how they were  
arming themselves to fight [...] no  
one can believe that  
supposed laziness after all".***



Image: Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), Poster, National Air and Space Museum (via Smithsonian Institution)



“When the commander was talking to them, however, he forgot that he was addressing the Habesha, who, unlike some other Africans who didn’t have pride in their history and land, had a long history of resistance and, moreover, were endowed with honesty of heart and depth of mind. He forgot the Habesha soldiers were fighting because they sought bravery and heroism, not for the sake of a few pennies. He treated them as if they were children, and he boasted to them about Italian bravery.”

Unfortunately, it is too little too late for the Habesha at this point, who are forced to do the bidding of the Italians whether or not they believe in the propaganda or not. Tuquabo ultimately acknowledges this in his final dirge, dedicated to his mother:

“I killed my mother, to follow my vanity [...] I am done with Italy and its tribulations / That robbed me of my land and parents / I am done with conscription and Italian medals / Farewell to arms!”

However, I find it interesting to finally consider the interactions here between the way the Eritreans are portrayed - with “pride in their history [...] honesty of heart and depth of mind [...] fighting because they sought bravery and heroism” - and the ways in which Italian propaganda either rejects or capitalises on this. To learn more about this beyond the text, I tried to find examples of Italian propaganda depicting the askari troops. I managed to find some visual examples, one of which I would like to briefly analyse in particular.

On one hand, this painting certainly emphasises the masculinity which is such a fraught topic in *The Conscript*. The Eritrean soldier is broad-shouldered, standing tall in front of a vast mountainous expanse, looking hardened and undoubtedly masculine: his facial hair and strong brows are prominent on his face from the angle of the side-profile.

Also intriguing to me about the choice of angle is the interplay it results in between the Eritrean soldier and the Italian soldier. Their faces are almost lined up, seeming to represent the very beacon of equality. Their proximity portrays them as brothers-in-arms; the Italian’s back is turned towards the Eritrean, suggesting a level of trust between them. Most interesting of all is the fact that the Italian is slightly

lower on the canvas than the Eritrean soldier; the latter’s bright red hat adds a further few inches to his height, while drawing a great deal of attention to him in comparison to the soft beiges of the Italian uniform. Overall, it in fact seems that if anything, the askari soldier has the power and influence here. It is a shame that, as *The Conscript* tells us - or chants to us, or sings to us - this could not be further from the truth.

Image: italian-Ethiopian propaganda poster, Clemente Tafuri, 1937

# WEEK FOUR

# THE FIRST NOVEL IN SOMALI

FAARAX M. J. CAWL, *IGNORANCE  
IS THE ENEMY OF LOVE* (1974)

*“Alas, My Wives’ [was] a poem composed [by Sayyid Mahammad ‘Abdille Hasan] after he had escaped an assassination through food poisoning by one of his wives. In it he attacks his wives as ‘the basest of womankind’ [...] then turns to the praise of his new spouse, his first cousin, ‘Aasha Yuusuf[:]”*

*“Had I but found one like my cousin for a wife I wouldn’t be smitten with grief,  
Now that I have her, I spurn all the biting curs [his other wives],  
And that is why, of all women, I choose my cousin!”*

*[...] The exalted sentiment which the poet expresses for his new spouse conceals more mundane motives, notably the fact that the marriage to his cousin was prompted not so much by the urgings of the heart as by the cold calculation of the mind: after a close brush with death through food poisoning, he could trust only a near relative to prepare his dish.”*

(Said Sheikh Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Mahammad ‘Abdille Hasan*, pp. 154–155)

Full disclosure: I read the secondary reading in full this week as usual, but found it didn’t capture my interest as much as some of the other weeks, so I will likely reference it less in this entry. That said, the excerpt above did interest me, for the Sayyid’s conflation of familial trust/affection with romantic love in the poem about his wives. As someone who has experienced food poisoning myself, I almost understand(!)

But to digress for now, it drew my attention to the importance of parental relationships in the texts we have studied for the last three weeks: *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love*, *The Conscript*, and *Tobbya*. Parental bonds have been at the forefront in all of these texts, sometimes even moreso than the romantic relationships they share the narrative with (excluding *The Conscript*), and they are frequently placed in relation to the

project of postcolonial nation-building which Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia (respectively) were struggling with at the time the texts were written.

Throughout my degree, I have been interested in studying conceptions of the family unit, particularly as it relates to gender. Another module I am studying, *Queer and Trans Screen Cultures*, deals with this topic - particularly the formation

and valorisation of alternative structures of family within the framework of LGBTQ+ relationships, and how these influence and are influenced by the sociopolitical landscape in which they emerge. An interesting point from one of my readings for that module, “Queer Disorientations, States of Suspension” by Gayatri Gopinath, discusses how the specific visualisation of the heterosexual, nuclear family unit is



mobilised as an “ideal” for the racialised minority subject to aspire to, particularly within contexts of colonialism or (im)migration.

As such, it is reasonable to imagine that by 1974, 14 years after Somalia’s independence and the year in which Faarax M. J Cawl wrote his novel, defining and organising the family unit would be similarly caught between the tensions of the African pre-colonial tradition and the European transnational/migratory/capitalist “ideal”. I therefore find it interesting to study parental relationships in the novel and how they relate to the emerging sociopolitical landscape of Somalia in the 70s.

In the interests of staying topical for this week, I will focus here on *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love*, but it is first worth noting that the masculine figures in Cawrala’s family (her father especially, but also her uncle) display far more patriarchal attitudes and decision-making compared to both *The Conscript* and *Tobbya*, both written decades earlier. At the same time, Cawrala undeniably displays more agency than the women in the previous two texts; she is far from being a passive victim (as with the mother in *The Conscript*) or a paradigm of female modesty to the point she barely seems human (as in the case of

Tobbya; in contrast, when Cawrala is on the ship she herself suggests the women take off their clothes). Cawrala is a character who knows (and does) what she wants, and is fallible because of it.

Of course, her name does mean ‘purity’ in the Somali language, and therefore it could be argued that she is intended to be a paragon of femininity, but I would argue that it is more likely she represents a paradigm of femininity which aligns with the 1970s cultural landscape, and the new definitions of femininity and womens’ role in the family unit which emerged from this.

I find Week 7’s reading to be particularly useful in relation to defining what exactly a postcolonial, 70s, and particularly, Islamic vision of African womanhood would look like. In her analysis of Egyptian conduct books from the 20th century, Marilyn Booth, the focus of this literature (and education more broadly) was on working towards modernity within African society through gendered and domestic frameworks. According to Booth, “Since at least the 1890s, the notion of ‘companionate marriage’ had been one of several interrelated arguments made by those pushing for greater attention to the formal education of girls in Egypt. For the health of the family - and thus of the

fnation, envisaged as an ensemble of (middle-class, nuclear) families - women were to be trained in not only informed, scientific childrearing methods and techniques of orderly and ‘modern’ household management but also into becoming well-informed, appealing companions for the new effendi class of professionals, who would then want to stay home rather than spend their evenings (and the nation’s income) at foreign-run bars and gambling parlors. Some even envisioned the cautious introduction of mixed-gender gatherings, where the educated, intelligently articulate female spouse would be an asset.”

Which not only buttresses my above proposition, but also circles back to the story of *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love* itself, in which the well-informed and educated Cawrala fights tooth and nail for the aforementioned “companionate” marriage with Calimaax as opposed to the arranged marriage her family forces her into (page 88 offers a good outline of this argument - see below). In this scenario, then, the rest of Cawrala’s family represents tradition and its lasting influence in the postcolonial nation, marking the project of Somali nation-building - both within and external to the novel - as incomplete.

