ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Representation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (EOTC) in *Fikir eske Mekabir*, an Amharic Novel: Religious Elites in Focus

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Abstract

Representation is crucial in literature as it allows characters, events, and ideas to interplay harmoniously, forming a cohesive narrative. Without effective representation, the text's core ideologies and intended meanings risk becoming ambiguous or diminished. This paper aimed to examine the representation of EOTC in the Amharic novel, Fiker eske Mekabir. EOTC is one of the influential religious institutions that contributed for Ethiopian culture, history, education, civilization and liberty of the state. People, especially, the elites are important bodies for a given mission and goals to be attained or failed. It is clear that fictional works are 'of the people, by the people, and for the people'. Thus, studying representation of characters and its implication to the church in fiction is a significant aspect of literary analysis. To do this, the theory of hermeneutics, especially H.G. Gadamar's concepts of text, context and contextualization are applied. The novel is appropriate because many of the characters are from the EOTC elites. As Haddis, the author, was a socio–political critic, from his need for improvement, many of the religious elites are portrayed negatively relative to the virtuous ones. And those good ones incorporated as antagonist to the flaw culture and characters, this in turn implies that there are many expected from the church to consider regarding its elites.

Keywords: Representation, hermeneutics, context, contextualization, priesthood

Background

1. Introduction

The study of religion and literature is an emerging field that has witnessed growing academic interest among scholars working across disciplines such as theology, religious studies, and literary studies (Felch, 2016). Religion and literature are the elements of

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.20372/10.20372/erjssh.v13.i1.6

culture (Calhoun, *et.al*, 1994, Milner&Browitt, 2002, and Payne & Barbera, 2010). In cultural studies, literature as cultural artifact and religion as culture, represented in literary work is one focal area of study. Džalto (2016), states that one of the most important social forces and cultural components is religion. The world of fiction is not isolated from culture. And examining those reflections can give us insights, and lessons.

Representing the essence of humanity is the primary goal of literary works. It is also a means of sharing a wide range of thoughts and worries with other people. To put it simply, literature, in general, and novels, in particular, aids our understanding of individuals, groups, situations, and cultures (Bressler, 2011).Though there are different approaches of studying religion in fictional works, and the present study aims to examine religious elite characters and its implication to the church.

Fictional works can be described as '*by the people, of the people, and for the people*.' The purpose of fiction often lies in appreciating or critiquing human behaviors and personalities (Eagleton, 2003; Belsey, 2005; Booth, 1983). According to Abrams and Harpham (2012), works of prose fiction typically center on one or a few major characters that undergo significant development. This growth often involves their decision-making abilities, awareness, attitudes toward others, sensitivity and moral capacity.

Imaginative literature is often created within the historical, socio-cultural, economic, and/or religious context of the society. Zarandona (2009) notes Christianity in Africa is often perceived as a European import introduced during colonialism. However, this is not the case for Ethiopia, where Christianity was established as early as the fourth century or even earlier. Ethiopia is a home to one of Africa's oldest Christian churches. The EOTC plays a significant role in shaping Ethiopia's culture, history, politics, art, literature, etc. (Alemayehu, 2019). As such, it is reflected and represented throughout Ethiopians nation's cultural spectrum as well as art and literature. In addition to its religious pursuits, the Church has registered a number of development projects for the good of humanity and God's glory (Alemayehu, 2019). Spielman (2015) states, "Ethiopian culture, history, education, civilization and freedom are impossible to understand apart from the influence of EOTC Christianity." Thus, the EOTC's, strength and weakness, success and failure, merits and demerits could be discussed in literary works, especially in novels as they are written in considerable length. Hence, it is relevant to study the representation of EOTC in fictional works. When dealt with EOTC, its adherents, especially the elites have significant place, and by implication the church's representation is the main purpose of this study.

2. Priesthood and the Novel

According to *Fetha Negest Chapter VI* holy orders, priesthood which is designated to serve God and the believers is the high rank in the church. They are educated and do have the capacity to teach religious morals for the believers. They are elect group, for specific

and unique works such as, teaching, baptizing, providing communion, consecrating the adherents, shepherding, absolving and binding on, reconciling (settle disputes) and conducting funeral rites. In actual sense, priests are expected to resemble Jesus Christ in every activity. The men of the priesthood are called angels, ambassadors, vicars, shepherds, fathers and rulers. God entrusted priests to head His flock (the believers), to rule and to absolve (John 20: 23). He made them blessed and a source of blessings (Shenouda III, 1997). Education was not the only criterion for selecting and appointing priesthood – from the patriarch to deacons; those who are ordained for priesthood should be authentic, fearless to face the truth, devout, humble, decorum, peaceful, tolerant, sympathetic, generous, the one who manage his family and children in a good manner, not drunkard, not easily tempered, down to earth, free from holding grudge, free from any morally taboo acts, not hypocrite etc. (*Fetha Negest*, Chapter VI: V). Though, these are the principles of ordination and the expected behaviors, priests practically are not always recruited accordingly, and thus not acted as expected. Hence, the priests' strength and weakness can be reflected in the narratives as in life itself. How they are revealed in a novel and their implication to the church as institution is the main preoccupation of this article.

