

Article

## Women Writing Back: Decolonizing History and Cultural Memory in Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit*

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Accepted version published on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17060560>

**Abstract:** This paper uses a decolonial feminist perspective to analyze how Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* (2023) recovers Sudanese cultural memory. The novel, which is set in the late 19th-century Mahdist War, emphasizes voices that are frequently left out of colonial and nationalist historiography, especially those of women and enslaved people. The study examines how Aboulela uses narrative techniques like multiple perspectives, regional idioms, and oral storytelling structures to challenge colonial language hierarchies, drawing on postcolonial theory (Spivak, Bhabha) and cultural memory studies (Assmann, Nora). In addition to addressing the silences and rifts left by imperial records, the analysis demonstrates how *River Spirit* subverts Western historical archives by giving indigenous epistemologies priority. This essay contends that Aboulela's writings support a larger initiative of epistemic justice in African literature in addition to decolonizing the literary representation of Sudan's past. In the end, *River Spirit* establishes itself within current decolonial discourse as a narrative act of resistance as well as a historical reclamation.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial feminism; cultural memory; decolonization; African literature; archival silence; Sudanese history; Leila Aboulela

### Introduction

The writing of history has often been influenced by issues of power, such as who gets to speak, which voices are recorded, and whose stories are ignored. In colonial settings, these dynamics become stronger. Imperial powers create histories that justify their control while marginalizing, distorting, or erasing the views of colonized peoples. As a result, the field of historiography becomes part of the empire's project, embedding

colonial beliefs in what is shown as an objective fact. In this context, telling history from the margins is not just a literary choice; it is a political action.

Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* (2023) makes a strong statement in reclaiming narratives. Set in 1890s Sudan during the Mahdist War, a time of anti-colonial resistance and political turmoil, the novel revisits a history often told through British imperial records or nationalist views that highlight male heroism. Aboulela instead focuses on people whose lives usually go unnoticed in these narratives: women, enslaved individuals, and everyday citizens. With her multi-voiced storytelling, she brings to light forgotten histories and questions the colonial and patriarchal perspectives that shape Sudan's past.

This study examines *River Spirit* through the combined lenses of postcolonial feminism and cultural memory studies. Postcolonial feminist theory looks at the ways colonial and gender oppression work together, showing that women in colonized societies often face increased marginalization. Cultural memory studies investigate how societies remember, share, and reinterpret their histories, focusing on gaps, silences, and conflicting stories. Together, these perspectives reveal that Aboulela's novel not only critiques the distortions found in colonial archives but also contributes to the decolonial effort for epistemic justice. This effort seeks to restore the value of indigenous knowledge systems, local storytelling traditions, and everyday expressions. The significance of studying *River Spirit* lies in its timing and approach. As global conversations around decolonization intensify across literature, education, and heritage preservation, Aboulela's work shows how fiction can be a vital space for rethinking the past. The novel counters historical erasure and raises important questions about the politics of language, the ethics of representation, and the role of literature in reshaping collective memory. By examining *River Spirit* through a decolonial lens, this paper adds to the ongoing academic effort to break down Eurocentric narratives and broaden what we consider historical truth.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper uses two overlapping theoretical frameworks, postcolonial feminism and cultural memory studies, to examine how Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* challenges colonial and patriarchal histories. These frameworks give us the tools to look at the gendered power dynamics in colonial settings and how cultural memory serves as a space for resistance against the erasure of history.

### Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism emphasizes the twofold marginalization that women in colonized societies face. They suffer from both imperial control and patriarchal systems in their own cultures. While mainstream postcolonial theory, represented by thinkers like Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, critiques the Eurocentric way of understanding knowledge, postcolonial feminist theorists point out how gender deepens these exclusions. Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlights the challenges of representing marginalized voices in dominant narratives. In *River Spirit*,

Aboulela illustrates this struggle by telling Sudanese history through the eyes of women like Nya, whose voices are missing from both colonial records and nationalist stories.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes Western feminist discussions for their tendency to generalize “Third World women” and ignore cultural differences. Aboulela avoids this issue by placing her female characters deeply within Sudanese culture, language, and history. This way, she resists broad narratives. Obioma Nnaemeka’s idea of nego-feminism, which focuses on negotiation and compromise, reflects the tactics of Aboulela’s female characters. They skillfully navigate both colonial violence and local patriarchal norms to assert their agency in subtle, culturally rooted ways. Thus, postcolonial feminism provides a framework for reading *River Spirit* not only as a critique of colonial historiography but also as a reclamation of gendered subjectivity within Sudanese history.