### *Extract - Page 88*

*With this poem Cawrala, a girl of inborn intelligence combined with knowledge, who had reached a fair level of education, wanted to convince her father, who was not her equal either in intellect or accomplishments, that she attached value and importance to the manly qualities and attainments of a husband, to his intelligence and to his understanding of how marriage should be lived and of the mutual benefits which come to husband and wife in their union. Wealth, whatever its extent, is of little avail if these fundamental conditions on which a marriage is based are weakened. Cawrala set forth in detail, too, why it was unfitting in matters of marriage to use violence and coercion and how, instead, there should be friendship and love between the two people concerned.*

*But alas, her father could not comprehend the meaning of her poem [...]*

Indeed, it is also a project whose progress hinges largely on the changed attitudes of the Somali people themselves, as opposed to the lingering grip of British colonialism. This is also suggested through the figure of the older, married woman Saluugla, who longs to know what real “love” is and asks Cawrala to tell her what it feels like, while also narrating her experience of “the old days” where women “used to be given to the men who asked for them” (11). Ultimately, she reverses her support of Cawrala at a crucial moment, citing the importance of not severing her ties with her family and causing humiliation to herself on account of Caalimax. Overall, it is clear that in Faarax Cawl’s vision, Somalia may temporarily be out of these “old days”, but their customs haven’t quite reached the same stage.

To now move on to a complete tangent, I do also find it interesting that much of the cultural conservatism displayed throughout the text is a result of (concern about) damage to reputation caused by word of mouth. For example, Cawrala’s father has the following outburst on page 52:

### *Extract - Page 52*

*“I am a man with a sense of honour and propriety, and I cannot have it that when I go to the assembly ground people should say of me, “Here comes the one whose daughter has fallen in love with some man!” Once and for all, I tell you it is a disaster which will destroy our family, if people hear things like that about us, and I warn you, there must be no more of it from you!”*

I suppose this fear would only be natural given the orality so inherent to Somali culture. I wonder if it’s comparable to fear of social media backlash nowadays - a technology with arguably just as much, if not more, immediacy. I can definitely imagine a more contemporary adaptation of this tale, given that it itself is not dissimilar from the classic archetype of Romeo and Juliet, and that many of its themes still ring true today. Although, that said, I’m definitely not the person to write it.

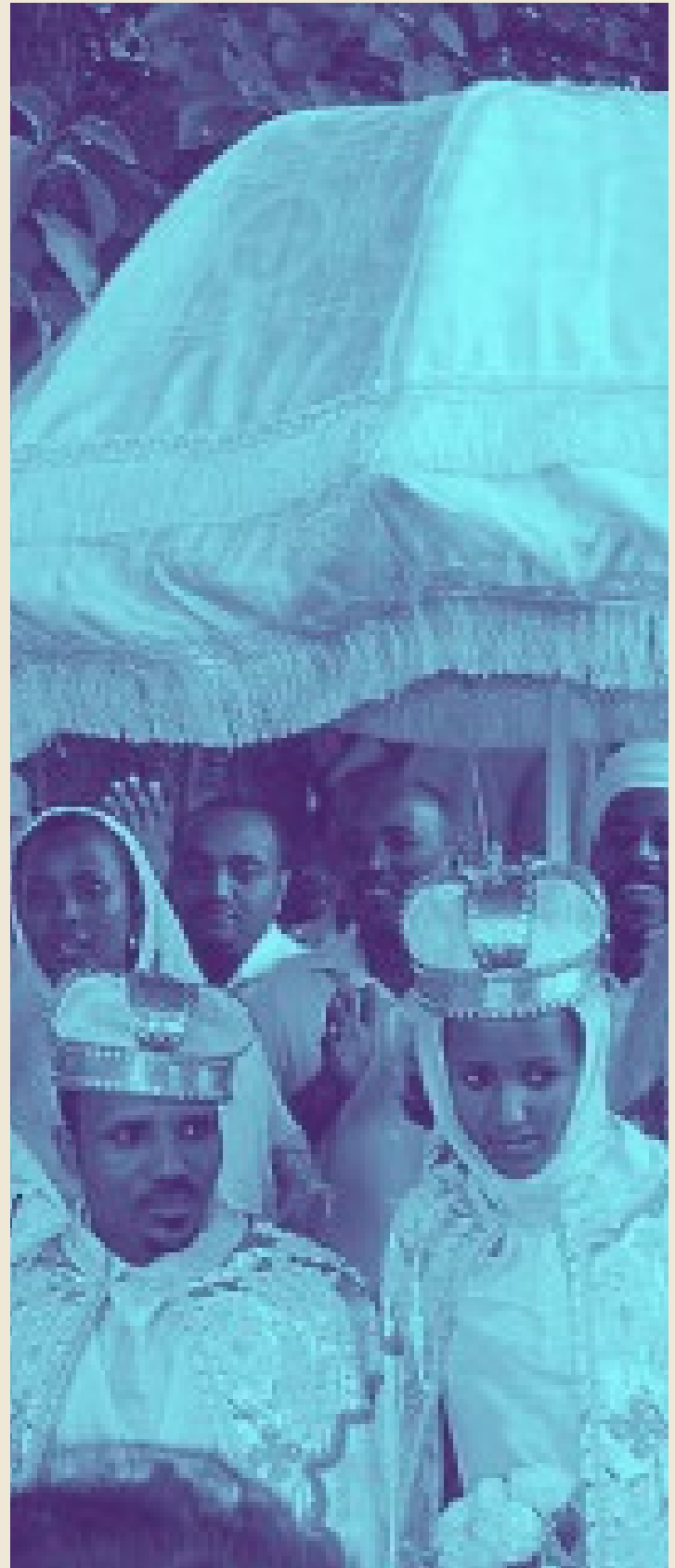


Image: Ethiopian Orthodox wedding ceremony

# WEEK FIVE

CLAUDE MCKAY, *AMIABLE WITH BIG TEETH: A NOVEL OF THE LOVE AFFAIR BETWEEN THE COMMUNISTS AND THE POOR BLACK SHEEP OF HARLEM*  
(WRITTEN 1941, PUBLISHED 2017)

## WHAT IS CULTURAL IDENTITY?

“Whether invoked as a temporally distant primal nation, as an abstract nation of the black race or synecdoche for Africa in general, or as an imaginary locus of biblical or antique nostalgia, the figure of Ethiopia resonates throughout the African American literary tradition.”

(Nadia Nurhusein, *Black Land: Imperial Ethiopianism and African America*, p. 6)

## AUTHENTICITY VS. SYNCRETISM

Now that it's week five (so, the week before reading week), I think it's a good time to take a moment to reflect on my learning journey with this journal (and this module) so far.

First, I would describe myself as a very methodical learner. I feel like I haven't really “read”

something if I haven't taken notes on it. I therefore prefer to work in the morning when I'm most alert (I started my university tasks today at 7am, for example; it always seems nicer to get up in the morning when you don't actually have to get up, for some reason). Often I like to listen to music.

That all being said, for the last two-and-a-quarter years of this degree, I've just been recording anything and everything in one Google Docs file per module. Sometimes they get up to 150 pages. Which I've since been told is an academic's nightmare.

So, in my attempt to make my work work for

me (as the saying goes... I think), I downloaded a referencing software for the first time - Zotero! Admittedly, the only reason I did this was because I saw my friend browsing his Zotero library in the common room, and it forced me to see how much easier my

life could be if I branched out from Google Docs for once.

I spent a day and a half collating all the sources I've ever used since first year, and ended up with a library of content which will hopefully come in very handy before the end of my degree (better late than never). Clocking in at 212 books and journal entries so far, it looks like this (below).

But to return to the topic for this week, Claude McKay's novel *Amiable with Big Teeth* is all about the relationship between tradition and modernity in relation to the formation and representation of an "authentic" African culture. The novel also particularly focuses on the differences and tensions

between the cultural identity and recognition of the African-American diaspora in comparison to the characters who have been brought up and educated in Africa.

