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Gendered Spirits: Reclaiming Militarism and Feminine Agency in Aboulela's *River Spirit*

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Abstract

This paper explores the positionality of war-ridden female characters in Leila Aboulela's latest novel *River Spirit* through the theoretical perspectives of Cynthia Enloe, Fatima Mernissi, and Sara Ahmed. Set in 19th-century Sudan, the novel is a depiction of intricate circumstances women go through during

times of war. This paper examines how gender, religion, and power dynamics intersect and determine feminine experiences. Drawing on Cynthia Enloe's analysis of militarism, this paper examines how war intensifies patriarchal control and situates women in a position that is pivotal yet peripheral to the war. Fatima Mernissi's critique of patriarchal interpretations of Islam helps the paper frame the man-made religious and cultural engagements that suppress female agency. It also explores those moments of rebellion when women implement their will within these structures of subjugation. The work of Sara Ahmed on emotions and feminist killjoy provides an affective line to these war-torn experiences and allow one to predict how emotions of fear, defiance, and resilience would shape their actions and identities. This research shows how *River Spirit* not only represents the gendered impacts of war and religion but also demonstrates women's agency against the interrelated forces of patriarchy, militarism, and religious orthodoxy.

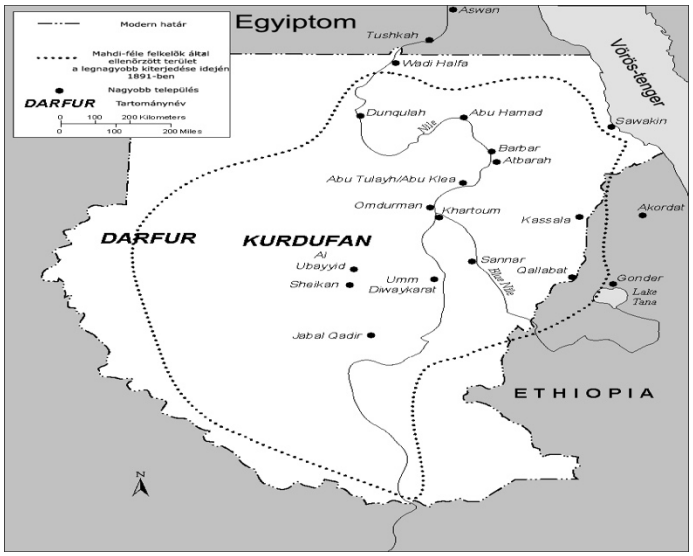
Keywords: Militarism, feminist killjoy, patriarchy-religion nexus, agency

Introduction

Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* depicts the condition of Muslim women in backdrop of one of the most turbulent historical episode of Mahdist War in Sudan. This was one of those critical chapters in Sudanese history in which a struggle over control of Sudan wove into the larger conflict between colonial powers and local forces. The novel vividly narrates the lives of several characters, mostly Muslim women, whose roles in the war and their spiritual journeys highlight the paradoxes of Sudan's identity during wartime. Through the richness of its characterizations, the novel depicts the intersection between gender, war, religion, and culture, making the book a treasure for understanding the Sudanese female experience during this tumultuous historical period.

The Mahdist War (1881-1899), also called the Mahdist Revolution has been one of the major uprisings in the history of Sudan. The uprising began with Muhammad Ahmad who was a religious leader from Sudan and assumed himself to be the Mahdi, or the "guided one" pursued in Islamic eschatology. This war was directly against the Egyptian and British colonies invading Sudan. It had embodied a structure of religiosity, economic discontent, and political ambitions.A variety of intertwined causes lay at the heart of the conflict. Muhammad Ahmad's claim to be the Mahdi gave war the crucial religious dimensions. His followers believed that they were fighting a holy war to establish an Islamic state founded on strict observance of Muslim principles. This religious motivation appealed to the Sudanese at large, most of whom had become disenchanted with the corrupt and oppressive nature of the Turco-Egyptian regime, which they considered both hostile and anti-Islamic. The second factor – heavy taxation – caused significant economic and social discontent among Sudanese people. The superimposed framework of colonization has been very relevant to the study

because the Mahdist movement emerged in the heyday of British expansion across the territory. This was thus not only a religious and national struggle but also a resistance to foreign rule.



The Mahdist State, 1881-98, modern Sudan (Commons W. 2009)

This map shows the territorial extent of the Mahdist State during the late 19th century, including key areas like Kordofan, Darfur, and Omdurman. The latter areas are central to the background of River Spirit because they represent the geographical heart of the Mahdist War.

