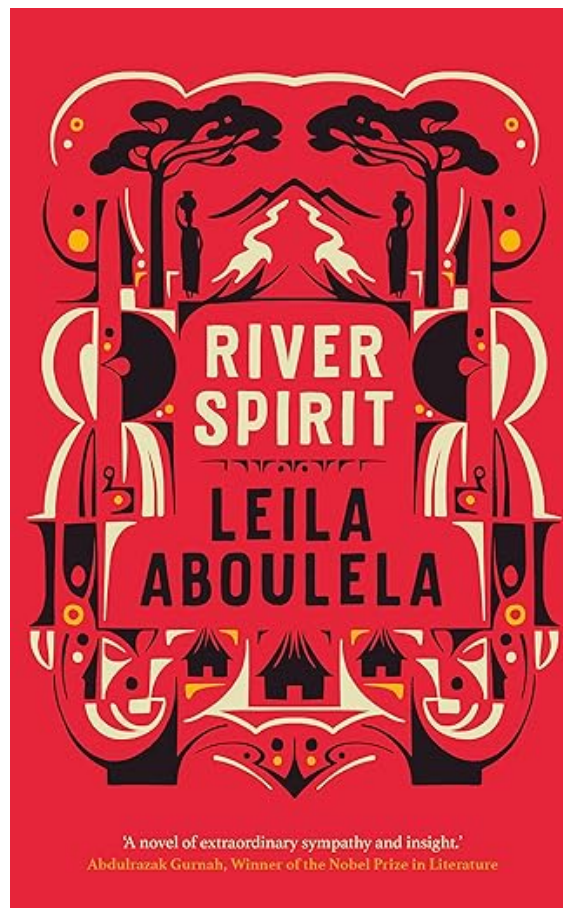


REVIEW

Love and Resilience: A Review of "River Spirit" by Leila Aboulela

by Olga Pinjung



***River Spirit* (2023) is a history lesson carefully wrapped in a blanket of masterful storytelling filled with fascinating characters. It tells the extraordinary story of the trials and tribulations of ordinary people whose destinies are intertwined and tied together by hope, devotion, love, and sacrifice. Leila Aboulela's captivating style draws the readers in from the very beginning and takes them on a journey to witness the challenges of life in 19th century Sudan. Each chapter is concerned with the life of one character and the reader is gradually introduced to them as the story goes on, as the connections between them are revealed slowly, chapter by chapter.**



Leila Aboulela © Judy Laing

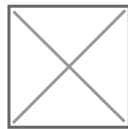
As regretful as it may sound, *River Spirit* was my first encounter with the critically acclaimed and award-winning writer, Leila Aboulela, who was born in Egypt, grew up in Sudan and currently resides in Scotland. Her story takes place in Sudan in the late nineteenth century during the Mahdist revolution when the country

was under Egyptian rule and centers around the life of the main character, an orphaned girl named Akuany (a.k.a. Zamzam), who lost her parents in a raid and was taken away and saved by Yaseen, a young merchant, along with her brother. Aboulela's perfectly depicts the everyday struggles her characters must face before, during, and after the revolution, while educating the readers about Sudanese history at the same time. Besides the main characters, there is Musa, a devoted believer in the Mahdi; Fatimah, Yaseen's mother who only wants what is best for her family, Salha, Yaseen's wife; and Robert, the Scottish painter who works in the boatyard and dreams of selling his paintings back in his homeland. Every character is very complex with a fascinating background. Unfortunately, the novel is not long enough, as I could have read three hundred more pages of their lives.

River Spirit touches upon various subjects, including but not limited to love, hardship, family, relationships, revolution, hope, and loneliness. One topic I would like to highlight from the novel is devotion, by which I mean the unwavering belief in and support of a religious leader. The trust, faith, and ever-growing devotion of Sudanese people, yearning for freedom, to the self-proclaimed Mahdi, who claims Prophet Muhammad appeared in his vision and declared him the Expected One. As Yaseen describes him,

he is popular, no doubt, charismatic. Then there are the miracles. They weary me insofar as they show how gullible the population is. Poor, simple folk, unlearned and therefore vulnerable.

Aboulela masterfully portrays the dangers and consequences of the gullibility and impressionability of ordinary people when they are presented with and misled by a self-appointed leader. Her genius in *River Spirit* lies in the representation of the two opposing sides of the revolution. On one side, we have Yaseen, the merchant-turned-jurist who represents the rational side and refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Mahdi, “I am not questioning his visions. They are his, but they are his alone. (...) Dreams are not evidence.”



"River Spirit" by Leila Aboulela

By introducing Musa, who is the embodiment of insecurity and low self-esteem, Aboulela provides the readers with not only a glimpse into, but a complete immersion into the world of blind faith. Musa idolizes the Mahdi and gives up everything for him: “he deserved everything I possessed, and what did I possess but this sinful body, this unruly mind, this life that pulsed within my heart.” The writer succeeds in convincingly describing the process through which believers such as Musa transform into the faithful followers of the self-proclaimed Expected One:

the Mahdi was now my family and my home; I lived for him and no one else. My wife and newborn daughter were indeed my responsibility, but they did not distract me from him.

The description of this almost unearthly connection is Aboulela's strong suit. Similarly to the Musa-Mahdi bond, we have Akuany's attachment to the White Nile. The river is the only link that reminds her of her childhood and parents, thus provides her with solace and comfort:

as soon as she had arrived, the river — huge and strumming — claimed her. After years in the desert, she felt welcomed by the water, knowing it to be the timeless companion, the one that ran without effort, gave without needing, and sang the ancient tunes she had heard in her childhood, the songs she had yearned for and listened out for, that she only half understood, but it did not matter, because listening was more important.

Interestingly enough, Aboulela has chosen to distinguish the characters by using different types of narratives; with the majority of the characters, Yaseen, Fatimah, Musa, and Salha, she uses first person narrative, which means that each character tells their own story, as opposed to the third person narrative, where an outsider tells the tale of the given character, as we can see in the case of Akuany and Robert. The reason behind this distinction is unknown. However, I must say that it takes away from the story in that, while reading, I had a feeling of missing something, and I only realized what it was when I finished the book: a more in-depth description of the mental and emotional processes of Akuany which might be explained by the third person narrative, by the distance it created between the reader and the main character. Although Aboulela does an incredible job depicting the thoughts and feelings of male characters — Yaseen in his doubts about the Mahdi and concerns regarding his relationship with Akuany and his family members; Musa in his devotion to the Mahdi — I found myself missing the same depth and emotional complexity in Akuany.

While reading, we are presented with the history of 19th century Sudan and unknowingly become immersed in the hardship of everyday life. Leila Aboulela's talent is indisputable, her style is engaging and instantly draws the readers in. *River Spirit* is entertaining and educates us about hope, love, humanity, strength, and perseverance.