



“Verdant, Green, Lush:” Aboulela’s Depiction Of The Nile In River Spirit

Shireen Hikmat Alkurdi¹ , Yousef Abu Amrieh²

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Corresponding Author:

Shireen Hikmat Alkurdi

English Language and Literature,
Salt Faculty for Humanities, Al-
Balqa Applied University, Salt,
Jordan. Email:
shireenkurdi@bau.edu.jo

Abstract: This paper aims to examine how the Arab-British novelist Leila Aboulela portrays the distinctive relationship between her protagonist, Akuany, and the Nile in her recent novel, *River Spirit* (2023), set during the Mahdist Revolution (1881–1898). This study employs the geocritical approach to examine the interaction between physical spaces and human experiences, highlighting how landscapes influence identity and memory. It analyzes the river not as a mere physical entity but as a personified character with profound cultural and political significations, demonstrating Aboulela’s ability to make geography a means of conveying emotional and historical resonance, playing a vital role in the narrative. Born in a village in South Sudan, Akuany remains attached to the river despite being forced to peregrinate around the country because of the ongoing armed conflicts. Aboulela frames Akuany’s circular journey, from Malakal to Al-Ubayyid, to Khartoum, to Omdurman, and back to her village, as both a physical and spiritual passage in which the Nile emerges as a living, unifying force that transcends colonial and political borders, shaping Sudanese identity through memory, belonging, and resilience. Akuany’s views on the places she is taken to, as well as her feelings towards the individuals she encounters, are influenced by their proximity to the river. Her feelings towards the individuals she encounters are shaped by their perceptions of the river. Hence, this paper investigates Akuany’s thoughts and emotions about the river to explore how Aboulela aesthetically transforms the Nile from a natural body of water into a breathing soul that speaks and listens. This study further emphasizes the novel’s contribution to postcolonial and environmental literary studies by connecting human experience with natural landscapes. In a novel that traces the shifting fortunes of prominent leaders, the Nile remains unchanged, as does Akuany’s unwavering devotion to it.

Keywords: Geocriticism, River Spirit, The Nile, Aboulela, Arab-British Novelist

1. Introduction

This study examines the portrayal of the Nile in Leila Aboulela’s *River Spirit*, focusing on Akuany’s journey as she is compelled to relocate from her home village to various locations across Sudan during the Mahdist Revolution. Aboulela employs the Nile not merely as a setting but as a narrative device that shapes the protagonist’s emotional and psychological journey (Tally Jr., 2011, p. 45). The Mahdist Revolution marks a significant historical episode in Sudanese history, led by Muhammad Ahmad, who declared himself the Mahdi, an Islamic messianic figure expected to restore justice before the end times. This uprising succeeded in ending Egyptian and British colonial control, briefly establishing an independent Mahdist state. The revolution occurred amid the broader “Scramble for Africa” during the late 19th century, when European powers divided African territories to secure control over resources and strategic waterways such as the Nile River (Gray, 2000, pp. 34-36). The Berlin Conference of 1884-85 formalized these territorial divisions, largely ignoring indigenous political structures and sparking resistance movements like the Mahdist jihad (Johnson, 2003, p. 18).

In the early 19th century, Egypt, under the rule of Muhammad Ali and later his son Ismail Pasha, expanded southward along the Nile to assert control over Sudan. This expansion aimed to consolidate Ottoman influence and exploit the region’s resources. Northern Sudan was primarily inhabited by Muslim Arab nomads, while southern Sudan was home to Black African communities practicing either Christianity or Islam. Amid ongoing tribal conflicts in the south, Arab groups took advantage of the chaos to engage in the slave trade. The colonial capital was established at Khartoum, located at the confluence of the White and Blue Nile rivers, making it a key trading hub due to its strategic location (Gray, 2000, p. 42).

By the 1860s, Egyptian authority in Sudan had weakened under the indirect rule of the Khedive. British officer Charles Gordon was appointed governor to suppress the slave trade, which Britain had outlawed. Gordon sought to combat corruption and alleviate the burdens imposed by Egyptian officials but faced difficulties after his resignation in 1880, leading to a resurgence in the slave trade (Hill, 1967, pp. 54-57).

Amid these tensions, Muhammad Ahmad proclaimed himself the Mahdi in 1881. According to Islamic tradition, the Mahdi is a prophesied leader who will restore justice before the Day of Judgment. Born near the Nile, Muhammad Ahmad was a religious scholar who gained a substantial following among Sudanese Arabs dissatisfied with Egyptian domination. He mobilized a large army and launched a jihad against Egyptian and Turkish rulers, calling for an end to their oppressive taxation and control (Gray, 2000, p. 45). Sudanese society at this time was a diverse mix of ethnicities and cultures. Aboulela’s novel reflects this diversity through the character Robert, who observes the blend of nationalities in Khartoum, hears languages such as Arabic, German, Greek, Swahili, and Turkish (Aboulela, 2023, p. 101).

¹ English Language and Literature, Salt Faculty for Humanities, Al-Balqa Applied University, Salt, Jordan

² English Language and Literature, School of Foreign Languages, The University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan

In 1883, the Mahdi's forces decisively defeated Egyptian troops under British leadership at the Battle of El Obeid, capturing their weapons and attracting more support from Arab tribes. The movement rapidly gained control over much of Sudan. The British sent Charles Gordon to Khartoum to oversee the evacuation of Egyptian forces. Still, he was besieged and killed when the Mahdi's army captured the city in 1885, marking the peak of Mahdist power (Hill, 1967, pp. 75-78).

The Mahdist state in Omdurman enforced strict Islamic law, banning slavery but imposing severe restrictions on women, including denying them property rights, divorce, and education. Punishments were harsh, such as flogging, amputations, and beheading, even as the Mahdi maintained a luxurious lifestyle (Gray, 2000, pp. 49-51). After Mahdi died in 1885, his successor, Khalifa Abdallahi, continued the jihad but failed in his attempts to invade Egypt. The British, seeking to reclaim control, prepared to retake Sudan.