There are several key phases that characterized the conflict. The initial phase included early Mahdist victories, such as the capture of Khartoum in 1885. Here, General Charles Gordon was killed, which marked the peak of Mahdist power, leading to the establishment of the Mahdist State that would rule Sudan for quite some time. However, internal divisions, economic struggles, and mounting pressure from British forces eventually led to the downfall of the Mahdist regime. The Mahdist forces were defeated in the Battle of Omdurman at the end of 1899, and British-Egyptian control over Sudan was restored.

The novel brings a fresh approach to this historical issue. Characters such as Rabiha, Akuany, Salha, and Halima all try to find their way through the intersection of religious conflict, colonial oppression, and gendered subjugation. The lived realities of the women through Aboulela's stories shed light on how they exercised resilience and agency in a patriarchal society torn apart by conflict. What gives their personal quests resonance is the spiritual journey of characters; that would otherwise represent wider challenges that Sudanese women faced in the course of events of a society torn between religious revivalism and colonial dominance.

By unfolding the novel and the historical context of the Mahdist War, *River Spirit* is not only a retelling of history but also a commentary on the intersections of gender, religion, and power. The novel serves as a platform for marginalized voices of Sudanese women whose stories of endurance, faith, and defiance cut across traditional patriarchal structures and introduce a fresh look at Sudan's past. Exploring this perspective gives the Mahdist War as a story of not only conflicts but of the power of resilience in terms of spirituality while at the same time it becomes an area to express feminine agency in a turbulent period.

This research explores these portrayals within the broader perspectives of War Literature and Sudanese history, considering how the novel challenges dominant historical discourses by foregrounding women's roles. This paper discusses how the novel makes use of the personal stories of Zamzam, Salha, Halima and Fatima, to shed light on wider socio-political transformations during Mahdist War, offering a deeper understanding of Sudanese culture and the ongoing consequences of war on gender dynamics.

Literature Review

Over the years, War Literature has depicted women not only as oppressed victims but also as active resisting individuals. The representation of women in contexts of war is not confined to the battlefield but extends to the personal and communal spaces they work in. Cynthia Enloe's investigation into how women are militarized and ultimately made marginalized has been applied across multiple disciplines, including international relations and gender studies. Jennifer Greenburg argues that "Enloe's work exposes how militarization often disguises itself as development and humanitarianism, reinforcing gender hierarchies" (2019, p. 88). It follows up on Enloe's agenda on how development projects often become militarized and perpetuate masculine dominance. Alison Howell narrates, "even when women are visible in militarized contexts, their agency is limited" (2011, p. 230). Howell discusses how humanitarianism is a dimension of militarization by invoking Enloe's critique to show how women become passive recipients and not potent actors in militarized societies and areas.

On Fatima Mernissi's critique of patriarchal interpretations of Islam, Margot Badran writes, "Mernissi recovers the egalitarian spirit of early Islam, arguing that male-dominated interpretations distort women's roles" (2009, p. 74). She explains the historical and theological bases of the oppression of women in Islamic societies and the ways in which these women battle patriarchal authority today. Leila Ahmed says, "Mernissi reveals ways in which Islamic texts have been manipulated to exclude women" (1992, p. 149). These are but a few illustrations of how Mernissi's work has been engaged and developed under the rubric of Islamic feminism.

Sara Ahmed's figure of the 'feminist killjoy' first explicitly formulated in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) has become one of the core concepts informing contemporary feminist theory. Bilge states that "the feminist killjoy unmasks distress by denying collusion with patriarchal norms" (2020, p. 59). Bilge

explores how countering normative forces is a kind of feminist resistance across identity categories. The same refusal to cooperate is described by Elizabeth Sarah Williams as she says, "the killjoy's refusal to comply breaks the anticipated social order" (2020, p. 12).

Mega Majumdar's review of *River Spirit* in The New York Times (2023) explores the subtle complications of revolution and religion in addition to womanhood. It is observed by the reviewer how Leila Aboulela enunciates "excessive taxation", amongst others "injustices" that the Mahdi's movement, born out of a quest for correcting "greed for power", turned "into a new instrument of oppression" (n.p). Bakaari (2023) comments that the novel "recasts this legendary episode in world history to tell the story not of the revolutionaries but of those who are charged with executing their vision, those who resist them, and those who must endure them." The reviewer notes how the novel has addressed the problem of ownership and slavery by Akuany's story.