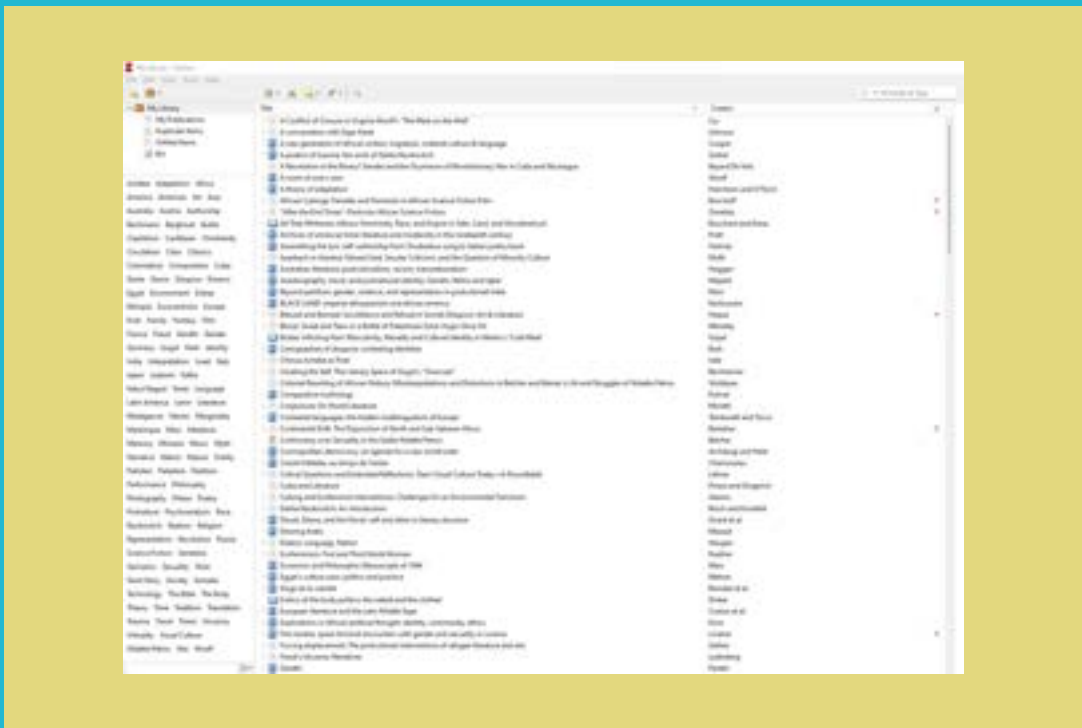
This week I was interested in the notion of symbols, particularly in the context of cultural synecdoche. As in the Nadia Nurhussein reading I quoted at the beginning of this entry, *Amiable with Big Teeth* and its relevant literary criticism often refer back to the notion of certain recognisable symbols standing in for the nation of Ethiopia in a way which allows the diaspora to engage with it - even if these symbols are inauthentic.

As a side note, I have only read Chapter 1 of the

novel as per the required reading, so any suggestions below are based on just this chapter.

The first example Nurhussein gives is the name of Ethiopia itself: "the vagueness around the name "Ethiopia" is in fact an essential aspect of its power and signification. Ethiopia was practically a place of myth. From the Greek for "burnt-faced ones", the Ethiopians were said to live in a far-off place where, according to Homer, they dined with the gods". Just this at once invokes the "temporally distant primal nation", the "abstract nation of the black race or synecdoche for Africa in general," and the "imaginary locus of biblical or antique nostalgia".

Koazhy, the protagonist of *Amiable With Big Teeth*, also has a roster of symbols which allow him to be recognised as the "true" or "authentic" symbol of Ethiopia to the African-American diaspora in Harlem - even though ironically, all of these are revealed to be fake from the very first chapter of the book. His outfit, a "barbaric fantastic costume" which "was not symbolic of the new spirit of Ethiopia" according to the supposedly 'real' envoy, Lij Tekla Alamaya, rouses the avid attention of the crowd, who demand to hear from "Professor Koazhy" once Alamaya has stopped speaking. Even Koazhy's name is established to be false: "He insisted that African names often sounded ridiculous to Aframerican ears because they were pronounced badly and written wrongly. And so he had turned Quashie into Koazhy and prefaced it with "Professor"". The addition of 'Professor' once again appears to make a claim to authenticity and knowledge, placing further emphasis on the significance of names as signs, and what they signify; while the double-translation and re-appropriation of the "potentially offensive term" (Nurhussein) 'Quashie' further bridges the gap between the continent of Africa and its



diaspora in America. Koazhy at once reclaims the term while also refusing it through his Anglicised translation.

More generally, Koazhy's outfit and his name are two interesting characteristics to consider, as they suggest that cultural "authenticity" is fundamentally divorced from cultural recognisability. The diasporic population find comfort in Koazhy's exaggerated proclamations of Ethiopian-ness as opposed to the Western, modernised, "actual" version of Ethiopian culture which Alamaya represents. I would suggest that this comes down to a desire for the rootedness which diasporic identity fundamentally lacks (and searches for) - the cultural difference established by Koazhy's outfit, which seems bizarre and traditional to a modern, African-American audience, invites their engagement with Ethiopia as a nation which is in turn still steeped in the tradition they lack (which Koazhy symbolically stands in for). As Nurhussein further suggests, his representation of himself as a "nameless, unknown soldier" rather than a key figure in Ethiopian history like Menelik, further establishes him as a representative of

"Ethiopianness itself", both broad and essentialist.

At the same time, Koazhy even goes so far as to suggest that the figures of "modern" Ethiopia, the Chairman and Alamaya, have become estranged from their own culture - they "do not know their great history". And thus the struggle for cultural authenticity begins between the representatives of Ethiopian tradition - who is "not symbolic of the new spirit of Ethiopia" - versus modernity - who "do not know their great history". All of these characters are established later on as equally falsified, suggesting that the only way for pan-Africanism to progress on the world stage is through a syncretism of the two - something which, looking forward in the module, Week 7's reading (*Marriage By Abduction*) seems to also touch upon in detail.

As a side note on this point, I am also drawn to Nurhussein's citing of Aric Putnam's argument that Ethiopia could "be employed readily "as a metaphor for a new, international context in which black community can be performed," as it was experienced as "a time and not a place."". The notion of community as experienced through time rather than place is very

often cited in diasporic or nation studies, and I always find it interesting: for example, it reminds me of Benedict Anderson's suggestion that national time is not only dependent on linear timezones, but is also experienced through media circulation, such as evening newspapers which are read by the population at the same time each day. This is something which *Amiable With Big Teeth* also engages with, in its regular mentions of newspapers.

I am also intrigued by Nurhussein's claim that "the novel argues that the only way forward for an authentic pan-Africanism grounded in imperial culture is paradoxically an inauthentic one that shifts from an aristocracy of birth to an aristocracy of service", suggesting that despite Koazhy's cultural inauthenticity, he becomes closer to "authentic" blackness by engaging more profoundly with the mission to push both the diaspora and Ethiopia forward toward a pan-Africanist future.

The notion of authenticity in relation to activism is one which particularly engages me, as I find it relevant to the present day - and I appreciate when this happens, as many of the texts in Comparative Literature are quite historical. If I attend a protest march or sign a

petition in relation to Cyprus or Trinidad (both of whose diasporas I am part of), would that make me a more authentic Cypriot or Trinidadian? My identity as part of two postcolonial diasporic communities has always troubled me: I have always wondered what makes a diasporic person able to "claim" the culture they are from, so to speak. Is it knowing the mother tongue? Is it familiarity with the homeland, despite not living there? Or, as *Amiable With Big Teeth* suggests, is it the engagement of the diasporic subject in the politics of the homeland, in the effort to strive towards a united future?

To give my own attempt at an answer, I'd like to refer back to a quote in the lecture, from Claude McKay's book *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*: "To the emotional masses of the American Negro Church the Ethiopia of today is the wonderful Ethiopia of the Bible. In a religious sense it is far more real to them than the West African lands". For me, as someone from the diaspora who has never visited Trinidad, I wonder how much of my relationship with it - like the African-American people in McKay's novel - is based on how I imagine it to be, and particularly how this imagination is influenced by how people have represented it to me, through signs, symbols, and sayings.

