



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Female agency in Aboulela's *Minaret* and *River Spirit***Aida Omet^{1*}, Malek Zuraikat², Yousef Abu Addous³ & Ibrahim Alhiyari²¹Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Jordan²English Department, Yarmouk University, Jordan³Arabic Department, Yarmouk University, Jordan*Correspondence: a_omet@ju.edu.jo**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the evolution of female agency in Leila Aboulela's novels *Minaret* (2005) and *River Spirit* (2023) through a comparative reading of her protagonist Najwa in *Minaret* with Akuany (Zamzam) in the later novel. It explores how Aboulela constructs women's empowerment across diverse cultural, temporal, and social alienating contexts. Her protagonists' transformation shifts from a private spiritual sphere to more historically oriented form of resilience. Drawing on an intersectional postcolonial feminist framework, particularly the work of Gayatri Spivak, Saba Mahmood, and Saidiya Hartman, further expands the understanding of this development in Aboulela's literary oeuvre. Her exploration of Muslim and African female agency moves from individual ethical self-formation towards a more expansive engagement with anticolonial history and political struggle. Aboulela depicts how women's strategies of survival are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression such as colonialism, gender, patriarchy, and enslavement. In so doing, this study contributes to Aboulela scholarship by reading her female characters, Najwa and Akuany, across diasporic and historical contexts, tracing how this shift enables her to recover forms of agency that have been silenced and marginalized within diasporic, imperial, and patriarchal discourse.

KEYWORDS: Leila Aboulela, female agency, patriarchy, slavery, post-colonial subjectivity

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Introduction

Leila Aboulela is among the first contemporary British Muslim women authors who writes from a Muslim perspective. What makes Aboulela's writing distinctive is her strong affiliation to Islam, reflected in her representation of Islam as neither inferior nor a threat. This perspective represents a new direction in Arab British literature which has mostly been produced by secular writers. Aboulela's narratives subvert western discourses of Islam as an oppressive religion for women by consistently highlighting her protagonists' agency. Throughout her writing trajectory, Aboulela challenges monolithic and essentializing gender representation by depicting individualized protagonists who experience identity as ultimately transformative. Her exploration of Muslim identity and Muslim diasporic experiences is an invitation to her Muslim and non-Muslim readers to pause and reflect on the complexities of historical, as well as contemporary, Muslim identities. Her work is of signal importance in the twenty-first century, in which, in Anglophone contexts, Islam is frequently presented as a threat, Muslims as terrorists, and Muslim women as oppressed.

Aboulela's fiction has long engaged with the intersections of faith, identity, migration, and displacement. From her early diasporic novels, particularly *Minaret*, to her historical reconstruction in *River Spirit*, Aboulela's writing reflects a distinctly Islamic feminist sensibility that is rooted in spirituality, morality, and agency rather than western secular feminism. This study positions *River Spirit* at the apex of Aboulela's literary development, showing how she redefines the idea of female empowerment within a context shaped by slavery, colonialism, patriarchy, and resistance. The women in *River Spirit*, in contrast to her earlier alienated protagonists, are situated within war-torn experiences that shape and complicate their identity formation and notion of freedom. However, emphasizing spiritual transformation as the primary basis of female subjectivity, undermines how Aboulela's later fiction engages more explicitly with historical and material restrictions of power. *River Spirit* indicates a clear shift as it highlights the repercussions of those events and constraining realities. It questions how political conflicts, social hierarchies, and slavery intersect in framing forms of female subjectivity. Therefore, Akuany's experience that is defined by enslavement and limited autonomy emphasizes distinct aspects of agency that are far more encompassing than mere ethical transformation and spiritual development. Building on theoretical frameworks on slavery and domination enhance the understanding of this shift. Agency in such contexts is examined through the lived experiences of women and by observing these experiences as variably situated in circumstances that may share certain elements of oppressive power constructs. The complexity of agency, as a result, becomes apparent as it develops through survival strategies and adaptation rather than explicit resilience and self-sufficiency. This expansion of the notion of female agency sheds new light on Akuany's experience as it underscores the need of rethinking prevailing frameworks interpreting Aboulela's earlier corpus. Despite the growing body of scholarship on Aboulela, relatively little attention has been paid to how her representation of female subjectivity evolves across her novels, particularly in relation to the shift from *Minaret* to *River Spirit*. While faith has been extensively examined as a central site of agency in her fiction, far less emphasis has been given to how her later work incorporates questions of slavery, patriarchy, and structural inequality in shaping women's lived experiences. Over the past two decades, there has been a growing critical interest in Aboulela's literary oeuvre. Most of this scholarship, either journal articles or book chapters, focuses on her earlier works particularly *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005) along with her short story 'The Museum' (1997) to single out the Islamic logic in the presentation of Muslim women's diasporic experience and the colonial misrepresentation of Sudan and Africa, respectively. Critics such as Geoffrey Nash (2007), Wail S. Hassan (2008), Renata Pepicelli (2011), Esra Santesso (2013), Eva Hunter (2013), Mahmudul Hassan (2015), Peter Morey (2018), H. M. Talafha et al. (2022), N. Koç, (2025) and others engage in the debate concerning Aboulela's writing back to western discourse, Islam as religious faith, Muslim identity construction, and the deterritorialization of Islam in Aboulela's fiction. Ileana Dimitriu (2014), Sadia Zulfigar (2024), and Choudhury, M. A. (2025) on the other hand, are more concerned with displacement, exile, and home making in addition to Islam and the Muslim identity. While others like Nadia Butt (2009), Ahmed Ben Amara (2024a, 2024b), Morve Roshan K and Yasir Al Tamimi (2025) discuss migration, travel, space, and translation in Aboulela's work.

