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Aboulela, Leila. *River Spirit*. (London: Saqi Books, 2023), 307 pages.

Leila Aboulela's latest historical novel, *River Spirit* (2023), is a groundbreaking work, that represents a significant period in the modern history of Sudan. *River Spirit* is also a notable departure from Aboulela's preceding novels, which primarily dealt with intricate psychological dimensions of religion by depicting politically unaffiliated spiritual female protagonists. Aboulela's latest main characters have explicit perspectives (supporting or resisting) on the Mahdist revolt (1881-1899) and the concurrent religious and political challenges faced by the Mahdist Sudanese, led by Muhammad Ahmad bin Abdullah. The novel offers a valuable interrogation and subversion of conventional Western and Muslim depictions of Muslim women's marginalized and erased roles in the public sphere, highlighting their contributions to the political history of the region.

Beginning in 1877, *River Spirit* reveals the poignant journey of Akuany and Bol, an orphaned girl and her younger brother, as they navigate the aftermath of their father's murder and the devastating impact on their village inflicted by slave traders. Rescued by a merchant from Khartoum named Yaseen, who later departs for Cairo to study at Al-Azhar University, Akuany and her brother are entrusted to Yaseen's sister, Halima. However, as Halima has only daughters, she becomes possessive over Bol, envisioning him as her future son-in-law. Meanwhile, Akuany, who has developed deep affection for Yaseen and feels a strong connection to him, faces a harsh twist of fate when Halima sells her to Nazli Hanim, the wife of a Turkish governor. This marks a major turning point in Akuany's arduous journey, characterized by enslavement and humiliation in the household of the Turkish ruler. The narrative then takes another compelling turn as Akuany's journey continues with a Scottish painter named Robert until she eventually reunites with Yaseen, who is in hiding from the persecution of the Mahdi fighters due to his steadfast refusal to acknowledge the Mahdi's authority. Akuany's story involves diverse households that showcase the intricate social and political conflicts within both Sudanese Muslim society and a Western household. The narrative skillfully provides readers with a nuanced exploration of historical and cultural landscapes dur-

ing the Mahdist revolt era while also navigating themes such as enslavement, discrimination, religious extremism, and imperialism.

Exploring Diverse Representations of Muslim Women Beyond the Harem Stereotype

River Spirit introduces readers to a rich array of complex and diverse female characters. These characters not only draw inspiration from scholarly historical studies but also actively challenge prevalent Islamic, colonial, and Orientalist portrayals of Muslim women. Subsequent discussions explore these narrative elements, particularly through the lens of characters like Rabiha (a historical figure) and Sahla, culminating in the portrayal of the protagonist Akuany. Akuany, a Black South Sudanese woman, suffers the dual marginalization of her historical narrative and cultural identity, both overshadowed by the veneer of civilization, whether Islamic or Western.

Rabiha is an orphan, whose father “died worn out of the Tyranny of the Ottoman invaders, their cruel incessant taxes, their disregard to people’s circumstances” (2), and she is depicted as a symbol of faith and liberation, driven by her belief in achieving social justice and dignity. Faced with the oppression of the Ottoman invaders, she bravely confronts challenges to warn Mahdi and his followers of an impending ambush, altering the course of a crucial battle. Despite the superior numerical and logistical strength of the Turkish forces, Rabiha’s courageous actions lead to their defeat, solidifying Mahdi’s triumph in Sudan. The historical triumph of Mahdi’s forces is primarily attributed to Rabiha, as Mehdi’s wife says: “Rabiha you saved us. Strengthened and saved us all. We will drive these foreigners out of our lands” (9).

Aboulela’s story of Rabiha aligns with the scholarly work of Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatima Mernissi, who challenged patriarchal norms in Muslim societies by revealing the overlooked history of assertive Muslim women involved in political life.¹ The depiction of the historical female character Rabiha both aligns with and challenges the representation of Muslim women in mainstream medieval English romance literature. On the one hand, unlike the common portrayal of Muslim women who often abandon their faith for a Christian hero, transforming into obedient wives and conservative Christian women, Rabiha stands out by steadfastly adhering to her faith and actively engaging in liberating her community from the unjust actions perpetrated by corrupt Muslim leaders. On the other hand, Rabiha’s character conforms to the conventional portrayal of Muslim women’s otherness in Western medieval literature as assertive and daring figures. These audacious Muslim women symbolized the contrast between the sensual pagans who adhered to a false creed and the supposed rational, civilized European Christians who upheld the true religion.² Elizabeth Archibald (1990) delves into the categorization of female characters in medieval romance, identifying two primary groups: the female protagonist and minor characters such as maids and servants. The archetypal female protagonist is depicted as beautiful, frail, lacking agency, and awaiting rescue or the return of the male hero. Conversely, pagan

Muslim female characters exhibit some degree of autonomy within the second category. Archibald notes that the “Otherness” of these Muslim women is accentuated through their contrast with the passive, sexually conservative, and virtuous Christian heroine.

