

# Navigating the Labyrinth of Otherness: A Postcolonial Intervention and Identity Formation in Hailu's Novel *The Conscript*

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## Abstract

This article examines the intricate interplay of Otherness and identity in Hailu's novel, *The Conscript*, focusing on the relationships among various colonized cultural groups and the internal struggles of the protagonist, Tuquabo. Through a postcolonial lens, the study reveals how Otherness manifests within the black community in Port-Sudan, as Ethiopians and Eritreans perceive the Sudanese as inferior, while the Sudanese view the *Askaris* as slaves. The analysis also explores the complexities of self and 'Other' within the conscripted *Askaris*' experiences as they journey from Eritrea to Libya, encountering different cultures, landscapes, and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the article investigates the role of external factors such as colonization, climate, and cultural differences in shaping perceptions of self and 'Other'. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of identity as a constructed image, the study highlights the transformations and evolving understandings of self and 'Other' among the conscripted *Askaris*. This exploration of Otherness and identity in *The Conscript* deepens our understanding of the impacts of colonialism, the fluid nature of identity, and the need for empathy in bridging divides between self and 'Other'.

**Key words:** Identity Formation, Marginalization, Power Dynamics, Identity Construction, Interactions, Identity Transformation, Fluidity of Identity, Colonialism, Otherness

## Introduction

In the novel *The Conscript* by Abba Gebreyesus Hailu, readers are transported to the tumultuous era of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea during the early 20th century. This article explores the historical context of Italian colonization in Eritrea and the experiences of the Eritrean people through the lens of Hailu's powerful narrative. With a deep understanding of his people's language and culture, Hailu skillfully captures the struggles and challenges faced by the colonized population. Through the story of the protagonist, Tuquabo, who is forcibly conscripted into the Italian colonial army, Hailu delves into themes of identity, resistance, and the resilience of the Eritrean people. By examining the dynamics of power, oppression, and cultural suppression depicted in the novel, I navigate the complexities of postcolonial societies and their impact on identity formation. The notion of the 'Other' is crucial in postcolonial studies which touches question of identity.

The 'Other' involves justifying the dominance of certain groups to subordinate others. The 'Other' refers to marginalized or subjugated individuals and communities who are considered different or inferior by the dominant culture. Postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argue that the 'Other' is

defined in relation to the dominant group and is shaped through discourses of difference and subordination. This concept reveals power dynamics, representation, and identity issues influenced by colonialism. It also explores how colonialism has affected identities, knowledge systems, and cultural practices. Postcolonial works of literature often reflect on the ‘Other’, and authors like Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Achebe, and Walcott have depicted the historical reality of colonization. In the novel *The Conscript*, the Italian colonizers dominate and dehumanize the Eritrean *Askaris*, exemplifying the self-mirroring and control dynamics of colonialism. While Hailu’s recognition is limited compared to renowned West African authors, his portrayal highlights the dehumanization inherent in colonial domination.

### **Families and Individuals as the Other in *The Conscript***

*The Conscript* begins with the sense of uncertainty and vulnerability that Tuquabo feels as he embarks on his journey to a foreign land. “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’” (3). The condemnation and questioning from the crowd reveal the societal expectations and judgments placed on individuals who choose to leave their families and engage in conflict. “What a cruel son! How could he leave his old parents behind” (8)? These elements and statements demonstrate the complexities of Otherness, including the emotional distance between Tuquabo and his parents, the collective response to his departure, and the tensions between individual desires and societal expectations.

From a postcolonial perspective, the author in his first chapter of the novel reflects the theme of the influence of colonialism on individuals and communities. Tuquabo’s decision to join the army and fight in Libya is evident as a response to the influence of colonial powers and the glorification of war in society. The story portrays the complex dynamics of power and control, as well as the emotional toll that colonialism and war inflict on families and individuals. In this sense, the notion of the ‘Other’ refers to those who are marginalized or excluded by the dominant culture or power structure. In this case, Tuquabo and his family is evident as the ‘Other’ within the colonial context.

