



Transcending borders: The Violence on/of History as implied in *Minor Detail*

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Abstract

Violence has an implied history. It is apparent and at the same time, it leaves invisible marks on History. The history of violence is similarly invisibilised by the perpetrators as a means of hiding the truth about their actions and at the same time to lessen the awareness and articulation of the magnitude of pain and cruelty inflicted on the victims and of course to show their own tolerance and humanity to the world that lies beyond the borders of these violent acts. Palestinian author Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* that was translated into English by Elizabeth Jaquard is a telling metaphor of our times. It is a novel that examines historic violence and also immediate violence. Shibli constructs a story that cuts across time to gather justice for a woman murdered and in the process, she passes through Palestinian territories ravaged by the Israeli soldiers. The paper examines the implications of the politics that also gets translated in the process as the book is its own politics. This self-reflexive awareness makes the book less fictional and more a documentary-fiction. Shibli's book when translated also carries out a parallel warfare to win readers over to its political stand. Though a slim novella, the work manages to never lose sight of its creative and cultural purpose.

Keywords: Palestine, Adania Shibli, Israel, violence

Palestinian literature in English is a vital aspect of global literary traditions, offering both a personal and collective perspective on Palestinian history, identity, and the ongoing struggle for justice and recognition. It is a genre shaped by the displacement, exile, and political struggles that Palestinians have faced, particularly in the wake of the 1948 Nakba (the "Catastrophe"), which resulted in the mass displacement of Palestinians from their ancestral land following the creation of the State of Israel.

Scholars have increasingly examined how Palestinian writers—whether writing originally in English or translated from Arabic—address themes of exile, memory, identity, and resistance. For example, many reviews note that key works like Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2006) and Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* (2017) not only recount family histories of displacement but also reframe Palestinian narratives beyond political allegory. Researchers have traced the evolution of the Palestinian novel from early works that often served as national or resistance literature (as seen in the writings of Ghassan Kanafani or Emile Habibi) to more recent texts that offer nuanced portrayals of everyday life, trauma, and diaspora.

Review of Literature

Critical works on Palestinian fiction in English have grown significantly over the past few decades, particularly with the rise of Palestinian literary voices and the global interest in Middle Eastern politics. These works often examine themes like displacement, exile, identity, resistance, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Palestinian Novel: A Modern History (2003) by Baruch Kimmerling provides a historical analysis of Palestinian fiction, tracking its development and connection to the broader history of Palestinian identity and national consciousness. It also examines the impact of external influences, such as the 1948 Nakba, on the evolution of Palestinian literature.

The Literature of the Palestinian Diaspora: A Study of the Fiction of Emigration by Nur Masalha (2012) focuses on Palestinian diaspora literature, particularly fiction written by Palestinians who were displaced during and after the 1948 Nakba. Masalha investigates how these works reflect themes of loss, identity, and memory, while highlighting the impact of exile on Palestinian writers.

The Question of Palestine by Edward Said (1979) While not exclusively about fiction, Edward Said's seminal work is an essential critical text in understanding the political and cultural context that shapes Palestinian literature. Said's discussions on the Palestinian struggle, displacement, and identity provide foundational insights into the literary works of Palestinian writers.

Published in 1999 and edited by Kamal Abdel-Malek and David Jacobson *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in History and Literature* looks at the interconnectedness of Israeli and Palestinian identities. The shared legacies of land, displacement, exploitation and uncertainty have led to mutually inclusive identities that both sides are reluctant to recognise.

Reflections on Exile and Other Essays, (2000) another key text by Edward Said, collects several essays, including some that discuss the Palestinian literary tradition and the experience of exile. The collection offers insight into the diasporic experience that shapes much of Palestinian fiction.

Politics and Palestinian Literature in Exile: Gender, Aesthetics and Resistance in the Short Story (2017) by Joseph R. Farag looks at Palestine through the short story during the three massacres in its history.

The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine (2017) by Salim Tamari examines the last years of the Ottoman Empire. The secular, vibrant spaces of the Palestinian public sphere is also discussed here. The contrast with the denial of the Palestinian claim to statehood could not be more stark.

The Contemporary Literature of Palestine: Poetry and Fiction is a critical study (originally submitted as a PhD dissertation in 1982 by Hanan Daud Mikhail Ashrawi) that examines the emerging body of Palestinian literary work—both in poetry and prose—produced around the late 1960s.

The work provides a detailed analysis and translations of key texts, illustrating how Palestinian writers began to articulate the complex realities of life under occupation and in diaspora.

Key Themes and Historical Context:

Palestinian literature, especially in English, tends to focus on several core themes:

1. **Displacement and Exile:** A central theme in Palestinian literature is the experience of exile and the trauma of being displaced from one's homeland. Writers grapple with the tension between memory and loss, narrating the emotional and psychological toll of living in refugee camps or in diaspora. This theme often extends to the larger experience of being a stateless people. Samir El-Youssef's *Illusion of Return* (2007) discusses an unnamed protagonist who is born in a refugee camp in Lebanon and who ends up in London. While the Palestinian resistance is a theme, it is only obliquely referred to, with the author choosing to dwell on the complexities of identity that the people in exile with no hope of getting back nurse.
2. **Occupation and Resistance:** The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories have heavily influenced Palestinian writers. Literature in English often explores not just the physical aspects of occupation—such as military checkpoints, settlement building, and the erosion of land—but also the psychological effects on Palestinian individuals and communities. The literature reflects a spirit of resistance, resilience, and hope despite systemic oppression.
3. **Identity and Cultural Preservation:** In a context where Palestinians often feel their identity is under threat—either through direct political action or through the erasure of their history and culture—literary works provide a space for asserting and re-asserting Palestinian identity. Writers in English explore the nuances of cultural heritage, language, family, and religion, striving to preserve and transmit the richness of Palestinian culture in the face of adversity.