Winston Churchill, then a young British officer, documented the British military campaign in his book *The River War*, portraying the occupation as an effort to economically unify Egypt and Sudan while securing British dominance over the Nile, crucial for trade and imperial strategy (Gray, 2000, p. 55). General Herbert Kitchener led a modern and well-equipped army of about 25,000 men to confront and defeat Khalifa Abdallahi's forces. In 1898, the British military decisively crushed the Mahdist army at the Battle of Omdurman, employing heavy artillery and machine guns. Although the Mahdist forces numbered around 50,000, many were armed only with swords and spears, which left them vulnerable to modern weaponry. The battle resulted in approximately 10,000 Mahdist casualties and effectively brought an end to the Mahdist state (Hill, 1967, pp. 112-114).

Following the defeat and the death of Khalifa Abdallahi in 1899, Sudan came under a condominium agreement between Britain and Egypt. They appointed a governor and introduced new laws, including the official abolition of the slave trade. Sudan gained independence in 1956 but endured decades of famines, civil wars, genocides, and political instability. The protracted conflict between Muslim Arabs in the north and Christian Black Africans in the south eventually culminated in Sudan's division into two separate countries: Sudan and South Sudan in 2011.

The Nile's geographical and historical significance has shaped political, economic, and social developments in Sudan, making it central to understanding the journey depicted in *River Spirit*, since rivers in Africa, as Burroughs explains, were exploited by European powers to penetrate the continent:

The exploration of the African interior in the nineteenth century, a precursor to European colonization, was facilitated by river navigation. Locating the sources of the major waterways advanced European geographical knowledge, created inroads for mercantile and missionary expansion, and imposed Eurocentric traditions. (Burroughs 2019, p. 6)

As the novel depicts Akuany's exceptional relationship with the Nile during the Mahdist Revolution against one of Europe's colonial powers, Britain. It is essential to map the geography of Sudan and the Nile in order to trace Akuany's journey in relation to the river, since not all the locations she visits are directly crossed by it. The importance of the Nile is tied to numerous political, economic, and social factors. In his book, *Handbook of Energy and Environmental Security*, Muhammad Khalifa et al. (2022) give detailed geographical information about the Nile:

The Nile River basin is drained by the Nile River and its tributaries and is the second-largest basin in Africa. The area of the basin is approximately 3.2 million km² and accounts for nearly 10% of the African continent's area [...]. The Nile is the longest river in the world with a length of 6670 km [...]. The Nile River's waters originate in the Ethiopian Highlands and the Equatorial Lakes, and they flow northward. The river reaches the Mediterranean Sea after crossing extremely arid regions such as the Saharan Desert. The territory of the basin is shared by 11 countries, namely: Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania. (Khalifa et al., 2022, p. 433)

Khalifa emphasizes the importance of the Upper Nile Basin, which spans South Sudan, particularly in terms of its agricultural significance. Nevertheless, climate change, along with inconsistent rain and changing temperatures, has led to droughts in the region, affecting agriculture and causing food shortages in Sudan (Khalifa et al., 2022, p. 436).

The novel is set against the backdrop of the Mahdist revolution, during which many tribes follow the Mahdi. Aboulela portrays the Mahdi as a model Islamic figure whose preaching, manners, and smile inspire widespread devotion, encouraging his followers to renounce materialism and embrace the jihad movement. As noted by P. J. Vatikiotis, the Mahdi "exercised a powerful charismatic authority that united diverse tribes and mobilized them around a common religious and political cause" (Vatikiotis, 1971, p. 45), underscoring his role as a unifying and transformative leader in Sudanese history.

Aboulela also portrays the tyranny imposed by the Ottomans in Sudan, with heavy taxation exacerbating the people's hardships, while the Mahdi emerges as the sole source of hope and protection (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 2, 3, 15). This depiction aligns with historical accounts, as Charles Anderson notes, "The oppressive tax policies and administrative corruption under Ottoman rule fueled widespread resentment, which the Mahdist movement capitalized on by promising relief and justice to the suffering populace" (Anderson, 1984, p. 72). Aboulela's narrative traces the Mahdist movement's expansion from Kinana land through Al-Ubayyid, Sennar, Darfur, and ultimately Khartoum (Aboulela, 2023, p. 9). The promised Mahdi is the Expected Redeemer, and people believe that he is the one who "would pull them all out of their misery, who would bring justice and peace to the world after it had been filled with tyranny" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 15). The narrative aesthetic transforms historical events into an exploration of hope and moral authority, echoing Edward Said's argument in *Culture and Imperialism* that literature can reinterpret historical experience to illuminate ethical and humanistic themes (Afzal-Khan and Said 1994, p. 22).

This study is significant because it offers a geocritical reading of *River Spirit*, focusing on the Nile as a central, living presence rather than a passive backdrop. While previous scholarship on Aboulela has emphasized themes such as faith and identity, this paper highlights the river's active role in shaping Akuany's journey and the narrative itself. By exploring this unique bond, the study offers fresh insights into Aboulela's novel as a cartographic work that aims to map places and spaces. The space represented by the Nile is symbolic, and it reshapes the reader's understanding of it not as a river but rather as a personified spirit. This study is particularly significant because, to the best of current scholarship, no research has yet analyzed the Nile itself as an active character in *River Spirit*, making this reading the first to foreground the river as a dynamic force shaping identity, memory, and cultural meaning.

2. Literature Review

In spatial literary texts, nature and rivers are often depicted metaphorically to reflect deeper cultural, emotional, or political meanings. They are typically portrayed as referring to the significance of religion, politics, society, and economics. In his book *The Urge to the Sea* (1942), Robert J. Kerner demonstrates the importance of rivers in religion as he states: "In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, 'wash away sins'; they are at once purifying and regenerating" (Kerner, 1942, pp. 4-5).

In her book *Rivers in Russian Literature* (2020), Margret Ziolkowski, refers to the representation of rivers in Russian literature as they "have played important roles in the formation of ethnic and national consciousness, the development and sustenance of religious affiliations, the creation of conceptions of social tradition and progress, and the growth of aesthetic appreciation and environmental anxieties" (Ziolkowski, 2020, p. 1). Similarly, Aboulela's depiction of the Nile in her novel reflects the importance of the Nile for the Sudanese national consciousness.