Fikir eske Mekabir is one of the classical works in Amharic fiction. It is one among the earliest Ethiopian novels dealing with aspects of the problems of social life of the time (Fekade, 1988). In the course of the novel, the religious elements, especially EOTC is incorporated as a subject matter, as the religion was the major socio-cultural constitute of the society under which the setting of the novel took place. Fekade (1988) also stated that the novel discloses the role of the feudal order and the church that play in social life. Priests, monks, the *dabtara* and the *aleqa* are the church elites portrayed in the novel. That means, the characters are drowned from the resources available in the community to portray the socio-cultural conditions or structure of the time and before (Molvaer, 1997).

3. Hermeneutics as Theory and Method of Literary Interpretation

In its broad definition, hermeneutics is the viewpoint of interpretation of meanings, including explication, analysis, and commentary. It was first used in the interpretation of scripture, but from the nineteenth century onward, it has been recognized as a general theory of interpretation applied to any kind of text (Mambrol, 2016). Contemporary hermeneutics has been molded by certain scholars. These elites have further developed hermeneutics beyond its traditional biblical and theological origins, by applying it to philosophy, literature, law, humanities and the social sciences.

As many scholars are from the German, it is possible to agree on that modern hermeneutics is developed in German. For instance, the German theologian and philologist Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) is considered as the first and the father of modern

hermeneutics. He extended hermeneutics further than theology to embrace all forms of text interpretation. He introduced the idea that interpretation involves both comprehending the psychosomatic purposes (intension) of the author and the organizational (grammatical) features of the text. Moreover, he also developed the idea of the hermeneutic circle, in which comprehending the whole text relies on comprehending its parts and vice versa (Rutt, 2006).

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is the second German philosopher who was the student of Husserl – advocator of objective/descriptive phenomenology (Sharma, 2024), reconstructed hermeneutics by placing it within ontology—the study of being. In his work called *Being and Time (1962)*, Heidegger claimed that comprehension is not just a technique of interpreting texts but a central way of being in the world –humans are always engaged in a process of interpreting their environment. Furthermore, he introduced the idea that interpretation is always made by two interrelated concepts, preconceptions and background assumptions (pre-understanding) which are fundamental to his hermeneutic phenomenology. Pre-understanding is the general concept which means our interpretations are rooted in our cultural, social, and historical backgrounds; similarly, preconception/prejudice refers to the specific preconceived notions or judgments that build our comprehension. Pre-understanding, and preconceptions, according to Heidegger are not inherently negative; they are inevitable and part of the human condition (Sharma, 2024).

The other individual who played his part for the development of hermeneutics is Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). He was also a German philosopher and student of Heidegger. In his work *Truth and Method (2004, originally 1960)*, he introduced the closely related concepts of Fusion of Horizon and Dialogical Process. Both concepts underline that understanding is not a static, one-directional retrieval of meaning but a two-way interaction between the interpreter and the text, where both horizons—past and present are brought into dialogue. The fusion of horizon refers to merging of the totality of knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and expectations that an interpreter has at any given time, and the text or the author. Understanding occurs when the horizon/context of the interpreter/reader and the horizon of the text (or the author) merge through practice of reading. This fusion generates new meanings and insights that neither the interpreter nor the text could have attained in isolation.

The hermeneutical process, according to Gadamer as discussed by Vladutescu (2018), starts with something that address us –which implies that a text initiates a dialogue with the reader or text challenges, questions, or speaks to the reader, awakening curiosity, reflection, or a sense of relevance. Next to that, in interpreting a text, one thing that should be kept in mind is that no text is free from any sociological and psychological biases (Gadamer, 2004). Thus, context (authorial background, sociological and cultural context of text production and textual context) are the things in hermeneutics analysis of a text that we need to consider. Contextualization, which is the process of connecting

the text to its broader context and applying its meanings to the contemporary situation or considering how its message can be relevant and applicable in modern times, is another element and feature of hermeneutics (Nurcahyo, 2006). In this respect, text, context and contextualization are the core elements of Gadamer, which this study is going to apply.

Generally, in studying the representation of EOTC's religious elites, theory of hermeneutics, particularly H.G. Gadamer's (2004) concept of text, context and contextualization (application) is employed. **Text** is about how the author represented the EOTC elites. We can get it by examining the language in its textual context. **Context** – in this paper refers to the reality or rules used as judgment parameters that are covered in section two – priesthood. **Contextualization** refers to how the representation is applied today. It is a comparison of what is represented in the text with the reality in the present situation, as well as its implication. These steps provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing and interpreting a novel using a hermeneutic approach.

