Narration in Gebreyesus Hailu's The Conscript

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the types of narration in *The Conscript* (2013), an Eritrean novel written by the Tigrinya author, Gebreyesus Hailu. *The Conscript* was originally composed in the Tigrinya language in 1927, and was published in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, in 1950. The book was translated into English 2013 by Ghirmai Negash. Prior to being annexed by Ethiopia in 1962, which led to a prolonged war of independence (1961-1991) and the country’s successive independence in 1993, Eritrea was an Italian colony from 1890 to 1941, an occupation which ended when, during Second World War. In addition to Eritrea, Italy had also two other colonies in Africa: Libya and Somalia. *The Conscript* narrates the story of Eritrean conscripted soldiers that were recruited by Italian colonialism to fight nationalist Libyan forces, who resisted Italian colonial presence in Libya. In exploring the types of narration in Hailu’s novel, my main interest in this thesis is motivated by a desire to shed light on how Hailu, despite his religious background as a priest of the Catholic church of Eritrea, has been able to create a vividly contrasting world outlook that transcends his own (narrowly defined or conventionally understood) religious, cultural, and ethnic prejudices and boundaries. I argue that Tuquabo, the main protagonist of the novel, starkly diverts from Hailu’s presumable stance and, evolving into an independent character /narrator, crosses the boundaries of his creator. I also argue that, as an attempt to give his moral voice and that of the ostensible stand of the Eritrean
and Ethiopian educated elite (which the author collectively refers to as the *Habesha*), Hailu, in addition to main narrator, employed two other narrators, who effectively drive the plot but rarely appear in the story as they sometimes hide and other times highlight his perceived religious and moral stances. I further attempt to explore the relations between the three narrators and their respective roles. By tracing the novelist’s use of dialogue, spiral of silences, monologues, and internal voices of reason, I also attempt to offer insight into why Hailu chose to employ shifting narrative modes.
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Introduction

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter attempts to provide a survey history of Italian colonialism, conscription, colonial education, and the publication of the novel in Eritrea. This chapter particularly discusses the Italian colonial period as a background to the publication of the novel, and Hailu’s veracious intervention to create a national narration within that colonial context. In addition to providing a brief survey of scholarly works produced about *The Conscript*, this section of the thesis also charts the individual history of the novel starting from its writing to publication in Tigrinya, and after its translation into English. The second chapter offers a theoretical discussion, which would later be used as a framework for analysis. As an attempt to give a deeper theoretical background, I delve in some detail into the current discussions of the theories of narration. In the third chapter, I grapple with the three narrators in *The Conscript*. The particular focus of this chapter is to identify and analyze the identities and functions of the characters and narrators, their credibility, the narrative shifts, and the forms of authorial voice.

Aims and Justifications

Gebreyesus Hailu’s *The Conscript* holds an important place in Eritrean literary history for two reasons. First, it was the first Eritrean novel ever written in any Eritrean language and, second, it is highly regarded internationally as a one of the first postcolonial novels written about the colonial experience of Africa. Composed in 1927 and published in 1950, the novel traverses continental spaces in its purposeful focus on criticizing and problematizing Italian colonial presence in Africa. Set in Eritrea and
Libya, the novel takes as its departure the national humiliation of those countries and peoples and uses that disgrace as a departure for criticism and, eventually, a wakeup call for anti-colonial resistance. By doing so, and as a written/printed literary document, it attempts to create in those countries a form of rudimentary national consciousness and solidarity, which, according to Benedict Anderson, is necessary for the construction and/or formation of nations as “imagined communities.” It is not certain how many people might have read the novel on its first publication; language barrier and limited circulation have hampered the book’s wide readership and scholarship in Eritrea and elsewhere. The book only started to have wider scholarly attention and readership after it was translated and published in English in 2013. However, despite the initial limited readership and circulation, after its publication in English an increasing number of Eritrean and international readers have received and appreciated the novel for its anti-colonial nationalist stance and transcontinental imaginary, and even considered it a pioneering postcolonial African novel, written by a Tigrinya author. From the perspective of literary-critical studies, one result of reading *The Conscript* primarily as an anti-colonial nationalist narrative and/or postcolonial text has also meant that, due to emphasis on its postcolonial theme, very little attention has been given to the other aspects of the novel, including to the stylistics, aesthetics, and narrative types of the novel. In short, for a variety of reasons, the book remains understudied. Therefore, while recognizing the text’s vital importance in the field of postcolonial African literature and the need for more research in the future, in this thesis I attempt to examine and shed light on the different types of narration that are employed by Hailu in the novel. The thesis
aims to open a new approach of studying and appreciating the narrative and aesthetic qualities of the novel.

Scope and Limitations of the Thesis

The thesis will focus on the experience of Italian conscription in Eritrea, and Hailu’s critical voice in documenting the colonial conquest, as a background to contextualize the writing and publication of the novel. Because I am mainly interested in understanding the types of narration the author employed in writing his novel, I do not discuss other literary devices employed, unless tangently related to narration. The thesis offers an extended theoretical discussion highlighting main arguments in the field, and will serve as a framework for understanding the narrative techniques used in Hailu’s text.

While closely analyzing the text, the thesis will try to comprehend the credibility of each narrator and why in the first place the author chose to employ different narrators. It will then discuss the authorial voice, formulate the identity of the narrators, and analyze the shift of narrative axis. As the thesis will only focus on the narrative types of the The Conscript, it will only be limited to discuss the narrators involved.

Methodology and Research Questions

For this exploration, Wayne C. Booth’s The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961) will be mainly used as theoretical framework in analyzing the narrative types of the novel. In addition to Booth, the thesis will also use other contemporary theoreticians including: Susan Sniader Lanser’s The Narrative Act (1981); Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s Narrative Fiction (1983); Daniel Frank Chamberlain’s Narrative Perspective in Fiction (1990); H.
Porter Abbott’s *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2002); Moshe Simon-Shoshan’s *Stories of the Law* (2012), and others.

Taking the text as the center, it will also provide some contextual analysis and will offer brief historical background that could help deeper understanding of the novel. The thesis aims to analyze the three narrators of the novel and will attempt to associate it with the theories forwarded by different scholars.

The thesis will try to answer some of the following questions:

1. Why did Hailu employ different narrators?
2. Who are the three narrators employed?
3. How reliable are the narrators?
4. What is the distance of the author from the narrators?
5. Why does Hailu shift narrative focus?
6. Do the settings play roles in the narrative focus?
Chapter 1: The Conscript: Text and Context

Conscription and Italian Colonialism in Eritrea

When Italians occupied the territory that would later become Eritrea, they faced very little resistance from the indigenous population. Rather, they seem to have been welcomed or in any case faced little resistance from the local population\(^1\). This lack of resistance is explained by historians by two main reasons. First the great famine of the previous years’ crippled the whole nation and thus, the chieftains did not have material resources and manpower to resist. The continuous invasion of Ethiopian chiefs also pushed the Eritrean chiefs to welcome any force that could later help combat Ethiopian invasion. As Zemhret Yohannes also deals in his book *Mekete Antsar Italyawi Megza’ti ab Ertra* (2010b) the chieftains who first easily let the Italians in, later became the first to resist and mobilize the locals mostly in the form of banditry and sometimes open confrontation. Yohannes argues the Italian border demarcation combined with the later resistance across the country--of both religions and different ethnic-groups--were crucial factors in the formation of Eritrean national consciousness (2010a: 62-78).