# THE CRISIS OF GENDER ROLES

**MENGISTU LEMMA, *MARRIAGE BY ABDUCTION* (1959/60)**

*"Imperial rhetoric's insistent focus on the gendered organization of societies [...] meant that what was usually called 'the woman question' took center stage in nationalist movements."*

(Marilyn Booth, "Go directly home with decorum!: Conduct Books for Egypt's Young, c.1912", p. 395)

My notes for this week's reading are 23 pages long. Mengistu Lemma's *Marriage by Abduction*, and its concomitant secondary reading, had so many interrelated themes that I have found it almost impossible to boil this learning journal entry down to a neat and tidy meditation on the texts.

In the interests of length and readability, I will focus specifically on the character of Taffesech, but more broadly on her position and resonance as a female character in the metatextual system of Ethiopian politics - particularly in relation to burgeoning feminist viewpoints which began to emerge from the 60s

onward, and which the secondary readings both focus on.

To provide the starting point for this entry alongside the framing quotation I have chosen above, I'd like to note that I am writing this entry shortly after attending a seminar for my Minor Languages in the Literary Imagination module, hosted by the guest Cristina Viti, who is a translator of works from (and into) Italian, English and French. During this seminar, she discussed the life and works of French-Algerian poet Anna Gréki.

I read a brief account of Gréki's tragically short life, which noted that

while she was imprisoned in 1957 during the height of the Algerian War of Independence, she spent much of her time in prison uplifting the other women incarcerated alongside her, whom she also lauded in her poetry. My interest was piqued, so I asked Cristina: "Was it common, particularly in colonial or post-colonial African societies, for women to support each other collectively in this way - or was this a peculiarity on the part of Gréki?"

I don't want to incorrectly quote what Cristina said in response, so to sum up in my own words, she said that Gréki's tendency towards this sisterhood was not unusual - in fact it

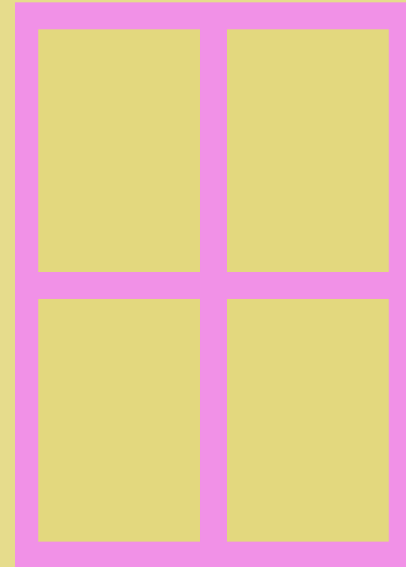
was a major focus of women during struggles for independence - but what was unusual was the strength of emotion she was known for. She was known for her rage, Cristina said; her dissatisfaction at the system which had caused her and her comrade-sisters so much pain and grief - but she was also known for her indomitable joy, which refused to be suppressed under the heavy hand of oppression, and which emerged as a form of resistance to the structures which wished for these women to succumb to grief.

I now find it apt to address the quote I've chosen from Marilyn Booth's article above.

Women occupy a crucial position both as markers of the state of the country in crisis (as I will discuss further in Week 9's entry), and also as victims (and resisters!) of the horrific conditions and violences which the country's structures enact during these periods. Female rage and female joy are fascinating to me as modes of negotiating national crisis, in equal measure.

Before I continue on to discuss *Marriage by Abduction*, I would first like to briefly touch upon the opinions of Tobi Onabolu in her article 'The Location of Theory: on 'Nego-Feminism'', in which she weighs up the titular idea of nego-feminism coined by Obioma Nnaemeka.

In a critique of Nnaemeka's conceptualisation of nego-feminism, which privileges negotiation and exchange as a more authentically African method of promoting and applying women's rights within society, Onabolu posits that "it could easily be argued that the approach of negotiation panders to male hegemony and fails to dismantle a heavily patriarchal society. It would be interesting to gauge Nnaemeka's position on how feminism in such environments can successfully overturn male dominance and achieve gender equality". I would posit that this exchange neatly articulates the tension



between female rage (which largely appears to be considered the western model of feminism) and female joy (or at least contentment, as far as this is suggested by the notion of negotiating for an advantageous position). I wonder if Anna Gréki's position as French-educated but Algerian-residing led to such a natural culmination of both in her.

With this in mind, to now move on to *Marriage by Abduction*, I think the opposition of rage versus "contentment"/negotiation is a useful framework through which to view the text, particularly as we might also consider how these two ends of the spectrum of the female experience interact with

the equally opposing (and overlapping) ideas of tradition and modernity, action and thought, masculinity and femininity, and African versus Western society, which all dominate the plot of the play. Within the play, tradition, action, masculinity and African identity are generally fundamentally opposed to modernity, thought, femininity and Western influence. To refer to Marilyn Booth's assessment of the period, in Africa in the 1960s, "masculine comportment [...] is implied to be under threat from 'feminizing' influences of colonial modernity, requiring discursive reinstatement of the gender hierarchy and reassertion of local mores in the face of imported danger".



Image: Habte Giyorgis Dinagde, a Fitawrari



The premise of the play, which is set in 1963, involves four young men discussing a way of combining tradition with modernity to create “consistency” and a “compound that will be superior to either”. They conclude that the paradigmatic example of this is the titular ‘marriage by abduction’, which appears to them as the most straightforward, modern form of getting married, while still honouring the masculine ‘tradition’ of Ethiopian culture to abduct the chosen wife and implicate her in an arrangement of convenience rather than love. In the words of the first-introduced protagonist Wondayehu, the plot is intended to prove the masculinity of himself and his friends: “We are proving we are men today!”

As such, the abduction of Taffesech by the four young men fundamentally engages with the fraught oppositions above. It is enlightening to consider how she is situated between each opposing pole as the play progresses.

By and large, Taffesech complicates all of these binary categories as opposed to satisfying one over the other. This corroborates Marilyn Booth’s suggestion that “even books purporting to confine females to the domestic sphere had to take note of changing realities” - i.e., this was a point at which women’s role in African society was becoming increasingly complex and difficult to define. Women could be

just as desirable within the home - as housewives and carers for their children - as they could be outside of it: as educated, multilingual professionals who would be an asset to their husbands at the more fashionable, and increasingly multicultural, social settings of the time.

The first stage directions describing Taffesech establish her as “beautiful”, “dressed in the most modern style” - and yet “beautiful in an unobtrusive way [emphasis mine]”, hinting at the humility of the domestic, traditional wife beneath her modern dress. She wears “heavy lipstick”, a “heavy gold bracelet on her arm, and nylon stockings”, all markers of modern wealth and industry (as Gelaglé points out: “She must be a commercial school graduate. The daughter of some big shot. Did you notice the gold bracelet she is wearing?”) - and of course, all of which enhance her femininity.

At the same time, her shoes are removed; it is later revealed that she used her high-heels - additional markers of her femininity - to attack Yesahak during the initial abduction attempt on the street. This ironically

leads him to see her as more masculine: “That I am walking on this earth alive is in itself a great miracle. Her grip ... it is like iron! You can't imagine the strength of her arms.” Once again, the complex relation between masculinity and femininity is articulated within the terms of tradition and modernity, as Yesahak chalks the scuffle up to the change in Ethiopia’s education system: “The whole grand mistake was committed by the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts! That they should allow such a study as physical culture and things like that for our young sweet girls is the blunder of the century.”

Depictions of Taffesech in this way - oscillating between masculinity and femininity - continue throughout the play:

Yesahak uses a pair of handkerchieves to imitate Taffesech’s figure, before imitating her “walk of the Kubkuba (urbanite) that is of a sophisticated town girl”. As he “shak[es] his hips and waist in a highly exaggerated and comical manner, looking to this side and that side while winking in every direction”, the viewer is presented with a hybrid figure which Yesahak’s imitation blurs the lines between: we might



either interpret this figure as Taffesech as comically masculine, or of Yesahak as comically feminine/feminised.

Additionally, while Bezabih initially dismisses a discussion of Taffesech by saying “She is a woman, that is enough”, her fighting spirit when the boys attempt to lock her in the kitchen is met with Aregga’s contradictory remark that “She is a man!”.