4. Biographical Background of the Novelist

Haddis was born in 1902 E.C. in a small village called Indodam in Gojjam province. His father was priest and his mother's father was a mentor of church chant (*zema*) and one of the evaluator of skills of chant, and Haddis learned church chant from the age of 6 to15 under his grand-father. Then after, he moved away from his village to learn *qine* (Geez poetry) to different places like *Debre Elyas, Debre –Work and Dima*, where the Novel *Fikir eske Mekabir* made its setting. After graduating in *qine*, Haddis came to Addis Ababa in 1918 E.C. in company of one of his teachers. Then he joined modern education and certified to teaching at Menilek II School. Haddis has started his creative work while he was at elementary school and he wrote his first playwright called *Yehabesha ena Yewodehuala Gabich* (The Marriage between Ethiopia and the Backward One). He participated in the Ethio-Italian (1935–1936) war against colonialism, demonstrating unwavering resolve until he was captured by Italian forces, and sent in exile to the Island of Ponza and later to the Island of Lipari in Italy. Haddis, finally, returned to Ethiopia in 1943, and worked in different ministerial positions and as diplomat in different European countries and America. He is patriot, novelist, statesman, and diplomat. He has produced different texts and three of them are novels and *Fikir eske Mekebir* is one of his classic works.

5. Representation of the EOTC Religious Elites in the Novel, *Fikir Eske Mekabire*

The novel begins with the marriage of Bogale Mebratu and Wudnesh Betamu. Bogale was from poor family who lost his parents at the earlier age and brought up an orphan. In his early age, he was hired as a shepherd, and then when he became strong enough to plough, he was also hired as a farmer to meet his livelihood. He was hopeless about

marriage as he spent almost half of his age lonesome; however, he was advised by his close friends to marry so as to have assistant during his old age. On the other hand, Mrs. Wudnesh Betamu was from an affluent background, and she was brought up well. When she reached the age of matrimony, she wedded to her equals in wealth and class. Unfortunately, shortly after she married to her first, second and third husbands successively, they died one after the other of natural deaths, and she lived widowed. Following this misfortune, people in her village, especially women, scorn her as 'killer of her husbands'. Thus, Wudnesh, dreadfully and desperately, lived alone since she did not expect anyone would ask her for marriage. Even if one dares to come, she is afraid of her fate that he may die (p. 19). Thus, she was highly heartbroken woman of her fortune.

However, Bogale Mebratu sent Wudnesh's father confessor Priest Tamiru as arbiter to the desperate Wudnesh for marriage proposal. The priest is sent deliberately since it was not easy to convince Wudnesh for her fourth marriage. . Priest Tamiru was the appropriate and influential person to persuade her because firstly, he is a religious father, and secondly he is her father confessor. Culturally, religious fathers, especially father confessors are respected in our society. While they were discussing the proposal and when she felt sad and weeping recalling her past, the priest reproached and warned her that he would excommunicate her in case she weeps again; at this time she said, *"Forgive me Father, please father, it is because I become susceptible….You're not only my secular father, but also my souls agent. Alright, father; objecting your advice, where would I go? I accept"* (p. 13). It is clear to imply that religious people, especially laity considers priests and their father confessors as agents of their souls; that is why, Wudnesh eventually accepted the advice.

Priest Tamiru was portrayed as the one who is performing the role expected from him being a religious father. He understood and tried to alleviate Wudnesh's grief over the loss of her previous husbands and to free her from the disrespect, alienation, and stigmatization she faces from the community. Priest Tamiru deciphered how Mrs. Wudnesh was living excluded from the villagers by the so called bad omen, and he endeavored to ease her from the grief of stigmatization and alienation by persuading her to accept the marriage (p.12). He also taught her to have the right perception about her fate in relation to the death of her previous husbands based on religious logic (p.14). Eventually, he also promised her that he will pray for her (p.16) which heartened and consoled her as it was coming from a religious father like him. A priest like Tamiru positively represent the church in doing his responsibility effectively as it was expected of him to console, empathize, teach and solve problems of spiritual children. Though, he has a realistic and sensible personality, he lacks certain canonical knowledge. This was exposed when she asked him the question of how many times a woman is allowed to remarry if her husband died (P. 14 -15). Priest Tamitu was nervous about a question that he had never imagined he would ever be asked. Though he was not sure, he speculatively responded, yet he warned her not to tell to anyone. Why did this happen? This implies that the minimum requirement

to be ordained as a priest, are pass through *Nebab Bet* (Reading school), and *Qedasse Bet* (Liturgy school). Thus, relatively little education is expected from a young man to be ordained an altar priest (Haile Gebriel Dagne, nd*)*. My own experience about a father confessor also informs me that priests are demanded by their spiritual children for certain feast blessing and confession. Many of the priests could not preach or ever tried to, or counsel their spiritual children. Though one basic criterion for priesthood, according to *Fetha Negest*, is teaching religious moral for the believers, the minimum requirement of priesthood does not enable them to do so. *Fetha Negest* (Amharic Version), article 6:212& 215 respectively, presents, "No one should be ordained as a priest who does not know the good things of God's books, most importantly the four gospels". "A priest has only one authority; that is, to teach, to baptize, to bless, to sanctify". This, in turn implies that, though it has governing rules on paper, the church may not always strictly comply with them.