In contrast, critical attention to *River Spirit* remains relatively limited and only recently emerging. Most of the existing studies, whether journal articles or conference papers, tend to approach the novel through frameworks of decolonial history, gender and militarism, religious identity, and environmental symbolism. In this sense, *River Spirit* can be understood as a form of writing back to colonial narratives, foregrounding

perspectives that have historically been excluded from official accounts. Studies such as those by P. T. Suryamol (2025) and Ahmed Shalabi and Yousef Abu Amrieh (2025) approach the novel as a form of writing back to colonial historiography. Similarly, Muhammad R. Sabir (2024) and Amany Abdelrazek-Alsiefy (2024) focus on the portrayal of Muslim women and feminine agency. Meanwhile, Shirin Alkurdi and Yousef Abu Amrieh (2025) examine the novel's ecological dimension, highlighting how the Nile as a symbolic and narrative force affects Akwany's identity, spirituality, and belonging. Moving beyond the critical works published to date, this study follows the development of Aboulela's aesthetics by offering a close reading of her two novels adding a sustained comparative analysis to the existing, somewhat, thematic scholarship. By reading these two novels together, this article contributes to ongoing debates within postcolonial studies, offering a more nuanced account of how female subjectivity is constructed under different conditions of power.

Minaret: Freedom, Agency, and Re-Islamisation

In *Minaret*, Najwa is portrayed in two strikingly different ways. Najwa's life in Sudan is almost the opposite of Najwa's life in London. Aboulela shifts between the two settings and time frames to underline the transformation in Najwa's character. For this reason, Aboulela adopts a special technique to construct her novel. The novel is divided into six parts and a short prologue. The events take place in different periods of time stretching between 1984 and 2005, and in two different contexts: Khartoum and London. Najwa's geographical movement reflects her fractured diasporic identity under postcolonial conditions. She narrates her own story in sections that alternate between political instability in Sudan and diasporic alienation in London.

Najwa starts narrating her story by expressing her feelings of displacement and distress. She notes: 'I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move' (Aboulela 2005, p.1). Najwa's life cannot be understood outside the context of Sudan's political instability and its postcolonial legacy. The military coup that dismantles her family's elite status marks a decisive rupture, transforming her from a member of the privileged class into a subject defined by loss, migration, and social dislocation. She feels that she is confined in this highly circumscribed place where it is difficult to move. Najwa's description of her place is metaphorical; she does not refer to a physical geographical location, but rather to an accumulation of traits and feelings that she acquires based on her recent socio-economic status. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, 'the structure and feeling-tone of space are tied to the perceptual equipment, experience, mood and purpose of the human individual' (Tuan 1997, p. 399). That is, we perceive the world through the possibilities and limitations of our senses. So Najwa's attunement to space overlaps with her feelings about her current situation. Helpless, penniless, and exiled, she cannot be in a worse situation. To build upon Tuan's definition of place, what Najwa refers to as place is her social position since people are defined by their position/place in society, and Najwa as a maid sees that she has moved to the bottom. Yet this movement will eventually lead her to the place where she finds her renewed spiritual identity.