Also on the topic of labels, Yesahak later refers once again to tradition in order to justify that Taffesech, who he compares to “the daughters of our universal mother Eve” by virtue of her female gender, should be forced to cut her nails so she cannot attack them once again like a “wild animal”. The comparisons to Eve (and her daughters) are later sustained by her father, the Negadras - just as he also interestingly sustains the wild animal comparison, significantly by comparing “modern girls” to “veritable serpents!”. This appears to be a particularly loaded comparison, for two reasons. Comparing modern women, and thus Taffesech, to a serpent as opposed to Eve transfers the power (and notably, the masculine power) to her in this intertextual scenario which references biblical mythology. At the same time, given that the serpent in the Genesis story is generally understood to have been Satan in disguise, one might recall that as Wondayehu’s father says himself, “for Fitawrari, Satan and Devil are words of

praise and not of insult”, further complicating these gendered terms and their signification within the narrative. The characters themselves acknowledge the difficulty of discerning the categories of masculinity and femininity from one another, which are not as binary as they were in Ethiopian tradition - as Wondayehu and the Fitawrari both say at different points of the narrative, “in the days of Menelik, male and female, man and woman were distinct, separate entities. Men were men, and the women beautiful”. Wondayehu points to the reason for the blending of the two being the “abundance of philosophers” in modern society - i.e. the privileging of education and thought above action.

This is a relevant moment at which to return to the starting point for this entry. The difference between Taffesech’s rage and her negotiatory composure is also interesting to pick up on - as if to form the paradigmatic feminist symbol, she expresses both in equal measure, and each to great effect. When she is first kidnapped, she directly addresses the group of young men with disdain, “fa[cing] them squarely”, “rudely interrupting”, and threatening them with the consequences of involving law enforcement. She slaps Wondayehu when he first attempts to bring

her out of their makeshift ‘prison’, but when she does eventually come into the main room, she is the picture of dignity: “She is properly attired and her manner of walking is unimpeachable; she would impress any gathering. [...] Taffesech is calm, proud, her hair combed, no trace of tears on her face, dignified in her walk. Everything about her belongs to a lady and not to the semi-hysterical girl we have seen before”. She speaks with such fluency and intelligence that the men can only bow their heads, shamefaced, and yet impressed by her wisdom; she is even compared to a “high priest” at the “climax of Holy Mass”, which neatly bridges the gap between tradition and modernity in her behaviour. Further, her command over the room seems to feminise the men, which in turn masculinises her once again.

The distinction between a ‘girl’ and a ‘lady’ in this particular extract is perhaps most interesting. I wonder if it is the case that girlhood is characterised by rage and womanhood is characterised by negotiated contentment; but I also feel that these characteristics, instead of being binary, are relational. It may not be about the emotion, but the context in which it is expressed; does her eventual negotiation of a marriage with Bezabih, as her final act of the play, make her appear more

ladylike? Or does the scenario, over which the presence of her father looms as he has threatened to disown her, make it evident that this quiet dignity does not quite make her a lady when she is ultimately her father’s child - little more than a girl in the grand scheme of things. Or indeed, perhaps the final description of Bezabih-Tori as “resigned to his fate”, further cements Taffesech as in charge of her own, and in fact as the masculine presence in the relationship, compared to Bezabih’s humorously feminised depiction: bowing his head to the tune of a traditional song in praise of the bride. There appears to be no correct interpretation of the ending of this play, in the same way that presentations of womanhood in Ethiopian society in the 60s were just as much in flux.

# THE 1960S IN ETHIOPIA: QUESTIONING EXCEPTIONAL -ISM

## WEEK EIGHT

MENGISTU  
LEMMA,  
BASHA  
ASHEBIR IN  
AMERICA  
(1974)

This week we studied an extract from another of Mengistu Lemma's texts: this time a poem, entitled *Basha Ashebir in America*. Admittedly, I did not find this text quite as stimulating as some of the other weeks, so my entry for this week may be more brief.

I did find the below quote by Yonas Admassu a useful frame through which to view Mengistu Lemma's work, as it

encompasses the tensions of 1970s Ethiopia as we have seen, and will see, it over the past and future weeks of this module. Having come back to this journal entry after watching the assigned documentaries on Ethiopian music, I recall the BBC programme narrator noting that Ethiopian music between the 60s and 80s was borne out of the interaction (and perhaps indeed the tension) between the

sacred and secular traditions within the country's cultural landscape. For example, Alemayehu Eshete, who was popularly known as the "Ethiopian Elvis Presley", spoke about his own syncretic musical background, which combined influences from his childhood singing hymns at a missionary school, with the popularity of rock-and-roll music among wider society and his peers.

The reason I mention this is that the notion of *combining* modernity and

tradition in order to progress further as a society, appears to contradict the widespread, largely "western" - and especially western feminist - view that what is truly needed for the progression of society is a radical break from all of its structures and traditions, which have historically been influenced by and in turn upheld patriarchy, class divides and racial tensions. For instance, Hélène Cixous's seminal essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa', which discusses women's writing in a way

*"To the writers of this generation there was no contradiction between living and working under a monarchy and espousing modernization, for "aren't England and Japan monarchies?" Haven't they moved so far ahead of us without having to do away with their respective systems?"*

(Yonas Admassu, "What Were They Writing About Anyway? Tradition and Modernization in Amharic Literature", p. 75)

which incorporates considerations of race, emphasises the need for the “explosion” of traditional structures, both in writing and in society, in order to privilege the minoritised female voice: “If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within,” to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (p. 887).

These reflections are perhaps more pertinent to Mengistu Lemma’s play *Marriage by Abduction* from the previous week, but the relationship between Ashebir and his cellmate in this poem bring these ideas to mind nonetheless.

On one hand, Ashebir’s perspective comes across as ignorant at best (indeed, as the cellmate himself says), and racist at worst, particularly when he attempts to explain the relationship between black people, white people, and (in his eyes, the separate) Ethiopian people by framing it within religious tradition.

““You Black people are the sons of Ham, / and whites the sons of Yafet”. As we learnt in the lecture, Ham’s bloodline was cursed by Noah while the latter was drunk, according to the Bible. The justification of modern social ills through historical, and particularly religious, storytelling is common throughout history, particularly in relation to the exceptionalism that Ashebir expresses, and is of course regularly employed in order to make apologies for heinous race-related crimes. In the cellmate’s own words, which reference this exact question of historicity, “One swears by one’s grandpa when dad is not honored.”

On the other hand, I would like to take a moment to think more theoretically about the counter-argument which Ashebir’s cellmate proposes, which is to assert that Ashebir is part of the black African community, regardless of his specific identity as Ethiopian. This is of course true. However, in the same stanza as above, he notes that ““It didn’t start with you, this human tendency / to shun the ‘victimized’ and ‘side with’ the victor, / to ‘adore’ the mighty and ‘despise’ the weak one”. It took some time for me to recognise why this phrasing troubled me, until I realised that it is because

Ashebir does not actually take sides: “I know that, since time immemorial, that / white and Black people / have begrudged, despised, and fought one another. / On whose side should I, the habasha, choose to be?” When he compares himself to his cellmate, it is only to establish the difference between their physical traits in order to exempt himself from the binary category of ‘black’, which in turn would exempt him from the wrath of the white community who have “begrudged, despised, and fought” with them “since time immemorial”. The phrasing ‘fought one another’ further appears to emphasise, in Ashebir’s mind, the seeming evenness of the bad blood between them - which he ultimately wants nothing to do with, if the rest of his monologue (including the excerpt about the sons of Shem, Ham and Yafet) is any indication.

Ultimately, this reading of the scenario is intended to suggest that although Ashebir’s perspective on race relations is outdated, and fails to recognise race (and racialisation) as a political assignment as opposed to purely being defined by physical traits, the cellmate’s perspective reinforces the binaries which modern society has imposed upon them - black and white, victimised and victor, weak and mighty.



