

From Autonomy to Instrument: Dehumanization in The Conscript

Özerklikten Araca: *Lejyoner*'de İnsanlıktan Çıkarılma Süreci

Abstract

This article examines the processes of dehumanization and thingification in Gebreyesus Hailu's The Conscript: A Novel of Libya's Anticolonial War, drawing on colonial and postcolonial theories to explore how colonialism transforms individuals into instruments of imperial power. Employing Aimé Césaire's concept of thingification, alongside insights from some other colonial and postcolonial critics such as Frantz Fanon, Ania Loomba, and Albert Memmi, the study highlights the systemic reduction of colonized subjects to objects of production and domination. The novel's depiction of forced conscription serves as a lens through which the physical, psychological, and cultural erasure and thus dehumanization inherent in colonial systems is analyzed. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Hailu critiques the colonial apparatus, which subjugates and commodifies the colonized while erasing their identities and autonomy. By focusing on the protagonist Tuquabo and the Eritrean conscripts, the article reveals how colonialism perpetuates power imbalances through violence, alienation, and the internalization of colonial hierarchies. Furthermore, it addresses the ideological strategies used to instill loyalty to colonial powers and sever indigenous cultural ties. Ultimately, this study highlights the relevance of Hailu's work as a critique of colonialism's enduring impact, offering a vital perspective on the physical, psychological, and cultural mechanisms that sustain imperial domination.

Keywords: Thingification, dehumanization, Gebreyesus Hailu, The Conscript, colonialism

Öz

Bu makale, Gebreyesus Hailu'nun *Lejyoner*: Libya'nın Antikolonyal Savaşı adlı eserinde yer alan insanlıktan çıkarma ve nesneleştirme süreçlerini, sömürgeciliğin bireyleri nasıl emperyal gücün araçlarına dönüştürdüğünü sömürgecilik ve postkolonyal teoriler bağlamında ele alarak incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, Aimé Césaire'in nesneleştirme (thingification) kavramı ile birlikte Frantz Fanon, Ania Loomba ve Albert Memmi gibi diğer bazı kolonyal ve postkolonyal kritiklerin görüşlerinden yararlanarak, sömürgeleştirilen bireylerin sistematik bir şekilde üretim ve tahakküm nesnelere indirgenmesini vurgulamaktadır. Romanın zorunlu lejyonerliğe ilişkin tasviri, sömürge sistemlerinde yer alan fiziksel, psikolojik ve kültürel açıdan yok edilme ve nihayetinde insanlıktan çıkarma süreçlerini analiz etmek için bir mercek işlevi görmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, Hailu'nun, sömürgeleştirilen bireyleri tahakküm altına alan, metalaştıran ve onların kimliklerini ve özerkliklerini yok eden sömürge aygıtını nasıl eleştirdiğini ortaya koymaktır. Makale, baş karakter Tuquabo ve Eritreli lejyonerler üzerinden, sömürgeciliğin şiddet, yabancılaşma ve sömürgeci hiyerarşilerin içselleştirilmesi yoluyla güç dengesizliklerini nasıl devam ettirdiğini gözler önüne sermektedir. Ayrıca, sömürge güçlerine sadakat aşılacak ve yerel kültürel bağları koparmak için kullanılan ideolojik stratejiler de ele alınmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, Hailu'nun eserini, sömürgeciliğin kalıcı etkilerini eleştiren güçlü bir yapıt olarak konumlandırmakta ve emperyal tahakkümü sürdüren fiziksel, psikolojik ve kültürel mekanizmalar hakkında önemli bir perspektif sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nesneleştirme, insanlıktan çıkarma, Gebreyesus Hailu, *Lejyoner*, sömürgecilik

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Introduction

Colonialism, as an enduring historical phenomenon, is rooted in the exploitation and subjugation of other cultures and societies, justified through an ideology that systematically dehumanizes the colonized. This ideological foundation not only establishes a hierarchy of power but also enforces the view that colonized peoples exist merely as tools to serve the colonial project. This process of reducing human beings to instruments of economic and political gain has been articulated as “thingification,” a term that captures the transformation of individuals into objects or commodities devoid of agency and intrinsic value. In examining the literature and narratives born out of colonial contexts, it is possible to observe the persistent themes of dehumanization and thingification mechanisms through which colonial powers assert control and dominance, and thus justify their superiority. This article explores these concepts through a close analysis of *The Conscript*, focusing on how the novel portrays the psychological, cultural, and physical impacts of colonial rule on Eritrean conscripts. By examining the forced conscription of Tuquabo and his fellow soldiers, the study highlights how colonialism not only exploits their labor but also erases their individuality and autonomy. Through Hailu’s vivid depiction of their suffering, the novel reveals the devastating consequences of dehumanization and thingification, offering a critique of the broader imperial system that reduces colonized subjects to mere instruments of war and subjugation.

