



THE SILENCE OF MEMORY: TRAUMA AND IDENTITY IN ADANIA SHIBLI'S MINOR DETAIL

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Abstract:

Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2017) is a powerful work of historical fiction that interrogates memory, violence, and silence within the context of the Palestinian experience. This paper examines the traumatic psyche of the unnamed female protagonist in Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail*, situating the novel within the intersecting frameworks of trauma studies, historical fiction, and Palestinian narrative discourse. *Minor Detail* is a minimalist yet unsettling novel that revisits a silenced historical incident from 1949 and traces its psychological reverberations into the present. Rather than representing trauma through overt emotional expression or dramatic narration, Shibli constructs it through absence, restraint, repetition, and silence. This study argues that trauma in the novel functions not merely as an individual psychological condition but as a collective and intergenerational experience shaped by historical erasure, political violence, and unresolved injustice. The novel is structured in two distinct yet interconnected parts. The first recounts the abduction and killing of a Palestinian Bedouin girl by Israeli soldiers in a detached, clinical tone that mirrors the bureaucratic indifference of official history. The second part follows an unnamed Palestinian woman in the present who becomes obsessively drawn to a minor archival reference to that event. The protagonist's psychological disturbance emerges from her engagement with fragmented historical records, illustrating Cathy Caruth's notion that trauma is experienced belatedly and returns in repetitive, unresolved forms. Central to this analysis is the concept of intergenerational trauma. Although the protagonist did not witness the original violence, she bears its psychological weight through silence, absence, and partial narratives. Her compulsive need to document and retrace the event reflects an unconscious attempt to restore narrative coherence to a deliberately marginalised history. Obsession and repetition further reveal trauma's destabilising effects, gradually eroding her sense of safety and selfhood. The abstract also explores the embodiment of trauma through hyper vigilance, fear, and bodily response as the protagonist navigates checkpoints, borders, and surveilled spaces. Her fractured identity and persistent displacement underscore trauma's existential dimension. Ultimately, *Minor Detail* presents trauma as an ongoing condition, demonstrating how unacknowledged histories continue to wound the present and transform human suffering into an enduring psychological reality.

Key Words: Adania Shibli, *Minor Detail*, trauma studies, memory, silence, Palestinian literature, gendered violence, narrative fragmentation.

Introduction:

Literature emerging from contexts of war, occupation, and displacement often grapples with the ethical and aesthetic problem of how to narrate trauma without reducing it to spectacle or sentimentality. In Palestinian literature, this challenge is intensified by the systematic erasure of historical records, the politicisation of memory, and the persistence of everyday violence under occupation. Writers are compelled to negotiate not only how to remember but also how to write against silencing structures that seek to control narrative authority. Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* occupies a distinctive and unsettling position within this literary tradition.

Rather than offering an expansive historical epic or an emotionally charged testimonial narrative, Shibli presents a text that is austere, controlled, and deeply disquieting in its quietness. The novel reconstructs a little-known incident from 1949, in which a Bedouin girl is abducted, raped, and murdered by Israeli soldiers, and links this event to a contemporary Palestinian woman's obsessive attempt to investigate the incident decades later. The novel's power lies not in dramatic revelation but in its careful orchestration of omission, repetition, and narrative restraint.

The title *Minor Detail* signals Shibli's central concern with historiography and power. What is classified as "minor" within official archives particularly colonial or state-sponsored ones often involves the lives and deaths of those deemed expendable. Shibli reclaims such marginalised detail, exposing how large-scale political violence is sustained through the erasure of individual suffering. This paper argues that *Minor Detail* employs silence, fragmentation, and narrative minimalism not merely as stylistic choices but as ethical strategies that mirror the structure of trauma itself and resist the voyeuristic consumption of Palestinian pain.

Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Marianne Hirsch, this study examines how Shibli represents trauma as belated, repetitive, and resistant to narrative closure. It also foregrounds the novel's gendered dimension, demonstrating how the violated female body becomes a contested site of power, control, and memory.

Ultimately, the paper contends that *Minor Detail* challenges readers to inhabit discomfort, compelling them to confront the political consequences of silence in both literature and history.

Literature Review:

Critical engagement with Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* has largely focused on its minimalist aesthetic, political urgency, and ethical restraint. Reviewers and scholars have noted that Shibli's prose resists emotional excess, instead cultivating an atmosphere of unease through repetition, precise description, and narrative omission. This refusal of conventional dramatic intensity aligns the novel with a broader movement in contemporary trauma narratives that prioritise absence, delay, and fragmentation over explicit depiction.