Italian colonialism, known for its economic growth and structural changes, has contributed very little towards upward mobility of the indigenous population. In relative terms, unlike the Angolophone and Francophone colonies in Africa, the local populace did not benefit from the Italian school system. With the intention of creating a buffer zone between the locals and the colonizers, those who attended schools were also limited to fourth grade. By 1937, fifty years after the Italian colonial period, only 4,177 Eritrean students had attended the Italian schools. There were 25 native school teachers (2010a:

\(^1\) See Zemhret Yohannes’s *Italyawi Megza’ati ab Ertra* (2010a: 115-150)).
The total number of Eritrean population in 1935 was estimated 600,000 (refer Dirar 2004). One of the reasons why the Italian colonialism limited the educational level and discouraged the growth of indigenous literature also emanates from the idea of blocking narratives that would eventually lead to formation of national consciousness.

Italians chose Eritrea as a settler colony and thus, they started to confiscate the fertile land. Yohannes elaborates that the confiscation of land was met with severe resistance in one facet and an influx to conscription on the other. The relative economic stability of the conscripts and their families created a new dependent class. As Yohannes notes, throughout their colonial rule in Eritrea, the Eritrean conscripts became the main instruments of colonial expansion (2010a: 150-151). Additionally, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar points out, apart from the human costs, in terms of forced dislocation from their ancestral land, conscription played crucial role in structural transformation of the Eritrean society. Dirar contends it created serious labor imbalances in the market, especially agriculture that pushed for rapid urbanization (13-15). In comparison to the population size, a significant number of Eritreans were conscripted in the Libyan war. Tekeste Negash in *Eritrea and Ethiopia* (1997) estimates around 4,000 Eritrean conscripts were permanently stationed in Libya between 1912 and 1932 (16). Although it was difficult to distinctly differentiate the Eritrean conscripts from neighboring countries of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia, Killion (cited in Dirar) puts approximately 130,000 Eritreans served in the Italian colonial army between the years 1890 and 1935. The impairment of conscription could only be visible in comparison to the population size of the time.
Tekeste Negash (cited in Dirar) asserts that Eritrean population was estimated 600,000 in 1935.

Conscription has brought notable social and economic changes in Eritrean society. Dirar argues it played significant role in bridging the religious and ethnic gaps. He contends:

This wide spectrum of social and administrative involvement in the colonial administration made the ascari the nucleus of an urban elite whose role in the development of Eritrean nationalism has still to be fully investigated. It is in fact apparent that ascari’s massive employment in different fronts had a significant impact in their perception of religious, ethnic, and racial identities. Serving under the same flag, though being from different linguistic, religious and ethnic communities, they played an important role in smoothing, at least partially, consolidated localism and ethnic-based antagonisms, and paved the way for the development of a germinal Eritrean nationalist feeling. (15)

The history of the Eritrean conscripts who fought the infamous Libyan war is part of Eritrean oral history. In written Eritrean literature the experience of the conscripts was first told in Gebreyesus Hailu’s The Conscript. In this book, Hailu describes brilliantly the physical and mental journey of the conscripts in Libya. He elaborates the context of their description; how they were recruited, how they were transported to Libya by land and sea, and their final destination and defeat in the war against the Libyans.

The publication of this book has also an interesting history. The Italian colonial rule was defeated by the British in 1941, ending conscription and most of the Italian
colonial baggage. British Military Administration served as a protectorate and administered Eritrea for 10 years (1941-1951). However, although brief, the British period in Eritrea, were very crucial in the formation of Eritrean national consciousness. As Alemseged Tesfai discusses in his book Aynfelale (2002), the brief British Military Administration that opened local newspapers, allowed Eritrean political parties and measured practice of freedom, created forums for Eritreans to write and publish in their indigenous languages. It was during this brief period and hey days of Eritrean political debates and formation of national consciousness that The Conscript saw the light of the day. Hailu states in the preface to his book, the novel had to wait for 23 years for lack of means. And, indeed, as Negash (1999) notes, with its content and language, there was no way it could have been published during the Italian colonial period (130).

Eritrean Languages and Literature

Eritrea has nine languages. Each language is as the medium of instructions in elementary schools. All the languages have rich oral literatures and they are broadcasted in the national radio. Although Eritrea does not have official language, Tigrinya, Arabic, and English are used as working languages. Tigrinya, the mother tongue of more than 50% of Eritrean population and the country’s lingua-franca is also spoken by about four million people in Tigray, the northern region of Ethiopia.

Tigrinya uses Ge’ez script, one of Africa’s indigenous scripts, for writing. Until later publicized and widely used mainly with the help of religious missionaries, Ge’ez was only limited in the churches. The first secular literary piece, About the Author’s Journey by a man called Fessahe Giorgis in Tigrinya language was published in 1895.
Since then the language, with its rich oral literature, has been used for publishing and broadcasting widely. *The Conscript* was initially written in Tigrinya language in 1927. And as such marks the foundation of the literary novel in Eritrea (read Negash 1999).

**The Conscript: Plot Summary**

*The Conscript* is set in Eritrea and deserts of Tripoli-Libya in the 1920’s. The book deals with the Eritrean conscripts who fought the Libyans defending their sovereignty against the Italian invasion.

The novel’s hero is a conscript called Tuquabo. Tuquabo is a tragic figure, the only surviving son of an aged family, whose formative age was brainwashed by heroism and war and later volunteered to join the Italian army knowing very little where his adventure will end. When Tuquabo and his colleagues land in the deserts of Libya, greatly suffering from harsh weather, they are faced by fierce resistance of the Arabs. Their suffering is augmented by bad treatment from the Italian commanders. Disillusioned and frustrated, they start to realize that the conscripts could have better defended their country in the first place instead of helping the Italian colonizers invade other Africans. The war ends when the Italian commanders lost the chain of command and most the conscripts end in disarray. Most of them perished in the Libyan deserts, some Tuquabo among them survive the war and return to Eritrea to tell the tale-tale story.

**Preliminary Readership, Studies, and Reviews**

There is scarcity of documentation regarding the readership *The Conscript*. Yet, according to oral accounts the book was widely read and had immense influence among the first generation of local elites. Issac Yosief, a well-known Eritrean writer, indicated in
his novel set in 1940s that families and friends were reading the local newspaper in groups. If so, it is then possible that *The Conscript* was among those set of Eritrean literary novels that were read widely in the community in such settings. In a context predominantly oral culture many people might have also heard of Hailu’s text about the Libyan expedition which had become an important part of Eritrea’s historical memory by then. Within the circle of learned class and his contemporaries, Hailu has played a vital role in defining and chartering the landscape of Tigrinya literature.