The concept of thingification, introduced by Aimé Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*, describes the colonized person’s reduction to an inanimate state, in which they are perceived by the colonizer as something to be owned, used, and discarded. Discussing the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, Césaire stresses that there is “no human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production” (2001, p. 42). This dynamic exemplifies the systematic dehumanization inherent in colonialism, where the colonized are not only exploited but also stripped of their personhood, reduced to mere objects of utility. Césaire signifies that colonialism erases genuine human connections, replacing them with exploitative mechanisms that sustain a rigid hierarchy. The colonizer assumes roles of authority that enforce dominance, while the colonized is denied individuality and agency. This reinforces Ziauddin Sardar’s idea that “black is not a man” (2018, p. vi). In this process, thingification operates as a tool of dehumanization by commodifying the colonized and valuing them solely for their labor and utility. Césaire reflects this psychological, cultural, and material reduction of the colonized in his equation: “colonization = ‘thingification’” (2001, p. 42). This formulation highlights the fact that the act of turning people into things is not merely about economic exploitation but also about stripping them of their humanity. Expanding on this idea, Ania Loomba argues that “this ‘thingification’, or the reduction of the colonized person into an object was achieved not only by turning her/him into ‘an instrument of production,’ but also, by Western accounts (including some radical or socially progressive accounts) of subject formation” (2015, pp. 138-139). Loomba’s observation reinforces the idea that thingification and dehumanization are deeply intertwined; colonial rule systematically reduces individuals to objects or instruments, not only by exploiting their labor but also by erasing their autonomy, individuality, and cultural heritage. This process ensures that the colonized remain tools within the imperial machinery, devoid of subjectivity and stripped of their fundamental human worth.

However, thingification or dehumanizing transformation is not limited to physical enslavement or forced labor; it encompasses a broad spectrum of psychological and cultural alienation whereby the colonized are stripped of their own values, history, and identity. From a similar point of view, Nick Haslam states that “dehumanization, corresponding to the denial of other individuals’ humanity, is based on the refutation of uniquely or essentially human characteristics (e.g. civility, refinement, moral sensibility, emotional responsiveness, interpersonal warmth, or cognitive openness)” (2006, p. 252). Haslam’s definition of dehumanization highlights its basis in denying individuals characteristics that are considered inherently human, such as moral sensibility, emotional responsiveness, and cognitive openness. Such a denial effectively reduces individuals to subhuman status, often justifying their marginalization, exploitation, or mistreatment. This process reflects the psychological and sociological mechanisms that sustain systemic inequalities, particularly in colonial societies, where the humanity of the colonized is erased to legitimize domination. By refuting these human traits, the oppressors deconstruct the victim’s personhood, creating a framework where violence and subjugation appear rational or even necessary. Over time, this process of dehumanization pervades every aspect of life for the colonized, shaping how they perceive themselves, their communities, and their place within the broader sociopolitical order.

This reduction of people to mere things was central to the colonial strategy, as it enabled colonizers to justify extreme violence, exploitation, and control. By denying the humanity of the colonized, colonial regimes were able to erase moral constraints that would normally prohibit such oppressive treatment. Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, explicitly indicates that colonialism “is violence in its natural state” (1963, p. 61), and thus he lays bare how colonialism is inherently a violent endeavor that creates a binary between the civilized colonizer and the savage colonized. Consequently, Fanon claims that colonialism necessitates “a systematic negation of the other person” (1963, p. 250), whereby colonized individuals are

defined not by their qualities or humanity but by their utility and difference as perceived by the colonizer. This negation erodes the social and cultural fabric of the colonized society, displacing traditional values, institutions, and identities. For the colonized, their worth is reduced to how effectively they serve the economic and political interests of the colonizer. By stating “violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm’s length; it seeks to dehumanize them” (1963, p. 15), Fanon also indicates that colonialism’s core strategy is to impose control through both physical and psychological violence. Rather than merely subjugating the colonized population, colonial violence actively seeks to strip them of their humanity, reducing individuals to objects defined only by their utility to the colonial regime. This dehumanization is not an incidental effect of colonial rule but an intentional, systemic approach aimed at reinforcing the colonizer’s superiority and diminishing the self-worth of the colonized. Through this relentless physical and psychological degradation, colonialism inscribes inferiority upon the colonized, thereby justifying their exploitation and eroding their sense of identity and agency.