Semmi W's (2023) review provides investigation of the novel's historical and emotional landscape. The review highlights Aboulela's success in immersing readers in the 19th-century Nuba Mountains, noting, "despite the political chaos, you become comfortable in the environment, silently observing, agreeing or disagreeing with each event and action as it unfolds" (n.p). It underscores the novel's exploration of colonialism and the East African slave trade, as shown in the review's observation of Musa's frustration.

All the existing scholarship has mainly focused on geopolitical dimensions of my primary text. However, this paper extends the geopolitical reading of the texts to focus on the intersection of gender, religion, and war within the novels demonstrates. This research investigates the marginalized and the militarized roles of women in a historical-fictional context to bring fresh input to feminist literary studies.

Theoretical Framework

Cynthia Enloe's extensive critique of militarism and its gendered effects provides a macro perspective from which to situate women's war-torn experiences within *River Spirit*. Enloe (2017) argues in *The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy*, "silence flowing from many women's belief that their wartime experiences don't "matter"—that they are merely private, trivial, and apolitical. Men wage war; women simply "cope" with wartime. Coping does not make for exciting history". (p. 116) The latter perspective peculiarly pertains to the novel, within which female characters such as Rabiha and Akuany are actually victims of the atrocities of war, while their experiences have often been relegated to secondary status in favor of more heroic male portrayals of war.

Enloe's (2017) claim that 'men wage war; women simply 'cope' with wartime' indicates the paradox in the story involving women who have a crucial impact on the survival of their communities but are excluded from historical narratives. The character Rabiha, for example, risks her life by going to warn the Mahdi of an impending attack and fits into the unfolding narrative. However, her story is but one

of many to support and substantiate Enloe's argument: survival is not necessarily "exciting history," especially for women whose contributions were often bypassed in times of war. As Enloe (2010) narrated in *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War*" wars are fought not just on the battlefield but also in homes and communities, where women often bear the brunt of the violence and upheaval, yet also become central to the survival of their societies." (p. 4)). This quote is crucial for understanding the implications of feminine experinces as it describes that after the concept of war, home and community become the second battlefield on which women like Akuany build their survival. They often find themselves relegated to the margins of the main stories of war, yet they are central to the social fabric, providing key services in maintaining cultural and social continuity through the tumult.

In her book, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* Enloe examines how military conventions and imperatives seep through everyday life, thus, setting up and determining women's lives. Enloe (2000) explains that "militarization is not just about armies and weapons; it is about the ways in which daily life becomes infused with military values and priorities, affecting how women live their lives" (p. 3). This unceasing state of tension weakens daily activity, social participation, and even the level of personal identity. As Enloe describes, militarization is not to be perceived in battlefields alone but also in the elementary portion of society.

Fatima Mernissi criticizes patriarchal interpretations of Islam and provides a significant view on how religious and cultural norms are used to control women. In her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Mernissi argues that patriarchal traditions place women not only on the bottom of social structures but also define and confine their very basic existence in society (Mernissi, 1991). In this respect, the female roles in the novel have been designed and framed by religion and culture in such a way that their potency is often undermined.

The interest of Sara Ahmed in emotions and their workings within feminist theories allows for an emotional dimension in analyzing the story. Ahmed's scholarship, particularly in her work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) reflects the idea that emotions like fear, anger, and hope are not individual events but are deeply political; they shape social relations and dictate individual behavior. She says, "Emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have" (p. 10). She goes on arguing:

> It is, on the contrary, through affect, or how we are moved in relation to people and things, that surfaces or boundaries are formed: the 'I' and the 'we' are informed by, and indeed come to assume the qualities of, interattachments. (p. 10)

This paper will, therefore, avail a broad framework from the broad feminist theoretical standpoints of Cynthia Enloe, Fatima Mernissi, and Sara Ahmed upon which to base the appraisal of the gendered impacts of conflict, religion, and power as narrated in Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit*. The story not only touches on the institutionalized oppression of women but also underlines their agency and resilience.

Analysis

Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* weaves together a story of rich narratives that investigates the lives of women amidst chaos and devastation in the Mahdist Revolution in Sudan. The novel's female characters, especially Rabiha and Akuany, have to live in a world where their roles are circumscribed by war and strongly entrenched in patriarchal structures that wish to control their bodies and their destinies. Through them, Aboulela represents not only the particular historical context of the 19th century Sudan but also intervenes in larger feminist discourses that question how war, religion and patriarchy intersect in framing women's fate.