*The Conscript* has never been reprinted and the country’s political discourse and the long war must have clearly played part. Its theme obviously did not fit in any of the politico-ideological frames of the subsequent regimes and governments in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

*The Conscript*, then entitled “The Black Train” was briefly noticed with Amanuel Sahle’s translation of 1988. Although Sahle attempted to bring the book to the limelight, his attempt had two drawbacks. First, he did not faithfully translate the whole book. He was only concerned with its content which ended up summarizing the novel and only provided the synopsis of the story that was summarized into 36 pages, published in academic journal (refer Sahle 1988). In addition, the medium of publication obviously played role in lack of readership.

The book was mainly revived 49 years later with the publication of Ghirmai Negash’s *History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea* (1999) who also immortalized the book by using the first page of the novel as his cover photo and later to rigorously promote it. In the *History of Tigrinya Literature*, Negash devotes five pages to the novel
(130-134). He discusses at length the historical and literary importance of the novel in the sphere of Eritrean literature. More significantly, he claims a special space for the novel by arguing that, together with Beyene Haile’s *Madness* (1965), *The Conscript* is the most important literary piece in the Tigrinya language.²

At a global level, *The Conscript* as an important work of African literature, with post-colonial content, came into the attention of interested scholars when Negash again published an article that discusses the novel along other first Tigrinya literary piece in the journal *Biography*. In his article entitled, “Native Intellectuals in the Contact Zone: African Response to Italian Colonialism in Tigrinya Literature,” Negash argues the semi-biographical novel is among the first novels in Africa written literary works in indigenous languages that attempt to decolonize the African mind in terms of culture and politics. He contends in addition to its sharp critic of colonialism and conscription, the very idea of Hailu’s drifting away from writing in Italian is the best example in challenging the status-quo of European colonial mission.

After the book was published by Ohio University Press in 2013, with Laura Chrisman’s thorough analysis and in-depth introduction, it re-defined the canonical

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² Now mainly rediscovered through Negash’s research, the book started to be read afresh. Although it was only circulated in photocopies, the book was used as text-book in the Department of Eritrean Languages and Literature (ERLL), University of Asmara first and the same department in College of Arts and Social Sciences nowadays. Similarly, the book was read in literary workshops organized by ERLL and hence it was relatively revived among the young generation of readers who did not have the opportunity to read when first printed.
works of anti-colonial literature. Writing about the significance of *The Conscript*, in African literature, Chrisman states:

The publication of Achebe’s novel during Nigeria’s emerging independence from British rule reinforced a view that African literature only properly came into being with postcolonial sovereignty. Canonization of Achebe’s novel also sanctioned European languages as unquestioned medium of African literature.(xv)

She adds that Hailu through intertextuality connects with some of the great thinkers of his time like Aimé Cèsaire and Frantz Fanon. Hailu’s theme of colonial humiliation as a point of departure for decolonizing the mind is one aspect of the universality of the novel. “Hailu, complicates,” as Chrisman notes, “this equation by featuring both colonizer and colonized as animals” (xix). *The Conscript*, published during the British Military Administration in Eritrea, as Chrisman discusses, has changed the assumption that anti-colonial literature only emerged with African decolonization and state formation.

Similarly, Christine Matzke, an expertise of Eritrean performing arts further argues, “The novel can look back on almost a century-long gestation period.” Matzke elucidates, “This is part of the sophistication of Gebreyesus Hailu’s text that it does not reduce colonial and colonized entanglements to a one-dimensional dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed, but also shows Eritrean involvement and complicity. It makes the story of Tuqabo’s political awakening all the more powerful” (358). Taking this argument further Rosetta Codling, in her review “*The Conscript*: The Immoral Life of a Colonized Soldier,” attempts to place the novel with its contemporaries in the corpus of
world literature. Codling compares the book with some of the most known war novels like Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

**Decolonizing Mind, Transcending Boundaries**

Hailu’s novel in many ways attempts to create Eritrean imagined communities. Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Homi Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* (1990) argue that national narration is very crucial in formation of imagined communities and national consciousness. The reason that most colonial powers discouraged writing and publication in their colonies could also be linked with the idea of blocking national narration that eventually would lead to national consciousness. In a similar vein, Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) contends the power of narration and its role in creating national consciousness. Said posits, “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (xiii).

*The Conscript* in many ways deplores the colonial grandeurs and calls for national consciousness. Its first step in creating Eritrean imagined community is the very first use of indigenous language. Although Tigrinya has a long history of written tradition--Ge’ez alphabets--its literature was only limited in the churches. Apart from the compilation of oral poetries by researchers associated with colonialism and missionaries, and religious works, there has never been any attempt especially by the indigenous to write any creative works of such length. The significance of Hailu’s work is that he took two steps forward in writing longer piece that heavily criticizes the colonial conscription and
expansion. As Anderson argues, Hailu’s book has created, “a new glory in the print elevation of languages they had humbly spoken all along” (60).

Hailu was being one of the privileged citizens who were sent to the metropolitan centers with the intention of creating colonial elites. At the end, however, he turned exactly the opposite by writing a novel that criticizes the colonial ambitions and expansion in his indigenous language. Hailu composed his novel against all the odds of writing a novel in a language that has never been regularly in print media. The secular and newspaper in Tigrinya—*Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazeta*—only started in 1942 with the British Military Administration (Negash 1999: 114).

As Ghirmai Negash describes in the “Translator’s Note” of *The Conscript*, Hailu was a Catholic priest who did Ph.D in theology in Italy (viii). The colonial intention of sending Hailu to study in Italy was very obvious. Discussing the aim of colonial education and its role in psychology of colonialism, Ehiedu Iweriebor points the system established by colonialism and missionaries was to create low-level technical, clerical and artisanal personnel that were needed for the colonial bureaucracies. Iweriebor argues the very few educated colonial elites become journalist, priests, teachers, lawyers and politicians. As their expected role they become the prime agents in dispersing the psychology of colonialism (471). Iweriebor says, they become: “[T]he ‘native’ carriers of the colonizers’ view about themselves and were therefore a very powerful local vanguards for normalization and propagation of the colonialists view of African societies as inherently backward, pathological, immobile, and in need of Western colonial domination” (472).
Focusing on the question of language, Ayọ Bamgboṣe in *Language and Exclusion* (2000) discusses the typical character of Africa’s postcolonial elites in matters of language choice. He argues, they are:

[T]aking pride in proficiency in the imported languages at the expense of a sound knowledge of one’s own mother tongue, preferences for written communication in a European language, addiction to information disseminated in imported languages by electronic and print media, and lack of interest in, and concerns for, the development of indigenous language. (43)

In *The Conscript*, because Hailu writes in indigenous language criticizing colonialism, he undermines the colonial goal and reverses his expected role. His stand of producing literature in his indigenous language is what the great critic Ngugi wa Thiong’o calls “decolonizing the mind.” In his book *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) Ngugi strongly argues that the first step of decolonization is to talk and write in indigenous language. For Ngugi, language is not only a means of communication, but a carrier of culture. In the Eritrean context, as Negash has broadly discusses it in his article, “Native Intellectuals in the Contact Zone” Hailu has transcended political, cultural, and religious boundaries to decolonize the *Habesha* mind.

Although it is common in early novels to end with one resolution, *The Conscript* does not end with the traditional style of a resolution. The story closes when Tuquabo requests to be released from the army after all the disillusionment. The end which symbolizes, if not surrender, Eritreans should at least request to be discharged from the Italian conscription was also reflected during the Italo-British war in Eritrea. During the
war, as Yohannes documents 6,000 Eritreans surrendered to the British army and more abandoned their services and went home (2010a: 423). Hailu’s book was a symbolic tribute to those who like Tuquabo were affected by the brutalities of the war.