Born in 1906 in Afelba, a small village in Eritrea, during Italian colonial rule, Gebreyesus Hailu was deeply influenced by the socio-political upheavals of his time, particularly the exploitation and conscription of Eritrean men into the Italian army. His novel *The Conscript: A Novel of Libya’s Anticolonial War* is one of the earliest novels from Ethiopia, and it remains a landmark work for its vivid portrayal of colonial violence and its enduring impact on Eritrean identity and resistance. Carmela Garritano states that *The Conscript* “written in 1927, offers a fierce critique of Italian colonialism, which probably explains why it was not published until 1950, well after Italy relinquished control of Eritrea in 1941” (2013, p. 202). Expanding on this, the novel starkly illustrates the brutalizing effects of colonialism on Eritrean society, particularly the systematic degradation and objectification of conscripted soldiers. More specifically, set against the backdrop of Italy’s colonial ambitions in North Africa, *The Conscript* tells the story of an Eritrean man, Tuquabo, who is conscripted into the Italian colonial army and forced to fight against fellow Africans. In other words, in *The Conscript*, by reflecting “the evils of colonialism —that is, the abuse and misuse of the colonized” (Negash, 2012, p. xii), Hailu provides a critical account of colonial violence, especially through its protagonist Tuquabo as he is forced to abandon his own life to fight in a war he does not understand and for a cause he does not support. His journey exemplifies the reduction of colonized subjects to mere instruments of imperial control, robbed of agency and identity. Thus, this article seeks to examine how colonial dominance imposes forced conscription, violently subjugates African bodies, and erases individual identity. More specifically, it aims to contribute to existing scholarship by offering a deeper exploration of the psychological and cultural dimensions of thingification in *The Conscript*, shedding light on how colonial violence extends beyond physical oppression to fundamentally reshape the colonized subject’s sense of self.

From Humanity to Object: Colonial Violence and the Loss of Self

The opening chapter of the novel, “*A Portrait of Youth*”, (Hailu, 2013, p. 3) describes Tuquabo’s preparation for his journey to Libya, where he will fight on behalf of the colonial Italian army, and the novel begins with a meaningful symbol reflecting the erasure of traditional identity and the acceptance of the colonial gaze both of which ultimately result in the dehumanization of the colonized. At the very beginning of the novel, Tuquabo, who was “growing as a Habesha” (Hailu, 2013, p. 5), appears before his parents dressed in “a gray uniform” (Hailu, 2013, p. 4), which is the uniform of the colonial Italian army. While his parents express admiration for this, the situation holds profound symbolic significance since it represents the erasure of cultural identity and the imposition of colonial authority. Traditional attire often embodies people’s values, heritage, and individuality, serving as a marker of their connection to their community and history. When colonized individuals are stripped of these garments and put on the uniform of their oppressors, the act becomes a powerful metaphor for their cultural and personal subjugation. In this process, the colonized subject is rendered, as Govand Khalid Azeez puts it, “an empty signifier, one which Eurocentrism consequently refills according to its imperial interests,” (2016, p. 718) a concept that aptly captures how colonial power strips away indigenous subjectivity and replaces it with a constructed identity aligned with imperial narratives. The Italian uniform, hence, signifies conformity to the colonizers’ expectations, marking the individual as a tool of the colonial apparatus rather than a person with autonomy and a unique identity. This transformation emphasizes the dehumanizing aspect of colonial rule, where the colonized are not only physically controlled but also symbolically severed from their cultural roots. Thus, by replacing Tuquabo’s daily traditional clothing with uniforms, colonizers assert dominance and enforce a homogenized identity that aligns with the imperial agenda, thereby silencing expressions of resistance, heritage, and individuality. In this way, the uniform becomes a visual and material manifestation of colonial hegemony, encapsulating the loss of agency and the forced assimilation of the colonized from the very beginning of the novel.

Putting on his uniform and arming himself, Tuquabo, towards the end of the novel’s first chapter, leaves home and joins “the army as a conscript bound for Tripoli” (Hailu, 2013, p. 8). Hailu portrays conscription as a central mechanism of colonial control, one that exemplifies the systematic dehumanization and subjugation of colonized peoples. Through the protagonist