Tuquabo’s parents, as members of a marginalized community, have already experienced the loss of their other children. Their worries and anxieties about Tuquabo’s safety in Tripoli reflect the vulnerability and precariousness of their position as the ‘Other’. “His parents were speechless” (3). They are deeply affected by the dominant culture’s glorification of war and the pressure for young men to join the military. The narrator tells readers, “Tuquabo was dressed in a gray uniform with a colorful belt that embellished his waist, and from his ankle to his knee was bandaged with a thick strip of cloth that looked like a horse blanket” (3). Within these family units, individuals may hold differing views on the war based on their personal experiences, beliefs, and values. The Eritrean chiefs beg, “Lord, don’t let us be dormant, please bring us war” (7). Some may see themselves as part of the cause or identify with the goals and motivations of one side in the conflict, considering it as a struggle for justice. However, there are those who view the war as detrimental, perhaps due to concerns about the loss of life, destruction, or the potential for further violence and instability. “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?” (8). This division within families highlights the complexity of identity formation and the negotiation of allegiances in the postcolonial context. It demonstrates that individuals within a shared cultural or societal framework can have divergent perspectives on matters related to politics, power, and conflict. These differing opinions are influenced by factors such as personal experiences, historical legacies, and the interplay between tradition and modernity. By acknowledging the existence of multiple viewpoints within families, readers can gain

insight into the intricacies of identity construction and the diverse ways in which individuals engage with the complexities of postcolonial societies. The recognition of these differences fosters a thorough analysis of power dynamics, social inequalities, and the ongoing struggles for justice and equality that are inherent in postcolonial contexts that is to say the book reflects ‘Other’ and self within the families and individuals. Hailu reflects it plainly:

One person inquired of another why thousands of people were passing by. “It is today that the soldiers are going to Tribuli. Let’s go and see.” Another was saying that it is not really appealing to see people wailing in their misery and sadness. Anyone who doesn’t feel a pinch in that situation really is devoid of human feeling. (11)

### **Colonized as the ‘Other’: Unveiling Subtle Forms of Othering by the Colonizers in *The Conscript*.**

Another important aspect which the paper highlights is that the power dynamics in the relationship between the ruling power and the subjugated population. Tuquabo’s desire to fight in Libya is influenced by the idea of gaining fame; “His ambition may also have been influenced by those *Habesha* chiefs who said they hated to sit idle” (7) and proving his valor, which aligns with the expectations imposed by the colonial power. The community’s response, with some condemning Tuquabo’s decision while others glorify it, represents the internalized effects of colonial ideologies and the internal divisions that emerge within the colonized community. The narrator in the book reveals the dire situation of the people within their own capital city and the mistreatment they endure at the hands of the colonizers. The Italians beat “with a whip like a donkey” (12) The Italians are depicted as brutally beating the *Askaris*, referring to them as “weak donkeys” (47) and treating them with utmost cruelty. As in “Self-Representation in the Contact Zone: An Autoethnographic Reading of *The Conscript*” the researcher says “fear and punishment tactics are used to control the *Askari*” (Hughes Waldick 33). The narrator witnesses the dehumanization of the black soldiers, stating that even “dogs fared better; they at least ate their masters’ leftovers” (46).

The book also discloses straightforwardly through its narrator’s report as the Black soldiers gear up to confront the White Libyans, the Italian commander delivers a speech to the *Askaris*, intending to inspire them. However, the speech primarily revolves around the commander’s self-reflection, revealing racial prejudices and depicting the colonized individuals as intimidating beings and formidable entities. In “Whiteness, racism, and identity.” the Otherness has put and has been described as “whiteness is the ideological counterpart of race relations, both of the ways of skirting around the relations of political, social and economic power that have determined the place of” (Fields 9) the colonized *Habesha* in Italian time. In *The Conscript*, the commander says:

O black Eritrean *Askari*! Those whom you are now going to fight against are but a bunch of shepherds. You may perhaps be frightened because they are whites. However, they are not like us. (27)