In his article *Travel Writing and Rivers*, Robert Burroughs (2019) highlights the prominence of rivers in the travel genre, noting that they have long been a central theme in travel literature. Most narratives, he observes, focus on journeys that follow the course of rivers rather than crossing them. These "hydrological annotations" allow "rivers [to] foster innumerable traditions, legends, rituals and poetics. Mythic channels leading to the underworld, or springing from paradise, recur in various societies" (Burroughs, 2019, p. 1). In modern travel writing, the riverine experience is often depicted metaphorically (Burroughs, 2019, p. 2). Rivers also play a defining role in shaping communities, as "their changing physical properties [help] to create cultural differences between neighboring peoples" (Burroughs, 2019, p. 4). For Ronald Barthes, "rivers serve as guides to the human histories and cultures that have harnessed and been channeled by them" (Barthes, 1972, p. 112).

Smith (2015) emphasizes the relationship between human civilizations and rivers as a crucial one in which rivers represent a "powerful global force" in shaping civilizations and destroying anything that might stop them (p.5). He suggests that the power of rivers includes destroying myths, politics, and even borders created by authorities. The power of rivers exceeds scientific explanation, political and economic roles, and the natural power to eliminate the division between people based on borders, religions, and politics, making them all disappear. Likewise, Akuany finds the Nile purifying, and whenever she bathes in the river, she feels a sense of relief, as if she has been newly reborn.

2.1. Aboulela's Depiction Of The Nile In *River Spirit*

River Spirit traces Akuany's circular journey, beginning and ending at her rural home along the Nile River, while passing through multiple towns and cities across Sudan. This cyclical movement reflects both physical travel and an inner quest for identity amid the complexities of personal loss, cultural displacement, and political turmoil. Throughout the narrative, Akuany's evolving relationship with Yaseen, a figure embodying both intimacy and conflict, unfolds in tandem with her geographical trajectory. The Nile functions not only as a geographic anchor but also as a potent symbol of continuity, transformation, and the interconnectedness of place, memory, and identity. Through this cyclical journey, the novel explores broader themes of belonging, resilience, and the socio-political forces that shape the Sudanese experience. Aboulela establishes Akuany's unique relationship with the river from the very beginning of the novel and follows its development as she is forced to relocate to other parts of Sudan. This research will examine how Akuany's identity fluctuates depending on her proximity to the river, whether she is near it or far from it. While previous ecocritical and postcolonial readings of Aboulela have focused on themes of faith, gender, or displacement, this study explicitly foregrounds the river as an active agent. By centering the Nile itself as a dynamic participant in the narrative, this paper highlights a geocritical perspective that has not yet been fully explored.

Aboulela's *River Spirit* challenges dominant representations of Muslim women by highlighting their agency in political and social fields. In her article "Muslim Women's Representation, Religious Identity, and Politics: On *River Spirit*," by Leila Aboulela, Amany Abdelrazek Alsiefy highlights how Muslim women play a crucial role in politics and actively contribute to transforming political landscapes in an attempt "to deconstruct the mono-lithic representation of Muslim women and societies found in Orientalist texts and imperial discourses" (Alsiefy, 2024, pp.123-124). For Alsiefy, the novel is a counter-narrative to Western art, using different voices other than the protagonists', which are depicted as "various dimensions of gender, social class, skin color, and cultural perspectives" (Alsiefy, p. 124).

Faith and transcultural journeys are central to understanding identity in Aboulela's narratives. In "Choked by a kind of brightness": Travelling Transculturally into Leila Aboulela's Narrative of Faith," Susanna Zinato (2024) explores how Aboulela's works navigate themes of faith and identity through transcultural journeys. The article examines how Aboulela's narratives challenge conventional postcolonial perspectives by focusing on the spiritual and cultural experiences of Muslim characters as they negotiate multiple identities across different geographies (Zinato, 2024, p. 46).

Urban spaces such as Khartoum serve as sites where memory, identity, and belonging intersect in Sudanese storytelling. In the article, "The Politics of Space in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Jamal Mahjoub's *A Line in the River*: Khartoum, City of Memory," Ahmed Ben Amara looks at how Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Jamal Mahjoub's *A Line in the River* use the city of Khartoum to explore ideas about memory, identity, and belonging. He demonstrates that Khartoum is not just a backdrop, but a place rich in history and meaning that profoundly shapes the characters' lives. The article highlights how both novels explore themes such as displacement and the struggle to find one's place in a rapidly changing world. Overall, it presents a thoughtful examination of how space and memory intersect in Sudanese storytelling (Ben Amara, 2024, pp. 268-269).

3. Methodology

Tally & Battista (2016) present the ecocritical and geocritical approaches and schools of criticism as part of a growing scholarly discourse. This discourse reflects a shift in cultural studies toward greater attention to the "lived environment, social and natural spaces, spatiotemporality, ecology, history and geography" (Tally & Battista, 2016, p. 1). The book emphasizes how critics now engage with literature through the lens of environmental and spatial literary studies, particularly by highlighting how "space, place, mapping and literature" are interconnected, and asserting that "space is of the utmost social importance" (Tally & Battista, 2016, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, the editors point out that "the key theorists, as David Harvey, Edward Soja, Fredric Jameson, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Doreen Massey and others, who have been influential on the development of geocriticism have been themselves deeply engaged political

thinkers" (Tally & Battista, 2016, p. 2). This connection underscores the political nature of geocriticism and its foundation in critical, place-based inquiry.

Tally and Battista suggest that "literary geography has itself been motivated by intensely political goals, as the need to map the spaces and places of literature appears crucial to the genealogical disclosure or uncovering of formerly repressed narratives" (Tally & Battista, 2016, p. 2). They also demonstrate that modernity's mapping systems are facing growing ecological disruption, and our understanding of space, place, and territory is becoming increasingly unstable. Landmarks and spatial divisions, once seen as fixed, such as national borders and regional boundaries, are now subject to the unpredictability of both environmental and social change. In fact, the very distinction between the natural and the social is proving to be problematic and unsustainable in the context of the twenty-first century (Tally & Battista, 2016, p. 2). Based on this, Aboulela represents the Nile's significant role in politics in the sense that the Nile becomes the main factor in mapping Sudan and reshaping borders within the context of the narrative. The article refers to nature, represented by the Nile, as a vital, dynamic presence that plays a significant role in shaping Akuany's identity, memory, and resilience.