It is nevertheless true that the cellmate is just illustrating the reality of the situation, which is why I established my position as quite theoretical before delving into this interpretation - but overall, I would say that perhaps Ashebir isn’t totally at fault for projecting a new way of looking at things, as opposed to the rigid binaries which govern the American society he cannot seem to comprehend: because by all means, these structures are incomprehensible. As an Ethiopian exceptionalist, his intentions are of course not so noble, but I almost feel it is just as much of a disservice to encourage the ‘taking of sides’ when what could be imagined is how to dissolve these ‘sides’ in the first place.

# WEEK NINE

# THE 1974 ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION

## HIWOT TEFFERA, *TOWER IN THE SKY* (2012)

As the first text from the module about Ethiopian women and womanhood which was written by a woman, *Tower in the Sky* by Hiwot Teffera has piqued my interest much more than some of the previous few weeks. I found myself completely absorbed in the assigned reading of the first 162 pages, and have many interrelated comments to make on it.

The mention during the lecture of sex worker unions having formed in Ethiopia during the revolutionary period was the moment in which I knew the direction I wanted to take for this week's journal entry, as it reminded me of an essay I wrote at the end of second year about the gendered body in the works of Pakistani short-story writer Saadat Hasan Manto: one of the most memorable writers I have studied as part of this degree. In this essay, I posited that his female prostitute characters,

which are crucial (and complex) protagonists in many of his short stories, are the bodies upon which the turmoil of the nation are mapped, both physically and psychologically, particularly in relation to the tensions between socialism and capitalism in pre-partition India. I really enjoyed writing this essay (which is easy to say now it's over!) as it fell in line with the exact intellectual interests I have developed during this degree.

Which brings me to this week's reading, *Tower in the Sky* - and why I have selected the above quotation as the starting point for this entry. My argument with Manto's literature was only the tip of the iceberg in the scholarly tradition of interpreting the female body as a site of political engagement, and which in turn suffers the ails of the nation either metaphorically or physically (indeed,

violence against women is one of the most prevalent expressions of political violence, and often is synonymous with it). Other works I have read, which come to mind when I think of the female body as a crucial marker of the broader 'body politic', are Assia Djebar's *Women*

*of Algiers in their Apartment*, Albert Camus's *The Adulterous Woman*, and a vast range of poetry collections including Warsan Shire's *Teaching My Mother How To Give Birth*. And of course, Week Seven's reading from this module,

*"her health did not seem to be a priority for her as she continued her political engagement, ignoring the messages her body was sending her. The narrative describes her growing politicisation as if it alienates her from her body: "I started feeling malaise and getting frequent headaches. [...] The idea of being sick again terrified me [...] because I would be unable to continue my Party activities." (263–264)"*

(Luleadey Tadesse Worku, "Campus Movements and Student Revolutionaries: Imagining Haile Selassie I University in Hiwot Teffera's Memoir *Tower in the Sky*", p. 18)

Mengistu Lemma's  
*Marriage by Abduction*.

Luleadey Tadesse Worku's comments above do touch upon the fraught relationship between Hiwot Teffera's health and her political activities, but I feel that she perhaps could have delved further into this point to acknowledge the sustained relationship between Hiwot's health and the health of the nation which are largely directly proportional, which becomes increasingly apparent as the narrative progresses. On the first page of the text, she immediately introduces her illness as the starting point of the autobiography, according to specific importance and attention to it: "I was afflicted with an illness when I was in high school. I didn't know the word affliction then. But I knew how it felt. It left me with a physical and psychological scar. I was broken and despaired of ever filling the fissure". The psychological element here is important, as it lends itself to the establishment of this illness as not only physical, but also metaphorical in its relationship to her discovery of herself alongside her increased political awareness.

There are some particularly pertinent moments which occur later on in the text which

establish Hiwot's health / physical condition as the frame within which political turmoil is depicted. When the Revos return from their sanction and students of her university campus begin to take protesting more seriously, one such protest is disrupted by the arrival of the Fetno Derash / riot police. Amidst the chaos of the police suppression, the focus is placed on Hiwot's body. She at first attempts to run; when she falls over, she is picked up and carried by someone she cannot see, then left to find a hiding place - from which she is ultimately exposed by the police: "They [the riot police] beat me up with their batons and kicked me with their boots even after I fell onto the ground. I thought doomsday had finally arrived. It was the first time I had been beaten up. Compared with this, the demonstration in Harar was a picnic in the park. The soldiers finally left me lying on the ground."

The comparison between the picnic-like demonstrations in Harar to the present situation, in which her battered body is left lying on the ground, successfully mark this passage as a turning point in the narrative - and indeed in the revolution. Much of the following pages describe a marked uptick in Hiwot's political engagement, from what she was reading to the codes she had to intercept

in order to meet with other members of the Abyot [revolution], the underground "society" of which she is part. As she becomes more serious about ushering in the revolution, her physical appearance changes even more dramatically - not out of her own will but from the "depths of her being": "I made significant changes to the way I looked, keeping to bare essentials and denying myself things that my peers indulged in. My Afro shrank. I descended from my platform shoes. Let me quickly say that I did not even try that much to make changes in the way I looked. Rather, it sprang out of the depths of my being."

On the topic of books, one book she reads is also worth mentioning, as it once again aligns her physical condition to the political situation: "I recall reading a biography of Che, whose title I could not remember. It shook me to my core. I felt an instant identification with his affliction. My heart went out for the revolutionary icon who suffered from asthma. He was not just a guerrilla fighter to me serenaded in the streets and on campus but an afflicted man whose experience resonated with my own."

This is a particularly useful point at which to turn my attention to the next topic of my journal

entry, which is the humanity of the revolution and its key figures. Not only is there a parallelism between physical illness and revolution in the extract above, but it is also made clear that Che's illness humanises him in Hiwot's eyes: instead of just being an iconic guerilla fighter, he is also simply "an afflicted man" to her, which allows his story to resonate further with her.

An interesting feature of Hiwot's autobiography, which Luleadey Tadesse Worku also remarks upon, is the conflation of her lover Getachew with the EPRP. In Luleadey's words, "for her, the party became inseparable from Getachew, and hence, her world suddenly merged with that of the party and Getachew. She writes: "He represented to me not only the party but also what was best in it. The love I had for him was meshed with the love I had for the party. It was hardly possible to distinguish between them".

Once again, the conflation of love with revolution appears to be quite a popular way of staging national conflict in African literature. One text I studied last year, as part of the Ideas of Nation module, did exactly the same - this being *The Yacoubian Building* by Alaa Al-Aswany, which is set in Cairo.




Image: Protest marches in Ethiopia

from both a practical standpoint - “When the issue of the *Zemecha* came up [...] How was I to deal with the lack of balanced diet and regular visit to the doctor and continued supply of medication?” - and from a metaphorical one. With regards to the latter, Hiwot imagines her name on a tombstone epitaph, before concluding that “Even death has its seductive moments”.

This moment encompasses the entirety of her struggle thus far for me: the relationship between love, death, and revolution - and the lengths to which she would go in which to see it succeed.

The fate of the female characters in Al-Aswany’s book is especially heartbreaking; I remember it distinctly for its especially evocative storytelling, which spared nothing in the descriptions of the characters’ grief and tragedy at the hands of political corruption in Egypt.

The point at which all of these factors converge in *Tower in the Sky* - illness, love and revolution - is worth mentioning: ““Why? Why me?” I had asked during my illness and before I met Getachew. My restless heart had kept on searching for an answer. There was no answer, but healing later came in the shape of a young man named Getachew Maru. Every book he discussed, every word he uttered, every concept he defined and every sentence he completed had a healing touch. It awakened my brain and soothed my troubled heart. Getachew

was the shaman who resuscitated my lethargic soul and solved my existential riddle.”