Two particular scenes showcase Rabiha’s resilience and determination: one is her arrival at the masculine space of Mahdi’s forces, suffering from and enduring a snakebite. She refuses to be silenced or disregarded, transcending societal expectations of femininity. The other is at the conclusion of the narrative with Rabiha on her deathbed, surrounded by family. She remains a rebel until the end, rejecting the tradition of seeking forgiveness from her husband for her actions in support of Al-Mahdi. In her last breaths, she strives to be more than an obedient wife, solidifying her legacy as a woman who changed the course of a revolution. Overall, Aboulela’s portrayal challenges the official historical records and emphasizes that the role of women in warfare and political life has been either overlooked or relegated to marginal mentions and footnotes, as Aboulela mentioned in her interview with *Brittle Paper Magazine* (2023).

Muslim Women, Religious Identity, and Violence

River Spirit avoids offering a singular image of Muslim women in response to the Turkish-Egyptian presence and the “Mahdist Revolt” in Sudan. Aboulela refrains from providing a single interpretation of Islam and its values within Sudanese society under occupation. Instead, the narrative introduces characters like Salha—an educated woman from a wealthy Muslim family who insists on teaching her the Quran, reading, and writing. Salha, the wife of Yaseen, educated at Al-Azhar, engages in discussions with her husband and those around her. She rejects the leadership of Muhammad Ahmad Al-Mahdi bin Abdullah, viewing him as a pretentious and extremist figure who doesn’t truly represent Islam, especially after the uprising turns into a violent and extremist movement.

Salha finds herself in the clutches of the Mahdists when they raid their home, branding them as enemies of the Mahdi. Compelled to marry one of the Mahdi’s followers, Salha experiences a psychological release upon learning of the Mahdi’s demise. Alongside her father, uncle, and husband, she harboured doubts about the authenticity of the Mahdi, despite being aware of the corruption and injustice under the Ottoman ruler. Salha articulates a profound skepticism, asserting that religion was merely an external facade—a potent tool of manipulation with powerful slogans aimed at enticing the impoverished and illiterate masses. Salha says: “But religion was only the outer shell, powerful slogans to attract the poor and the illiterate. Shining rhetoric to whip up support. The Mahdi was never the Mahdi, and this was a revolution happening under our noses and not only a religious deviancy” (287). Her words shed light on how religion could turn into extremist ideology within the framework of three key factors: corruption, social injustice, and ignorance. The portrayal of Al-Mahdi and the effectiveness of this extremist ideology in

garnering support are attributed not solely to Mahdi himself or Islam per se, but rather to the contextual milieu surrounding Mahdi's call.

Thus, in contrast to her novels *Minaret* (2005) and *The Translator* (1999), where the conclusions symbolize allegories of the "left's defeat," portraying Marxists being overcome by Islam (Abbas 2011, 445), *River Spirit*, aligning with historical eras, depicts the defeat of Islam as a political extremist ideology. Although the narrative challenges the notion of Islam's defeat by emphasizing its cultural, historical, and spiritual identity, it portrays Muslims who are open to embracing progress and diverse social life while rejecting the extremist ideology of Islam. However, the narrative underscores the challenges they face, particularly in combating the spread of corruption that undermines their progress. In this context, religion is depicted as being misused, resulting in the fracturing of Sudanese cultural and social unity.