Geocriticism is the theoretical framework employed to examine Aboulela's novel *River Spirit* as it emphasizes "a concern for the manner in which spaces and places are perceived, represented, and ultimately used" (Tally & Battista, 2016, p. 2). This article highlights the way Aboulela depicts the Nile not only as a physical river but rather as a breathing soul that speaks and listens to Akuany. When Akuany moves between the regional borders from one place to another in Sudan, her compass is the river, which reflects her relationship to nature with spiritual and ecological connotations. Geocriticism is deeply concerned with the theme of displacement and connection to the natural world, reflecting the complex relationship between humans and nature. This relationship is examined in Aboulela's novel by shedding light on Akuany and the Nile, as the protagonist is deeply connected to the river; when she is away from it, she feels displaced and lifeless. As geocriticism is concerned with the dynamic relationships among space, place, and literature, this article presents the Nile as an embodiment of cultural memory and resilience, despite the unstable political and social circumstances in Sudan.

Geocriticism, on the other hand, offers additional insights by examining how the Nile functions as a geographic and cultural space within Aboulela's novel. It focuses on spatial narratives and place-making, which enriches the analysis of the Nile as a site of memory, history, and identity in the Sudanese socio-political context. This aligns with Nixon's notion of 'slow violence' as environmental and spatial violence is often gradual, and it is distributed across time and space, and entwined with postcolonial dispossession (Nixon, 2011, p.2). Thus, this study primarily employs geocriticism to investigate the transformative portrayal of the Nile and to contextualize its spatial and cultural dimensions within the novel.

3.1. Malakal 1877

The story of Akuany, an eleven-year-old girl, starts in the village of Malakal in September 1877. The narrator describes the unique relationship between Akuany and the river early in the novel: "The river was her language" (Aboulela, 2023, p.11). From a geocritical perspective, the intimate bond between Akuany and the Nile illustrates how physical landscapes are permeated with personal and cultural meaning, shaping her identity and experiences (Tally & Battista, 2016, p. 2). Akuany "stood in the shallow, humming Nile, listening to what the water was saying, believing" (Aboulela, 2023, p.11). Whenever Akuany is by the river, the omniscient narrator vividly describes Akuany's sense of comfort and restfulness as she wades into the river: "Akuany pressed her feet in the sticky mud, looked down at the shifting cloth that covered her hips. The raised tribal decorations on her stomach were now in the water. She bent her knees, and her breast became wet" (Aboulela, 2023, p.11). Her femininity and tribal decoration on her stomach are celebrated when she is in the river, reflecting a magical relationship in which culture and female figures are celebrated in the water. Although the river's primary functions include supplying water, enabling washing, fishing, and navigation, Akuany's connection to it carries a more profound significance that surpasses these practical uses. It is "the spirit of who she was. The place that kept her safe when they raided the village" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 11). Most of the actions take place at the riverbank; there, she sees Yaseen, the merchant from Khartoum, who comes to buy gum from her father. He is the lovely man who comes every year for trade and brings Akuany sweets, which always make her excited when he comes for a week (Aboulela, 2023, p. 12).

Malakal County, located in the Upper Nile State of South Sudan, is inhabited by the Shilluk/Chollo, Padang Dinka, and Nuer peoples. It "has a narrow international border with Sudan to the north-west," with Malakal town situated along the eastern bank of the White Nile, which flows northwards through the county ("Malakal Country, Upper Nile State," para. 1). Malakal's strategic location made it vulnerable to raids aimed at capturing people for the northern slave markets. Aboulela represents the slavery trade in this country as it was a target for invasion for the slave market in the North (Aboulela, 2023, p. 12). The harsh reality of these invasions is vividly portrayed during an attack on Malakal, where huts burn, people scream, and Akuany flees alongside Yaseen and her brother Bol. Furthermore, Aboulela emphasizes the river's significance during Akuany's suffering: "At first, she [is] soothed by the songs of the river. Then she [feels] hungry and Yaseen [has] no food" (Aboulela, 2023, p.12). Even in the most challenging moments of starvation and invasion, the river's songs provide her with comfort. When Akuany comes back with Yaseen, her village was utterly destroyed, and her father was killed (Aboulela, 2023, p.13, p.14). He saves Akuany and Bol, and they become his property as he takes them with him to Khartoum. Akuany is shocked and fearful, believing that children taken from their families often never reunite with them again (Aboulela, 2023, p. 16). During their journey to Khartoum, Akuany bathes in small streams and waterways whenever they stop (Aboulela, 2023, p. 16). As anthropologist Marc Augé observes, "Water is not only a source of life but also a medium that carries memory and myth, sustaining cultural identities through its flows" (Augé, 1995, p. 82). Accordingly, Akuany's journey northward, following the flow of the Nile, is not only a physical passage but also a symbolic journey where the river sustains her life and spirit.

The novel's portrayal of the river situates it within the riverine literature, emphasizing the river's social, political, environmental, and cultural significance, as illustrated through Akuany and Yaseen's interactions with it. Smith (2015) highlighted that riverine literature often moves beyond mere symbolism to explore the tangible social, political, and environmental realities that shape how rivers are experienced and imagined (Smith, 2015, p. 56). This perspective emphasizes the multifaceted roles rivers play in human life, not only as natural features but also as sites of cultural and historical significance. In *River Spirit*, whenever Yaseen visits Malakal, he asks Akuany to guide him to the river, claiming that he does not know the destination. As Akuany leads him there, she feels "charged with pride" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 13). Meanwhile,

Yaseen, who typically avoids the water, becomes absorbed watching Akuany engage with it, seemingly oblivious to his own presence.