As this extract exemplifies, Getachew is the presence which fills the earlier psychological ‘fissure’ which Hiwot describes, and who is described by the narrator herself as having a “healing touch”. Where Getachew is present in the narrative, Hiwot’s ailment is rarely mentioned, except in the case that she does not want to admit to him that she has tuberculosis. On the contrary, during the period in which he is in jail and the *Zemecha* programme begins concurrently, questions of illness come back to the fore,



# WEEK TEN

## HEALING AND DEVELOPMENT (1974-1991)

KIDIST YILMA, *REBUNI* (2014) AND  
HAILE GERIMA, *TEZA* (2008)

*"Why should a mother die? / Let her live eternally. [...] / Day in and day out / she nurtures her child / while denying herself nurture. / While she was suffering / I was playing childish games."*

*(Singer, Teza (2008), Haile Gerima)*

I have been discussing gender for likely the majority of my learning journal entries so far, but I always find it personally preferable to continue to build upon a specific knowledge base rather than dip more shallowly in and out of a vast range of different topics. My interest in gender extends across all of the modules I am taking this semester; it's a topic which has endless discursive depth, which problematises established structures within society, and which

is especially contemporary (the fight for equal gender rights largely seems to have only just begun).

One module I am currently studying, Minor Languages and the Literary Imagination, has been helpful for framing my exploration of this week's films, *Rebuni* by Kidist Yilma and *Teza* by Haile Gerima. For my final essay for this module, I have been focusing on images of motherhood, and by extension

childhood, in relation to how they are employed by writers in order to articulate the nation (the 'mother-land', one might say). The broader preoccupation of African writers with the relationship between familial legacy and national post/colonial legacy is long-standing; it reminds me not only of *The Conscript* as studied earlier in this module, but also the short story *Xala* by Ousmane Sembène, as studied in last year's Ideas of Nation module.

Motherhood (and its adjoining theme of childhood) is a crucial theme in *Teza*, and also figures more abstractly in *Rebuni*. While I was watching, I made a note of all of the times the figure of the mother is important in relation to the developing nation, and if relevant, the specific connotations involved in each instance. My final list was as follows:

## REBUNI:

- *Rebuni's* key subplot on the part of Leul is the failing relationship between himself and his wife as a result of his infertility. It is worth noting that until the lecture and seminar discussion, I actually hadn't realised that his infertility was medical; Ribka mentions the notion of being fed up with Leul ignoring her so frequently that I had assumed he was just too preoccupied with his work to consider having children. I wonder if the connection between an excessive focus on industry/industrialisation, and inability to procreate/generate 'organic' life, was an intentional one.
- Ultimately, Ribka's arc is resolved in conjunction with the overall resolution of the story: Adey teaches Leul 'how to love' again, he does not end up building the factory, and he reconnects with nature - at which point Ribka becomes pregnant. This maintained the connection I had originally made between industry/infertility versus nature as a life-giving force.
- There is no apparent 'mother' figure in *Rebuni* in the context of Adey's family - her grandmother is present, but Adey is largely the most influential feminine figure in the household. One might argue that Adey is a stand-in for a mother figure in relation to her siblings, such as her younger brother: who relies deeply on her, holds her dress every time they walk together, and cries at the thought of her marrying Leul and therefore abandoning him - a fear more generally reserved for children towards their single parents. Adey's position as a land owner and teacher of Leul makes her appear older than her years, which is at odds with her seemingly childish personality - bringing the jarring clash between childhood and motherhood to the forefront of her tale.
- Leul's mother-in-law / Ribka's mother is a formidable presence within their relationship, applying pressure upon Leul to give Ribka children and continue the family line. At one point she instructs him to 'be a man'; like many of the other texts studied within this module, the women clearly hold sway over the men with regards to their relationships (or at least attempt to).

## TEZA:

- The film itself is dedicated in part to the director's mother
- Cassandra's situation is symptomatic of the changing state of both Ethiopia and Germany in the 1970s. Her secret pregnancy and subsequent abortion is a tragic byproduct - and reflection - of the instability of the sociocultural landscape of both nations in relation to migration. Equally, her denouncement of Tesfaye and Gabi's pregnancy announcement is not necessarily unfounded - the racial abuse Anberber is met with later on in the narrative proves this. Overall, her narrative arc grounds the notion of childbirth, in relation to the nation, within the literal, material and specific context of black diasporic identity in Europe.
- The same is indicated through Gabi's narration of her issues with raising Teodross after Tesfaye left them to return to Ethiopia. Shots where Teodross, dancing with Anberber, becomes Tesfaye in Anberber's imagination, raise questions of legacy and continuity in relation to family. The fact this sequence of shots comes after Anberber knows Tesfaye has been murdered, appears to be significant - I wondered if it might suggest that Teodross is fated to suffer a similar fate.
- Tesfaye himself was an orphan. The orphaning of children is also at the forefront of the narrative; when Anberber returns to Addis Ababa in the 1980s, he witnesses children's parents being taken away by the military. Equally, he also sees children killed in their efforts to run away from the military themselves. Both instances mark a total rupture in notions of lineage, exposing the deeply troubled - and often conflicting - state of the emerging nation.
- The same is suggested through Azanu revealing that she killed her first child in a fit of jealousy towards her husband marrying another wife. Not only does this suggest a rupture of lineage, but also a rejection of normative family structures, particularly in their relation to class stratification. Her relationship with Anberber also problematises these established structures.
- Anberber becomes a teacher. As was mentioned in the lecture, education in *Teza* ultimately becomes a method by which to bridge intergenerational gaps between adults and children within the developing nation.
- Anberber's mother protects Azanu, who is pregnant (i.e. a future mother). She also helps deliver Azanu's baby during the latter's labour, which naturally has matrilineal connotations.
- The ending of *Teza* involves the birth of Anberber and Azanu's baby, who they name Tesfaye. This is significant both for its recollection of the past, which encourages the continuity and legacy which all of the other disjointed relationships (and the development of Ethiopia generally) have lacked, while it also connotes a view towards the future (Tesfaye meaning 'hope'). The family unit and the nation are both repaired, even 'reborn', in conjunction with one another.



# WEEK ELEVEN

# TRAVELS AND MIGRATIONS

FESSEHA GIYORGIS,  
THE VOYAGE OF  
DÄBTÄRA FESSEHA  
GIYORGIS TO ITALY  
AT THE END OF THE  
19TH CENTURY  
(1895) AND ABU  
BAKR KAHAL,  
AFRICAN TITANICS  
(2014)

*"Migration came flooding through Africa, a turbulent swell sweeping everything along in its wake. None of us knew when or how it would end. We simply watched, dumbfounded, as the frenzy unfolded."*

*(Abu Bakr Kahal, African Titanics, p. 8)*

This entry of my learning journal is of course the final one, and as such I thought it would be prudent to take this opportunity to reflect on the module as a whole, using the two texts by Fesseha Giyorgis and Abu Bakr Kahal as a jumping-off point for my overall reflections.

The lecture for this week was largely focused on using this week's material in order to reflect on previous weeks, so this will be the approach I take for this entry. Over the past eleven weeks, we have observed how

writers, poets and filmmakers from the Horn of Africa have responded to regional, national and global affairs in their works, while also taking into account how culture can have an impact on politics - in line with the second materialist model of critical thought outlined during the lecture, that of articulation, which suggests that a society's "socioeconomic structure and cultural superstructure [...] mutually produce and determine each other". This model prompted me to consider the initial reading from Week 9,

before the topic was changed to Hiwot Teffera's *Tower in the Sky*: the documentaries on Ethiopian music from antiquity to modernity. One of the documentaries focused for some time on singer Tilahun Gessesse, described as "the king of Ethiopian modern music". After Tilahun passed away in 2009, Ethiopia held a state funeral in his honour - which appeared, from the clips shown, to have been attended by thousands, including many of the political elite. The idolisation of musicians is a particular area of interest for me,

and I think it is very pertinent to the question of how culture is able to influence politics: one more contemporary example is the way in which K-pop bands are frequently mobilised by political leaders or at political gatherings as a way to improve state relations - but I will digress for now!

Just as contemporary is the way in which Abu Bakr Kahal's short novel *African Titanics* explores themes of migration, which is of course perpetually in the global news.