In London, this transformation is accompanied by a profound sense of isolation which complicates her subjectivity. Najwa's fear of recognition and her anxiety that others might discover 'who I am, who I was, what I've become' (Aboulela 2005, p. 71) reveal a fragmented sense of self, caught between past identity and present marginality. Her attempts to pass as Eritrean or Somali indicate not only a strategy of concealment, but also a deeper instability in how identity is performed and perceived which lead to her indecisiveness and confusion (Tancke 2011, p. 8). Najwa even avoids taking positions or engaging in serious meaningful conversations. She seems to be living in what Spivak calls a 'topography of withdrawal' (Spivak 1999, p.119). This withdrawal is both physical and psychological. Najwa comments on her own confusion saying: 'I become fragmented and deflated in discussions; I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking' (Aboulela 2005, p.79). Taking Najwa's distorted condition into consideration, an important question arises: can the subaltern speak?

To answer this question, I build upon Gayatri Spivak's theory of subalternity. Spivak borrows the term 'subaltern' from Antonio Gramsci (1971) to refer to the unrepresented group of people in society; the oppressed subjects and those of inferior rank. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (Spivak 1988), Spivak focuses on the texts of those people who are marginalized by dominant western culture: 'the new immigrant, the working class, women and the postcolonial subject' (Morton 2012,1). She asserts that 'in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (Spivak

1988, p. 83). It is important to note that Spivak's clearest investigation of Third World subaltern women's resistance is often seen in her engagements with literary texts. In 'A literary Representation of the Subaltern', Spivak suggests that 'literary texts can provide an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of the subaltern women' (Morton 2012, p.55). She continues her argument by emphasizing the displacement of women by stressing that 'The question of 'woman' seems most problematic...Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get [displaced] in three ways' (Spivak 1988, p. 90).

Critical engagement with *Minaret* has largely focused on Najwa's experience of displacement following the loss of social and economic privilege leading her toward an increasingly devout religious life. In this context, Najwa's trajectory has often been interpreted as an inward process of ethical and spiritual self-formation, with scholars emphasizing how religious practice becomes a meaningful framework through which she reconstructs her identity. Such readings have played an important role in challenging reductive assumptions that equate Muslim women's religiosity with passivity or oppression.

It is crucial then, in considering Najwa's trajectory, to return to the difference between the notion of liberty in western and Muslim thought. To explore the notion of freedom in western feminist discourse, Saba Mahmood distinguishes between two notions of freedom propagated by liberal theorists: negative freedom and positive freedom. Negative freedom, Mahmood explains, refers to the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action, whether imposed by the state, corporations, or private individuals' (Mahmood 2001, p. 207). On the other hand, positive freedom refers to 'the capacity to realize an autonomous will, generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of 'universal reason' or 'self-interest' (Mahmood 2001, p. 207). This positive freedom is free from the impediments of custom and tradition. Taking these two notions into consideration, Mahmood argues that for 'the individual to be free, it is required that her actions be the consequences of her 'own will' rather than custom, tradition, or direct coercion' (2001, p. 207). In this regard, an action that may seem illiberal can be tolerated if it is determined; that it is committed by a free consenting individual who acted out of her free will. I build upon Mahmood's definition to examine Najwa's notion of freedom. In London, Najwa has freedom of dress and sexual relations, yet she feels uneasy at the gaze of strange men admiring her body in her revealing clothes. She also feels guilty after her sexual relationship with Anwar. Najwa reflects:

Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized? ... A few years back, getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society ... And now nothing, no one. This empty space was called freedom. (Aboulela 2005, p. 60)

This excerpt is interesting because according to liberal western representations of Muslim women, freedom suggests the adoption of a secular western lifestyle and the rejection of assumed suppressive Islamic doctrines (Hasan 2015, p. 98). Accordingly, Najwa should feel a sense of emancipation after losing ties with her homeland, family members, and any symbol of patriarchal control. Nevertheless, Najwa is not happy with the freedom that she conceives as an 'empty space'. Paradoxically, she disapproves of the liberal notion of liberty that she finds in London and finds an alternative liberty in the rules and teachings of Islam. She uses her freedom to adopt an Islamic identity and embrace Islamic principles.