Tuquabo's enlistment into the Italian army, which "is evident as a response to the influence of colonial powers" (Tesfamariam, 2023, p. 2), the novel exposes how conscription operates not only as a tool for military expansion but also as a means of asserting dominance over colonized bodies and minds. The fact that the people of Habesha volunteer to enlist in the military, despite having no stake or loss in the wars Italy waged in Tripoli to maintain its colonial domination, demonstrates that they do not possess autonomous identities. This is particularly demonstrated by the statement of the youth who sing "He is a woman who refuses to go to Libya," and in the response of small children, "Come back to us later, Tripoli ... give us time to grow up" (Hailu, 2013, p. 7) as these remarks reflect how willingly the people of Habesha fight in the Italian army and, consequently, how they are turned into instruments of the colonial mechanism. Thus, Hailu's depiction of the Eritrean people's willingness illustrates their transformation from autonomous beings into expendable tools of the colonial machine. That is, the Habesha conscripts are stripped of their individuality, their bodies drilled into compliance, and their identities subsumed under the uniform of the Italian army. This process mirrors the concept of thingification, where the colonized are reduced to things whose sole purpose is to serve the colonizer's agenda. Discussing this, Albert Memmi claims that as a result of the dehumanizing impact of colonialism, the colonized "is hardly a human being. He tends rapidly towards becoming an object. As an end in the colonizer's supreme ambition, he should exist only as a function of the needs of the colonizer" (1991, p. 130). In the novel, Memmi's perspective is reinforced by Tuquabo's parents, who say, "Why do you wish to fight for a foreigner? What use is it for you and your people to arm yourselves and fight overseas?" (Hailu, 2013, p. 8). Thus, here, Hailu highlights the psychological and moral conflict faced by the colonized subjects who are forced to align with the interests of a foreign power that neither represents nor values them. Tuquabo's parents critique the colonial system's exploitation, which coerces individuals into fighting wars that serve the oppressor's agenda while offering no tangible benefit to their own communities. In short, by questioning the rationale behind the conscripts' participation in the Italian army, Hailu exposes the colonial strategy of severing the colonized from their cultural and political identities, reducing them to pawns in a global power struggle, and deepening their alienation from their heritage and self-determination.

The second chapter of the novel, "*The Departure from Asmara*" (Hailu, 2013, p. 11) recounts the Ethiopian conscripts' transport to Libya by Italian soldiers. Hailu describes the conscripts' departure from Asmara with a chilling detachment that mirrors their treatment as not only expendable resources but also animals. One of the most common discourses used by colonizers to legitimize colonialism is the assertion that colonized societies lack human qualities and values, suggesting that they are closer to animals. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon expresses this perception of colonialism through statements like "the Negroes are animals" (1986, p. 165) and "the Negro is a beast" (1986, p. 170). Similarly, Sartre, in the preface he wrote for Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, critiques the dehumanizing impact of colonialism by highlighting the colonizer's ideology of "debasement of the colonized to exalt themselves, denying the title of humanity to the natives, and defining them as simply absences of qualities – animals not humans" (1991, p. 22). Starting from the scene at the train station where the conscripts are gathered by Italian soldiers to be taken to Tripoli, Hailu employs striking descriptions to reveal this colonial perspective. First, the attitudes and behaviours of the Italian soldiers towards both the conscripts and their families, who wish to bid farewell to their loved ones at the train station, depict how the local population is merely seen as animals since Hailu writes "some others would pot 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)" (Hailu, 2013, pp. 10-11). Thus, by employing the imagery of a whip that likens the colonized subjects to animals, Hailu further presents their dehumanization under colonial rule which clearly validates Achille Mbembe's view as he, in his book *On The Postcolony*, sheds light on the dehumanizing impact of colonialism by stating that "what goes for the animal goes for the native" (2001, p. 190).

Moreover, Hailu vividly portrays the dire conditions endured by the conscripts during their voyage by ship, drawing stark parallels to images of herding and domestication by writing: "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" (Hailu, 2013, p. 14). This depiction manifests the dehumanization they experienced, reducing the conscripts to mere cargo in a process that has no individuality and agency as they are packed tightly together, devoid of comfort or consideration for their individual needs, echoing the treatment of animals bound for slaughter or labour. Mbembe describes how colonial powers use processes of othering, dehumanization, and objectification to keep the local population under control: "the native as nothing, as thing, and as animal is a creation of the colonizer who summons this nothing into existence, creates it as a thing and domesticates it as an animal" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 188). Therefore, such imagery as Hailu uses, strips the conscripts or, more generally, the natives of their identity and individuality, reducing them to a collective, indistinguishable mass, fit only to fulfil the desires of their colonial oppressors. Moreover, by likening the conscripts to animals, Hailu illustrates the psychological violence of colonialism. This metaphorical framework serves to reveal the alienation experienced by the colonized subjects, who are not only physically displaced but also existentially disconnected from their humanity. The colonial system's reduction of these men to animalistic roles diminishes their sense of self-worth,

compelling them to internalize their imposed inferiority.