I found it interesting to consider, as I was reading, the way in which it does this by in fact tying together many of the themes we have already discussed as part of the module, making the text both appear universal as an experience of migration, and specific as a cultural production originating from the Horn of Africa. I noted down so many connections that I found it more productive to express these as a mind-map, connecting

texts from previous weeks with this week's texts, and the quotes from *African Titanics* and Fesseha Giyorgis's travel writings which can be seen to express and explore these themes. The texts also reminded me of further reading from some of my other modules, which I have also mentioned in the mind-map - wrapping up my learning journal not only in the context of this module, but in the broader context of my degree in Comparative Literature.

Terhas's struggle following the illness and death of Assgedom [*African Titanics*]

## THE STRUGGLE OF MIGRATION AND THE IMPACT ON THOSE LEFT BEHIND

## THE CONSCRIPT

Motherhood and the nation

[Kahal, p. 26: Abdar and Terhas] 'Perhaps Hamouddi was her husband,' I suggested, 'or a lover? Or a friend?'

'Or maybe it was her son. Maybe it was a little baby she left behind because she thought the journey would be too difficult. I know mothers from Eritrea and Somalia who did that. What agony their lives must be!'

## ETHIOPIAN, ERITREAN AND SOMALI LITERATURES IN GLOBAL INTELLECTUAL HISTORY: A MODULE MIND- MAP

(BASED ON THIS WEEK'S  
TEXTS BY FESSEHA GIYORGIS  
AND ABU BAKR KAHAL)

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF (NICK)NAMES

[Kahal, p. 26] Even before I set foot in Khartoum, I had amassed an impressive amount of information about what to expect from the next stages of my journey. I knew the nicknames and pseudonyms of all the smugglers[.] [...] All my life I've been dogged by an endless succession of nicknames. In Eritrea, my birthplace, I was al-Shammam, Arabic for Sniffer[.] [...] Even though the rumour was utter nonsense, that nickname soon superseded my original childhood one of Ambsa, the Tigré word for lion.

## AMIABLE WITH BIG TEETH, MARRIAGE BY ABDUCTION, THE CONSCRIPT

[p. 43] My heart was flooded with gratitude: gratitude for the apparent similarity between the words Mauritania and Eritrea, and gratitude for the policeman's dubious hearing having transformed us from illegal immigrants into Mauritanian citizens – with full rights to be in Tunisia.

## IGNORANCE IS THE ENEMY OF LOVE (also set on a shipwreck)

## ORAL TRADITION

(e.g. music, poetry)

[Kahal, p. 53] Occasionally, he [Malouk] regained consciousness and scrabbled weakly to regain his purchase on the plank as it slipped from under him. Fragments of Rimbaud flashed through his mind. He had written about the young poet once and began recalling all he could still remember of his work, murmuring verses with his final breaths as he floated on the waves.

[p. 56] I was not the only one preoccupied by Malouk's death. A veritable legend grew up around him, and I began to hear tales of him in internet chatrooms, from people in faraway lands.

## SYNCRETISM OR CLASH BETWEEN MODERNITY AND TRADITION

## OTHER COMPARATIVE LITERATURE MODULE – MODERN MYTHS

## MARRIAGE BY ABDUCTION

Abdar's obsession with observing the practices of "fortunetellers and witches"  
[*African Titanics*]

[Kahal, p. 34] 'I lost her,' he [Malouk] eventually replied in a strangled voice, 'It was the same criminals who butchered all of Liberia ... They killed my beautiful Waninabanda.' [His lover]

## THE FIGURE OF WOMEN IN RELATION TO THE NATION

## TOBBYA, IGNORANCE IS THE ENEMY OF LOVE, MARRIAGE BY ABDUCTION, REBUNI, TEZA

[Kahal, p. 10] As I said, the song ['Joy', as sung by Kaji] came to the lips of the first man on earth. After many years of solitary existence, this man began to feel that something was missing from his life: there was a terrible and intangible void he could neither fill nor define. [...] And then, with sharp stones, he began to carve up a tree trunk, allowing his hands to follow the patterns of his dreams. After finishing this artistic endeavour – the very first fruit of man's labour – he carried his woman-shaped statue to bed and lay down next to it. On waking, he found her next to him, awake and smiling the sweetest of smiles. This is when the 'Song of Joy' began [...] It came from the unexpected vision of a beautiful, gentle-hearted creature. Folklorists categorise this song – which is closer to a prayer – as Africa's earliest musical and narrative heritage.

## TOWER IN THE SKY

## MOTIFS OF SICKNESS IN RELATION TO THE NATION

The figure of the Iraqi woman in *African Titanics* (p. 28)

[Giyorgis, p. 366] On the tenth day of our departure from Massawa, as we approached Naples, the sun was very low. On their pointing out Naples to me from a distance, the sea sickness immediately left me.

## BEING OUTSIDE ONE'S COUNTRY / IN TRANSIT GIVING ONE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF IT

(The context of Fesseha Giyorgis's writings)

## THE PRESENCE (OR ABSENCE) OF EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPING NATION

See also Giyorgis, p. 364

[Kahal, p. 44] 'Certainly,' the waiter replied, bringing us an elegant container [...] with the number twenty-one printed in the middle.

'And what does that number mean?' Malouk asked[.] [...]

Looking a little flustered, the waiter attempted a convincing answer. 'Well, it's seven ... multiplied by seven ...' He paused and his face fell as he realised that multiplying seven by seven added up to much more than twenty-one.

## IGNORANCE IS THE ENEMY OF LOVE, MARRIAGE BY ABDUCTION, TOWER IN THE SKY, REBUNI, TEZA

## HIND SWARAJ, GANDHI - IDEAS OF NATION MODULE

(Written on a boat between South Africa and the UK; talks about India as a developing nation)

# 'IN LAMPEDUSA' BY RIBKA SIBHATU, AN ERITREAN POET – MINOR LANGUAGES AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION MODULE

[Kahal, p. 57] Some time later, another stranger wrote to me about Malouk. This time it was a woman from India, who told me more details of the same tale. 'Fishermen in the Mediterranean,' she told me, 'reported that they had seen a sailboat the likes of which they had never set eyes on before. As they watched, the boat's crew pulled a young African man from the waters. He was apparently walking on the crest of a wave as calmly as people walk on land. When he stepped up onto the deck of the strange and wonderful ship his rescuers embraced him one by one, as noisy celebrations broke out, pulsing with lively African music.'

**THE GEOGRAPHICAL  
CONTEXT –  
MIGRATION TO  
LAMPEDUSA**

**FEMALE CHARACTERS AS  
THE MORAL  
INSTRUCTORS FOR MEN**

**TOBBYA,  
IGNORANCE IS  
THE ENEMY OF  
LOVE, MARRIAGE  
BY ABDUCTION,  
REBUNI**

**ONE OF THE  
PROTAGONISTS AS A  
CHRISTLIKE FIGURE**

[Kahal, p. 37] 'Oh boy ... How sweet it is to lie on a bed,' Malouk announced in flawless English, rolling over on the springs. 'Far sweeter to lie on a woman though,' one of the others chipped in, oblivious to Terhas's presence nearby. She cast him a scathing look, her mouth twisted into a sarcastic grimace and her face filled with contempt. The man cowered before her, turning his face from her cold glare.

**REBUNI**

Religious, especially Orthodox Christian motifs and/or discourse

**ETHIOPIAN  
EXCEPTIONALISM**

**HATATA, TOBBYA,  
BASHA ASHEBIR IN  
AMERICA**

[Giyorgis, p. 367] As people like us were like curiosities then, they, wishing to know about all conditions in Ethiopia, asked us any question they fancied. These people looked upon Ethiopia much like Ethiopian highlanders looked upon other Africans surrounding them. When I heard of this cultural attitude, it became new to me and I marveled.

[Giyorgis, p. 364] [W]hen on that night I was on the ship and looked at Naples, decked and decorated with lights, it became to me just like when Queen Makeda [Sheba], seeing Jerusalem, said that what she was seeing was more than what she had heard [of it].