*The Conscript* is also important for its thematic concerns of embodying elements of pan-Africanism and transnationalism. Hailu goes beyond limited geographical space and religious difference to support the Libyans for their right cause. Unlike most first generation of African novelists, who were fascinated with Africa’s past history and tried to create romantic precolicial setting that was disrupted by colonialism (refer Peters 1993: 11-20), Hailu does not try to paint a romantic image of precolicial Eritrea. Neither was he obsessed with feelings of nostalgia of the precolicial past. His story set in historical time and place depicts the evils of colonialism.

Hailu also reversed the *Habesha’s* perception of war and heroism that hounded generations. This is so because, *The Conscript* is not only important as the first anti-colonial novel among the corpus of African literature, but also the first novel that questioned the popular notion of heroism among the *Habesha*. In this novel, *Habesha’s* fascination with war is juxtaposed with the greedy fat bodies of the chieftains, who prayed for war to come so that their fattened bodies could be trimmed (7).

The pan-Africanist quality of the novel is interlinked with the novelist’s condemnation *Habesha* intervention in the Libyan war. After their bitter experience in Libya, the conscripts start doubting their mission and end up sympathizing with the Libyan nationalist fighters and cultivating resentment against the Italian colonialism. In
this way *The Conscript* as narrative becomes a narrative of African solidarity shaped by history within and between different geographical locations.
Chapter 2: Types of Narration, Narrators, and Credibility

Author, Narrator(s), and Narration

Narration is an important aspect in the study of aesthetics of a novel. Susan Sniader Lanser in *The Narrative Act* (1981) contends the study of narrators is equally important as the study of characters. Lanser adds, “narrators, too are personae created by the text” (42).

Booth argues that narration is an art, not a science. However, he adds:

> But this does not mean that we are necessarily doomed to fail when we attempt to formulate principles about it. There are systematic elements in every art, and criticism of fiction can never avoid the responsibility of trying to explain technical successes and failures by reference to general principles. But we must always ask where the general principles are found. (164)

The most common narrative perspectives are first, second, third-person, and omniscient narrators. Booth claims such designation of narration is overworked distinction and adds, “To say that a story is told in the first or third person will tell us nothing of importance unless we become more precise and describe how particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects” (150).

In addition to the clearly designated narrators, the distinction between the author, narrators and characters could sometimes be very subtle and difficult to differentiate. Booth further argues, “The act of narration as performed by even the most highly dramatized narrator is itself the author’s presentation of prolonged ‘inside view’ of a character” (18). Identifying narrators and if possible noting the authorial voice and the
distance or proximity of the author to the narrators, however, helps for critical understanding of a literary work. In a similar vein, Abbott, H. Porter in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2002) proposes, “Narrative is so much part of the way we apprehend the world in time that is virtually built in to the way we see” (6).

Narrative mode is one aspect of studying narration. Daniel Frank Chamberlain states, narrative perspective, “plays an essential role in the writing and reading of texts and has become a major issue in the theory that narrative gives rise to” (3). The author’s choice of narrators and narrative perspective could also mean more than telling the story intended. As Lanser contends the point-of-view as narrative technique can reflect the ideology of the author. Lanser says, “It is possible that the very choice of a narrative technique can reveal and embody ideology” (18). Lanser further expounds, it is crucial:

[T]o recognize the existence not only of fictional narrators but also of an “extraficitonal voice,” an authorial presence, traditionally overlooked, that is situated within the text itself. While this voice must be carefully distinguished from fictional narrator, a recognition of its existence sheds light on one of the thorniest issues in narrative theory: the relationship between the “implied author” and the narrator of the text. (8)

Furthermore according to Lanser the gender and personality of the narrator are crucial in a story. She notes the relationship between the writer’s circumstance and beliefs and the narrative structure of the text are also important (5).

The dividing line between narrator(s) or the author could be very delicate. For Booth, characters could be “prolonged inside view” of the author. The author’s stand on
some particular issues is often reflected directly or indirectly through the narrators. One big challenge for an author is to ably tell without his/her views being openly reflected by the narrators.

Points-of-View

Point-of-view is another literary device that is essential in understanding a literary text. Rene Rivara in “A Plea for Narrator Centered Narratology” argues: “[S]everal critics or novelists not only considered viewpoint as fundamental narrative concept, but attempted to accredit the thesis that aesthetic quality of a novel was based on its treatment of viewpoint: the beauty of literary narrative was due to the unity of viewpoint through which the story was told” (59).

The most common narrative points-of-view are the first-person point-of-view, the third-person point-of-view, the omniscient narrator, and some-times the second-person point-of-view. Third-person narration is often used interchangeably with omniscient narration, but as Abbott remarks the third-person narrator is not ‘knowing all’ like an omniscient narrator.

The first-person narration, narrated in the “I” pronoun is very common type of narration. Lanser, however, debates there is a difference between I-witness and I-

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3 Booth explains: “One of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of character’s mind and heart. Whatever out ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one I so-called real life could possibly know” (3).
protagonist narratives. Lanser says the I-witness has the dual role of witness and co-protagonist narrator (40).

Second-person narrator is not a commonly used narrative technique. Matt Dolconte contends second-person narration is an overlap of first and third-person narration. Dolconte explains the inevitable overlap occurs because of the axes. He adds while first and third-person narrators are defined along the axis of narrator, “second-person narration is defined along the axis of narratee—more precisely, by the coincidence of narratee and protagonist” (204). Unlike the first and third-person narrative modes that give more emphasis to the speaker, second-person narration is mainly concerned with the listener or the reader.

First-person narrator, with the obvious constraint of viewing events from a limited perspective, could create more credibility and intimacy with the reader depending on the story. Lanser elucidates the proximity the first-person narrator creates with the reader. Lanser says:

The use of first-person or first ‘figuration’ (in the broad sense) tends to create a ‘you’ in the reader. The use of ‘you’ helps create the standpoint of the ‘I.’ The use of an ‘it’ helps create a common standpoint of ‘you’ and ‘I’ that is we. The choice of pronoun is a choice of figuration that will affect the narrative perspective on the levels. From the empty core at the centre of ‘I’ emerge the figurations of the narrator’s voice and reader’s questioning and answering voice. The use of a highly impersonal pronoun such as ‘one’ or ‘no one’ can create an abstract reflexive and highly analytical ‘artificial’ standpoint. (134-135)
Although, obviously the first-person narrator creates such intimacy, yet as Booth argues it has the obvious limitation. He says, “It is true that the first-person is sometimes unduly limiting; if the ‘I’ has inadequate access to necessary information, the author may be led into improbabilities” (150).