The third chapter, titled “*Deep in the Wilderness*” (Hailu, 2013, p. 23), begins with the conscripts’ arrival in Tripoli, where many of them, as the instruments of the colonial army, will lose their lives. At the opening of this chapter, the first lines of a poem by the Italian poet Leopardi, quoted by Hailu, serve as a depiction of the thingification process the conscripts are subjected to. Leopardi, saying “He who fights on a foreign soil another man’s war, Not for his family or his country’s honor” (Hailu, 2013, p. 23) seems to articulate, years in advance, the absurdity of Eritrean conscripts fighting for a piece of land that is not theirs and for purposes entirely unrelated to their society. After arriving in Tripoli, the conscripts are forced to march long distances under the scorching desert heat, making “their lives miserable” (Hailu, 2013, p. 25). However, what is more outstanding is the disparity between the conditions of the Italian soldiers and those of Tuquabo and his companions, because it is as stark as the difference between the lives of a human and an animal:

The conscripts travelled for the whole day and rested in the evening. Their feet were burning with blisters and wounds. They slept on the sand without any carpet or cover, wearing their clothes, their ammunition bound to their bodies. 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. (Hailu, 2013, p. 25)

Through the quotation, Hailu exposes the profound inequality between the colonized and their colonial overlords, revealing the exploitative nature of colonialism. On this, Hughes Waldick claims that “rooted in racism, the dominance—subjugation relationship between the Eritreans and the Italians represents both an ideological and an active manifestation of domination over somebody who is considered as inferior beings” (2021, p. 33). Therefore, the conscripts, stripped of dignity and forced to endure extreme physical hardship, represent the subjugation and disposability of native populations under colonial rule. Meanwhile, the Italian commanders, shielded by their privileges and provided with comfort, exemplify the structural hierarchy that devalues and marginalizes the colonized.

In addition, what is more devaluing for the colonized is that it is the duty of the Eritrean conscripts to provide comfort and fulfil all the needs of the Italians. Despite being the ones “who most needed help and assistance” (Hailu, 2013, p. 26), the conscripts are tasked with serving meals to the Italians, preparing their horses, and performing various other services. For the colonial Italians, the Eritrean is “despicable” (Hailu, 2013, p. 26), yet he takes pride in the service he provides. In reality, what he takes pride in is the erasure of his identity and his reduction from being an autonomous individual to an object. However, the Habesha is unaware of this truth as Hailu indicates that “when a son of Habesha was elected as a privileged orderly to serve a white man, whether it was making his bed, or preparing his sword and weapons, or cooking his food, or lighting his cigarette, he thought that he had reached seven skies higher than his colleagues” (Hailu, 2013, p. 26). Through the perception of the Habesha conscripts, Hailu reflects the internalization of colonial hierarchies and the resulting dehumanization of colonial subjects. In other words, the act of a Habesha man perceiving servitude to a white colonial figure as a mark of privilege reveals the extent to which colonial power structures redefined social status within colonized societies. This privileged orderly role, which involves serving the colonizer in personal and menial ways, is not inherently prestigious. However, within the colonial framework, proximity to whiteness and participation in colonial power dynamics are falsely equated with upward mobility and prestige. This resonates with the condition of the Senegalese black officers who serve in the French colonial army, discussed by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, as “they are used to convey the master’s orders to their fellows, and they too enjoy a certain position of honor” (Fanon, 1986, pp. 18-19). Fanon also adds that the natives who believe that “the colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adaptation of the mother country’s cultural standard” (Fanon, 1986, p. 18) desire to assimilate into the colonizer’s world, even at the cost of perpetuating their subjugation. Nevertheless, such subjugation ultimately strips the natives of dignity and autonomy by valuing them only through their utility to the colonizer, thus turning them into mere objects and instruments.

The conditions of dehumanization, thingification, or instrumentalization reach their peak, especially in the scene where the young Eritrean conscripts approach the battlefield and prepare for the war. The speech given by the Italian commander to the conscripts, who have been marching for days on scorching sands deprived of their basic needs, is not only a demonstration of physical dehumanization but also a stark indication of how the conscripts are culturally stripped of their identities. This dual process of erasure highlights the colonial system’s deliberate attempt to reduce conscripts to mere tools of war, devoid of personal or cultural significance. First of all, dehumanization is evident in the way the colonized are addressed and treated by their Italian commander as his assertion, “We alone are the brave whites; we, Italians, your masters” (Hailu, 2013, p. 27) establishes a dichotomy where the colonizer is characterized as brave and superior, while the colonized are implicitly rendered cowardly, subservient, and less-than-human. As Desbele Teckle Tesfamariam indicates the Italian commander’s emphasis on “whiteness as a mark of superiority, reveals the racial prejudices deeply ingrained in the colonial mindset” (2023, p. 9) and such a hierarchical relationship denies the colonized their personhood, relegating them to a position of submission and obedience. Also, the use of the term ‘your masters’ illustrates this degradation, framing the colonized as possessions or dependents rather than autonomous individuals. This reduction to subhuman status is central to