Another religious elites that represents the church is **priest Mihretu**. The villagers and the neighbors distanced themselves from visiting and consoling the sick Bogale and his wife Wudnesh when they heard that their sickness was a pandemic; people were afraid of being exposed to it. Wudnesh Betamu, a blind woman, was alone in her home for about four days with her agonizing husband at his death-bed. She has also spent about three days with her husband's corpse after his death. This was a very dreadful experience. She was anxious, and did not know what to do; she lost any one who could help her. At that time, it was Priest Mihretu, Mr. Bogale's father-confessor who came and called her name loudly from the gate to ask for Mr. Bogale's health condition. As he was a father confessor, whether he likes it or not, he came to ask his spiritual children's health. However, he was careful of the contagion that he might caught it; that is why he stood outside and told her not to come near to him. Furthermore, he was asking her about the will Mr. Bogale made (56). Priest Mihretu does not act like a spiritual leader. He shows no compassion for the bereaved woman, prioritizing his own health instead and ordering her not to come near him as he vividly said "Don't get closer to me!" As a Christian, it is unexpected for any believer to treat a heartbroken woman in such a manner let alone a priest. Moreover, he was asking her about the will; he probably expected the poor Bogale to leave his property to him, which reveals his greed. He was also concerned about repaying for the shroud he would send to cover and wrap the corpse. When she inquired about the funeral arrangements, he was hesitating about whether to send his servant Gebrie or not. In the end, he decided to send Gebrie, fearing social condemnation. He sent him in the evening to avoid risk of exposure to the contagion, so that he could assist her in preparing the corpse for burial and transporting it to the burial site. His actions were not driven by compassion or a sense of spiritual duty, but rather by his fear of social criticism (p. 57). Priest Mihretu conveys the impression of being indifferent to Wudnash's loss, loneliness, and sad life without her husband and son. He was portrayed negatively as a hypocrite priest, more concerned with the will and his own well-being during a time of hardship and misfortune. .

Despite everything a religious fathers—especially father confessors, whether they like it or not, are necessary for solving any problem due to the moral obligation imposed on them. When Wudnesh was helpless, even though the priest did not treat her in a sympathetic manner, it can be said that he had fulfilled his fatherly duty. One can imagine what would have happened to Mrs.Wudnesh, had the priest not been there. Thus, despite his weakness, the priest's presence was essential. Even in present context, some priests often visit their affluent spiritual children for the sake of getting charity rather than their economically disadvantaged ones. These priests also manipulate their priesthood for secular purposes; for every sacrament they perform, they often expect a return in money or in kind (*Mahibere Kidusan, 2025*). Consequently, the laity may view many priests like *Aba* Mihretu unfavorably, leading to a loss of trust in the clergymen. This erosion of trust may create social disruption.

Priest Mogessie, the father confessor of *Fitawrary* Meshesha, a feudal lord, is another religious father that represents EOTC. In the story, he is depicted as a coward, opportunist, and hasty on the one hand and as a respectful, forgiving, sincere and all serving on the other hand, (p. 111). Moreover, he was speaking and doing things if and only if it pleased or at least did not disappoint *Fitawrary* Meshesha. (p.99). whenever there were any invitation and feast at the *Fitawrary's* house, priest Mogessie is available. He, even, quoted and interpreted the scripture for his own purpose and to the delight of the Feudal lord *Fitawrary* Meshesha at the expense of others and the truth (p. 194).

Besides, father Mogessie was not a devoted priest, as he did not reproach his spiritual son from going to war; he, rather, consecrated *Fitawarary* while he went to the fight (p.152); he also did not denounce him for having many concubines (P. 113). Generally, *Aba* Mogessie did not have his own stand; he was able to speculate and interpret men's intention from their eyes, or countenances, he is pretentious and cowardly; he was led by anyone who filled his belly; he sold and exchanged his priesthood for his materialistic need, especially for food and drinks (P. 220). This implies the presence of priests in the church who fail to meet the criteria of priesthood highlight the church's inability to address the misconduct of its elites. Consequently, this situation harms believers and damages the church as an institution by ruining its reputation. Trust in the church may be eroded, as spiritual leaders like *Aba* Mogessie represent the institution. In our current context, some priests and church officials seem more focused on pleasing government authorities whenever they have the opportunity to speak. Rather than upholding their spiritual mission, they work to appease these leaders and cover up their wrongdoings. This behavior deviates from the true responsibilities entrusted to them by the church and God (Solomon, 2023).