The work of Cynthia Enloe on the militarization of women provides an insightful conceptual framework. Enloe (2004) argues, "the personal is the (politically) international," (p. 188) meaning the roles of women in various conflicts cannot be removed from the international political arena. Women's struggles in domestic spaces are linked with larger issues of war, nationalism, and imperialism. In the novel, this practice befalls Rabiha's actions. She takes the task of communicating an impending attack to Mahdi upon herself against the societal dictate that women are to remain in their homes. She has performed an outright repudiation of the limitations placed upon her by patriarchal prescription in her last act. She dies, not as a duty-bound wife, but as a revolutionary who changed the course of history "striving to become more than an obedient wife" (Aboulela,2023, p. 93).

This defiance by Rabiha is in line with what Enloe says: that it is when the family or community is under threat that women often burst out of their confined roles. Enloe has equally asserted that "women are not passive; they're active makers of political life" (2014, p. 7), as found in Rabiha's quest to save the Mahdi's forces from surprise attack. Rabiha is adopting a protector role, a position usually held by men in the patriarchal setup. This disobedience positions Rabiha as a protector, not only of her family but of the revolutionary cause at large.Thus, it challenges the amenability of traditional representations of women as helpless victims in times of war.

According to Enloe's conception, "Militarization is fundamentally a process that exaggerates the naturalness of masculinized authority and the deference of women." (2004, p. 219). Rabiha's confrontation with the Shilluk warrior is exemplary. Beyond the courage, she is forced to utilize her body as a potential weapon before eventually using violence to defend herself. The manner in which she chooses this position is exemplary of the "naturalness of masculinized authority" that Enloe writes about. (2004, p. 219). The resistance of Rabiha denies the assumption of the only supporter role of women in wartime. "Curves, breasts, glow of shoulder, long braids. She forces her body into limpness, hangs her long neck in submission, hides her hand behind her back, palm tight over the knife." (Aboulela, 2023, p. 10).

The story further complicates the portrayal of women's agency in war through the character of Akuany, a young girl who has to face the direct consequence of war. Akuany's story is heralded with

the destruction of her village and the murder of her father: "Homes burnt to ashes, beddings and utensils smashed, livestock vanished. Her father, splayed flat in front of their hut, speared to death" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 19). This becomes the traumatic backdrop for her subsequent journey, where she is taken in by a Khartoum merchant named Yaseen and sold into the household of the wife of a Turkish governor. Akuany's narrative also echoes Enloe's feminist methodologies, especially how war disrupts the life of a woman and, at the same time, opens unexpected paths to survival and resilience. As Enloe says, "war makes women vulnerable to exploitation, but it also creates new spaces for agency and resistance" (2000, p. 45). Abducted and sold into slavery, Akuany is the woman who demonstrates her agency by learning how to navigate her surroundings, be those in Al-Ubayyid or later Khartoum. Akuany does not stop at the role of victim but rises to that of survivor and agent of her life, even within a system engineered to oppress her. All this makes the relationship between Akuany and Yaseen another important illustration of the observation made by Enloe, that women's experiences of war are also often structured by men who exploit or try to protect them, but again-even in these dynamics-finds the agency of women being elaborated.

Moreover, Salha is symbolic of a woman with deep roots in her culture and family, but at the same time, her existence is circumscribed by structures of patriarchy. Enloe examines how militarization affects women; thus showing how Salha negotiates this war-torn world. Salha's plight further illustrates systemic entrapment of women in patriarchal wartime societies which Enloe had made: during war, women "are used as symbols of honour or shame, yet their own desires and voices are often ignored" (2004, p. 153). Her story is reminiscent of Enloe's observation that women often serve as pawns in political and marital alliances during conflicts with little agency over their life decisions. Salha whispered plea for Yaseen's divorce. It resistively indicates the use of her body as a bargaining chip in the patriarchal aspect of war. Salha's case shows the appropriateness of Enloe's assertion: "women's bodies become the terrain upon which wars are fought and nationalism is performed" (2014, p. 19).

