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River Spirit by Leila Aboulela (review)

Farah Bakaari

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by African American celebrities, are also worthy of attention. Overall, *Bounds of Blackness* is a reminder of the always evolving notions of identity and how they inform the politics of solidarity.

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Leila Aboulela, *River Spirit*. New York NY: Grove Press (hb US\$27 – 978 0 8021 6066 9; pb US\$17 – 978 0 8021 6275 5). 2023, 311 pp.

In April 2019, a photograph of a protesting young Sudanese woman captivated the world. In the photograph, the young woman – who was later identified as Alaa Salah, a twenty-two-year-old architecture student in Khartoum – is wearing a traditional Sudanese white *toub*, standing atop a parked car in the middle of a large protest, and singing a revolutionary song while the crowd films her and chants ‘Thawra!’ – *revolution*. Overnight, Salah’s image became a global sensation, an emblem of the resistance of the Sudanese people who spent months on the streets demanding an immediate and a radical change to the order of things. A day after the photograph was taken, Omar al-Bashir, Sudan’s dictator of nearly thirty years, was deposed by his own military forces. A joint military–civilian transitional council was established, a new constitution drawn up, and an interim civilian prime minister appointed. And for a brief, precious moment it seemed that the vision of a free and democratic Sudan was not only possible but nearby. Thawra! But less than two years after Bashir’s ousting, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and its paramilitary ally-turned-rival Rapid Support Forces (RSF) suspended the new constitution, ejected the interim civilian prime minister, and finally turned against each other in a catastrophic power struggle that has plunged the country into another civil war with no end in sight.

Today, as the civil war in Sudan enters its third year, having already claimed over 150,000 lives and displacing another 12 million, with millions more on the brink of famine, it is difficult to recall the exuberance and the cautious hope that Salah’s photograph once signified. As the death toll rises and peace negotiations stall, the Sudanese people are left wondering what is left of their revolution. Indeed, what is an appropriate way to narrate the legacy of the 2019 uprising in the aftermath of its collapse? Leila Aboulela’s 2023 historical novel *River Spirit* ruminates on this exact question. Interested in how revolutionary movements gain ground and find an enduring cultural form, Aboulela’s sixth novel attends to the tragedy of finding oneself interpellated in the utopian politics of a movement precisely in the moment when its conditions of possibility vanish from the political terrain.

River Spirit revisits the late nineteenth-century Mahdist revolts against Ottoman-Egyptian rule in Sudan led by Muhammed Ahmad bin Abdullah, an impoverished Sufi leader who declared himself the Mahdi (the prophesied Redeemer) and waged a holy war against imperialism. Through the public battles and private sacrifices of the insurgency's ardent followers, political opponents, religious sceptics and unwitting victims, the novel dramatizes the rise and fall of the Mahdist movement. The Mahdists grow and defeat several formidable foreign powers because they position themselves as a reflection of and a voice for the collective suffering of the native people. As a result, they inspire rebellion: in the novel's prologue, a woman named Rabiha flees her tribe in the Nuba Mountains to warn Muhammed Ahmad about an imminent assassination plot. As she traverses the unforgiving mountainous terrain, ignoring the fatal snake bite on her foot, she remembers how her 'father had died worn out by the tyranny of the Ottoman invaders, their cruel incessant taxes, their disregard for people's circumstances'. Likewise, Musa, the Mahdi's most loyal soldier, is marred by the shame he felt watching his father cry for mercy while being whipped by a Turkish officer. But as the movement grows, Ahmad and his followers abandon the liberatory ethos of their religious insurgency and become despots themselves.

River Spirit is a novel for our times because it throws into sharp relief how the ideology that founds a movement can become the very stuff of its undoing. And yet, it resists the narratives of failure that in recent years have come to dominate historical accounts of anti-colonial movements. Rather, by attending to how the political imaginations of non-elite actors are set alight long after a movement is viable, the novel asks, 'What are failed revolutions for?'