On the other hand, the third-person narrator, depending on the involvement of the narrator as a character or only a narrator, has wider perspective than first-person narrator. Booth explains:

[W]hether or not they are involved in the action as agents or as sufferers, narrators and third-person reflectors differ markedly according to the degree and kind distance that separates them from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story. In any reading experience there is an implied dialogue among the author, narrator, the other characters, and the reader. Each of four can range, in relation to each other’s, from identification to complete opposition, on any axis of value, moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and even physical. (155)

Booth charts the relationship of narrators, readers and authors for better understanding of a story. He states the narrator could be more or less distant from the implied author, the characters, and the reader’s norms. Similarly, the implied author could be less or more distant from the reader and other characters. Booth explains that the distance maybe moral, intellectual, and emotional (156).

In the process of delivery the author, discovers the best way to reach the reader, which is complex in theory, and quite complicated in realization. Booth aptly summarizes the intricacy of the problem thus:
Majority of the choices are consequently choices of degree, not kind. To decide that your narrator shall not be omniscient decide personally nothing. The hard question is: Just how inconscient shall he be? Again to decide on first-person narration settles only a part of one’s problem, perhaps the easiest part. What kind of first person? How fully characterized? How much aware of himself as narrator? How reliable? How much confined to realistic interference; how far privileged to go beyond realism? (165)

In addition to distinguishing narrators according the established literary tradition, as Booth elucidates, it is also important to note if they are self-conscious narrators who are aware of telling stories or just observers who are unaware and never attempt to communicate with the reader (153).

Reliability of Narrators

Another important element of narration is the reliability of the narrators. The reliability is best defined in terms of its underlying relationship to the implied author of the narrative. A reader cannot rely on the narrator to act as direct or indirect representation of the implied author. Even the most sober, knowledgeable and narrators can turn out to be unreliable narrators.

Booth gives tentative definition of reliable and unreliable narrators. He explains, “I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not” (158–9). Although Booth’s criteria of reliability suffers from too much belief in a subjective pact between the norms of the narrator and the implied reader, his definition is
useful especially when he questions his own conclusions by recognizing that some narrators can be very ironic and are considered as “unreliable” as they have great potential in deceiving the reader (159).

By contrast to Booth’s Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan definition of reliability of narrators provides a more realistic account:

A reliable narrator is one whose rendering of the story and commentary on it the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth. An unreliable narrator, on the other hand, is one whose rendering of the story and/or commentary on it the reader has reasons to suspect. There can, of course, be different degrees of unreliability. But how can the reader know whether he is supposed to trust or distrust the narrator’s account? What indications does the text give him one way or the other? Signs of unreliability are perhaps easier to specify, and reliability can then be negatively defined by their absence. (100)

Part of the reliability of the narrators has to do with points-of-view of the narrators. William F. Riggan further elaborates concept of reliability of narrators: “First-person narration is, then, always at least potentially unreliable, in that the narrator, with these human limitations of perception and memory and assessment, may easily have missed, forgotten, or misconstrued certain incidents, words, or motives” (19–20).

The reliability of the narrator(s), the writer himself/herself cannot be completely detached from the narrators too. A writer creates an implied version of him/herself which he calls it, implied author. “Whatever the writer tries to be impersonal, his reader will
inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner – and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values” (Booth 70-71).

Monologues and Dialogues

Dialogue helps formulate characterization. It is a means by which an author establishes characters and creates credibility. Moshe Simon-Shoshan in *Stories of the Law* (2012) discusses the importance of a dialogue in characterization. Simon-Shoshan argues:

The presence of character and dialog are examples of such narrativity-enhancing characteristics. Character and dialog are the most common ways in which narratives express both their dynamism and their specificity. Human beings are finite and unique, and they are given to action. Human and human-like characters are thus common features of stories. The most specifically human form of action is speech. Speech allows a person to express his or her individual thoughts and feelings and hence is most conducive to displaying the unique facets of a character. Speech is also a primary means by which people interact with each other. (22)

Simon-Shoshan concludes, “Dialog thus often plays an important role both in generating dynamic interaction between characters and in portraying the specific and particular attributes of individual characters” (22).

Monologues also help better understanding of the characters. Authors repeatedly employ monologues to reflect inside views of the characters. This is the kind of narration Abbott calls “shift of focalizer.” Abbott explains the reason in shifting focalizer’s voice:
Most frequently this shift is accomplished by moving from the narrator’s voice to that of a character by means of direct citation, either of thoughts or openly expressed words. …..unvoices thought... But this kind of shift can also be done indirectly by filtering a character’s voice though the third-person narrator. It can be done freely, that is, without the quotation marks or other indicators like the usual “she thought/she said.” This is called free indirect style, where the author simply allows a character’s voice momentarily to take over the narrative voice.

(70)

The following chapter will attempt to see the theoretical parts discussed in here in the context of The Conscript. It will analyze the novel against the theories and concepts discussed above.
Chapter 3: Types of Narration in *The Conscript*

Three Narrators of *The Conscript*

*The Conscript* is narrated by four different narrators who tell the story interchangeably. Most parts of the story are narrated through a perspective of an observant third-person narrator, who has limited knowledge of the circumstances. A second-person narrator addresses the audience through the pronoun “you.” These narrators are helped by first-person narrator who shares his first-hand experience of the course of events. The role of the omniscient narrator is small; he appears briefly to fill the gap of absence of the third-person main narrator.

Telling the story from the axis of the *Habesha* conscripts, the main narrator travels with them all the way to Libya. While the narrative axis is from the perspective of the conscripts in most parts, the narrator for the first time shifts from the conscripts to the Arab nationalists when the war starts. At this juncture the narrative also shifts from the main narrator to the omniscient narrator so that to tell the views and preparations from the Libyan side. When the war ends, following quick but brutal confrontations however, the focus once again shifts to the conscripts. Particularly, the third-person narrator follows the actions and thoughts of the main protagonist Tuquabo. By contrast the omniscient narrator practically disappears from that until the end of the story when he reemerges briefly to report on Tuqoabo’s grieving of his parents.
The Third-person Narrator

The third-person narrator tells the major party of the story exploring the events as the story unfolds. Because of his limited knowledge, the narrator is unable to report to the reader what is being thought and planned by the characters.

There are indications that show that the main narrator is a Habesha man who, in all likelihood, travelled with the conscripts. His calling out the colonizers as “heartless Italians” (8) is one significant indication that he was not Italian. Moreover, the narrator repeatedly expresses feelings through Tigrinya proverbs and makes refers to oral stories and poems, common among the Tigrinya. For example, when the narrator describes Tuquabo’s intelligence he says, “There is a Tigrinya proverb that says ‘a razor is created with a sharp edge,’ and it reminded Tuquabo’s father of his son’s valor and intelligence in handling the weaponry, which made him proud” (5). The use of reference of events and incidents with a Tigrinya cultural perspective and saying like, “There is a Tigrinya adage which says...,” (25) also shows he is from Tigrinya ethnic-group, probably who hails from Eritrea.

Good examples of the references to poetry and stories are found on page 48 when the text alludes to the epic Eritrean poem, Ngusse-Nguse. The narrator’s solidarity with the conscripts is evident too. When the police beat the conscripts at the train station he describes the scene. “… and the military police would intervene and beat them with a whip (yes, with a whip like a donkey)” (17).
From the gender perspective, there are other indications that show the narrator is a man. His remarks about gender, the lack of women’s voice, the linguistic register, the repeatedly referred physical strength and masculinity contributes to this conclusion.