colonialism, as it legitimizes exploitation and justifies the violent subjugation of the colonized. In the same speech, it is possible to observe how the conscripts are instrumentalized to protect and sustain the economic interests of the colonial ideology as the Italian commander says:

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. (Hailu, 2013, p. 27)

The thingification of the colonized is explicitly illustrated in the demand that ‘everything you find you hand it to me’ since the colonized are positioned as extensions of the colonizer’s will, mere instruments for the acquisition of wealth and resources. On this, Lisa B. Y. Calvente states that “thingification is indeed the ‘master’s tools’ that transform real living, experiencing bodies into the abjectified object-subjects used only as a means for western flourishing” (2023, p. 355), a process that captures the colonial reduction of human beings into exploitable, depersonalized labor. Thus, the conscripts’ labour and efforts are not recognized as their own; instead, they become commodified, valued only for their utility to the colonial Italian army. Besides, the threat of corporal punishment for withholding any spoils further reinforces this objectification. In Shiera S. el-Malik’s terms, “colonialism is a system and the system is violent through and through” (2023, p. 5) and within this structure, the colonized body itself becomes a site of control and discipline, underscoring the conscripts’ reduction to a functional and punishable object within the colonial framework. Furthermore, the economic logic of colonialism also contributes to this process of dehumanization. By allowing the colonized access to livestock but strictly forbidding them from keeping gold, silver, or other valuables, the colonizer delineates the limits of their worth and rights. Livestock, which can sustain the colonized at a subsistence level, symbolizes their relegation to a state of bare survival, while the colonizer reserves the wealth that signifies power and autonomy. This allocation reflects the colonizer’s perception of the colonized as economic tools, whose value is tied exclusively to their ability to sustain the colonial enterprise.

Additionally, the Italian commander’s speech addressing the conscripts contains remarkably striking expressions of cultural dehumanization as it illustrates the mechanisms by which colonial powers sought to erase indigenous identities and supplant them with loyalty to the colonizer’s ideology. The command addressed by the Italian commander, “You should feel gratified and privileged for fighting under the Italian banner” (Hailu, 2013, p. 27), manifests the forced imposition of colonial values, presenting participation in the colonizer’s military enterprise as an honour rather than an act of coercion. This rhetoric exemplifies the colonial strategy of stripping the colonized of their cultural heritage and reorienting their sense of belonging and pride toward the colonial regime. Besides, the phrase “We, the Italian government, are great” (Hailu, 2013, p. 27) reinforces the supremacy of the colonial power, positioning it as a benevolent and invincible force deserving of reverence. Such declarations do more than assert political dominance; they aim to instill a psychological dependency in the colonized, cultivating a perception that their value is derived solely from their association with the colonizer. Towards the end of his addressing, the Italian commander demands that the conscripts repeat “Viva l’Italia; Viva Emanuele, our king” (Hailu, 2013, p. 27) and as such, the colonial apparatus enforces an explicit rejection of the conscripts’ indigenous cultural and political allegiances, compelling them to internalize and vocalize loyalty to a foreign authority. This act of chanting becomes a symbolic disavowal of their native identities, reducing the conscripts to instruments of the colonial power’s nationalist and imperialist purposes. In other words, this forced allegiance highlights the colonial system’s intent to dehumanize its subjects not only through physical domination but also by eroding their cultural autonomy. The colonized are not permitted to retain a sense of self rooted in their traditions, histories, or communities; instead, their identities are overwritten by the narratives and symbols of the colonizer. The glorification of the Italian banner and monarchy serves as a mechanism of ideological control, ensuring that the colonized internalize the colonial power’s worldview, thus perpetuating their subjugation. In this context, cultural dehumanization is inseparable from the broader processes of colonial domination. By denying the conscripts’ cultural integrity and coercing them into celebrating the very power that oppresses them, the colonial system obliterates their individuality and collective identity. Hailu’s portrayal of this moment is a scathing critique of colonial practices, exposing how deeply they penetrate the personal and cultural dimensions of the colonized, leaving them alienated from themselves and their heritage. In short, through the Italian commander addressing the young Habesha conscripts, Hailu reflects the devastating impact of cultural erasure and the dehumanizing logic of colonialism, which seeks not only to exploit the bodies of its subjects but also to claim their minds and souls.