Furthermore, priests like *Aba* Mogessie hold symbolic significance. When the church becomes dependent on the governors, it risks being undermined, manipulated, and losing its influence as an institution. Unless the church firmly maintains its position,

any attempt to compromise with the governing bodies at the expense of its mission will lead to failure, causing it to serve the governors instead of God. To end such problems, the church should implement a robust system for controlling and monitoring its elites. Whenever an ordained individual acts inappropriately and is not promptly punished or removed from service, their failure can spread and become a culture that undermines the church, and diminishing its influence. That is what is happening now within the Church. The minor faults and mistakes of individual elites which have been accumulated over times, have led to its current state of weakness in implementing its codes of conduct as they were not corrected timely. Now days, especially, after the coming of the Abiy Ahmed's Administration the church and it believers are being the targets of political and religious extremists, and it is on account of the church leaders failure to protect itself (Fana Television. 2018, Tewahedo Documentary, 2024, VOA Amharic, 2019, Ze-Yeneta. 2023).

Aba **Teklehymanot**, a monk residing in a shanty grave house near Church of Dima Giorgis, is one of the religious elites who are portrayed negatively. The context for *Aba* Teklehymanot's emergence in the story is the gossip about Seblewongel's pregnancy from Bezabih in the absence of her father. *Fitawrary* learned that his daughter had been forced into sexual relation by her appointed teacher, Bezabih, and because of this, her father felt disgraced and enraged (p. 408–410). *Fitawrary* believed that Bezabih had casted a spell on her. Consequently, *Fitawrary* was critically in need of experts (*debtera*) who could exorcise the spell that was supposedly casted by Bezabih. With the approval of Aba Mogessie, *Fitawrary* Meshesha summoned Aba Teklehymanot to address the issue. *Aba* Teklehymanot is portrayed as an ascetic monk – one who abnegates his worldly life and reaches at the highest spiritual level. Moreover, he was from Wolega province (West Ethiopia), and at an early age, he lost his male private part to cultural practices; then, he came to Gojjam province and learned lower-level church education, i.e., reading, church melody, and few poetry (*qenie*). After that, he became a monk and went to different churches in Gojjam, spending at least two years in each church. This implies that he became monk because he could not marry as he lost his private part. His clothes and monk's cap were made of *debelo* (tanned skin), which signify his ascetic life. He was acting as genuine ascetic monk. But these all are sycophancy used to win him trust among the people.

Generally, he was considered spiritually knowledgeable, holy, a hermit, and someone who could break any spell cast by conjurers – thus, sent for by *Fitawrary*. Though *Fitawrary* was doubtful about his ability to heal the spell, *Aba* Teklehymanot tried to convince *Fitawrary* by showing a cross, as he said, was endowed as a reward from God because he prayed for fifteen days and fifteen nights standing only on his one foot (P. 420). The cross has the authority on a devil and bad spirit, magic charms, and could solve any problem. This implies that *Aba* Teklehaymanot was exorcising in the name of Jesus, or holy method, but not by illicit magical (*debtera's*) method. However, the writer has

exposed his imposture. The writer did not give any clue that Bezabih was conducting any kind of spell at someone in the entire story. Secondly, in the event of exorcising the spell, we have not seen any churchly method –we have not informed or heard the kinds of prayer that *Aba* Teklehymanot was murmuring or other holy methods. And we have not seen Seblewongel in a state of oblivion, and any sign of bad spirits speaking in her (Mark 5: 2-13), as well as it was elicited by the holy method – prayer, sprinkling holy water and other methods as we know in reality. Thirdly, while he (*Aba* Teklehymanot) was conducting the rite by putting the cross on her forehead, he asked what came to her mind, and she replied *"The cross is our strength, the cross is our redemption, the cross is our comfort, and the cross is the savior of our souls"*, which implies her normal state of mind (422). He asked her again whether a person who had made a spell on her came to her mind or not, which implies that *Aba* Teklehymanot was pre–informed that a spell was casted upon Seblewongel. The fourth illustration is that *Aba* Teklehaymanot conducted a rite privately with Seblewongel and then, he informed about the case to her father confidentially. He lied to *Fitawrary* that it was a very powerful spell that was put onto her, but casted out by the power of the cross. Nevertheless, such activities should be performed in the presence of others; there is no hidden activity unless he wanted to deceive the people. Another important aspect is his suggestion that the families of Seblewongel refrain from discussing the case or spell caster for a while, and instead focus on spiritual stories. This approach was more of a psychological trick than a spiritual directive. The belief is once a demon or spell is exorcised, it cannot return simply by recalling the magician—something the possessed individual is unaware of, but which is known to the exorcists and those observing the ritual. It is known that the afflicted person often speaks in unknown or bizarre voices, making it difficult for them to recognize the magical activities occurring around them. When the exorcism is successful, the individual typically feels a sense of relief (*Mahibere Kidusan, 2025*). *Aba* Teklehymanot employed these techniques as a means to prepare for further beneficial actions. Consequently, he was asked to provide guidance to Seblewongel for a certain period, with *Fitawrary* Meshesha promise to fulfill what *Aba* Teklehymanot desire. However, *Aba* Teklehymanot hesitated to agree, citing that his responsibility is to those destitute individuals to whom he provided food and clothing. In response, *Fitawrary* promised to cover the food and drink expenses for those in need, including *Aba* Teklehymanot himself. Ultimately, when *Fitawrary* offered him money and drink, *Aba* Teklehymanot remarked, "It's the drink, not the money that matters to me; it is meant to be charitable to the destitute. I accept it to provide for those in need, not for my own sake," Saying this, *Aba* Teklehymanot was trying to prove his righteousness. Eventually, the author showed that *Aba* Teklehymanot was not the genuine hermit he claimed to be, rather he was an imposter. He was a drunkard and he drank a lot and started singing and dancing like a worldly person. Lastly, he was so drank that he was not aware of Seblewonkgel undo his clothes and took it (p. 483-485). Similarly, fraudulence of *Aba* Teklehymanot is exposed by other characters like Seblewongel and Gudu Kassa on p. 421 and p. 428 respectively. Currently, the church is facing a significant issue with fraudsters infiltrating its sanctuary. Around the churchyard, in grave shanties or