In the loneliness of her exile, Najwa returns to religion, and Islam provides her with the rootedness and belonging that she lost. This sense of belonging helps her cope with the painful reality of her up-rootedness and social and national displacement. It provides her with a deep sense of protection and a sense of 'home'. As Eva Hunter highlights, Najwa will 'reject secularism, political activism, and sexual attachment' (2023, p. 91). In searching for a place where she can feel at home, Najwa is only able to find it in Islam. In representing Najwa's experience, Aboulela is arguably producing a new version of Islam. It is not a fixed Islam that immigrants bring with them from their homeland. It is, rather, something new that Muslims might find, build, and rediscover in the countries to which they immigrate. Esra Santesso describes Najwa's transformation as a slow 'methodical conversion' (2013, p. 88). She argues that Najwa's 'conversion' is ironic since she is initially unsympathetic towards Muslim women and explicitly avoids the company of girls in *tobes* or *hijab* during her life in Sudan. Najwa longs to be identified with everything western in her clothes, lifestyle, and beliefs.

Yet, once in the West, Najwa sees her Islam and *hijab* as appeasing and part of her new identity. Islam is the only way to be able to deal with her displacement and exile. This is what Oliver Roy refers to as 're-

Islamisation'. According to Roy,

Re-Islamisation means that Muslim identity, self-evident so long as it belonged to an inherited cultural legacy, has to express itself explicitly in a non-Muslim or Western context. The construction of a 'deculturised' Islam is a means of experiencing a religious identity that is not linked to a given culture and can therefore fit with every culture, or, more precisely, could be defined beyond the very notion of culture. (2004, pp.23-24)

Najwa chooses to embrace this kind of culturally transcending Islamic identity 'with all its ramifications and manifestations in individual and social relationships and moral and social values' (Hassan 2015, p. 98). She decides to wear the *hijab*, discontinues her illicit relationship with Anwar, attends classes at the mosque, and gets attached to a new multi-ethnic community of Muslim women. Aboulela, by constructing Najwa's re-Islamisation, is representing a non-political alternative. Najwa as a born-again Muslim is far from embracing militancy or religious extremism; she approaches Islam peacefully and spiritually. She finds peace, happiness, and emotional and psychological security in the mosque; it is where all barriers of class and economic status are shattered.

As discussed earlier, Najwa's transformation takes place gradually. It happens through her desire to be a devout Muslim like the other committed Muslims. She wants to recite the Quran, wear the *hijab*, and eventually perform *haji*. This transformation process is the purification that Najwa needs to find her true self and inner faith. As Nash argues, 'although she adopts the outward forms, wearing the hijab and modest clothes, Najwa's attachment to Islam is individualized, internalized, and stresses repentance' (2007, p. 138). Najwa cries out of repentance; the more she learns about Islam, the more she regrets her past life. Yet, she is hopeful as she believes in *Allah's* mercy. Najwa eventually replaces her westernized lifestyle with a personal Muslim faith 'which, rather than representing a return to traditional religion puts self at the center of a religiosity disconnected from ethnicity and culture' (Nash 2007, p.138). Hence, diasporic London becomes the appropriate place for Najwa to assert her religious identity and spiritual transformation. The non-religious Najwa of Khartoum gradually becomes the devout Muslim of London. Najwa's re-Islamisation challenges the stereotypical conception that Muslim females escape Islam and its alleged barbarity and oppression to embrace a free western lifestyle. Najwa uses her freedom in London to come back to Islam and not to run away from it.

In contrast to Najwa's inwardly oriented transformation, Akuany's subjectivity in *River Spirit* is shaped by conditions that are far more materially and historically constraining. Her experience of slavery situates her within a system where autonomy is fundamentally restricted, and where identity is formed through relations of power rather than personal choice. Aboulela presents a form of agency that emerges through the intersection of religious conflict, colonial oppression and gender subjugation. In her trajectory, Akuany tries to adapt to and negotiates these structures that limit her movement, voice, and self-determination. In this sense Akuany's position reflects what Saidiya Hartman describes as agency under constraint, where actions emerge not from freedom but from the need to survive within unequally harsh conditions (2019, p. 45). At the same time, Akuany's ability to act must be understood in relation to the patriarchal norms that determine her everyday ethical practices. Her experience is not only shaped by slavery as an economic and social system, but also by patriarchal structures that regulate women's bodies and roles more directly and forcefully than in *Minaret*. While Najwa negotiates expectations within religious and social frameworks, Akuany's choices are shaped by forms of control that are both physical and structural. This distinction highlights a significant shift in Aboulela's portrayal of female subjectivity, moving from a model of inward, faith-based agency to one that focuses on the material realities of power, inequality, and historical violence.