### Cultural Memory Studies

Cultural memory theory provides another way to look at how societies remember, keep, and challenge the past. Jan Assmann differentiates between communicative memory, which involves everyday memories shared within living generations, and cultural memory, which includes established practices that maintain knowledge over centuries. In *River Spirit*, Aboulela’s storytelling techniques, including oral storytelling patterns, multiple narrators, and local expressions, show how cultural memory is passed down beyond written colonial records.

Pierre Nora’s idea of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory) shows how literature can serve as a symbolic space for collective remembrance, especially when official archives are silent. The Mahdist War is important in Sudan’s history, but it is mainly remembered through colonial records and nationalist accounts that highlight military and political leaders. *River Spirit* acts as a literary lieu de mémoire, keeping alive the voices of ordinary Sudanese people whose experiences could otherwise be forgotten.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1995) highlights how history becomes silenced at various stages: fact creation, archival recording, narrative framing, and retrospective interpretation. Aboulela’s novel directly addresses these silences. It builds an alternative archive that emphasizes enslaved individuals, women, and local communities. In doing so, she broadens what is considered historical knowledge.

By combining postcolonial feminism with studies of cultural memory, this paper highlights the gendered aspects of historical erasure and the politics of remembrance. Aboulela’s *River Spirit* does not just add women’s voices to the historical record; it reshapes how history is told, prioritizing indigenous knowledge and oral traditions instead of colonial views. This approach shows how literature can serve as a space for feminist resistance and as a cultural archive, providing a new perspective on Sudanese history.

### Women’s Voices as Historical Agents

One of the most striking changes in *River Spirit* is its focus on women as key figures in Sudanese history. In both colonial histories and nationalist accounts of the

Mahdist War, women are mostly missing. They are often seen as passive victims or symbolic figures. Aboulela breaks this trend by highlighting female experiences through her main character, Nya, and the various female viewpoints throughout the story. By allowing women to share their perspectives on Sudan's colonial history, *River Spirit* questions the male-dominated narrative and emphasizes women's roles as important voices in memory and resistance. Nya's story represents this reclamation. As a young woman who faces both enslavement and displacement, she finds herself in a deeply vulnerable position. However, through Aboulela's narration, Nya is not silenced or seen as an object. Instead, she serves as a lens that reflects the violence of colonialism and patriarchy. The novel captures her memories, daily struggles, and acts of survival, revealing experiences that might otherwise go unrecorded. In this way, Nya embodies what Spivak calls the "subaltern." These are people who are often silenced in dominant narratives. However, Aboulela gives Nya a voice, challenging Spivak's belief that subaltern voices cannot be heard.

The novel challenges the view of women as mere bystanders in political struggle. Female characters do not just endure history; they actively shape it. Through caregiving, negotiation, storytelling, and subtle forms of resistance, they preserve cultural identity and strengthen community ties. These actions, often ignored by traditional history, are important forms of agency. Obioma Nnaemeka's idea of nego-feminism is especially relevant here. Women in *River Spirit* often wield power through negotiation and compromise instead of confrontation. For example, Nya learns to navigate patriarchal and colonial limits, maintaining her dignity and asserting her independence in small but meaningful ways. By focusing on women as historical narrators, Aboulela challenges colonial silences and nationalist efforts to tell history through male heroism. The female voice in *River Spirit* is not just an addition to existing records; it changes the way we remember the Mahdist War and Sudanese identity. Women are not shown as minor characters but as key historical figures. Their lives, memories, and stories make up an essential archive of cultural knowledge.

### Linguistic Decolonization

Language has been a powerful tool of colonial rule for a long time. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) discusses how colonial powers imposed European languages as the main way to teach, govern, and share culture. This approach displaced indigenous languages and cut communities off from their cultural history. Literature written in colonial languages can reinforce this language hierarchy unless authors actively fight against it. In *River Spirit*, Aboulela demonstrates this resistance. She uses English as her medium but also challenges its dominance by incorporating Sudanese sayings, oral traditions, and culturally specific expressions that push back against assimilation into the colonial narrative. One key strategy of linguistic decolonization in the novel is incorporating Sudanese vocabulary and expressions into the English narrative. These untranslated elements interrupt the smooth flow of English and remind readers of another linguistic world beneath the surface. Instead of fitting Sudanese culture into English norms, Aboulela encourages her audience to engage with Sudanese ways of speaking and understanding on their own terms. This technique

mirrors Chinua Achebe's use of Igbo proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where the rhythms of indigenous language disturb colonial English and affirm the value of local knowledge.