monasteries, imposters claim they will pray for others, predict fortunes, and offer various forms of spiritual guidance. Some dressed as monks, priests, or hermits, claiming they can help those possessed by demons using holy water, holy Myron, or holy oil. Nowadays, these individuals are increasingly using technology—such as telephones, and social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Telegram, and others—to promote their services. They assert they can exorcise evil spirits, interpret dreams, and provide advice, leading to confusion among Christians and resulting in financial exploitation. The faithful believers are being preyed by self-proclaimed prophets, monks, nuns, priests, and deacons (Mahibere Kidusan, 2022, Aberham Tube, 2022, HDFresh Tube, 2022, Albastros Tube, 2023, Eyoabe Media, 2025). This situation threatens to erode the trust that believers place in authentic religious leaders. Alarmingly, the church has yet to take significant action against these wolves in sheep's clothing (MK TV, 2022, and Tsegaye, 2024).This indicates that the church has considerable work ahead in examining itself and exposing the impostors.

Kassa Damtie is another religious elite known for his bold and straightforward personality. He pursued advanced church education. Since his father *Fitawrary* Damtie died in Kassa's early age, and his relatives were not wishing him to inherit his father's position, he, then, distanced himself them and grew up with his mother's family. Kassa was also the nephew of Mrs. Tiruaynet, the wife of the feudal lord *Fitawrary* Meshesh. He learned primary level church education at his parish. Then, he left his family to travel from parish to parish and monastery to monastery in pursuit of higher education. Kassa became well known for his specialization in *The New Testament* (121). As he was highly educated and was from high class family, he could have got the chance to be presided as a head of the famous church, or at least he could have presided as head teacher of famous church like *Dima Giorgis* (121). This tells us that priests who are assigned as a head of a church are highly educated. It also implies that those who are from political authorities are more privileged in getting position in a church. However, his viewpoint was unique from the clergymen as they were acting as impious; thereof, he eschewed the church on account of clergymen's corrupted and ungodly manner. Then after, he was boldly preaching for change, and criticizing his community's norms, traditions, customs, and rules as they were worthless and harmful. He also severely reproached those who wanted the old social structure to persist as God's words saying, "*You all slaves of tradition, you cattle, you stones…"* (P. 122). Moreover, he is also known for condemning not only the political elites, but also the clergymen for their engagement in illicit sorcery activities (p. 428).

When we consider why Kassa acted as deviant and courageous enough to critique the social structure and culture, the prime reason is his education. Those who have received a solid education, particularly in religious studies, and have reached at a level of spiritual maturity can better differentiate between the harmful and beneficial elements of life; they will gain the courage to denounce social injustices and challenge the authorities. Secondly, he studied alongside ordinary students rather than being taught by a private tutor like his

peers, despite coming from an aristocratic background. . From these, it can be concluded that everybody should face challenges. Those who have overcome troubles can be inclined to be stronger, fair and can better realize various problems. This is why Kassa Damtie, despite his aristocratic background, was able to distinguish the sociological issues of his time.

The third point is that he belonged to the nobility, which gave him the confidence to critique both the aristocracy and the common people. What if he was from the common people? Would he remain safe insulting, criticizing and dehumanizing the authorities? May he be considered as Gudu (the abnormal), and left without being punished? Whoever be, mentally ill person who threw away his clothes, not only during the feudal time but also in the present time, if found openly criticizing political elites (authorities) and religious elites, he or she will be considered as deceptive, and then will be tortured, imprisoned or killed (Papademetriou, 2023).