Modern European Painter, Political Harem, and Muslim Woman

The protagonist, Akuany, is initially portrayed as a seemingly uncomplicated girl who appears incapable of taking a stance on the intricate political and religious divisions within Sudan. However, the narrative unfolds with a subtle understanding of the domestic life of Muslims in Sudan during the 19th century through Akuany's lens. In this historical context, European painters and travel writers engaged in a competitive discourse, vying to depict Muslim women, with a particular emphasis on the private sphere commonly referred to in Western literature and discourse as the "harem." The representation of Muslim women in Western art, such as paintings and postcards, stands out as a pivotal medium for shaping the Western perception of the East and Islamic culture, particularly since the 19th century. These depictions not only contributed to a discourse aligning with political interests and ideological concepts in the region, but also served as a veneer for colonial and imperial projects from the 19th century onward (Said 1979; Zine 2006). Prominent European museums, such as the Louvre in France, showcase many of these artworks, including Eugène Delacroix's "Women of Algiers in Their Apartment" and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's "The Turkish Bath." In these pieces, Muslim women are often portrayed reclining on cushions in various states of undress, symbolizing the submissive figure in the harem, awaiting the desires of Muslim men (Mernissi 2002). This imagery propagated the notion that the "civilized" white European man had a duty to rescue these women from Islam and the allegedly misogynistic Muslim man (Said 1979). Critiqued for reflecting the sexual fantasies and imperial aspirations of European men, these paintings also result from artists who never set foot in the designated "harem" for women. Instead, inspiration came from accounts of European women travel writers or images captured by colonialist photographers. These depictions, however, did not accurately represent the real-life situations of ordinary Muslims, as highlighted by Algerian literary critic Malek Alloula in *The Colonial Harem* (1986). Parallel with Alloula's argument, *River Spirit* portrays the ambitions of a Scottish shipbuilder and amateur painter aiming to depict

Akuany, not just to showcase the unseen to his people and gain fame in his country (197).

Ella Shohat maintains that “it is this process of exposing the female Other, literally denuding her, which comes to allegorize the western masculinist power of possession, that she as a metaphor for her land, becomes available for Western penetration and knowledge” (1993, 53). However, taking an anti-colonial stance—in contrast to Europeans who had the capability to capture semi-naked images of painted Muslim women or imagine them in provocative poses for the European audience’s voyeuristic gaze—Akuany defiantly tears apart the canvas. This act not only shatters the young painter’s dream of immortalizing Akuany in a painting for her daughter, Christina, but it also extinguishes his desire to paint again.

Aboulela demystifies the mysteriousness of Muslim women’s private spaces, describing the beauty of Sudanese women with braids, tattoos, beautifying rituals, and body adornments. Beauty products like kohl, henna, and skin moisturizers, forced upon the enslaved woman in the Turkish governor’s palace, become items used by Muslim/Sudanese women for personal hygiene and beautification for their husbands. The narrative navigates this private realm without resorting to explicit sexual imagery, a departure from colonial literary works and Orientalist paintings. Notably, Aboulela avoids using the term “harem,” with its sexual and patriarchal connotations in Western imagination, opting for “women’s area” to refer to the space where women usually gather and a space inaccessible to male strangers. The singular mention of the term “harem” in the text comes from the Scottish painter, Robert, who associates it with notions of “going back” and a “jungle,” subtly insinuating a sense of backwardness and an unsuccessful attempt to emancipate these women. Robert, perplexed by Akuany’s apparent lack of appreciation for the opportunity to work and earn money with him, questions her preference for returning to Yaseen’s possession, even after he offered her freedom due to her perceived mischievousness and uselessness. As the narrator recounts:

One morning, after another burnt porridge, he gave in and freed the girl. He signed the necessary papers. She grabbed them and left without a thank you. What made her even more of a fool was that she was going back to the same Sudanese man who had first taken her out of the jungle. Robert was offering freedom with offers of paid employment, and she was choosing a harem! (214-15)

While this scene acknowledges the unjust practice of slavery in Sudanese Muslim society during this period and recognizes the enslaved individual’s desire for freedom, it also showcases Akuany’s successful strategy to liberate herself from a foreigner and achieve her goal of returning to her Sudanese roots, specifically through her connection with Yaseen. This connection is emphasized by Yaseen’s wife, who regards Zamzam/Akuany as a “member of the family” who must stay with them (206). Moreover, the narrative suggests that even without Yaseen’s wife welcoming Akuany, the orphan girl did not wish to stay at the European house. She cleverly deceives the painter, telling him that she has family and relatives to whom she could

return after gaining her freedom. This interpretation challenges and subverts the Orientalist representation of non-Western women escaping from Muslim men and culture.

Aboulela skillfully portrays instances of forced marriages and polygamy among the followers of the Mahdi, despite their claims to represent true and just Islam. The narrative also explores the stories of women who attempt to resist these practices, juxtaposed with those who succumb to them. Furthermore, in the public sphere, Muslim/Sudanese women are portrayed wearing colorful clothing, engaging in market activities, and raising and teaching their children after the death of their husbands without assistance. Aboulela challenges Orientalist narratives that depict all Muslim societies as forcing women to veil themselves, emphasizing that veils were typically worn by upper-class women in most Muslim societies, while ordinary women often covered their heads without necessarily veiling their faces, allowing their necks and breasts to be visible.