Towards the end of the novel, when Mahdist rule has long devolved into destructive isolationist religious tyranny, the narrative turns to what is left over. How does the post-revolutionary present reckon with its contingencies and limitations without surrendering the new political imaginaries fashioned in the struggle? Exemplary of this enduring revolutionary consciousness is the Mahdi's tomb. In a letter to her son, Salha, one of the novel's main characters describes her unexpected encounter with the newly constructed tomb. She starts with a straightforward description of the shrine, its attributes, the process of its construction: 'From the outside it looks like a rectangular building with a huge cone of the qubba on top. On each corner of the building there is a small minaret.' She then shifts from describing the qubba to describing how she relates to it, the affects elicited by its sight. 'The windows are especially pleasing,' she tells her son, 'all oval and identical. I enjoy visiting and seeing it being constructed.' But she does not immediately tell us why exactly she delights in the shrine. Instead, she returns to the qubba's architecture, noticing how it differs from the customary form. At the top of the Mahdi's qubba, 'there is a spear instead of the traditional crescent'. Salha senses the political bid initiated by the tomb's aesthetic form and finds the denunciation of the 'traditional crescent' misguided, given that the crescent is a general Islamic symbol rather than a Turkish one in particular. And yet, she finds herself moved by the qubba, delighted by its homegrown qualities. She writes, 'I cannot help but feel a certain pride in it. Unlike the buildings in Khartoum that were of foreign design, this was something designed by us Sudanese.'

But what is the mechanism by which the qubba becomes Sudanese? As she admits in her description, the form of the tomb is not culturally pre-given. On the contrary, Salha emphasizes the novelty of its architectural design. It is only after she describes

it that she proclaims it Sudanese. That is, the qubba does not necessarily recover a buried and repressed Sudanese cultural aesthetic but instead produces it. In the qubba's iconography, much like in the photograph of Alaa Salah, a new Sudan is born. It is no wonder then that Salha, who was never a Mahdist supporter, ends her reportage of the Mahdi's tomb with an affirmation of Sudan's independence. She writes, 'One can never defend foreign occupation. Independence is natural and just.' The process of externalizing the image is also what ensures the longevity of revolutionary consciousness, what enables it to be useful and usable after revolution's end. This is perhaps why the British had destroyed the tomb upon reconquering Sudan. Salha encounters the tomb 'cracked like an egg'. But it is too late: Salha has already been interpellated as the rightful heir of its legacy. In destroying it, the colonizers have only fortified the revolutionary force of the tomb's aesthetic order.

The qubba commemorates not the great man who made history, but the political imagination to which a movement gave birth. The gluttonous brutality of the current military standstill in part betrays an understanding of this calculus. It is as if both the SAF and the RSF had long recognized that, while they could be means to the people's revolution, they could not be its end. The movement had already exceeded them because the new Sudanese political imaginary enshrined in Alaa Salah's blazing photograph makes no room for military rule. Theirs is a barbarism enacted from a place of absolute ontological vulnerability. Excluded from the image of the future, it is only a matter of time ...

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Fatin Abbas, *Ghost Season*. London: Jacaranda Books (hb £16.99 – 978 1 9143 4476 3). 2023, 296 pp.

South Sudan has fought for independence from the Sudanese government and its militias for decades. Overshadowed by the Arab slave trade, there are centuries of pain that have to be atoned for. While the current war eclipses this possibility in the context of a Sudanese government, there is an emerging movement of Northern artists reflecting on the civil war and trying to understand why South Sudan had to secede. Fatin Abbas's *Ghost Season* is an important story in this effort. The novel is not only worth reading for the human truths treasured inside the pages; it is a history lesson published at a most relevant, pressing time.

Ghost Season begins with a burned corpse. The body is brought to an NGO compound in the fictional border town of Saraaya in South Kordofan, where Alex, a white American cartographer, and Dena, a Sudanese-American filmmaker, live