Kassa's opposition to the system was also evident in his practical life. By marrying a woman who had been given to him as a slave servant, he showed his defiance to the oppressive societal structure that imposed the labels of master and slave. From this, we understand that if the church, as an institution, establishes a strong system and plays its expected role, it can nurture individuals who are not only mature in faith but also committed to fighting for truth, justice and freedom in their country, even at great personal cost. Kassa exemplified this by sacrificing his identity, life, and family in pursuit of the truth. Consequently, he was rejected by society, lived in isolation, and was labeled as *Gudu* (Crazy) Kassa by the community (122 -123). He truly manifested his education of the *New Testament* in his life by following the example of Christ. Thirdly, the fact that he is being The New Testament scholar can have its symbolic implication for new order of change as opposed to the Old

A priest cannot be considered genuine unless he fearlessly rebukes those who break the rules and act unfairly, regardless of their social standings. This is the mission entrusted to them by God and the church (*Fetha Negest* Chapter VI: V). This is precisely what Gudu Kassa, as a religious elite accomplished, even at the cost of his life. In doing so, he positively represented the church and its true purpose. Kassa's story implies that the church should look into its education policies and design it in a way that could make its guardians (priests and other elites) to be bold enough like Christ himself, John the Baptist, Christ's Disciples, martyrs and more specifically the Ethiopian archbishop *Abune* Petros's to stand by the side of the truth against the Italian invasion, and the second Patriarch of Ethiopia, *Abune* Theophlos against the Dictator *Derg* regime (Fesseha, & Rubenson, 2000; Religion Wiki. n.d).

Standing on the side of those who are oppressed and opposing unjust practices and systems should not be limited only to individuals. The church as an institution should

have guidelines and enforcement documents that it can monitor and influence the unjust treatment in the country, and the society. As this has not been practiced, the church as an institution and its children in general have been pushed aside, oppressed and harmed; and it continues even now in the 21st c.

Similar to Kassa Damtie, **the Chief Priests of the Dima and the Bichena St. George churches** were the other priests who were very brave enough in reproaching the dictator feudal lord, *Fitawrary* Meshesha. This happened when the aggressive, arrogant and old *Fitawrary* Meshesha who is worrying more about his reputation became obstinate to carry out the duel with a stronger and younger *Fitawrary* Assegahegn (PP. 132 -171). The Chief Priests of the two churches reproached boldly the disobedient *Fitawrary* Meshesha. These chief priests were presiding as the chief of the well-known and famous Churches because they were highly educated, and this can be one reason why they become truthful and dare enough to rebuke him (p. 122). Aleka Teume of Dima Giorgis reproached boldly the hypocrite *Fitawrary* Meshesha saying, "You wronged, you rebellious, and you impractical Christians, Christian by name" (p.167). To boldly reproach any political authority implies possession of spiritual knowledge and strength. The same was done by the chief priest of Bichena Giorgis church *(*p.168*).* Both of them openly and fearlessly rebuked *Fitawrary* Meshesha's transgressions. Moreover, this part of the story does have symbolic meaning. While Meshesha represents the political sphere, the two chief priests represent the EOTC. Their communication is clear and rooted deeply in their extensive knowledge of the Gospel. This suggests that the Church holds the moral authority, freedom, and duty to monitor the behavior and governance of both political leaders and society, though it is not observed in most of the current church fathers. Religious leaders of this quality can influence politicians to act justly and ethically, and they represent the Church at the highest standard.

Although there are priests, bishops and patriarchs like them in every age, they are few in number. For example, currently there is conflict between the government force and the armed resistance force called Fano in Amhara Region, and the religious father, Archbishop Abune Luke spoke out against the authorities, declaring that drone strikes and military actions should not target innocent civilians and that peaceful people must not be harmed (Chonsview Media. 2023, 17 Media. 2024, Fetune Rediet ፍጥነ ረዲኤት, 2024).When the Archbishop made this statement, he knew it can cost him the freedom to visit and live in the country he loves. Such efforts would have been more impactful and effective if the Church had undertaken it institutionally.

Another church elite mentioned in the novel is **Aleka Sergew**, a prominent church leader in Addis Ababa, a church named by the Archangel Raphael. He is depicted as a corrupt person who accepts any kind of bribe whenever he appoints priests or deacons or any church service provider in the church he administered. The writer narrates the character's practice of receiving bribe when he appointed Bezabih as a poetry (*qenie*) teacher. Aleka

Sergew requested a hundred Ethiopian *Birr* (dollar) as bribe from Bezabih (455). In the 1950s and earlier, a hundred Ethiopian *Birr* note had significant purchasing power (*WorldData.info, 2025*). Eventually, with Bezabih's contribution of twenty birr and the additional gifts from *Negadiras Hunegnaw*—a jar of honey and a jar of butter—Bezabih secured the position of *qine* teacher. Before this, the author hints at how difficult it is to secure a job, especially a position as an EOTC priest or any church role in Addis Ababa, without paying money for bribes or influential connections (p. 434). This implies that in the churches, especially in Addis Ababa, there was and is still corruption that needs to be eliminated.

Nowadays, it is common to hear that corruption in churches and monasteries having high income is proliferated aggressively (gize media, 2024). Church leaders like priests and chief priests, as well as those who are at high position do not only receive bribe while they hire church service providers and their relatives, but also plunder the churches' money and resources while they get any opportunity. One has not seen anyone being charged or deposed from his position. From the time this novel was written on wards, as the church has been weak in controlling and eradicating maladministration and corruption, it is at the risk of losing its identity and its believers. Corruption should not be manifestation of the Church. Thus, the Church should work on eradicating or at least diminishing all kinds of corruption (Mahibere Kidusan, 2017).