It is very clear from the very beginning that the narrator strongly condemns the war and ridicules the *Habesha* conscripts who volunteered to fight the Libyans. The narrator expresses his anger and utter disappointment at the *Habesha* children who were imploring Tripoli to wait them to grow. He describes the children’s song as “dispersing their poisonous words” (7).

As the narrator has extreme anger and disappointment with the *Habesha* conscripts, it is expressed through mockery and irony which become outlets for his frustration. He describes the whole preparation, “This was a time when there was war going on in Tripoli, and it was deemed fitting for the people of *Habesha* to be willing to spill their blood in this war” (7). And with a sarcastic tone at the role of the *Habesha* who were close with the Italian commanders, he says that, “So the useless one who follows a mule and feels full by smelling its dungs thinks…” (26).

Another attribute of the narrator is also that he is a well-rounded person with a mastery of the Italian language. He makes allusion to the Italian poet Leopardi (23) and talks of an Italian book, from which, he says he copied the Arab stereotypes (33). These qualities make the personalities of the narrator and the author come closer. Yet, the narrator is different from the author in the sense that he transcends a Christian perspective in the telling of the story. Significantly, he admires the Libyan Muslims for upholding their religion and for never missing prayers (32). He thinks of the camel as being blessed
by Prophet Mohammed and criticizes the Habesha for considering the drinking of camel’s a sin (30). Ultimately, he supports the right cause of the Libyan Holy-war (jihad) against the aggressor, Italy (38).

The narrator, furthermore, transcends geographical and cultural limitations. Criticizing the Habesha ethno-centrism, he discusses the harsh encounter between with the Sudanese when they first meet in Port Sudan. Both people being colonized, they were nonetheless making negative remarks about each other, he concludes in a resignedly (17). On the other hand he describes the Arabs positively: “Most of them are red in color, but the heat has darkened their skin slightly. They are beautiful, they tend to be tall. Their women were dressed like the women of our lowlands, and since they were always covered, they were lighter in complexion than their husbands” (32).

The narrator is a traveler. His repeated interjection and mention of personal anecdotes indicates his probable involvement in the campaign. Indications for his whole or partial/involvement in the campaign abound. When the conscripts were departing from Asmara, he personalizes the story saying, “Anyone who doesn’t feel a pinch in that situation really is devoid of human feelings” (11). He also describes the conscripts feelings as they travel to Libya intimately, “It was such a pitiful moment…” (11). Similarly, when the conscripts were traveling to Libya, the narrator tells their feelings very familiarly: “It is easier to imagine than to describe how fast their hearts were beating at that time. The memory of one’s homeland can be overwhelming” (16). Additionally he describes the situation in Libya with intense feeling of compassion when he says about the conscripts that: “Neither the shoes, nor the cloth with which they improvised to make
shoes, could save them from the heat, as the sand that got into their shoes rendered the foot it covered bare. What can be said? Oh my God, it was devastating to see the wrath unleashed on them” (24-25).

First and Second Person Narrators

The story chronicles the Libyan war and expresses the main character’s strong stand against conscription and the Habesha fascination with war and weaponry. We have seen the previous section that the main narrator’s focus on the core course of events. The two other narrators--first and second-person narrators--narrate the story with more Habesha cultural sensitivity than the third-person narrator; this twist helps the reader comprehend the story on familiar grounds.

The first-person narrator is particularly, more fully immersed in Habesha culture and worldview. He is also a Habesha conscript who participated in the war. The first-person narrator shares more of his personal anecdotes and feelings. With the intention of creating more credibility and intimacy with the Habesha listener, the first-person narrator--himself a Christian Habesha conscript--tells his story in familiar language and setting. When travelling, he describes the Red Sea: “It is said that Simonis was saved by dolphins, that they carried him back to his country, when he was thrown into the sea by his enemies. And some people say dolphins like to swim around a ship in case somebody throws food at them. Which one is the truth, I do not know” (17). The first-person’s interjection similarly continues along the sea: “As the light fell on the conscripts and the ship sailed on, it seemed to the conscripts that the moon also moved. I mean to say, it seemed to the conscripts that the moon also moved” (18). In another episode he relates
his story in the Libyan desert: “I recall one day myself running unawares into one of those hot ashes craters. My legs sank up to my knees; I was full of burn wounds. Anyone who went through this experience like me will know; those who have not experienced it can, however, contemplate it with open heart” (24).

The first-person narrator constantly appears to provide a Habesha outlook to the story, but as the example below shows he is also eager to demonstrate that he is able transcend religious and cultural boundaries as anti-war African nationalist:

A Christian who drank the milk of a camel was also considered to have converted to Islam. I remember one day when I was small boy. I met a man leading camels, and I saw the man milking and drinking from a bowl. Being curious, I approached him and asked him if a camel’s milk tasted good. “Sure” he said, and he offered me a taste. I sipped from his bowl, but when I started swallowing, I felt uncomfortable and spit it out. (30)

The second-person narrator similarly plays the role of intermediary between the main narrator and the listener. Unlike the main and first-person narrators, the second-person narrator (who addresses the listener as “you”) functions as moralizing figure.

As Hailu mentions in the preface, he was inspired to write the story when he was travelling by ship with conscripts to Libya. Very close to the author’s experience, the second-person narrator tells his experience of the sea voyage thus:

In fact, you don’t know what your heart feels when you stand before the view: it feels like you are a dreamer looking at some magnificence, and you are dumbfounded by it. Many thoughts run into your mind, and desires as well. A
desire that cannot be contained; you feel like running and jumping into the sea? Oh no… how about fear? Where would it go? Unable to control yourself, you cry (what can I say) and laugh at the same time. To praise the God who created this perfect beauty, your heart flies up to the skies on high, (13)

The second-person narrator continues linking the sea experience with biblical stories:

You also spot some fishing boats leaving to catch fish, with their nets cast (masts hoisted, too), at the same time that some of the big fish that come to swallow waters closer to land to find food somersault away before the sun hits harder. This indeed is very pleasant to see. But furthermore, it also makes you feel as if you are witnessing what you read in the Gospel about the Sea of Tiberias, or the lake of Gennesaret. It remind you of Peter, Andreas, the sons of Zebedee, and Jesus Christ. All the conscripts felt that way. (14)

The third example shows the second-person narrator describes his personal experience at sea:

In the sea, you can see fish and listen to the sound of waves. Not even a single chirping of birds was heard, nor was a bird in flight seen in hot oven. The nausea created by the permanent blaze and the absence of breeze makes one wonder whether one is in the land of life or death. What a stark difference, when you think of the green, windy, fertile land of Ethiopia, where streams flow. (24)

After prolonged discontinuation, the second-person narrator suddenly interjects and vents his emotion. His description borders on despair:
Oh, it was horrible sight. You wouldn’t even wish that to happen to your enemy. May the parents of these sons of Habesha not see this; may anyone who has human hearts not see this. This has become the end of the brave young Ethiopians. And the Italian who led them to this and made this happen was going to have a good night sleep in his homeland. Nothing was going to happen to him. Everything worked well for him. (48)

The Setting and Its Role in the Narration

The narration starts with apex as Tuquabo was kneeling down in front of his parents to be blessed. He was ready to depart to Libya to undertake his call. Then from the apex the story the pace of the story slows down and becomes less dramatic. The upbringing of Tuquabo in tranquil rural setting, alternates with news of conscription as he grows up.