Nonetheless, the significance of the portrayal of non-Muslim characters in imperial Islamic culture and Western civilization is paramount in *River Spirit*. The novel explores the dehumanization and rejection of cultural identity and history experienced by non-Western, non-Muslim Black females. In the narrative, Akuany, a Black girl from South Sudan, witnesses the devastation caused by Arab/Muslim slave traders who destroy her village, massacre its inhabitants, and traffic survivors into slavery in the North. She grapples with the loss of her name, traditions, and the life she once knew along the White Nile. Repeatedly dressed, redressed, and renamed under the directive of the Turkish governor's wife in the North, Akuany's identity undergoes a coercive metamorphosis, symbolizing her journey from perceived primitiveness to the perceived civilization epitomized by Islamic culture in northern Sudan.

The narrator contemplates Akuany's roles within the Muslim Turkish ruler's household and later as the muse of a Scottish painter, saying:

There followed a great deal of bathing and delousing. Nazli scrubbed Akuany so hard that she scratched her skin. She made her try on outfit after outfit and then marched her to see her in the mirror. Akuany preferred how she had looked the first time, like a girl who could be her friend. But Nazli Hanim did not care about her opinion. She gave her a new name, a Muslim one. Akuany became Zamzam. (55)

Akuany realized that the Scottish painter and the affluent Turkish Muslim household represented by the governor's wife, Nazli Hanim, shared a similar essence despite their differences in nationality and gender. Both were restless and felt entitled to a better life. They both treated her as a mere plaything, a decorative part of their lives. Eventually, Robert would discard her as her allure faded, her exoticism preserved on canvas for someone else to enjoy (206).

Conclusion

Aboulela's *River Spirit* represents a notable departure from her previous literary works, particularly in the portrayal of her fictional heroines, thus presenting a paradigm shift. Muslim women are presented as politically engaged and assertive agents actively reshaping the political landscape in defense of their beliefs and the well-being of the Muslim community. The novel also

aligns with Aboulela's postcolonial project, aiming to deconstruct the monolithic representation of Muslim women and societies found in Orientalist texts and imperial discourses. *River Spirit* acts as a counter-narrative to Western art (such as Rudolf Sultan Pasha's autobiography *The Fire and Sword in the Sudan: A Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes, 1879-1895* (1898) and the British film *The Four Feathers* (1939)) that unfairly depict Sudanese women as oppressed, subordinate, and brainwashed Darwishes following extremist religious leaders. Instead, *River Spirit* features a diverse range of voices, extending beyond the central characters, Akuany and Yaseen. It introduces nine characters representing various dimensions of gender, social class, skin color, and cultural perspectives. By centering the narrative on ordinary Sudanese characters, the text intricately explores the dynamics within the struggle for both political and religious authority during the Mahdist revolt era. This perspective transcends the conventional focus on political and religious leaders. The deliberate inclusion of individuals aligning with or resisting prevailing religious and political views contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the broader societal dynamics at play.

Biography

Amany Abdelrazek-Alsiefy is a writer and lecturer at the Zentrum für Transdisziplinäre Geschlechterstudien at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. She holds an MA in English Literature and a PhD in English Literature and Language, both earned from German universities. Her academic pursuits encompass a broad spectrum of fields, including gender studies, postcolonial literature, secularization, and fashion theories. With a substantial portfolio of publications in Arabic, English, and German, she is the author of *Modern Egyptian Women, Fashion, and Faith: Discourses and Representations* (2023).

Notes

1. See Mernissi (1987; 1993; 2002). Mernissi, a distinguished feminist and sociologist, played a pivotal role in reshaping perceptions of Muslim women's roles through her groundbreaking scholarship. In her seminal work, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991), she challenges the entrenched notion of confining women to the private sphere and excluding them from political participation, a concept deeply ingrained in Islamic traditions. This pioneering research laid the foundation for Mernissi's influential examination of the often-overlooked contributions of Muslim women to political life, confronting the marginalization they endured in male-dominated societies. Her acclaimed work *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993) sheds light on the significant political agency of women in early Islamic history, dispelling widespread misconceptions. By uncovering the leadership roles held by 16 Muslim women who governed states between 1,000CE and 1,800CE, Mernissi enriches our understanding of women's historical contributions. She not only challenges the patriarchal narrative perpetuated by

Muslim male elites but also addresses the Western marginalization of Muslim women's history of resistance and their role in the public sphere before Western modernity. In her book *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (2002), Mernissi challenges the 19th century Western discourse that portrays Muslim women as oppressed through practices like the harem and veiling. She argues that this Orientalist view, depicting Muslim women as passive and hidden behind veils or within harems, ignores their history of resistance and reflects Western men's suppressed sexual desires and obsession with unveiling Muslim women.

2. See Mohja Kahf (1999).

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