The above quoted highlighting the commander’s emphasis on the immense importance and superiority attributed to whiteness. Intricately, the Otherness is mirrored and indelibly etched into the psyche. “Rooted in racism, the dominance –subjugation relationship between the Eritreans and the Italians represents both an ideological and an active manifestations of domination over somebody who is considered as inferior being” (Hughes Waldick 33). Though Nir Arielli witnesses “Eritrean troops were the key to crushing the revolt in Cyrenaica” (Arielli 55), in the novel, Hailu portrays them as dehumanized beings. He uses animals such as dogs, donkeys, monkeys, hyenas, vultures, camels, and flies to symbolize the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The natives are depicted as being treated no better than animals,

subjected to brutalization and dehumanization. Furthermore, the colonized often referred to as animalization or zoological representation. This system of dehumanizing and reducing individuals from colonized communities to the status of animals, reinforcing oppressive power dynamics and perpetuating stereotypes. The translator of *The Conscript* notes “the evils of colonialism—that is, the abuse and misuse of the colonized” (xii) is enormous. This representation reflects the situation of colonized which is purely considering as ‘Other’, “master-slave” (Hughes Waldick 33) relationship.

### Portrayal of Self and ‘Other’ in *The Conscript*

The actions of the colonizers in the novel highlight the dynamics of Selfness and Otherness. The country, which should belong to the natives, becomes an alien world where they are marginalized and estranged. As Frantz Fanon explores in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, the question of “Who am I in reality?” (Fanon 182), becomes relevant to every conscripted *Askari* in the novel. The weeping and wailing of the crowd indicate a sense of alienation and marginalization. The moments of dehumanization lead to immense confusion and disturbance, exceeding what one can imagine, “the confusion and disturbance were beyond imagining” (12). The colonizers, following a pattern seen throughout history, implemented discriminatory rules and laws that separated the native population from the settlers. They consistently pursued segregation through means such as education, religion, infrastructure, and other methods aimed at diluting, suppressing, and assimilating the natives. During the imperialism of Italians, “there were at least four areas within which an essential difference between colonizers and colonized was articulated during the Liberal period ... it is in relation to the issues of Italian citizenship, intermarriage, education, and penal justice” (Sòrgoni 41) revealing restricted several areas highlighted the essential differences between the oppressor and the oppressed. Thus, throughout the entire novel, the theme of the oppressor over the colonized population, particularly the Italians over the natives, is consistently depicted. The narrator employs various metaphors that objectify the black natives and their circumstances, such as referring to them as the “black train,” (12) “black tick smoke,” (12) “black track,” (12) and “nine in the evening” (12). These deliberate objectifications serve to reinforce the power dynamics and highlight the stark contrast between the oppressor and the oppressed. As a result, readers witness the colonized individuals crying while the whites maintain control and dominance over them. The narrator enriches the Otherness:

The Italian officers seated themselves on an upper deck apart from the rest. As for the *Habesha*, they were stationed in the open, where there is no shelter from the sun’s heat and rain, a place where you put animals. (14)

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha discusses “that familiar alignment of colonial subjects – Black/White, Self/Other – is disturbed with one brief pause and the traditional grounds of racial identity are dispersed” (Bhabha 58) leading to a dispersal of those established grounds of racial identity. This disruption of racial identity categories is reflected in *The Conscript*, where both the colonizers and the colonized are incomparable, creating a clear distinction between the Self and the ‘Other’ from the very beginning. The speech of the commander, in *The Conscript*, explicates the several qualities of the self and ‘Other’. In the book the oppressor says:

We alone are the brave whites; we, Italians, your masters. Hence, beat him (the enemy); do not be afraid of him. If we happen to find goats, camels, cattle, donkeys, or sheep, we will give you some to slaughter and eat. However, woe unto him who finds gold, silver, or any similar item and keeps it for himself. I shall flog his bare bottom with fifty-five lashes of the whip in front of everyone.