***River Spirit*: Displacement, Agency, and Historical Resilience**

In a recent *Brittle Paper* interview, Aboulela emphasizes the importance of challenging the mainstream colonial histories that have traditionally been shaped by Eurocentric perspectives. She argues that the role of women in historical Sudanese accounts, particularly during the Mahdist Revolution, has been marginalized or even erased. Women, according to Aboulela, were actively involved in various ways including cooking, nursing, trading and even spying in addition to their domestic duties. Nevertheless, they were only mentioned as 'footnotes in history or not mentioned at all' (Aboulela 2023). Therefore, 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' (Suryamol 2025, p. 194).

River Spirit is Aboulela's second historical novel in which she represents a crucial period in Sudan's modern history. In a remarkable departure from her earlier novels, she emphasizes the importance of political history, recent or ancient, not as a backdrop, but as a constructing force that governs the experience of the characters, their attitudes, and their destinies. Contrary to her previous protagonists, her major characters in *River Spirit* have explicit perspectives, whether supporting or resisting, on the Mahdist revolution. Aboulela attempts to amalgamate different and overlapping perspectives to fuse them into a single narrative unit. She utilizes multiple narrative points of view in contrast with the single omniscient point of view used in her earlier novel *Minaret* to underline the variety of attitudes and identities of her characters.

The Mahdist War (1881-1899), often referred to as the Mahdist Revolution, is considered one of the prominent uprisings in Sudanese history. It was initiated by Muhammad Ahmad, a Sudanese religious leader who proclaimed himself the Mahdi, "the Guided One" anticipated in Islamic theology. In addition to its religion-based structure, the revolt was influenced by political, social, and economic conditions of its time. Nonetheless, Ahmad's claim convinced his followers to consider it a holy war of independence against the corruption and oppression of the Turco-Egyptian administration and the colonial British expansion across the territory. Furthermore, the heavy taxation intensified popular dissatisfaction and contributed to the momentum of the uprising (Halt 1970, p. 45). 1883 marked a turning point in the rise of the Mahdist state. During that year, Mahdist forces achieved a series of decisive victories, most notably defeating a large Egyptian-British army led by the British general Hicks at El-Obied. By the end of this year, they had also defeated the Anglo-Egyptian troops led by general Baker. By early 1884, the Mahdist control expanded dramatically with most of the country falling under his authority. Despite its anti-colonial positioning, the Mahdist's state reinforced strict Islamic laws and denied women several rights such as owning property, divorce, and education. Women's agency, as a result, was constrained by a system that endorsed male authority and supported the exploitation of enslaved women. Hence, Aboulela's narrative emphasizes how women practice resistance and negotiate their agency under a colonial rule that coexisted with the consolidation of patriarchal rule. These historical realities shape Akuany's experience and provide her with a dynamic force that both restricts and generates the conditions through which her agency becomes possible.

Set in 1877 Sudan, the novel unfolds as a vivid mosaic of multiple women identities shaped by violence, upheaval, and uncertainty. It follows polyphonic, interwoven structure, where multiple voices intersect around Akuany's journey. Through this structure, Aboulela inspires 'us to think in a contrapuntal way...that encourages a plurality of perspectives and challenges hegemonic and monolithic patterns' (Zulfikar 2024, p. 579). This form does more than simply broaden perspective; it unsettles the coherence of colonial historiography, which has long silenced subaltern voices. In this sense, Aboulela's approach echoes Saidya Hartman's notion of 'critical fabulation,' where gaps in the archive are reimagined through storytelling to recover marginalized histories (2008, p. 10). The novel's shifting viewpoints and episodic movement across spaces create a layered sense of history as something fragmented, lived, and collectively shaped (Semmi, para. 2). History plays a key role in the process of identity construction as the 'identity operates through narrative, and narrative needs to start from the past and operate its way to a future that resolves the discrepancies between past and present' (Fludernik 2003, p. xxix).