Marrying and divorcing a wife every other month is the other habit of chief Sergew. In this novel, we hear the character called *Aleka Belay* defined intentional remarrying and divorcing repeatedly as sinfulness or adultery (p.25). The Church's canonical book, *Fetha Nagast* (Amharic version), Article 24: 835 and 836 says that since priests are not allowed to marry a second time. This law must be observed and breaking it would undermine or depose their honor. In addition to his corrupted act, *Aleka* Sergaw was portrayed as the one who remarried repeatedly in a broad day light, and yet serve as a chief of the church though he should have been excommunicated and abrogated (P. 459 -60). According to *Fetha Negest*, such priests must be repelled from participating in any church sacraments and rituals or from any priestly activity (*Fetha Negest* chapter VI: V). This implies that the presence of such wicked elites should be deposed from the church, and it is also represented that the church is intentionally ignorant and weak in observing her canons and her elites' immoral act (Haleta TV., 2023).

The author portrays priests that could not be exemplar to the followers are still leading the church, and he was reproaching the church of turning its deaf ear and covering its eyes, or slumbering intentionally not to hear and see the transgression of its spiritual laws by its elites. These days, it is very common to hear about priests who are allegedly of having concubines, archbishops (celibacy monks) who do have children, and those who were even prosecuted of sexual scandals etc (Afomale Media, 2023, Zemedkun Bekele, 2023, Haleta TV, 2023). However, we do not see the church deposing criminals and unlawful

elites.

Aleqa Kinfu, Dima Giorgis's head teacher of *qenie*, and Books, and *Aleqa* Nurie of the Washera are the other scholars discussed in the novel. *Aleqa* Kinfu who is a well –known actor (reciter) with his knowledge of *qenie* is categorized among great teachers of the time. *Aleqa* Nurie, the Washera's *qenie* teacher, is Aleqa Kinfu's contemporary during their student days. *Aleqa* Nurie was known by his nick name *ebuye (*turgid**)** Nurie, given by his friends since they were early students, because he considered highly of himself and undermining others. Previously, when all the students who left from another poetry school went to him, he said that they should start from the *gubae qana* (a couplet–primary level), though they had learned beyond. Then the other teachers including *Aleqa* Kinfu conspired on him, and let the students who came from *ebuye* Nurie, to start their *qenie* lesson from *gubae Qana* though they passed this level. While they were struggling for their honor, the students had to bear with all consequences.

As a result, no student went to him to learn *qenie* and then, realizing resistance would be futile, he stopped the rivalry. The scholars like *Ebuye* Nurie, are either superficial or destructor who grew up without virtue and humility. The Church and the scholars who have produced him are also to be blamed. Such behavior shall make him deposed from his priesthood as it is said, ". . . one who knows the law but does not observe it and acts arrogantly…" (*Fetha Negest* Chpter VI: V). The one of reasons for this misbehaving is the lack of central system in which the church as an institution monitors, supervises, and accredits its teaching and learning process or education. Likewise, in the current context, the church also lacks a system to manage and regulate its education and the systems. This even makes the church fall prey of infiltrators that could poison its teaching.

6. Conclusion

In the novel, EOTC and its constituent elements are represented sufficiently and reasonably. As the author himself was a member of the church and passed though the church education, he depicted it critically well. His desire seemed to improve the overall systems of the church as the dominant culture, as well as the tradition of the society and the government system (Molvaer, 1997).Thus, through the portrayal of characters of religious elites, Haddis criticized the church's system. Some of Church elites in this novel are portrayed negatively as lacking sufficient theological knowledge, or deliberately manipulate the system to their benefit. The problems are still existed in the church in a proliferated condition. Therefore, conducting research on the problems that are discussed, the church should formulate strong, inclusive and accountable system. Moreover, it should modernize its administration, and can maintain its quality and survival.

On the other hand, few characters like Priest Tamiru, represented as virtues in solving social problems. Elites like Kassa Damtie (Gudu Kassa) – represented as the one who is brave enough and practical in criticizing unfair traditional social structure, society and authorities. Similarly, Aleka Teume of Dima and Aleka Neway of the Bichena Giorgis, though they were not proactive, they are courageous enough in reproaching the dictator leaders. These elites are embodiments of the church's potential, as civil organization, to be influential in working against the unjust treatment by anyone, any organization, and/ or the state upon herself, and/or up on any individuals or society.

To sum up, even though the church has canon, dogma and regulation at paper level, it is weak in putting them in practice. This, in turn, implies that the church needs to reconsider its elites so that it would proceed in its grace, influence, and contribute greatly to the country. Moreover, the church should be careful while recruiting, ordaining as well as producing priests who have good personalities to achieve its social and spiritual missions. Regarding those who are already ordained and currently at work, the church should massively work on enhancing their awareness and responsiveness either with short term training, or continual educational development program, and/or in distance education or any other method.

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