Now then, have you heard?! I am the owner of all the spoils. I am your master; everything you find you hand it to me. 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.” He finished by stating that they must all repeat as he shouted, “*Viva l’Italia; Viva Emanuele, our king!*” (27-28)

The colonized individuals (referred to as the ‘Other’) are portrayed as subservient and inferior to the Italians, who consider themselves as the brave and superior whites. The Italian commander emphasizes their dominance and ownership over the colonized population, asserting their role as masters. The language used underscores a clear power dynamic, with the commander asserting control over resources and imposing strict punishments for any defiance. The colonized are depicted as reliant on the Italians for sustenance, as indicated by the promise of providing animals for slaughter and consumption. However, the mention of severe consequences for keeping valuable items reflects the perception of the colonized as untrustworthy or prone to theft. Furthermore, the commander’s speech reflects a self-centered perspective, highlighting their authority and entitlement. The repeated emphasis on their ownership of spoils, the reference to Italian government’s grandeur, and the boasting of their superior resources (ships, trains, guns, rifles, and airplanes) serve to reinforce their perceived superiority over the colonized population. The self is reflected in the commander’s speech through the affirmation of their power and control, reinforcing the image of the Italians as masters. The speech aims to instill a sense of gratitude and privilege among the colonized for fighting under the Italian banner, further reinforcing the hierarchical relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed.

### **Otherness in between Colonized Cultural Groups in *The Conscript***

Otherness is not limited to the relationship between colonizers and the colonized in Hailu’s novel, *The Conscript*. It also reflects the dynamic interactions and relationships between various segments of the black community in Port-Sudan, where Ethiopians and Eritreans, collectively referred to as *Habesha*, have gathered. The Ethiopians view the Sudanese as inferior, proclaiming, “These black people! They could never be superior to us” (16), suggesting their belief in their own superiority. Conversely, the Sudanese describe the *Askaris* (Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers) as starving individuals who are solely concerned with obtaining bread and money, likening them to “slaves” (16). In this context, the author highlights the emptiness and judgment within people of the same skin color, as they bitterly critic each other while holding a sense of superiority or inferiority, “they could never be superior to us, both harshly judging each other” (16-17). Despite having a similar skin color, each group regards the other as the ‘Other’. This emphasizes “the inferior position” (Sòrgoni 1) assigned to the colonized people, as Barbara points out. Judging among each-other could not come from nowhere. Fanon, in *The Fact of Black Skin White Mask*, specifically in the section “The Negro and Psychopathology,” demonstrates that “magazines often depict symbols of evil, such as the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, or the Savage, using Negroes or Indians” (Fanon 113). This deliberate representation influences the perceptions ingrained in the minds of various individuals. Moreover The idea that ‘there is no innocent knowledge’ is often associated with feminist and postcolonial scholars who engage with epistemology, such as Linda Alcoff and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also encapsulates a broader critique of traditional epistemological frameworks that tend to be biased, limited, and shaped by power structures. It reflects the understanding that knowledge production is influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts, and therefore, it holds significant position to critically examine and challenge dominant knowledge systems. That presentation and portrayal

is deliberate. The novelist of *The Conscript* also ridicules the ill-thoughts of these two groups by introducing a dolphin, a sea-animal, to remind them that human love should be sufficient, indirectly mocking their judgments in the novel. All in all, the encounter between the Ethiopian soldiers and the Sudanese people in Port Sudan illustrates the tensions and prejudices that arise between different colonized groups. Both sides harbor negative stereotypes and prejudices about each other, reflecting the internalized effects of colonization. Postcolonial theorists would examine these dynamics as a result of the divide-and-conquer strategies employed by colonial powers, which perpetuated divisions and hostilities among colonized communities. The conscripted soldiers in *The Conscript* come from different backgrounds and countries, leading to a sense of one group boasting over the other due to the lack of natural resources. For example, the Ethiopian conscripted *Askaris* come from a “landlocked” (18) country without access to the sea. The narrator describes their sentiments, expressing, “my country is low and underdeveloped compared to the rest of the world’s kingdoms because it lacks the sea, which simultaneously makes people closed off and ignorant” (18). This marginalizes their own identity, making them feel like ‘Others’. However, the *Askaris* from Eritrea, having a long coastline, may not share this feeling of inferiority.