Fatima Mernissi critically examines the ways in which patriarchal interpretations of Islam have served to justify gender inequality. According to Mernissi, these are not inherently part of Islam but represent the framing of ideas and beliefs within historical and cultural contexts that project male dominance. "The political manipulation of religion is the practice of authoritarian regimes… Islam can be a source of liberation for women, but it can also be used as a tool of oppression." (Mernissi, 1991, p. 13). In the novel, it is seen that religious teachings are often misused to justify subjugation against women—something that reflects in the plight of characters like Akuany. Yet Mernissi is also offering a way of reading cases of revolt and resistance in acts from the structures. For instance, Rabiha acting on her own volition outside what her husband might want her to do—where she has loyalty to the Mahdi—can be looked at as resistance against the patriarchal imposition that her society carries out on

her. This is an act of disobedience and proves how much Mernissi believes in women's agency that finds ways to declare freedom and defies the very norms that constrain it.

In the novel, the female characters always face pressure, which is clearly justified through religious rhetoric. For instance, the novel relates how women must act according to a certain religion-based statute, when "she had pledged fealty to his cause, to forswear material things and not to shrink from jihad" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 11). This can be seen as a classic instance of religious expectations being invoked to control female agency in conflict. The novel thus deals with women's agency versus the religiously justified limitations imposed upon them.

Salha's demand of divorce is merely in tune with Mernissi's observation from *Women and Islam*: "divorce in Islam is one of the few domains in which a woman could exercise a certain autonomy, but this freedom was still fraught with societal barriers". (Mernissi, 1991, p. 79). Salha, doomed to live in a marriage that promised absolutely no emotional fulfillment and in danger of being given out again to the judge, takes her case into her own hands and asks for a divorce from Yaseen. She knows she would otherwise be compelled to join another man's household-a prospect she is determined to resist. As Hala Al-Karib's expressed in her critique of using women's bodies for political currency in wartime, where "women's bodies are often instrumentalized for political ends" (Al-Karib, 2020, p. 85). In the novel, Salha contemplates her fate: "after the mourning period, I am to be married off to a high-ranking judge in the new administration. This is my lot, much better than for the others" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 182).

Operating within the historiography of Sudan during the Mahdist War, Salha and Rabiha are examples of the transgression of subalternized gender conventions. Rabiha, being sent off to warn the Mahdi and through her actions showing strength, independence, and power against a culture constantly trying to displace women, is an example of insubordination. Meanwhile, Salha rises to the challenge through her persistence with bold decisions that defy patriarchal shackles. The action of each woman is serious in will, an assertion that change does come by altering what society expects of one. Their stories are quintessential examples of how Sudanese women, even during the war and historical turbulence, defined for themselves what it means to be a woman in a society that binds them and made their choices within constrictive social norms.

Halima, another influential figure, reveals the intricacy of women's roles in war, especially as she defected to take sides with the Mahdist cause. It can be explored in the light of Fatima Mernissi's exploration of women in Islamic history in both oppressed and rebellious frames. The action of Halima brings out the dual pressures of familial and political loyalty and personal costs of war. The defection act by Halima is not only political but very personal, driven to fulfil her need for autonomy and children's futures, especially her son. This reflects Mernissi's observations of the subversive ways that Islamic women deal with prohibition in their environment to exercise agenthood. Saba Mahmood's (2005) concept of "pious agency" (p. 04) dwells on how acts of religious devotion and submission

apparently become the means through which agency can be performed, opposed to how feminists view autonomy. Mahmood shows how women aligned with religious life are not just victims of subordination or passive objects but negotiate and enact forms of power through their piety and adherence to religious traditions. In *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood argues that such practices collide with the Western liberal conceptions of freedom and agency. In her critique, "agency… can denote not only resistance to social norms but also the capacity to inhabit norms" (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15). For instance, Rabiha's loyalty to the cause of the Mahdi reveals that she is a pious character. At the same time, however, she defies traditional norms as an independent person because she takes matters into her own hands by warning the Mahdi about his potential attack without telling her husband. This further act of dissidence, although highly contradictory to conservative gender roles, is bathed in her religiosity and adherence to a cause that she holds to be ordained by God. As it was stated, "Rabiha keeps striding. To renounce material things and not shirk from jihad". Her agency, therefore, is not an act against religion, but rather through her religious conviction, which corroborates Mahmood in that "acts of piety are also ways of inhabiting forms of subordination." (Mahmood, 2005, p. 23).

Akuany's commodification can also be explained by the concept of Sara Ahmed, the 'feminist killjoy'. According to Ahmed (2010), it is the feminist killjoy who disrupts the social order by refusing to take up the happiness offered at the expense of their own oppression. She does hold very close to her cultural identity since the memory of her river and her village remains alive in her and acts as some form of resistance against the denial of her identity. "She loved running errands in the souq. But she could feel neither one note of the river, nor a whiff of its water. People lived like that! "(Aboulela, 2023, p. 26).