However, as Tuquabo contemplates to join the colonial army, he begins to talk less and isolate, “Tuquabo began to talk less and isolated himself more” (7). That moment also marks the turning point in his life. While earlier his life was filled with childhood happiness in a pastoral setting, following that moment, his life becomes complex leading to monologues and reflections.

The story starts when the conscripts were taken by the trains to the port-city of Massawa in the Red Sea. The scene of the departure of the conscripts at the train station is marked with wailing and distress. The confusion and bitterness at the train station also foreshadows the end of the story. As the ship departs from Massawa, most of the conscripts soon withdraw in silence and avoid speaking to each other. This progression of
the story is reflected in a shift in the narrative tone: “There were all silent; except for whispers and unfinished sentences, not even one song or meaningful word was heard in the entire group” (23).

The narrator progresses with the conscripts in the midst of death and disillusionment shifting axes from Tuquabo to the whole group of conscripts. With the intensity of the situation, the narrator also raises his anger and frustration with the conscripts. The intensity of the battle does not seem to allow the characters to exchange long dialogues. In addition their disillusionment after defeat may also explain the absence and lack of dialogue in the story. The lack of the dialogue has affect characterization leading to the creation of flat and identical characters (of course with the exception of Tuquabo).

**Shift of Narrative Modes**

Depending on time and space, the narration of *The Conscript* shifts modes, focalization, and intensity. As the whole story is a catastrophic tale filled with dark scenes of death and despair, but lighter episodes break the intensity of the story. The story opens with imagery of warfare as the conscripts prepare to depart to Libya to fight the war:

He put down his gun beside him, knelt down before his parents, and asked: “My mother and father bless me, for I do not know what my fate will be in Tripoli”

Tuquabo was dressed in a gray uniform with a colorful belt that embellishes his waist, and from his ankle to his knee was bandaged with a thick stip of cloth that
looked like a horse blanket. Overwhelmed with emotion, his parents were speechless. (3)

Then, immediately using flashbacks, the narrator, thereafter, goes back to Tuquabo’s childhood and his upbringing. It is narrated in a flashback and in a matter-of-factly fashion:

They were a rich family with abundant cattle, and they hired a Moslem family to look after them. Sometimes Tuquabo and his father would go to the Saho Moslem family overnight…. When they traveled, Tuquabo, more than anything else, loved the mule ride, when his father sang and told stories, and the rhythmic motion of the mule, smoothly floating on the plains, carried them along, like water running on the ground. As a child, Tuquabo was riveted by the sudden movement of flying birds, and shuffling sounds in the bush would make his heart throb. As they rode by, they might see a flock of baboons, and Tuquabo would laugh at the sight of a monkey’s swift jump away from them. In his young heart, he wondered about why the baboons, so strong in numbers, were running away from them, but he kept such thoughts to himself. After reaching their destination, to be entertained with milk and porridge by their Saho Moslem friends, they would enjoy themselves under a full moon and listen to the chewing of the cattle. (6)

By contrast, the intensity and pace of narration rises at the time of farewell of the conscripts. Actions, emotions, reactions are narrated with intensity and dramatic language:
Some people had prepared food and drinks for their loved ones and were looking for them. Upon seeing the tumultuous crowd, they felt hopeless and just stood there. Some other would spot each other and run to be together, and the military police would intervene and beat them with a whip (yes, with a whip like a donkey). If they saw each other from a distance, they would say farewell and give their blessings to each other using hand gestures. But the most disturbing aspect of the scene was the black trucks that roared like starving lions, hungry to swallow the Habesha people in their beastly bellies. They were blaring, honking, and wailing while women sang together a melancholy song, “The train comes smoking and your mother’s daughter is crying.” (11-12)

The pace of narration gets slower once again when the conscripts board on ship. As they play playing their traditional music and dance in an attempt to avoid face reality, the conscripts are struck by the expansiveness of the sea and its mesmerizing beauty. This gives the narration yet another twist; lighter scenes follow before the reader confronts the unbearable situation in Libya.

The narration slowly builds up to climax during the war and exchange of fire in Libya. The narration that was full of life characterized with alternating scenes of imagination and question during the sea travel, suddenly truncates:

They were all silent; except for whispers and unfinished sentences, not even one song or meaningful word was heard in the entire group. The sense of shock, sadness, hopelessness, and regret was clearly visible on their faces. The view of the desert was overwhelming. There was not a single tree or blade of grass, not to
speak of water. One could not possibly move in any direction – left, right, front, or back – for one found oneself always surrounded by sand, stone, gravel, and heaps of dust. It was an expanse like the sea, but a more hostile one. In the sea you can see fish and listen to the sound of the waves. Not even a single chirping bird was heard, nor was a bird in flight seen in the desert. With the open cloudless sky, it was like a hot oven. The nausea created by the permanent blaze and the absence of breeze makes one wonder whether one is in the land of life or death. (23-24).

As intensity of the events raise, the pace of the narration similarly goes faster and is characterized by shorter sentences. The weather and setting also add to the gloominess narration. A good example in this regard is found in a passage that describes the event when the conscripts were dispersing in disarray after defeat:

The order to move was given again the next morning, and the soldiers walked slowly. The sun was unbearably hot, the sand got hotter, and the dust blew up. Many felt their hearts sinking, and order lost its meaning. They were dropping their guns and ammunition, and staggered. By midday, many had spinning heads and fell down and curled up and remained there, dark blood flowing out their noses. (46)

As stated earlier the most part of the story is told from the focus of the conscripts. The narrator shifts axed of narration to the Arabs at the point when the war is won by them (35-36). This shift of narrative axes shows the stark contrast of the Italians and Arab
commanders. The reader clearly learns that there was lack of command on the Italian side and bravery and determination on the Arab side.

Another event where there is shift of focalization is when war ended. The narrator again shifts his focus from Arab’s Tuquabo’s parents at home (49-54). With very little action, slow, monotonous, and painful moments, the story comes to a full circle when it goes back to the beginning to describe conscription and its effects.

Credibility of the Narrators

Most parts of the story are narrated by the third-person narrator who follows the footsteps of the conscripts and narrates the event from their perspective. The narrator, through monologues and unknown voice of reason tries to reflect the thinking of the conscripts but never tells their thoughts. The main narrator is not able to provide the bigger picture of the whole campaign from all perspectives. By focusing on the conscripts, he shows the shift of attitude among the Habesha conscripts. The narrator does not transcend his boundaries to reflect what the other sides --the Arabs and the Italian commanders-- are planning or saying. Rarely and only based on his assumption does he tell what the Arabs possibly were saying. For example, when the ship was docked in Port Sudan, the Sudanese were “thinking ‘These slaves! They are going to Tribuli for money’ while the former were thinking ‘These black people! They could never be superior to us,’ both harshly judging each other” (16-17), the narrator reflects their thinking.