Throughout the novel, this group of people often refers to themselves as ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ when encountering different people and cultures along the way to Libya. For example, unlike the Ethiopians, the group encounters the lands of Egypt and Israel from a distance. Being followers of Christianity, they perceive themselves as superior to others. They have reverence for places mentioned in the Bible, as the narrator states, “An Ethiopian has respect for places named in the Bible” (19). The concept of self and ‘Other’, for this particular group of people in the book, changes based on the similarities and differences in their cultures. Religion, as one aspect of their identity, plays a significant role in shaping their perception of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’, especially for the Ethiopian and Eritrean *Askaris*. When they encounter Egypt and the Egyptians, they see it as “the holy city and the home of the Patriarch of the Coptic Church, Patriarch Markos Eskenderia” (20). The familiarity with the many modern cities mentioned in their Bible adds to their sense of identity. They experience immeasurable happiness when they witness the position of the Patriarch, momentarily setting aside any frustrations they may have had with certain religious leaders in their own country who had caused disruptions. The encounter with significant religious sites and cultural similarities along their journey further reinforces the notion of ‘Self’ and Other for the Ethiopian and Eritrean *Askaris*. The experiences in Egypt and Israel, which hold biblical significance, evoke a deep connection and sense of belonging for them. Their biblical knowledge becomes a tool for identification and validation.

In contrast, the Ethiopian *Askaris* also carry a sense of disappointment and resentment towards certain religious leaders from their own country. They reflect on the troubles caused by some patriarchs who were sent from the same place to Ethiopia, highlighting the discrepancy between the idealized image of their faith and the reality of religious leaders who have caused turmoil. “The wickedness of some of the patriarchs who were sent from that same place to Ethiopia and gave the people so much trouble” (20). This adds complexity to their perception of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’, as they grapple with conflicting experiences and representations within their own cultural context.

The conscripted *Askaris* in the novel encounter various groups of people, including Sudanese, Israelis, Egyptians, and Libyans, each embodying the dynamics of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’. The Libyans, who follow the Islamic faith, view the *Habesha* or *Askaris* as mere animals, disregarding their humanity. “Did you see the *Habesha* dog who sold his life for money? Let him be.’ Beware, *Habesha*” (21). However,

the anonymous voice and narrator consistently remind them that the “Arabs are not your enemies” (21). Despite being from the same continent of Africa, no group in the book recognizes their shared identity.

### **The Protagonist, Tuquabo as ‘Self’ and ‘Other’**

The concept of self and ‘Other’ is explored among the colonizers, colonized, and even within groups of people belonging to the same country or religion. The novel presents the idea that self and ‘Other’ are interconnected and cannot exist independently. Tuquabo, an Eritrean and the main character, isolates himself from the Ethiopian *Askaris* who are singing and celebrating on the ship. While they engage in merriment, Tuquabo is lost in his own thoughts, reminiscing about his parents and homeland. As the ship departs, he feels emotionally stirred, witnessing his native land drifting away. The hero of the novel is occupied by “thoughts of his mother and father dominated his mind, and Tuquabo saw Massawa running away from him” (12). His internal conflicts have made him an individual of different identification.

The narrator depicts the internal struggle of Tuquabo, emphasizing the interconnectedness of self and ‘Other’. The singing and dancing Ethiopians represent the ‘Other’ to Tuquabo, highlighting his sense of detachment and introspection amidst the collective experience. The imagery of the ship sailing and his homeland fading into the distance evokes a deep emotional response, underscoring the significance of one’s origins and the sense of belonging in relation to self and ‘Other’. The narrator says:

The ship howled, emitting a sound that created cold shivers in your stomach, and moved slowly. The children of Ethiopia started singing. While one played the *kirar*, a left-handed boy was pounding a drum, making a deafening noise. Tuquabo was deep in thought, far away from the world of singing and dancing. From the deck of the ship he looked back towards his land. Thoughts of his mother and father dominated his mind, and Tuquabo saw Massawa running away from him. It is true that at nighttime on a ship it doesn’t look like the ship is sailing, it feels like the land is moving away. Tuquabo felt emotionally stirred up when he saw his native land moving away. (1