Trauma studies provide a crucial framework for understanding this narrative strategy. Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment of occurrence but returns belatedly in intrusive repetitions is particularly relevant. In *Minor Detail*, the traumatic event is never directly voiced by its victim; instead, it re-emerges decades later through the compulsive investigation of a narrator who did not witness the event herself. This narrative displacement reflects what Caruth identifies as the paradox of trauma: its simultaneous insistence and inaccessibility.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory further illuminates the novel's intergenerational structure. Post memory describes the relationship of later generations to traumatic events that precede their birth but nonetheless shape their identities through mediated forms such as stories, images, and silences. The contemporary narrator's fixation on the 1949 incident exemplifies this phenomenon, as her sense of self becomes entangled with a past she inherits rather than remembers directly.

Within Palestinian literary criticism, *Minor Detail* has been read as a counter-archival text that challenges Zionist historiography and its exclusions. By centring an unnamed Bedouin girl, Shibli disrupts nationalist grand narratives and foregrounds the vulnerability of those erased from official records. Feminist critics have further emphasised the novel's focus on gendered violence, arguing that the silenced female body symbolises both personal violation and collective dispossession. However, existing scholarship often addresses trauma, memory, and gender as separate analytical categories. This paper seeks to integrate these perspectives, demonstrating how *Minor Detail* constructs a cohesive critique of historical erasure through its formal and thematic strategies.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Memory, and Silence:

Trauma theory emphasises the difficulty and often the impossibility of fully representing traumatic experience within linear narrative forms. According to Caruth, trauma disrupts temporality, returning in fragments that resist narrative mastery. This disruption challenges traditional historiography, which depends on coherence, causality, and closure.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma provides a useful lens for reading *Minor Detail*. Acting out involves the compulsive repetition of trauma without critical distance, while working through entails a reflective engagement that acknowledges loss without collapsing into it. Shibli's novel deliberately withholds the possibility of working through. The contemporary narrator's investigation remains incomplete, compulsive, and ultimately fatal, suggesting that under conditions of ongoing occupation, trauma cannot be safely resolved.

Silence occupies a central position within this theoretical framework. Rather than signifying absence alone, silence can function as a mode of testimony, gesturing toward what exceeds language. In *Minor Detail*, silence operates at multiple levels: the historical silence surrounding the Bedouin girl's murder, the narrative silence that avoids overt emotional commentary, and the political silence enforced through surveillance, censorship, and restricted movement. These layered silences mirror the conditions under which Palestinian history is lived and recorded.

Memory studies further clarify the novel's structure. Hirsch's notion of post memory underscores how trauma is transmitted not through direct experience but through gaps, repetitions, and imaginative investment. The narrator's journey exemplifies this process, as she seeks to fill archival absences with bodily risk and obsessive attention. Memory, in Shibli's novel, is not a stable repository of the past but an unstable, dangerous force that intrudes upon the present.

Narrative Structure and Fragmentation

Minor Detail is divided into two distinct yet interconnected parts, each marked by a radically different narrative voice. The first part adopts an impersonal, almost clinical tone, recounting the events of 1949 largely from the perspective of the Israeli soldiers. The language is precise and observational, describing landscapes, routines, and bodily actions with meticulous detachment. Emotions are conspicuously absent, and the Bedouin girl remains unnamed, reduced to physical description and biological vulnerability.

This narrative choice underscores the dehumanisation inherent in colonial violence. By focalising the perpetrators and withholding access to the victim's interiority, Shibli exposes the mechanisms through which violence is normalised and bureaucratised. The absence of moral commentary forces readers to confront the brutality of the event without the comfort of narrative condemnation or emotional guidance.

The second part shifts abruptly to a first-person narrative centred on a contemporary Palestinian woman living under occupation. Unlike the detached voice of the first section, this narrator is marked by anxiety, physical vulnerability, and obsessive attention to detail. Her journey to investigate the 1949 incident is fraught with obstacles: checkpoints, permits, surveillance, and the constant threat of exposure. These barriers mirror the epistemic obstacles that prevent Palestinians from accessing their own history.