Akuany's journey to the north is always related to the river; it plays a vital role in her life. On their journey to Khartoum, the first question she asks Yaseen about is the river; she asks: "What is Khartoum like? Does it have a river? 'A mighty one.' 'Does it hum like our river'" (Aboulela, 2023, p.17). When they stop by the Nuba mountains on their way to the desert, a woman greets them warmly and offers them food "better than they had ever eaten for days. Asida freshly pounded, Spanish stew with goat's meat" (Aboulela, 2023, p.17). Akuany's displacement becomes most apparent when she is separated from the river. This estrangement emphasizes an essential geocritical involvement as the rupture of spatial connections can destabilize identity and alter one's perception of self within the environment (Tally & Battista, 2016, p. 2). "While in the Nuba Mountains, on her way to Khartoum, she grows restless: "Listening to the sounds of the night, searching for the tunes of the river and not finding them, Akuany started to doze" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 18). This quotation illustrates how her unease stems from the loss of connection with the river, leaving her alienated and estranged. This incident marks the first in a sequence of episodes in which distance from the river destabilizes her sense of self, a pattern this paper will trace. As Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) argues in *Space and Place*, place attachment is integral to personal identity; losing contact with a meaningful place can fracture one's sense of belonging and selfhood, a phenomenon clearly visible in Akuany's experience.

3.2. Al-Ubayyid

On their journey, Aboulela states that when they are away from the river, "they are often thirsty, now that the river is behind them, now that they are treading sand and dry scrub" (Aboulela, 2023, p.19). Although they have water, which they obtain from other travelers, they remain thirsty. Such a description by the novelist suggests that the thirst here is not the actual physical need to drink water, but rather the thirst for the Nile as a source of life for them. From a geocritical perspective, this 'thirst' illustrates how separation from specific landscapes has both physical and emotional impacts, demonstrating the interaction between identity and place (Tally Jr., 2011, p. 4). Eventually, they reach Al Ubayyid, the capital of the North Kurdufan State of Central Sudan at that time. It is governed by Gordon Pasha and has the most "prosperous markets, soldiers on horses;" it is also where Yaseen's sister, Halima, lives with her husband, Hassan (Aboulela, p.20: 2023). It is the first time for Akuany to see the Europeans, "the overdressed, puzzling missionaries who built a large house in Foshoda, who planted roses and liked the sound of the bells" (Aboulela, 2023, p.19). At this point, the omniscient narrator unveils Akuany's feelings: "She could not feel the river, not a single note nor a whiff of its water. People live like that! And water comes to them from the well" (Aboulela, p.21: 2023). Apparently, Akuany is unable to understand how people in Al Ubayyid live away from the river. She feels that this is an unreal life. Nevertheless, Akuany's stay in Al Ubayyid turns out to be detrimental as Yaseen leaves her and her brother in his sister's custody and departs to Khartoum.

Akuany has lived in Al-Ubayyid for six months, where she is dressed as a servant and Halima's bedridden mother-in-law treats her as an enslaved person. However, Halima keeps reminding her that the kids are orphans and not enslaved people (Aboulela, 2023, p. 22). Halima likes the boy, referring to him as "Our boy," and introduces him as her son; she changes his name to Ishaq (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 22, 24, and 273). She is "attentive and motherly" with Akuany too, but the boy comes first (Aboulela, 2023, p.22). Although Bothaina, the eldest of Yaseen's nieces, is cordial toward Akuany, she favors her other sisters because "they are dark brown and she is dark black, because they are circumcised and she is not" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 22). Aboulela highlights the idea that even among Sudanese people, no matter how they love each other and live as a family, there is always a division between people from the south and people from the north regarding color and Islamic rituals. Though Akuany learns to read the Qur'an, fasts in Ramadan, and wears clothes like Hassan's family, she is still considered inferior because of her darker skin. Thus, separated from the river and feeling different, Akuany feels increasingly alienated.

Despite the good treatment Akuany receives at Halima's house, she continues to wait for Yaseen to come and take her. In fact, Akuany feels displaced because she thinks people in Al-Ubayyid do not know her past, which, she insists, is intricately linked to the river: "she [cannot stay] with strangers who [do not] know about the river like her merchant [does], who [do not] speak to her like he [does], who [do not] see her as she truly [is], mouthing the water wards, naked and listening to the river" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 24). She continues: "how she [misses] it and [can] never feel settled in a town where people [cannot] feast their eyes on the moving blue or set sail or eat fish. Her merchant, her river- she [yearns] for them both" (Aboulela, 2023, p.24). Akuany's words are important on two levels. On the one hand, she seems to have fallen in love with Yaseen because in her imagination, he and the river are one.

On the other hand, through Akuany's words, Aboulela seems to suggest that it is the river that unifies people in Sudan and makes them Sudanese. Hence, writing from a contemporary perspective, Aboulela yearns for a time when the river has connected Sudanese people and given them a sense of unity. Akuany's logic is based on the assumption that because Halima's family does not know the river, they remain strangers to her. In contrast, Yaseen is closer to her because he knows the river. The river is the only thing that unites the Sudanese as a nation for her.

When Yaseen returns to Al-Ubayyid after around one year, she starts to feel "the rush of joy" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 24). Her eagerness to see Yaseen's eyes and to listen to his voice depicts her keenness to reunite with the river. She wants him to tell the guests and the family who she is. She listens to him delightfully saying: "Her father supplied me with the best gum, may Allah have mercy on his soul--- he was speaking about her; he is telling them who she really is. Yes, from the Shilluk" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 25). She corrects him, saying, "Chollo," and she wants him to continue his description of the village: "Verdant, green, lush, the White Nile pouring-yes, true, it has been like that and more" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 25). The only person capable of defining her is Yaseen, whose own identity is tied to the Nile; through him, she recognizes her uniqueness and who she really is. The river spirit symbolizes her inner vitality, and in its absence, she is a body without soul.

When Yaseen asks Akuany if she wants to stay with her brother with Halima, she tells him without any reluctance: "No-Because I am going with you to Khartoum" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 26). He tries to convince her that he lives in difficult circumstances and to stay with Halima, but she insists on leaving with him. Yaseen studied at Al-Azhar University in Cairo for four years, then returned to work with Sheikh Amin Al-Darir. Sent to meet Muhammad Ahmad Abdullah, the self-declared Mahdi, Yaseen visits Halima and learns Akuany was taken by the governor's wife and sold by Hassan for fifty pounds, which makes him mad because he feels that he betrays her trust (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 35-36, pp. 41-42).