Throughout the novel, the notion of self and ‘Other’ is not limited to external encounters but also exists within the internal world of the characters. It is clear that self and ‘Other’ are intertwined, and one cannot fully exist without the presence of the other. This implies that one’s sense of identity and self-awareness are influenced by their interactions with others. Tuquabo’s detachment from the singing and dancing Ethiopians on the ship reflects his internal journey and the complexity of his self-perception. As he gazes back at his land, thoughts of his parents and the familiarity of Massawa consume his mind. The departure of the ship creates a sense of emotional turmoil within him, as it symbolizes the separation from his roots and the start of a new chapter in his life. In this sense, he may regard himself as the ‘Other’

Tuquabo’s experience highlights the intricate interplay between self and ‘Other’ in light of the surrounding context of colonization. While he shares a common background with the Ethiopian *Askaris*, he feels a sense of distance and alienation from them. This internal division further emphasizes the multilayered nature of identity and the varying ways in which individuals relate to one another.

The novel suggests that self and ‘Other’ are not fixed categories but rather fluid and influenced by individual perspectives, experiences, and interactions. It raises questions about how individuals define themselves in relation to others and how these perceptions shape their understanding of identity, culture, and belonging. As the conscripted *Askaris* navigate their journey, encountering different groups and cultures along the way, the novel prompts readers to reflect on the complexities of self and ‘Other’, both externally and internally. It highlights the importance of recognizing shared humanity and breaking down the barriers of division and prejudice that perpetuate notions of superiority and inferiority.

In summary, the book emphasizes the interconnectedness of self and ‘Other’ within the conscripted *Askaris*’ experiences and explores the internal struggles and reflections of characters like Tuquabo. By delving into these dynamics, the novel invites readers to contemplate the construction of identity, the impact of colonialism, and the need for empathy and understanding in bridging the gaps between self and ‘Other’. Tuquabo’s deep attachment to his homeland and family becomes evident, portraying him as someone with a distinguished background compared to the others. This subtly suggests that he comes from a different upbringing or social standing. The theme of marginalization among the group persists even as they reach Libya, a country associated with harsh conditions akin to “hell” (24).

### ***Habesha* as the ‘Other’ in Libya in *The Conscript***

It is in Libya that the entire group, known as the *Habesha*, finally unites as they all hail from the same region. However, this realization only dawns upon them after experiencing bewilderment and perplexity. Tuquabo’s question, "Do you think people live in this dry sand" (22)? Indirectly highlights their underestimation of the Libyan land, emphasizing its barrenness and lack of life. In contrast, they hold an appreciation for their own countries. Their stay in the Libyan Desert reveals to the *Askaris* that they are all marginalized and regarded as ‘Others’. The unbearable climatic conditions in Libya, coupled with the mistreatment inflicted upon them by the Italian commanders, further solidify their subordinate position. The *Askaris* observe how the Italian commanders. The narrator reports:

For the Italian commanders who rode on mules for the whole day, a tent was put up to protect them from night cold and sandstorms. Their beds were prepared, and water was readied for them. And who was taking care of this? The wretched *Habesha*, whose lot is suffering. (25-26)

The above highlights the stark contrast in treatment between the oppressor and the oppressed, self and ‘Other’. The novel illustrates the marginalized status of the *Askaris* and their growing awareness of their collective Otherness. Their perception of the Libyan landscape and their own countries reflects the complex interplay between self and ‘Other’, as well as the impact of external factors such as climate and colonization. In this sense, the novel portrays how the notions of self and ‘Other’ are shaped and transformed in varied way; through encounters with different cultures, landscapes, and religious beliefs. The Ethiopian and Eritrean *Askaris* navigate these encounters with a mix of pride, prejudice, and a desire for affirmation. The dynamics of superiority and inferiority, rooted in cultural, geographical, and religious differences, contribute to the complex fabric of identity and the ever-evolving understanding of self and ‘Other’ in the narrative on top of the colonizers’ assumptions. According to Homi Bhabha’s perspective in *The Location of Culture* the process of identification goes beyond simply affirming a pre-existing identity. He says:

Finally, the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification – that is, to be *for* an ‘Other’ – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of Otherness’. (64)