Akuany , being a young girl who has witnessed the destruction of her village, embodies what Sara Ahmed calls 'feminist survival'. As quoted, Sara Ahmed writes, "survival can be an achievement, but it can also mean a compromise, a way of living that is living with a history of being broken" (2017, p. 235). Akuany's life, subsequent to the raid, living with the loss of family and the struggle to adapt to her new life under guardianship from Yaseen, expresses the trauma of war upon women and the choices that are never easy. Attachment to the river then becomes a way of survival in a world where everything else has been torn asunder by war and violence. "The river was her language," symbolising the profound need of attachment for coherence in the midst of confusion (Aboulela, 2023, p.17).

Throughout the story, emotions seem to play the most significant part in the way female characters handle their chaotic surroundings. It is Rabiha's fear of losing her ability ever to warn the Mahdi, Akuany's fury at the loss of family and home, and their joint courage in overwhelming adversity that go to constituting both their inherent nature and responses to the environment that surrounds them. Ahmed's theoretical framework brings about an advanced understanding of the idea that these feelings don't work only as a response to exterior conditions but importantly work in forming the

characters' acts of resistance against the patriarchal, militarized, and religious dynamics that come to control them.

Ahmed's work allows us to theorize that emotions like fear, defiance, and resilience shape the actions and identities of female characters. Fear may initially keep characters like Akuany and Salha in a state of vulnerability, but it is through their defiance and resilience that they begin to reclaim their agency. Ahmed argues that emotions are "directed toward the future" and that they create the horizon of what we can imagine as possible (Ahmed, 2010,p. 8). Ahmed expresses , "fear keeps subjects in place, but it can also be the site of transformation, when the subject refuses to let fear decide their actions". (2004, p. 165) Akuany's determination not to be overshadowed by the fear, to keep going forward, is an evidence of her emotional resilience and her refusal to be defined by the violence she had to endure. Both Akuany's and Rabiha's resilience enables them, for example, to see into a future in which they are not enslaved but a person with her own agency and history. Indeed, Ahmed's theory holds that emotions are crucial in the political formation of identities since they allow subjects to reimagine their position in the world. "Emotions are sites of transformation; they shape not only what bodies can do but also how they can be" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 12).

Audre Lorde's ideas about the intersectionality of struggles are important to understand the multi-faceted challenges faced by Rabiha, Hibra, and Salha. Audre Lorde's words, "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (1984, p. 122), aptly sum it up for them. Each one of the characters has to bear with a network of interweaving issues-personal, political, and social. The struggle for independence, taken by Rabiha, the suffering of Hibra, and the political manipulation of Salha reflect Lorde's perspective of showing that their struggles are connected. For example, the reflection of Rabiha, "each challenge I face is intertwined with my personal and political struggles" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 145) epitomises the complexity of her lived experience.

Conclusion

"When you expose a problem you pose a problem" (Sara Ahmed, 2017).

This research investigated how Sudanese women in Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* negotiate the superimposed oppressive forces of war, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy during the Mahdist War in 19th-century Sudan. Through characters like Zamzam, Rabiha, Halima, Akuany, and Fatima, Aboulela puts into view women's agency and resilience against systemic oppression. Through religiosity, these women claim their independence in their own way against the conventions of militarism and gender achieved through patriarchal traditions.

Informed by the work of Cynthia Enloe, Fatima Mernissi, and Sara Ahmed on feminist theory, this paper finds that war is that high-intensity space in which gendered inequalities sharpen, yet at the same time afford a site for women's strengths and acts of resistance to emerge. The personal story

helps to redefine Sudanese identity during wartime and challenges dominant historical narratives that often relegate women's contribution to the periphery. By placing women not only as victims but also as active agents within these historical and war-forsaken upheavals, the novel presents a rather complex drama of their resistance against the interlocking systems of power which attempt to marginalize them. This paper illustrates how Aboulela's narrative attempts to contest dominant historical discourses that continuously negate the role of women in their discourse while emphasizing thoroughly important roles in the maintenance of cultural and political continuity during wartime. Therefore, this research culminates in establishing that the novel plays a very significant role in being one literary testimony to the strength, resilience, and agency of women against piled-up oppression, joining the larger discourse on gender and war from both historical and literary standpoints.

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