Aboulela also uses the rhythms of oral storytelling to structure parts of the novel. She incorporates repetition, cyclical narration, and community-focused storytelling styles that remind us of the oral traditions keeping much of Sudan's history alive outside of written records. *River Spirit* highlights the shortcomings of colonial history, which values written documents and overlooks oral stories. By placing oral forms at the heart of the narration, Aboulela recognizes these traditions as valid historical records, pushing back against the Eurocentric view of knowledge. Moreover, the polyphonic narration of the novel, its blending of multiple voices, perspectives, and styles, acts as a linguistic way of decolonization. The colonial archive often speaks with a singular, authoritative voice, presenting its version of history as one and objective. Aboulela interrupts this by offering a chorus of voices that refuse to be reduced to a single truth. Each voice brings its own idioms, memories, and cultural views, asserting diversity against colonial uniformity.

Telling this history in English, while resisting English dominance, reflects what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space." This is a place of mixing where the colonized adopt and change the colonial language. Aboulela writes in English not to fit in but to cleverly use it, transforming the colonizer's language into a medium for Sudanese cultural memory. The outcome is a novel that challenges English's authority while making sure overlooked Sudanese stories reach a worldwide audience. Through these strategies, *River Spirit* shows linguistic decolonization. It reclaims the cultural legitimacy of Sudanese idioms and oral traditions. It weakens the authority of colonial English and asserts the many historical voices. In this way, Aboulela supports Ngũgĩ's call for literature that breaks down linguistic imperialism and places indigenous ways of knowing as valid and powerful.

### Challenging the Colonial Archive

Historiography of the Mahdist War, like much of colonial history, relies heavily on British imperial records and nationalist retellings that emphasize political and military leaders. These archives often overlook the experiences of women, enslaved people, and non-elite Sudanese, leading to a limited narrative that favors the voices of those in power. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues in *Silencing the Past*, silences take place at every stage of historical production, from what gets recorded as a "fact" to how it is kept in archives and written in history books. *River Spirit* directly addresses these silences by creating a counter-archive that brings attention back to those intentionally left out of the historical record. One way Aboulela challenges the colonial archive is by highlighting the lives of enslaved individuals, whose voices rarely make it into written records. Through Nya and other marginalized characters, the novel shows the real experiences of slavery in Sudan. It presents these not as abstract statistics or economic transactions, but as deeply personal stories of trauma, displacement, and resilience. By focusing on Nya's narrative, Aboulela redefines what is historically significant. She shifts the attention from battles and treaties to daily survival and memory.



Another important point is Aboulela's revealing of the gaps and distortions in colonial accounts. British records of the Mahdist War often showed Sudanese resistance as fanaticism and disorder. This description justified imperial conquest as a "civilizing mission." *River Spirit* challenges this view by presenting Sudanese communities as complex, diverse, and filled with internal conflict. In Aboulela's story, resistance appears not as irrational chaos but as a deeply human fight for autonomy and dignity. In this way, the novel undermines the colonial "master narrative" and emphasizes the politics of how archives are framed.

The novel critiques nationalist historiography. While it opposes colonial narratives, it often repeats silences by focusing on male heroism and ignoring women's contributions. By incorporating women and non-elite citizens into Sudan's history, Aboulela ensures that nationalist or patriarchal views do not control memory. This idea aligns with Ann Laura Stoler's call to examine "colonial archives as sites of power," where what is left out can be as significant as what is included. Aboulela's fiction creates a space where the archive is reimagined, expanded, and challenged. *River Spirit* uses multiple voices as an archival practice. Each narrator offers a unique perspective, serving as a piece of historical testimony. Together, they create a mosaic of memory that challenges the single voice of colonial authority. This fictional archive does not aim to replace the historical record. Instead, it adds to it and critiques it, highlighting its biases and filling its gaps with imaginative reconstruction.

### Cultural Memory and National Identity

The question of cultural memory is key to any decolonization effort. Paul Connerton (1989) reminds us that societies remember not only through archives and monuments but also through embodied practices, rituals, and storytelling. Colonial domination aims to disrupt these processes by imposing new symbols of authority, erasing indigenous practices, and breaking apart collective identity. In *River Spirit*, Aboulela fights against this erasure by reclaiming Sudan's cultural memory and reaffirming its role in shaping national identity. At the heart of the novel is the understanding that national identity goes beyond military victories or political leaders. It develops from the shared memories of everyday people. Their experiences, often left out of formal history, form the living fabric of a nation. By focusing on characters like Nya, who symbolizes enslaved and displaced communities, and by highlighting women's voices, Aboulela redefines Sudanese national identity as diverse, layered, and inclusive rather than single or patriarchal. The storytelling in *River Spirit* serves as a keeper of cultural memory. Oral traditions, songs, and sayings included in the narrative remind readers of precolonial and indigenous practices that endured despite imperial oppression. These methods of preserving memory reflect what Jan Assmann (2011) calls cultural memory: the long-term ways societies make sense of their past and pass on their identity across generations. By including these elements in her novel, Aboulela makes sure that the Sudanese struggle is remembered not just through colonial records, but through vibrant cultural forms that highlight resilience and continuity.