At the same time, the recurring return to Akuany's narrative throughout the novel provides a subtle structural anchor, ensuring continuity without imposing a single authoritative voice. Through this balance between fragmentation and connection, Aboulela turns narrative form itself into a space of resistance, where history is no longer a fixed backdrop, but an active force reconstructed through the voices it once silenced and excluded. *River Spirit* depicts Akuany's circular journey (Alkurdi and Abu Amrieh 2025, p. 163) in imperial Sudan. Her journey begins in her village of Malakal when she is only eleven years old and ends in it after eight years of displacement. Akuany moves across different towns and cities in Sudan; this movement is not only geographical but plays a significant role in her identity construction. Travel 'allows for simultaneous self-positioning in the local and global then back to another local, in the present and the past and then back to a transformed present' (Cooke 2000, p. 158) and transformational journeys necessitate constant movement.

As movement and mobility are increasingly vital elements in immigrant narratives, the discourse of mobility is replacing, to a certain extent, the old discourse of rootedness. This mobility 'creates multiple centers of consciousness' in which the self feels that 'it is participating in several cultural traditions without being fully

at home' (Leon 2009, p. 15). These displacements either real or imagined, create a sense of 'homelessness' which can be defined 'as the obscure feelings that simultaneously draw and repel a person in her relation to a place' (Leon 2009, p. 15). In this context, where the self is constantly negotiating its identity and reinterpreting its space and place, travel becomes the touchstone of exploring this new-found identity. The subjective experience of travel takes the self 'into the realms of perception and imagination that produce real and mental places and spaces of travel' (Leon 2009, p. 15). These places and spaces become as enabling as they are estranging. Travel's transformative effect on individuals is emphasized by Aboulela as she quotes a Sufi saying that: 'Travel and the difficulties you face will be medicine for your ego's badness. You will become softer and wiser' (Aboulela, 2000, 42).

Travel and home then 'constitute one process, and that in travelling beyond one's local time and space, one enters a mythical realm where home, the fixed point' of departure and return, is reimagined and further travel inspired (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990, p. xxi). In *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed challenges the association of 'home' with the notion of fixity. 'Home', according to Ahmed, is produced through a constant process of 'adjustment, transformation, negotiation, re-definition – a never-ending, ongoing work to reproduce the appearance of stability and the fixity that is part of the imagined community' (Gedalof 2003, p. 101). Home, therefore, is not a particular place of residence, but more than one place: 'there are too many homes to allow place to secure the roots or routes of one's destination...The journey between homes provides the subject with the contours of a space of belonging' (Ahmad 2000a, p. 77). Thus, Akuany embarks on her transformational journey seeking a sense of rootedness.

Akuany becomes a stranger in an unfamiliar territory. To better understand her condition, I build upon Ahmed's theory of estrangement. Ahmed defines strangers as those 'who are, in their very proximity, already recognized as not belonging, as being out of place' (Ahmad 2000b, p. 21). The stranger as a result fails to make sense of the place that she inhabits, and this failure is experienced in the discomfort of inhabiting a body that feels out of place. Thus, by fleeing her village due to the raids of slave raiders who destroyed her village entirely and killed her father, she is cut off from the homeland of traditions and the river, and she experiences a constantly challenged identity, and is 'required to make [herself] at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and heterogeneous present' (Chambers 1994, p. 6). To come from 'elsewhere', from there and not here, and hence to be 'simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes' (Chambers 1994, p. 6). In this regard, Akuany's identity generates complexities and ambivalent feelings of displacement.

Akuany and her brother are rescued by Yaseen, a merchant and her late father's friend, who decides to take them with him to Khartoum in the north of Sudan. 'They passed villages whose languages Akuany couldn't understand, whose ways were different' (Aboulela, 2023, p. 20), however, he chooses to leave them in Al-Ubayyid, where his sister Halima and her family lives, before continuing to Khartoum himself. Akuany's displacement intensifies in Halima's house. Although she exerts much effort to assimilate by learning to speak Arabic, adopting Islamic rituals, and even covering her hair, Halima's daughters 'were always superior ...because they were dark brown and she was dark black' (Aboulela 2023, p. 23). She is dressed as a servant and called a 'khadim' (Aboulela 2023, p. 22) by Halima's mother-in-law despite Halima's repeated reminders that Akuany is an orphan not a slave. These conditions intensify Akuany's alienation and distort her self-awareness.