Instead, it involves the construction of a representation of identity and the subsequent transformation of the subject as they adopt that image. This idea can be related to the themes discussed earlier, particularly the notion of self and ‘Other’ in the particular circumstances of colonialism and the experiences of the conscripted *Askaris*. Bhabha’s notion of identity as a constructed image aligns with the experiences of the characters in the novel. The conscripted *Askaris* grapple with their identities in relation to their own country, fellow countrymen, the colonizers, and other groups they encounter. Their perception of self and



the 'Other' is influenced by a multitude of elements including nationality, ethnicity, religion, and social standing. As the conscripted *Askaris* navigate their journey and encounter different cultures and peoples, they undergo transformations in their perception of self and 'Other'. Their interactions with Sudanese, Egyptians, Israelis, and Libyans challenge their preconceived notions and force them to reconsider their identities. These encounters contribute to their evolving understanding of themselves and others.

Bhabha highlights that the demand for identification involves the picture of the subject within the framework of Otherness. This resonates with the experiences of the conscripted *Askaris*, who find themselves continuously positioned as 'Others' by both the tyrant and the people they encounter. They are subjected to dehumanizing treatment, objectification, and discrimination, which reinforces their marginalized status and perpetuates the distinctions between self and 'Other'.

As the writer of *The Location of Culture* suggests ideas on identity that it is not fixed or static but rather a dynamic and evolving construct. This aligns with the characters' experiences as they navigate through different cultural contexts, confront their prejudices and biases, and reassess their own positions in relation to others. The malleability of identity is demonstrated through the changing perceptions and interactions among the conscripted *Askaris* and the various groups they encounter.

In summary, Bhabha's ideas about identity, representation, and Otherness provide a framework to understand the complexities of identity construction and transformation experienced by the conscripted *Askaris* in the novel. Their encounters with different cultures and peoples challenge their preconceptions, highlight the fluidity of identity, and demonstrate the power dynamics inherent in the process of identification.

## Conclusion

In Abba Gebreyesus Hailu's novel *The Conscript*, the intricate interplay of self and 'Other' serves as a central theme that deepens our understanding of the complex dynamics at play within postcolonial societies. Through a postcolonial lens, the novel presents a multifaceted exploration of identity formation, Othering, and the fluid nature of these constructs. The novel vividly portrays how the colonizers, in this case, the Italians, assert their dominance and superiority over the colonized population, exemplifying the power dynamics inherent in colonialism. The Italian commander's speech, emphasizing whiteness as a mark of superiority, reveals the racial prejudices deeply ingrained in the colonial mindset. The colonized individuals are consistently depicted as subservient and inferior, highlighting their marginalized status and the dehumanizing effects of colonial rule.

However, 'Otherness' in the novel extends beyond the relationship between colonizers and the colonized. It also encompasses the tensions and prejudices that exist among different colonized cultural groups. Ethiopians and Eritreans, collectively referred to as *Habesha*, view each other with a sense of superiority or inferiority, despite sharing a similar skin color. This internal Othering underscores how colonialism has fragmented and divided communities, perpetuating notions of superiority and inferiority.

The novel also delves into the internal struggles of the protagonist, Tuquabo, who grapples with his sense of self and 'Other' as he embarks on a journey far from his homeland. His detachment from the Ethiopian *Askaris* on the ship and his deep attachment to his homeland illustrate the interconnectedness of self and 'Other' and how individual perspectives shape identity.

As the conscripted *Askaris* journey from Eritrea to Libya, encountering different cultures, landscapes, and religious beliefs, their understanding of self and 'Other' undergoes transformations. They confront their own prejudices and biases, challenging preconceived notions about different groups. This

dynamic exploration of identity aligns with Homi Bhabha's perspective of identity as a constructed image, highlighting its fluid and evolving nature. In conclusion, *The Conscript* by Abba Gebreyesus Hailu offers a compelling narrative that not only sheds light on the impacts of colonialism but also invites readers to contemplate the complexities of identity, Otherness, and the need for empathy and understanding in bridging the divides between self and 'Other'. Through the experiences of the conscripted *Askaris* and the various groups they encounter, the novel underscores the malleability of identity and the power dynamics inherent in the process of identification. Ultimately, it serves as a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of postcolonial literature in our understanding of the human condition.

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