However, particularly after the speech given by the Italian commander, a group of conscripts, including Tuquabo, began to grasp the gravity of their situation. Although the conscripts who are mere “mercenaries” (Hailu, 2013, p. 28) thought that “it would indeed be too much for them to expect to hear better words” (Hailu, 2013, p. 28), they started to question themselves when they saw the Bedouin shepherds defending their lands. The fact that the Habesha, who had not fought but “bowed to the Italians like dogs” (Hailu, 2013, p. 29) when their lands were taken, were now present on the battlefield as a

major instrument of the colonial Italian army against the Arabs, is one of the most explicit proofs of how they had been turned into objects serving colonial purposes. This is also reinforced by Hailu as he writes “the Habesha were fighting for those who came to colonize and to make others tools of colonizing African neighbors, without anything of benefit to their country or society” (Hailu, 2013, p. 29). Here, it becomes clear that the Habesha conscripts are not only oppressed and instrumentalized but also manipulated into becoming agents of oppression themselves, perpetuating colonial dominance.

The bloody war between the Habesha conscripts, armed with Italian weapons, and the Arabs, who had sworn to defend their lands with their bare swords and at the cost of their blood, ends in “a full victory for the Habesha” (Hailu, 2013, p. 40). However, here Hailu corrects himself, saying, “No, I am wrong. It was for the Italians” (Hailu, 2013, p. 40), once again emphasizing that the Habesha were merely tools in achieving the Italian army’s success. Furthermore, after the war, Tuquabo reflects on how he, the conscripts, and indeed the entire Habesha people were instrumentalized to serve the colonial powers, expressing it as follows:

A curse be upon us! We didn’t do anything when the Italians came to take our fertile land. Not only that, we led the Italians like the blind and carried them like children and allowed them to enter our homeland, and now we are supporting them to conquer this land. We let our country be taken, and we are now instruments to occupy someone else’s country. (Hailu, 2013, pp. 41-42)

Through this, Hailu powerfully projects the self-reproach and moral awakening of the colonized, offering a poignant critique of the mechanisms of colonial domination. The lament reflects the internalized complicity of the oppressed, who, through coercion or manipulation, become agents of the colonial project. Tuquabo’s realization underscores the tragic irony of their situation: having surrendered their homeland without resistance, they now find themselves tools in the subjugation of others. Besides, the imagery of blindness and childlike dependency highlights the disempowerment fostered by colonial rule, as indigenous populations are alienated from their lands and identities. Moreover, Tuquabo’s words reveal a broader critique of colonialism’s ability to fragment and exploit societies, compelling the colonized to perpetuate the cycle of oppression. In their acknowledgment of this paradox, the colonized voice resists the colonial narrative, exposing the moral bankruptcy of imperial conquest and gesturing toward the possibility of reclaiming agency through self-awareness and resistance.

The final chapter of the novel, “*The Thirst of Death*” (Hailu, 2013, p. 45) describes the return of the Habesha conscripts to their homeland under the supervision of Italian soldiers. However, it cannot be said that this journey differs much from their departure to Libya. The dehumanized Habesha are forced to walk through scorching deserts once again, while the Italian soldiers ride on horseback. Furthermore, while the blazing heat causes the conscripts to be “dried up from thirst” (Hailu, 2013, p. 45), the Italian officers lounge in their tents by the water, enjoying themselves. Even more ironic is the fact that these same Habesha conscripts who “were on the brink of death from thirst” (Hailu, 2013, p. 45) are the ones guarding the Italian officers and their tents. The conscripts’ reaction to the sound of water coming from those tents is described as follows: “It was exactly like watching a dog whose eyes, while one is eating, are raised and lowered following the movement of one’s hand. In fact, dogs fared better; they at least got their masters’ leftovers” (Hailu, 2013, pp. 45-46). As the desperate Habesha succumb to thirst and collapse in the desert, becoming prey for vultures, the Italians compare them to “a weak donkey,” reasoning that “you couldn’t kill for meat or hide and therefore would leave behind to die in the field under God’s hand” (Hailu, 2013, p. 47). These metaphors, which liken the condition of the colonized to that of a dependent dog or a weak donkey, poignantly capture the dehumanization and subjugation of the colonized. More precisely, the imagery of the dog’s submissive gaze following its master’s hand or a worthless donkey brings the power imbalance into focus, portraying the colonized as passively reliant on the colonizers for sustenance and direction. In short, these assertions highlight the profound exploitation and deprivation inflicted upon the colonized, who are denied even the most essential benefits of their coerced service.