Fragmentation connects the two sections. The lack of a seamless transition between past and present reflects the disjointed nature of traumatic memory. Rather than offering resolution or synthesis, the novel leaves readers suspended between histories, emphasising the persistence of unresolved violence. The structural rupture itself becomes a formal enactment of trauma's resistance to narrative closure.

Gendered Violence and the Politics of the Body:

The violated bodies of women occupy a central and deeply unsettling place in *Minor Detail*, functioning as sites where political power, military domination, and historical erasure converge. The rape and murder of the unnamed Bedouin girl represent not merely an act of individual cruelty but an extreme manifestation of colonial violence in which the female body becomes a

symbolic terrain of conquest. Her body is rendered vulnerable, exposed, and ultimately disposable, mirroring the logic through which colonised land and marginalised populations are subjected to surveillance and control. The girl's anonymity is particularly significant: deprived of a name, voice, or interiority, she is reduced to a biological presence within the narrative, reflecting how women's suffering is routinely effaced within both patriarchal and colonial archives.

Shibli's refusal to grant the Bedouin girl a narrative voice underscores the structural silencing imposed on women and subaltern communities. Rather than allowing the reader access to the victim's emotions or thoughts, the novel forces confrontation with the mechanisms that erase subjectivity altogether. This narrative strategy resists sentimental identification and instead exposes the ethical discomfort of witnessing violence without redemptive closure. Feminist trauma theory suggests that such silencing is not merely representational but political, revealing how women's bodies are inscribed with meanings of domination, possession, and expendability within militarised contexts.

The contemporary narrator's body, though not subjected to explicit sexual violence, is nevertheless marked by vulnerability and precarity. Her heightened awareness of bodily sensations heat, exhaustion, anxiety, illness, and fear emphasises the embodied nature of trauma under occupation. Everyday acts such as travelling, waiting, or seeking information become physically taxing, transforming the body into a constant site of negotiation and risk. Unlike the Bedouin girl, the narrator possesses a voice, yet her bodily experience reveals how gendered vulnerability persists across generations. Through these parallel figures, Shibli demonstrates how trauma is transmitted not only through memory but through the body itself, shaping female subjectivity in spaces governed by surveillance and restriction.

Surveillance, Control, and Modern Resonance:

Surveillance functions as a central motif that binds the novel's historical and contemporary narratives, revealing the continuity of colonial mechanisms from 1949 to the present. In the first part of *Minor Detail*, military observation enables domination, classification, and dehumanisation. The desert landscape is meticulously mapped and monitored, while the Bedouin girl's movements are watched, controlled, and ultimately annihilated. Surveillance here operates as an extension of power, reducing both land and bodies to objects of strategic management.

In the novel's second part, surveillance assumes more bureaucratic and institutionalised forms. Checkpoints, permits, identity documents, and constant monitoring structure the narrator's daily life, regulating her mobility and access to knowledge. These contemporary mechanisms of control mirror the military surveillance of the past, underscoring what scholars have described as the "ongoing present" of colonial violence. Shibli thus collapses temporal distance, demonstrating that the structures governing Palestinian life have not disappeared but merely transformed.

The narrator's obsessive investigation into the 1949 incident becomes an act of resistance against enforced forgetting. However, this pursuit of truth is fraught with danger. Her movements attract attention, and her insistence on uncovering what has been erased places her body at risk. The novel's conclusion her death refuses narrative closure and disrupts expectations of justice or revelation. This ending highlights the peril associated with knowledge-seeking within oppressive systems and exposes the limits placed on historical inquiry under conditions of occupation. By denying resolution, Shibli critiques the illusion that truth alone can dismantle entrenched structures of power.

Conclusion:

Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* transforms a silenced historical incident into a profound meditation on trauma, memory, and identity. Through its minimalist style, fragmented structure, and strategic use of silence, the novel resists conventional representational modes and challenges readers to confront the ethical difficulties of narrating violence. Shibli's focus on gendered trauma reveals how women's bodies become sites where colonial domination and patriarchal control intersect, while the novel's engagement with post memory exposes the enduring impact of unresolved historical violence.

By foregrounding surveillance, bodily vulnerability, and inherited trauma, *Minor Detail* situates Palestinian suffering within both a specific political context and a broader global discourse on trauma and memory. Ultimately, the novel insists that what is dismissed as "minor" possesses the capacity to destabilise dominant historiographies and demand remembrance. In refusing closure and consolation, Shibli compels readers to reckon with silence not as absence, but as a charged political condition one that continues to shape identities, histories, and lives.

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