Aboulela shows how memory acts as a form of resistance. The characters remember violence, displacement, and betrayal not as passive memories but as active

refusals to allow colonial or nationalist stories to define Sudan's past. By remembering their losses, the characters create a counter-narrative that honors those whose lives have been silenced. This effort lays the groundwork for a more inclusive view of the nation. It reflects Aleida Assmann's (2010) idea of memory as a political tool that can challenge dominant histories and inspire communities to renew themselves.

The novel also complicates the idea of identity by presenting it as hybrid and contested. Sudanese identity, as shown in *River Spirit*, is shaped by various influences: indigenous traditions, Islamic heritage, colonial experiences, and exchanges across regions. Instead of romanticizing a "pure" precolonial past, Aboulela recognizes the complexity of Sudan's cultural landscape. This view aligns with Homi Bhabha's (1994) idea of hybridity, where cultural identity develops through engaging with differences rather than preserving an imagined essence. As a result, national identity is not fixed; it is dynamic, shaped by the interplay of memory, trauma, and resilience. Aboulela's narrative serves as a call to reclaim national memory through literature. By creating an imaginative counter-archive, she helps build a Sudanese identity that appreciates the contributions of marginalized groups and fights against colonial forgetfulness. Literature acts as cultural memory, making sure the nation's story is told not just from the viewpoint of empire or elite nationalism but also from the perspective of those whose voices have often been ignored. Through these strategies, *River Spirit* shows that cultural memory is both the foundation and the battleground of national identity. By bringing suppressed histories into collective awareness, Aboulela highlights the role of literature in shaping how nations remember themselves. In doing so, she presents fiction as an essential space for decolonization, where the nation is reimagined as diverse, inclusive, and deeply connected to the lived experiences of its people.

## Conclusion

This study examines how Leila Aboulela's *River Spirit* (2023) rethinks the Mahdist War and adds to the effort of decolonizing literature and history. By placing the novel within the contexts of postcolonial theory, memory studies, and feminist historiography, the analysis shows that Aboulela's work is more than just historical fiction. It engages with the politics of memory, storytelling, and cultural identity. The first major finding is that *River Spirit* reclaims silenced histories by focusing on enslaved individuals, women, and non-elite Sudanese. Their experiences are often missing from colonial and nationalist records. Through varied narration and character-driven storytelling, the novel avoids reducing Sudanese history to battles, treaties, and elite leadership. Instead, it highlights the everyday experiences of marginalized communities. This change broadens what is considered historically important and confronts both imperial and patriarchal exclusions. Second, Aboulela's use of language and cultural strategies shows the decolonizing power of words. By incorporating Arabic phrases, Sudanese oral traditions, and culturally specific metaphors, the novel resists the push to assimilate into English. At the same time, it reclaims space for Sudanese ways of knowing. This method turns the English novel into a mixed literary form that values indigenous knowledge and cultural expression. Third, the novel directly challenges the authority of colonial archives by revealing their silences, distortions, and

omissions. By doing this, Aboulela creates what Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation.” She blends fact with imaginative reconstruction to bring attention back to historically silenced figures. The text becomes a counter-archive that not only adds to but also critiques the limitations of colonial history. *River Spirit* shows that cultural memory is tightly linked to national identity. By incorporating Sudanese songs, idioms, and oral traditions into the story, Aboulela builds a cultural memory that fights against erasure and ensures continuity. Her portrayal of Sudanese identity as hybrid, plural, and contested challenges narrow or exclusionary ideas of nationhood. Instead, it offers a view of identity based on resilience and diversity.

These findings suggest that *River Spirit* is not just a novel about the past; it reclaims history as a living and contested process. The book positions literature as a key area for decolonization. It unsettles dominant narratives and restores power to marginalized voices. Aboulela’s novel shows that remembering—whether through archives, oral traditions, or fiction—is always political. This act shapes how societies understand their past and imagine their future. *River Spirit* makes a valuable contribution to postcolonial literature and memory studies. It shows that fiction can serve as an alternative archive, a language reclaiming space, and a cultural repository. This ensures that silenced voices continue to be heard. By bringing Sudanese memory to the forefront against imperial erasure, Aboulela reclaims a fragmented past and reimagines national identity. Her novel highlights the power of storytelling as a means of achieving historical justice and as a lasting act of decolonization.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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