The colonial ideology, which views the colonized individuals and societies purely as instruments, does not place much importance on their deficiencies. In other words, the survival or death of the colonized individuals—or more specifically, the conscripts—who are considered worthless objects that “had been bought anyway” (Hailu, 2013, p. 47) holds little significance for the colonizers. While discussing the one-sided relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, Memmi states that the former “does not have a serious obligation toward an animal or an object” (1991, p. 130). Reflecting this mindset, the Italian commander-in-chief, feeling no sense of responsibility toward the conscripts dying of thirst in the middle of the desert, “disappeared on his mule, leaving them behind” (Hailu, 2013, p. 47). Tendayi Sithole similarly argues that Black subjects are “exterior to the zone of life and they are in the zone of non-being” (2015, p. 179) emphasizing that colonial subjection operates by excluding the colonized from the realm of meaningful existence. Thus, only a few of the conscripts who went “to a foreign land to risk his life in the service of strangers” who “do not see [them] as any better than a dog” (Hailu, 2013, p. 49) could return home as many of them were captured by Arabs, died of thirst in the desert, or killed by their comrades during the struggles for water. Discussing the worthlessness or insignificance of the colonized, George Orwell states that they “arise out of earth, they sweat, and starve for a few years, sink back into the nameless mounds of the graveyard and nobody notices that they are gone. And even the graves themselves soon fade back into the soil” (1961, p. 181). Similarly, the novel

reveals that colonized individuals are valuable to colonizers only as long as they serve their purposes and otherwise become utterly insignificant, as illustrated through the conscripts abandoned to die in the desert. The novel concludes with a dirge by Tuquabo, who is among those returning home, as he learns that his mother has died of grief, and the lines of the dirge “going to a distant land, not for the honor of my homeland” and “deep within the devil deceived me” (Hailu, 2013, p. 56) once again reflect the dehumanization and thingification caused by colonialism.

Conclusion

Gebreyesus Hailu’s *The Conscript: A Novel of Libya’s Anticolonial War* serves as a profound critique of colonialism’s dehumanizing mechanisms, exposing the psychological, cultural, and physical tolls inflicted upon the colonized. Through the lens of the Eritrean conscripts forced to fight for the Italian colonial regime, the novel illustrates the systematic process of thingification wherein individuals are reduced to mere tools for the benefit of the colonizer. The narrative demonstrates how colonialism operates not only through overt physical violence but also through insidious psychological and cultural alienation, stripping individuals of their identity, autonomy, and humanity.

The novel’s central character, Tuquabo, embodies the plight of the colonized subject. His forced conscription into the Italian army, symbolized by his adoption of the colonial uniform, marks the erasure of his cultural identity and the imposition of a homogenized colonial identity. This transformation is not limited to external appearance; it extends to his very perception of self-worth, as he and his fellow conscripts internalize the colonial hierarchy that deems them inferior and expendable. The depiction of their journey, from their departure in Asmara to their grueling march through the desert, exemplifies the physical and symbolic dehumanization inherent in colonial rule. Reduced to the status of animals, as reflected in the Italian soldiers’ treatment of the conscripts, the colonized are subjected to conditions that reinforce their disposability within the imperial project. Hailu’s narrative also highlights the role of cultural erasure in colonial domination. The Italian commander’s speeches, which demanded allegiance to the Italian banner and monarchy, exemplify how colonial powers sought to overwrite indigenous identities and instill loyalty to the colonizer. This cultural dehumanization is portrayed as a deliberate strategy to sever the colonized from their heritage, reducing them to instruments of imperial ambition. The novel critiques this process by revealing the internal conflicts experienced by the conscripts, particularly Tuquabo, who begins to question his complicity in a system that exploits him and others like him.

The conclusion of the novel, with Tuquabo’s lament over his role in facilitating colonial oppression, conveys the tragic irony of the colonized becoming agents of their subjugation. His dirge reflects both a personal and collective awakening to the devastating consequences of colonialism, which alienates individuals from their land, culture, and identity. Also, the imagery of the conscripts abandoned in the desert, compared to animals or inanimate objects, poignantly illustrates their worthlessness in the eyes of the colonizers. Ultimately, *The Conscript* not only critiques the material and psychological violence of colonialism but also serves as a call to recognize and resist the pervasive dehumanization that it engenders. By portraying the lived experiences of the colonized, Hailu offers a powerful indictment of colonialism’s legacy, inviting readers to reflect on the enduring impact of these historical injustices.

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