Between 1879 and 1881, Akuany stayed at Al-Ubayyid's governor's house as a slave. In fact, this period is considered a critical one in the history of Sudan after the resignation of Gordon in 1880, who imposed anti-slavery laws and saved many black Africans from slavery. Still, the slave trade was practiced again by the Arabs, who bribed Egyptian leaders. Akuany becomes Nazli Hanim's slave (Aboulela, 2023, p. 54). She lives in a huge luxurious house where Nazli Hanim gives her a new name, a Muslim one; she becomes Zamzam. She is taught various skills, but is also mistreated. She is sent to live with other servants, including Hadija, who is from the same village as Zamzam, and she speaks Chollo. Zamzam finds relief listening to Hadija and enjoys her company (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 58-60). Zamzam can only find relief when she is with people who belong to the river. When a young soldier likes Zamzam and sends her gifts of food, she was disappointed whenever he talked to her because "he does not know her, nor has he ever seen a river" (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 61-62). Aboulela suggests that those who are unfamiliar with the river, unlike the merchant, cannot truly connect with the Sudanese Akuany, indicating a cultural mismatch. This idea resonates with Benedict Anderson's observation that "as borders, rivers give shape to the 'imagined community' of the nation and its cultural and political divisions, just as people have named and defined rivers" (Anderson, 1991, p. 13). Anderson's concept underscores the thesis that the Nile in *River Spirit* functions not merely as a setting, but as an active cultural and political force shaping identity and belonging within Sudan. In *River Spirit*, the Nile similarly shapes the 'imagined community' of Sudan, playing a crucial role in defining the national identity of its people.

Yaseen negotiates Akuany's release with the governor, and the governor agrees to give her back to him if he returns the fifty pounds. Because he cannot afford the money, he decides to leave and return once he has the funds. Akuany recognizes the date of his departure and runs away, hiding in Hadija's shawls. When she finds him, she insists on leaving with him for Khartoum (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 63-65). Her thoughts that night are all related to the river: "There are routes to the White Nile, the Sobat River, streamers, boats, river ways, and small villages all dotted along the river" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 66). Yaseen refuses to take her without paying the money, and he promises her to come back after completing his mission in Jazira. Disgruntled, Akuany returns to the governor's house; she is severely punished by Nazli (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 67-68). In fact, her desire to follow the river spirit is stronger than her fear of punishment. When Yaseen returns to Khartoum, he meets with Muhammad Ahmad in Jazira. He finds that his mother has chosen a bride, Fatima, for him, who is a relative of Sheikh Amin AL-Darir. He cannot refuse his mother's insistence on marrying the girl and postponing his promise to give his money to the governor to bring Akuany with him (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 77-78).

As Akuany/Zamzam loses hope that Yaseen will fulfill his promise and free her after getting married, she loses her virginity to a binbashi as a gift from the governor. She lives in the governor's compound with a drummer soldier in a semi-formal marriage until he dies in the battles when the Mahdi and his army arrive at Al-Ubayyied. When the governor's compound is destroyed, the family is evacuated to Khartoum. Zamzam meets Yaseen in Al-Ubayyied, where he tells her that he paid the fifty pounds as he promised to take her with him (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 109-112). When Yaseen sees Zamzam, he calls her by her name, "her real name, her old name, the one her parents had given her" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 112). Aboulela, in this part, starts to give Zamzam her real name, Akuany, as she meets Yaseen, who represents her relationship to the river; Akuany's real identity is restored; she is herself again. Although she refuses to go with Yaseen to Khartoum when she sees him for the first time after his prolonged absence, when the battle between the Mahdists and the native people in Al-Ubayyied begins, she takes all her belongings and goes to Yaseen. Being with Yaseen in the middle of war and chaos is the only thing that makes her feel "safe and blissful" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 123). Here, geocriticism emphasizes that proximity to culturally and personally meaningful spaces restores a sense of rootedness and security (Westphal, 2011, p. 35). Aboulela explains: "because he remembered her as a child, she felt rooted" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 124); her feeling of belonging is related to her childhood, when she lives with her family close to the river and the only one in Al-Ubayyied who makes her feel rooted is Yaseen, the one who knows the river and the one who will unite her with the river spirit again.

3.3. Khartoum, May 1884

Khartoum is the capital of Sudan and is situated at one of the world's most famous river junctions, where the Blue Nile from Ethiopia meets the White Nile from Central Africa. This meeting point, known as al-Moqran, forms the Nile River that flows north into Egypt (Zerboni et al., 2020, p. 2). Because of its location, Khartoum has been an essential center for trade, travel, and agriculture (Holt & Daly, 2011, p. 14). The city has grown into a hub that connects different parts of Sudan, with bridges linking it to Omdurman and Khartoum North on the opposite banks (Zerboni et al., 2020, p. 3). Its position on the river has shaped its history, economy, and daily life.

In Akuany's journey, Khartoum is not only another stop, but also a place where two great rivers converge, just as different parts of her own story intersect. This moment in the journey reflects the mix of change and stability Akuany faces. The city's layout, with neighborhoods on both sides of the rivers connected by bridges and ferries, shows how water shapes movement and relationships (Archnet, 2020). For Akuany, arriving at Khartoum means reaching a crossroads, both in geography and in the deeper meaning of her travels along the river.