The main narrator has antipathy against the conscripts. At times he denounces and condemns them and often uses ironic tone to portray their weaknesses. As the third-
person narrator is Habesha, he also tries to understand their case and deconstructs their values. Of course the narrator understands the Habesha conscripts are not mercenaries; yet he perceives their strong commitment to Italian imperialism and the fighting to their fellow Africa brothers as act of mercenary behavior.

All the narrators employed have some limitations and that is the main reason Hailu opted for other narrators to create credibility. As the main narrator has obvious limitation and fair and independent perspective that almost developed into an independent character, Hailu adds the other narrators to create credibility. Moreover he is concerned with creating credibility to his Habesha readers which explains why almost all the narrators reflect a Christian moral perspective and the Habesha cultural values.

Monologues and Internal Voices of Reason

With their obvious biases of the main narrators, the author uses other literary technique of creating credibility. He repeatedly employs the use of monologues and internal voices of reason to show the thinking and attitude changes of the conscripts. This was another technique of showing, instead of telling, and to let the reader witness the shift of attitude of the Habesha and the conscripts after all the disillusionment.

Hailu uses the monologues and internal voice of reason as means of expressing communal voice. In such cases, the author interjects the narrator’s flow and puts the words on the characters. For example, when Tuquabo was going off to Libya, his parents tell him:

You were our light and joy. We feel orphaned. Why do you wish to fight for a foreigner? What use is it for you and your people to arm yourselves and fight
overseas? You have all you want, why? But what can we say; it’s God’s wish. Go, and may our Lord protect you and give you strength. As for us, we are old people, beaten by sorrow, and we may not survive your return after two years. We hope to see you again, but all is in God’s hands. (8)

The narrator does not clearly indicate who from the parents says those words and with their grief and, with grief in the context, it does not seem credible for the parents to speak such strong and well-composed message. Therefore, it is probably a message put by the author in the parent’s mouth as a showing the frustration and magnitude of the problem.

When travelling to Libya, Tuquabo delves into himself and contemplates:

Tuquabo felt emotionally stirred up when he saw his native land moving away. And feeling a lump in the throat, he said, “O my country that raised me in its green land and beautiful hills, I say farewell to you. The entire field that once I lived in with my cattle and shepherds… I say farewell to you” (15).

Again, similarly, the author reflects Tuquabo’s thoughts through internal monologues. The author also expresses the collected voice of the conscripts and their disillusionment through internal voice. When the conscripts arrive in Libya frustrated and disenchanted, instead of the expected exchange of words among themselves, it is anonymous internal voice that speaks on behalf of all of them (21).

The use of monologues and internal voices similarly continues on pages 26-27; 40 and 41-42.
Throughout story, Hailu repeatedly uses internal voice of reason and monologues to show the shift of attitude. He employs those literary techniques in place of independent narrators. His use of monologues and internal voice adds credibility to the narration as the narrators employed have either their own limitations or some biases.

The Use of Question and Answer

The use of questions and answers is another literary device the narrator repeatedly uses to establish credibility. By doing so, the narrator tries to read the mind of the listener and provide possible answers or analysis. Although he fiercely condemns the Habesha conscripts, yet he does not completely dismiss them as sellouts and mercenaries. Rather he poses a question and elaborates:

All right, they were mercenaries? Weren’t they? It would indeed be too much for them to expect to hear better words. When the commander was talking to them, however, he forgot that he was addressing the Habesha, who unlike some other Africans who did not have pride in their history and land, and had a long history of resistance, and moreover, were endowed with honesty of heart and depth of mind. (28).

In another episode the narrator employs the question and answer technique at the critical situation to curiosity of the readers about the whereabouts of the Italian commanders. He provides a skeptical answer putting it as follows:

If you ask where the commanding officer was, he would be in his tent safekeeping his water. He had guards around his tent and stayed silent inside. A proverbial saying goes, “There are times when fighting war is easier than resisting hunger.”
Pity the conscripts who were in the brink of death from thirst yet were guarding the tent for somebody who carried water. (45)

The narrator describes the appalling situation in very graphic images and tries to show the contrast. While the commander-in-chief left in his mule, the conscripts were left to die. Yet, as the narrator has emphasizes with the question and answer style—that would obviously be on the minds of his reader—he concludes it is impossible for the Habesha conscripts to point guns at their commander.

The use of questions and answers technique, which is used mostly on the critical parts, is used once again used to underscore the humiliating destiny of the Eritrean conscripts:

And what happened to those conscripts who got away from this hell? They still had to fight their way out, and the Arabs started killing them one by one. The griot sang, “One by one they got fewer” when mourned the death of Negusse the legendary Habesha hero. It is true that the Habesha people were brave, but unfortunately the Arabs were coming in numbers. In the end, the Arabs drove them out to the rim of the sea, and the surviving conscripts eventually embarked on the ship that took them off towards their home. (48)

The Use of Oral Traditions

Hailu’s makes repeated use of oral traditions. As Matzke in her article "Ascari tales: preliminary remarks on Gebreyesus Hailu's The Conscript" argues, “Told from a variety of perspectives – an authorial narrative voice, a first-person narrator, and various figural narrative situations with different focalizations – the text is a story not only of
personal political awakening but also of a community (or rather: communities) under siege. (257).

Turning points in the story are expressed through a proverb or a traditional song. For example, when the conscripts were travelling to fight the war, the narrator reporting from the sea foreshadows their inevitable death through an oral song: “The dolphins seemed to be singing songs of welcome and farewell, and appeared as though to mean, ‘We saw you off and walked you over across the river, and now we return home for our reward,’ a song girls in our land would sing when sending away bridegroom to the bride’s village” (17).

In another example, the narrator, perfectly captures the then prevailing feelings of adventure linked to the Libyan war by saying: “Children singing their poisonous song” of imploring Tripoli to wait them until they become ready to fight the war (7). Similarly, when the soldiers return home defeated, they sing the traditional song in unison, “Let no one go to Tripoli, lest they be cut with long knife and sword” (48).

In functional terms, Hailu used oral tradition to create characterization. Especially in Tuquabo’s case oral tradition is not only used to characterize Tuquabo’s rural background, but also to explain Tuquabo’s formation as a talented oral poet. We see Tuquabo’s poetic talent expressed in several moments of crisis. This is epitomized when he mourns after his return from Libya, his mother’s death:

Farewell to arms

I am done with Italy and its tribulations

The robbed me off my land and my parents
I am done with conscription and Italian medals

Farewell to arms.

(57)
Conclusion

Hailu was a catholic priest and openly states his moral stand of the story in the preface: “I consider myself a blessed person and thank God for enabling me to express the concerns and feelings of my people at that young age” (xxix). What is significant is that he employs a narrator that starkly differs from his religious stand and embraces a different culture (Arab) and religious (Islam) as equal to his own.

As the thesis has discussed, Hailu employs three narrators that interchangeably continue the thread of the story. Most part of the story is told through a third-person narrator; two other narrators appear to give additional perspective. In varying degrees, the three narrators have a moral stand that strong poised against the war and conscription. Hailu uses the narrators interchangeably mainly to create credibility.

As the thesis has demonstrated, Hailu uses other literary techniques to build credibility including the use of monologues, internal voices, and use of question and answer. Especially the use of oral tradition is employed as a technique of narration to carry the story and also to create characterization and establish the location of the culture in which the story is set.
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