After spending some years at Halima's house, Akuany is sold to the governor's wife for fifty pounds. She 'became Nazli Hanim's girl' (Aboulela 2023, p. 54), who 'scrubbed [her] so hard that she scratched her skin ... made her try one outfit after outfit ... gave her a new name, a Muslim one. Akuany became Zamzam' (Aboulela 2023, p. 55). Such performances 'confirm the slave holder's domination and [make] the captive body the vehicle of the master's power' (Hartman 1997, p. 53). Her experience of slavery situates her within a system where agency is fundamentally restricted, and where identity is formed through relations of power rather than personal choice. The agency of the enslaved becomes a 'form of willed self-immolation' (Hartman 1997, p. 53) which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to direct one's own conduct. Akuany's position reflects agency under constraint, where actions emerge not from freedom, but from the need to survive under unequal and limiting conditions.

Akuany's alienating experience is not only shaped by slavery, but it is further intensified by patriarchal

structures that govern women's bodies and roles more directly and forcefully than in *Minaret*. While Najwa negotiates expectations within religious and socioeconomic boundaries, Akuany's choices are shaped by forms of control that are both physical and structural. Her relationship with Yaseen unfolds within these constraints in ways that repeatedly defer her autonomy. She waits for him for four years, hoping that he will be able to free her. Yet when he finally returns, he is unable to buy her back from the governor. Instead, he leaves again promising to come back with the money needed. Akuany tries to run away with him, but her agency is curtailed once more, as he refuses to take her until he pays the governor the money. Unfortunately, she has no choice but to go back to the governor's house where she is severely punished, reinforcing the limits imposed on her body and movement.

When Akuany loses hope that Yaseen will come back for her, especially after the news of his marriage, her position becomes more threatening. Working in the governor's guest quarter, she loses her virginity to a banbashi who treats her body as an extension of the governor's property assuming that 'it was a gift included in the governor's hospitality and did not pay extra' (Aboulela 2023, p. 111). At this point, Akuany loses control even over her intimate body relations as they become reduced to exchanged courtesies within overlapping systems of power, ownership, and entitlement. She considers herself as 'violated and spoiled' (Aboulela 2023, p. 114) and not good enough for Yaseen. Akuany's position within structures of enslavement places her at the intersection of multiple forms of constraints. Unlike Najwa, whose loss of privilege results in social marginalization, her lack of autonomy is not a consequence of downward mobility, but a condition imposed upon her from the outset. Abducted and sold into slavery again in the slave market in Khartoum, Akuany gradually learns to navigate the worlds she is thrust into. The slave market can be viewed as a 'reenactment of subjection'—one that operates through coerced agency, simulated contentment, and the effacement of the enslaved subject. Within this space, individuality is stripped away, and the self is displaced, reduced to something that can be inhabited and projected into others (Hartman 1997, p. 7). Nonetheless, Akuany does not remain confined to the 'role of victim but rises to that of survivor and agent of her life' (Sabir et al. 2024) even within a system designed to constrain and oppress her.

Akuany's challenging journey takes a significant turn as she is bought by the British painter Robert. This point encapsulates the intersection of visual representation, colonial power, and gendered subjugation. The act of purchasing her body transforms it into an aesthetic object; an object that portrays reductive and exotic representations of Sudan and Sudanese women. The black female body is often presented in western visual culture as decorative and aestheticized, a mode of representation that reinforces racialized objectification while obscuring histories of violence and exploitation (Childs, 2025). Robert is 'excited about his work, his name linked to the painters who depicted the Orient' (Aboulela 2023, p. 163). His aim is to 'show case the unseen to his people and gain fame in his country' (Alsiefy 2024, p. 122). But Akuany decides to destroy his painting of her, 'took a knife...and slashed the painting' (Aboulela 2023, p. 201). She rejects the version of herself that has been shaped for others, a version that reduces her to an object of display rather than a subject with agency. This is one of the moments where her agency emerges from within constraints, a moment of resistance.

Furthermore, Aboulela challenges the Orientalist narrative of 'white men saving brown women' as Akuany negotiates her freedom and refuses Robert's employment contract. Robert considers her a fool because 'she was going back to the same Sudanese man who had first taken her out of the jungle. Robert was giving freedom with an offer of paid employment, and she was choosing a harem!' (Aboulela 2023, p. 216). Aboulela highlights how women's agency has been associated too often with resistance to dominant norms. She then effectively turns this idea on its head, suggesting that the ways in which one lives within or inhabits norms—upholding and perpetuating them, rather than seeking to resist, undermine, or overthrow them—can also be understood through the language of agency. In other words, agency is not limited to resisting norms but is better understood as the 'capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of ethical actions' (Mahmood 2005, p. 30). Aboulela, therefore, underlines alternative forms of agency, ones that do not necessarily conform to feminist, western, or secular liberal aims.