When Yaseen becomes "a prisoner of the false Mahdi," he feels that he is helpless and unable to save or protect Zamzam (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 134-135). Zamzam is captured by the Mahdists and is taken with other women as slaves to Khartoum, where the bid market for the East African slave trade is located (Aboulela, 2023, p. 150). After many years of not seeing the river, Zamzam is again reunited with the river; her "old friend," as Aboulela describes it (Aboulela, 2023, p. 150). The omniscient narrator states:

Appearing like a savior in her hour of need. The captives were commanded to bathe, and she did not need any encouragement. She could stay in the water forever, becoming clean, losing her thirst, and desperate to shed her weakness, too, along with all the bad memories. How familiar the water was, its flow and color. She understood it, could speak to it, and marveled that the river had flowed all this time, all the years she had been away from it. Her very same river, the White Nile. This washer habitat, this mellow moving water. Moreover, it could fill her ears and leave no space for anything else, carry all anxiety with the breeze, the unknown, hideous tomorrows. (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 150-151)

The above quotation expresses the connection between Zamzam and the Nile; when she is reunited with it, she feels that she is being herself again. Zamzam becomes strong and clean, and she can hear the river speaking to her; she understands it as

if there is a common language between them; that is why she wants water to fill every part of her body as if it is her rebirth. This description of the dialectical relationship between Akuany and the river illustrates how she perceives the river and how it becomes an integral part of her identity. As Robert Macfarlane observes, "Rivers are the veins of the landscape, carrying stories and histories, acting as boundaries and connectors, and embodying the flow of time and memory in human experience" (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 72). This perspective shows that the Nile in *River Spirit* is more than a natural feature; it is a living presence that carries cultural memory and shapes Zamzam's sense of self and connection to her community. Zamzam's bond with the Nile exemplifies this symbolic significance, illustrating how rivers serve as living entities that shape personal and collective identity.

After spending one year in prison in Al-Ubayyid, Yaseen manages to escape with the help of Halima and Ishaq. He searches for Zamzam (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 180-181). Passing by a steamer, Yaseen, stops to look at the water with his son, stating that "the river has always been Zamzam's first love. She would gravitate toward it. That is where I should have looked for her- down the waterfront" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 187). Eventually, Salha finds Zamzam and asks her to live with her and Yaseen and to help her take care of the baby because she is a family member (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 206-208).

Aboulela never stops demonstrating the intimate relationship between Zamzam and the river. Zamzam is metaphorically wedded to the Nile: "the river huge and strumming- claimed her" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 195). Once again, the omniscient narrator elaborately describes Zamzam's feelings:

she [feels] welcomed by the water, knowing it to be the timeless companion, the one that [runs] without effort, [gives] without needing, [sings and sings] the ancient tunes she [has heard] in her childhood, the songs she [has yearned] for and [listens] out for, that she [has] only half understood, but it [does] not matter, because listening [is] more important." (Aboulela, 2023, p. 195)

As this quotation succinctly shows, there is a language between Zamzam and the river through which the river tries to send a message to her, a message that is only half-transmitted. Zamzam keeps listening even if she cannot understand the whole message, but she believes that the act of listening itself is the most important thing: "Every morning, she went to the river, washed and dawdled, bent her head and listened" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 195). As a native of the land, Zamzam feels attached to the river, a feeling that non-natives, like Robert, are unable to enjoy and appreciate. In a similar spirit, John Muir observes, "The rivers flow not past, but through us; tingling, vibrating, exciting every cell and fiber in our bodies, making them sing and glide" (Muir, 1894/1997, p. 46). This underlines how the connection between Zamzam and the river is both spiritual and elemental, transcending passive observation to become an embodied experience.

When Scottish engineer-cum-painter Robert paints the river, Zamzam finds it stiff in his portrait, without movement or singing. Such a depiction reflects the Nile's rejection of speaking to foreigners like Robert. She describes his paintings saying: "everything he captures in his paintings is restricted by systematic evaluation" (Aboulela, 2023, p.247). Robert never sees the beauty that Akuany sees.

Zamzam's name has great significance in the novel. She has not recognized the meaning of her name until Salha tells her that it means the miraculous waters that "everyone who goes on pilgrimage to Mecca drinks from the well of Zamzam" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 248). Historically, Hagar, a figure in the Islamic religion, is depicted with her baby, thirsty and hot in the desert. When her baby kicks the sand, Zamzam healing water comes out under his feet. At this moment, Zamzam changes her viewpoint about her name. Aboulela states: "She who speaks the river's language is named after sacred water. Moreover, is it not as if she knows Hagar and how she feels (Aboulela, 2023, p. 249). For Aboulela, water in the stories of both Hagar and Zamzam, which springs forth from the desert, is majestic, miraculous, and powerful.

The protagonist's names have connotation as both names Akuany and Zamzam refer to water. The name Akuany carries both cultural and symbolic meaning. While the novel does not explicitly define the name, it is of Dinka origin, an ethnic group in South Sudan known for its naming traditions tied to nature, spirituality, and circumstances of birth (Deng, 2010). In its connotative or symbolic meaning, "Akuany" evokes ideas of femininity, dignity, and spiritual endurance, qualities that define the character's journey. Although the name bears a resemblance to the Latin word "aqua," meaning water, there is no linguistic connection between the two; however, the phonetic similarity deepens the symbolic resonance, mainly because the novel features river imagery and themes of purification and survival. As the story progresses, Akuany is forcibly renamed Zamzam, a name that references the sacred Islamic spring, symbolizing spiritual renewal and rebirth (Aboulela, 2023, p. 183; Nadeem, 2023). The name Zamzam, given to Akuany by her captors, literally refers to the sacred well in Mecca and is derived from the Arabic phrase meaning "stop, stop," believed to echo Hagar's words as the spring gushed forth (Aboulela, 2023, p. 183; Al-Azami, 2016). Its religious meaning centers on divine mercy and purification, adding layers of spiritual and symbolic meaning to Akuany's transformation. This act of renaming signifies the loss of control over her identity during captivity, but her inner voice and memory remain rooted in her original name. Scholars observe that Aboulela's use of names underscores themes of colonial erasure, female resistance, and cultural survival (Badawi, 2023). Thus, Akuany's name functions not only as a personal identifier but also as a metaphor for resilience and continuity amid upheaval (Aboulela, 2023, pp. 65-66, 183).

Aboulela's personification of the river is very obvious in the novel. She describes Zamzam's relationship with the river as that of an old friend whom she visits and greets with affection. In the same way Salha pores over books, "the river was Zamzam's book, and she could read it"; nevertheless, the river, after the political instabilities in Sudan, "reveals stories of scorched water and bloodied shores, it thrills out warnings instead of familiar songs" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 255). In fact, the novelist keeps reminding us that the river spirit has a language of communication with people, and it has a message that all Sudanese should listen to.

