



The Conscript: A Novel of Libya's Anticolonial War (Modern African Writing Series)

Gebreyesus Hailu

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“This translation from Tigrinya into English by Ghirmai Negash brings the slim, fascinating novel to a broad readership so that we might appreciate its value as a complex and moving reflection on Eritrean involvement in the Libyan anticolonial war. ...The colonial encounter, as represented in Hailu’s novel, is messy and multifaceted, and this is, perhaps, the novel’s most important insight, one that could usefully be shared with students in African history or literature courses.”

—*Northeast African Studies*

Eloquent and thought-provoking, this classic novel by the Eritrean novelist Gebreyesus Hailu, written in Tigrinya in 1927 and published in 1950, is one of the earliest novels written in an African language and will have a major impact on the reception and critical appraisal of African literature.

The Conscript depicts, with irony and controlled anger, the staggering experiences of the Eritrean ascari, soldiers conscripted to fight in Libya by the Italian colonial army against the nationalist Libyan forces fighting for their freedom from Italy’s colonial rule. Anticipating midcentury thinkers Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, Hailu paints a devastating portrait of Italian colonialism. Some of the most poignant passages of the novel include the awakening of the novel’s hero, Tuquabo, to his ironic predicament of being both under colonial rule and the instrument of suppressing the colonized Libyans.

The novel’s remarkable descriptions of the battlefield awe the reader with mesmerizing images, both disturbing and tender, of the Libyan landscape—with its vast desert sands, oases, horsemen, foot soldiers, and the brutalities of war—uncannily recalled in the satellite images that were brought to the homes of millions of viewers around the globe in 2011, during the country’s uprising against its former leader, Colonel Gaddafi.

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