Akuany's journey ends with her return to her old village with Yassen and his son, marking not a simple restoration of the past but a reconfigured sense of self-shaped by everything she has endured. Throughout the narrative, she struggles with the loss of her name, traditions, and the life she once knew by the river. She is 'repeatedly dressed, redressed, and renamed' (Alsiefy 2024, p. 123), her identity continually written by the

forces of slavery, displacement, and patriarchal control. Her journey comes full circle geographically, and she feels that she is:

one of the lowly rising, one of the poor benefiting, one of the featherweight children of the land, thrust up by this shake-up, loosened, and made free to stand up and grab what was there to offer, what she had always wanted. (Aboulela 2023, p. 284)

Conclusion

This study explores the development of female subjectivity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and *River Spirit* in relation to the conjuncture of diasporic experiences, negotiations of identity, and historical restraints. In *Minaret* agency emerges through spiritual transformation, ethical self-discipline, and everyday religious practices. Meanwhile in *River Spirit*, female subjectivity is formed within structures shaped by slavery, patriarchy, and rigid social hierarchy. Thus, by comparing these two models, the analysis suggests that they reflect distinct, context-driven approaches in which women navigate and negotiate power.

Najwa's trajectory, shaped by a postcolonial, diasporic, and alienating setting, reflects Aboulela's portrayal of faith as something lived and experienced rather than an abstract doctrine. In faith, Najwa finds spiritual comfort, rootedness, and agency even amidst sociopolitical and geographical dislocations. Islam becomes 'the only relief to the sudden difficulties and great solitude in which she finds herself' (Pepicelli 2011, p. 2). It becomes a consolation for the other forms of belonging that she has lost. At the same time, this form of agency remains shaped by social and gendered expectations, suggesting that inward transformation does not exist in isolation from broader structures of power, but is worked through them. In this way, *Minaret* challenges reductive readings of Muslim women, presenting faith as an active and empowering practice rather than a marker of passivity.

In contrast, Akuany's experience in *River Spirit* is marked by harsher constraints. Her life within slavery highlights the limits of autonomy and how identity is shaped through externally imposed hierarchies. Her subjectivity takes a less overt form through negotiation, endurance, and relationships in her surroundings. In this sense, the novel serves as 'a platform for marginalized voices of Sudanese women whose stories of endurance, faith, and defiance cut across traditional patriarchal structures and introduce a fresh look into Sudan's past' (Sabir et al. 2024). Akuany's constant determination not to be silenced or marginalized is evidence of her resilience and refusal to be defined by all the violence she had to endure. This shift from inward transformation to materially grounded constraint reflects a deeper engagement with the historical dimensions of power, where colonial and pre-colonial structures continue to shape women's lives.

The comparison between the two novels shows that Aboulela does not present a single fixed idea of female empowerment. Instead, she develops an expansive and nuanced understanding of agency that is shaped by context, relationships, and historical realities. As her focus shifts from the diasporic, postcolonial setting in *Minaret* to the imperial alienating inequalities in *River Spirit*, it becomes clearer that women's experiences of power are never monotonous. So, whether portrayed as devout, moderate, non-Muslims or secular modern women, Aboulela's female characters are not homogenous, and each celebrates her own perception of faith and agency. As a result, this development not only enriches her portrayal of female subjectivity but also unsettles critical approaches that tend to frame women's experiences in simple reductive terms of either oppression or resistance.

In so doing, this study contributes to ongoing debates within postcolonial studies by emphasizing the importance of reading agency in relation to both belief and material conditions. It suggests that literary representations of women must be understood through a framework that accounts for the intersection of religion, patriarchy, class, and history. Therefore, Aboulela challenges the often-monolithic representation of Muslims by depicting the diasporic and alienating experiences of practicing and non-practicing women. Her fiction, particularly in its movement from *Minaret* to *River Spirit*, offers a compelling example of how postcolonial literature can expand the conceptual boundaries of subjectivity, making visible forms of agency emerge not only through transformation, but also through survival within constraint.

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