3.4. Omdurman And The Journey Back To Homeland

Omdurman, a city located on the Nile River, holds a significant place in Sudanese history, particularly during the Mahdist era of the late 19th century. When Al-Mahdi's forces took control, the social and political landscape shifted dramatically, affecting the lives of individuals caught in the turmoil. In *River Spirit*, Omdurman marks a critical point in Zamzam and Yaseen's journey, a symbolic moment of both loss and transformation. Their path reflects a circular journey along the Nile, where the river itself serves as a powerful symbol of continuity, memory, and hope. The journey ends by returning to the village near the

river, emphasizing the river's role in connecting past and present, sustaining identity, and nurturing new beginnings despite suffering and displacement. This circular journey highlights how the river structures both physical and emotional space, linking memory, identity, and place across historical upheavals (Tally Jr., 2011, p. 45).

Zamzam's feelings when she is close to the river are also depicted when she sees Omdurman (August 1885), a city on the Nile River. When Al-Mahdi's army had control in Sudan, everything changed. Musa, one of the Mahdist rebels, cuts off Yaseen's right arm with the sword as he is accused of being an infidel. Salha decides to marry a high-ranking judge in the new administration, and she asks Yaseen to divorce her; she asks Zamzam to take her son, Rustom, with them. Yaseen and Zamzam decide to move to Zamzam's village to start a new life. On their way, Aboulela describes Zamzam's feelings when she is in Omdurman. She says: "This is not the White Nile she had swum in as a child, this was not the Blue Nile that has comforted her in Khartoum. Instead, this is a union of the two.... water that was more than water" (Aboulela, 2023, p. 281). Zamzam tries to understand the message that the river attempts to transmit:

The river's song had always been that she would follow him, but now a more compelling power was taking them back where they started. They would build on what already existed. Beginnings that did not have the chance to flourish were suppressed by circumstances, strangled but not killed. (Aboulela, 2023, p. 281).

This final quotation captures the river as a symbol of cyclical renewal and resilience, suggesting that despite historical and personal disruptions, the roots of identity and hope remain alive beneath the surface. Zamzam's recognition of "beginnings that did not have the chance to flourish" but were "strangled but not killed" evokes the geocritical idea that places, especially rivers, hold layered meanings shaped by history, memory, and cultural identity. As Robert T. Tally Jr. explains in geocriticism, rivers "function as dynamic, living entities within literary texts, shaping and reshaping the spaces and identities around them" (Tally, 2011, p. 45). In *River Spirit*, the Nile is not just a physical setting but a powerful narrative force that connects characters to their past and sustains their possibility of renewal amid displacement.

4. Conclusions

This paper argues that in *River Spirit*, Leila Aboulela reimagines the Nile not merely as a backdrop, but as a central character, spiritual, cultural, and political, that defines both personal identity and national belonging. Through a cartographic reading of the novel, it becomes clear that Aboulela's portrayal of the river reflects how nature and environment actively shape the emotional and symbolic meaning of the story, particularly in relation to the protagonist, Akuany. Although she experiences repeated displacement and suffering, her connection to the Nile serves as a personal map and source of resilience. The river listens, speaks, and redeems; it remains a spiritual companion that sustains her sense of self. Akuany never feels truly alive or at peace unless she is close to the river, and her perceptions of places and people are filtered through their relationship to it. This oneness with nature reveals a more profound harmony between the individual and the land, which creates a unique representation of the human-nature relationship.

Although the novel is set during the Mahdist Revolution of the 1880s, Aboulela's narrative extends beyond its historical moment to suggest that the Nile has always been the unifying force in Sudanese identity. It is a site of memory, history, and continuity; more powerful than shifting political regimes or colonial borders. In this context, the novel uses space, place, and movement not as fixed constructs but as changing elements that can be redefined by the natural geography of the river. Aboulela's geocritical perspective allows her to critique political boundaries while asserting that the real map of Sudan is drawn by the river, not by colonial lines or official demarcations.

This study demonstrates how Aboulela's novel enhances our understanding of how natural landscapes influence both personal and collective identities. In the story, the Nile serves as more than a physical presence; it acts as a bridge between the past and the present, linking historical experiences with contemporary reflections on belonging and displacement. The narrative highlights the role of nature in postcolonial literature, demonstrating how environmental elements can convey cultural and spiritual significance that extends beyond political history. It also opens up new ways to consider intercultural encounters, contrasting the perspectives of locals and outsiders and showing how the environment influences understanding and connection. Overall, the novel highlights the importance of environmental humanities in examining the interconnections between landscape, identity, and cultural memory.

Ultimately, *River Spirit* calls upon readers to listen, as Akuany does, to the voice of the Nile; a voice that carries with it the stories of loss, survival, and spiritual endurance. In doing so, Aboulela proposes a reimagined Sudan grounded in nature, memory, and belonging. The Nile becomes a metaphor for the resilience of the Sudanese people and a symbol of hope for a new beginning. Overall, this study shows how Aboulela blends historical events, personal experiences, and the landscape of the Nile to explore the deep connections between place, memory, and identity, which highlight the broader significance of literary studies, suggesting that paying attention to the ways environments shape human experience can deepen our understanding of culture, history, and belonging.

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About the author (s)

Shireen H. Alkurdi is an instructor in the Humanities Department at Al-Balqa' Applied University in Jordan. In 2020, she received her Doctorate of English Literature/Criticism from the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Jordan, and she was given a Certificate of Academic Distinction. Alkurdi has participated in international conferences and published many articles in local and international journals. Her research interests mainly fall in American multicultural novels, young adult literature, and graphic novels.

Prof Yousef Abu Amrieh is a professor of contemporary Arab diasporic literature at the University of Jordan. His first monograph, *The Arab Atlantic: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*, is based on his PhD thesis, which he completed in 2011 at the University of Manchester. Since then, Prof. Abu Amrieh published several articles on the works of Arab writers in diaspora. Prof. Abu Amrieh is the founder of Contemporary Arab Diasporic Literary Studies (CADLS), an international research group based at the University of Jordan. Prof. Abu Amrieh has been included in the Stanford/Elsevier Top 2% Scientists List 2024.