4. **Memory and History:** Memory plays an important role in Palestinian literature, as writers often look back at pre-Nakba Palestine, recalling an idyllic world that was lost. Literature becomes a way to preserve the stories of family, land, and community, and to resist the historical erasure of the Palestinian narrative. *Where the Bird Disappeared* (2018) by Ghassan Zaqtan is a novel that explores themes of loss, exile, and identity against the backdrop of the Palestinian experience. The story is set during and after the 1948 Nakba, when many Palestinians were displaced from their homes following the establishment of Israel. The novel follows a Palestinian man, who returns to his homeland after years in exile, to confront both personal and collective histories of pain and displacement.

Prominent Palestinian Writers in English:

- **Edward Said:** Perhaps the most prominent Palestinian intellectual, Said's *Orientalism* and his memoir *Out of Place* (1999) have been foundational to understanding the intersection of identity, colonialism, and displacement in Palestinian literature. His writing has had a profound influence on postcolonial theory and is central to the discourse on Palestinian identity.
- **Mahmoud Darwish:** Although Darwish primarily wrote in Arabic, his poetry and prose have been translated into English, reaching a global audience. Darwish's work reflects the pain of exile and longing for home, and he is often considered the voice of the Palestinian people. His poems like *A Lover from Palestine* and *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* are seminal texts in Palestinian literature.
- **Ghada Karmi:** A Palestinian writer and physician, Karmi's work often deals with themes of exile and the Palestinian experience in Britain. Her memoir *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002) explores her personal journey of loss, identity, and displacement.

- **Randa Jarrar:** A Palestinian-American writer, Jarrar's fiction and essays often explore themes of identity, the immigrant experience, and the political situation in the Middle East. Her novel *A Map of Home* (2008) explores the complexities of growing up as a Palestinian in diaspora, offering a personal yet universal exploration of home and belonging.
- **Susan Abulhawa:** Known for her novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2006), Abulhawa explores the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on ordinary Palestinian lives across generations. The book spans several decades, providing a deeply emotional and personal perspective on the effects of the 1948 Nakba and subsequent generations' struggles.
- **Ghassan Kanafani:** *The Revolution of 1936-1939 in Palestine* (1972) takes a close look at the ways that the resistance remained strong at the heart of the various movements and struggles of the people. He spoke of the sentient trees that share a beautiful, subliminal connect with the human beings. The greenness of the trees hint at the resistance of the Palestinians and the solidarity that the lands have with their people.
- **Sahar Khalifeh:** A prominent Palestinian novelist whose works, such as *Wild Thorns* (1976) and *The Inheritance* (2005), tackle issues of resistance, gender, and identity in occupied Palestine.
- **Jabbar Douaihy:** A Lebanese-Palestinian writer whose novels, including *June Rain* (2006), reflect the complexities of identity and exile.

Impact and Role in Global Literature:

Palestinian literature in English plays a key role in breaking the silence around the Palestinian plight. It offers a voice to the disenfranchised and marginalized, sharing the human cost of the ongoing conflict. These works challenge prevailing narratives and offer alternative perspectives to the dominant discourses around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, providing a counterpoint to mainstream media representations of the region.

In addition to its political dimension, Palestinian literature in English has contributed to the broader field of postcolonial literature. It often engages with themes of resistance, nationalism, and the intersection of personal and political histories, all of which resonate with other postcolonial experiences around the world.

Challenges:

Despite its growing prominence, Palestinian literature in English faces challenges related to access and visibility. Many works are either translated from Arabic or written by authors who live in exile or the diaspora. The struggle for Palestinian self-determination and the marginalization of Palestinian voices in mainstream literary circles have meant that many works face censorship, limited distribution, or are written in a context of adversity.

However, as global interest in Palestinian issues continues to grow, so too does the appreciation for Palestinian literature, which remains a powerful means of expression, resistance, and cultural survival.

In sum, Palestinian literature in English serves as a vital space for articulating the Palestinian experience, contributing to global dialogues about conflict, displacement, identity, and human rights. Its writers continue to use the written word to navigate the complexities of their lived reality while also asserting the dignity and resilience of the Palestinian people.

Barbara Harlow's book *Resistance Literature* (1987) explores the intersection of literature and political resistance, analyzing how literary works serve as a form of opposition to colonialism, imperialism, and political oppression. Harlow examines the role of writers and their work in resisting political regimes, focusing on literature produced by marginalized and oppressed peoples in the context of national liberation movements.

Reading *Minor Detail*

A *Minor Detail* published in 2020, is a searing indictment of the ways that details that might seem minor, or are rendered insignificant by what is deemed as official history. The novel begins with the banal, mundane details of the platoon commander's compulsive need for order and neatness. There is a brooding atmosphere that pervades the camp and the novel. *Minor Detail* makes its central point a crime that purportedly happened a year into the Nakba when an Israeli battalion raped and killed a Bedouin girl in the Naqab desert. In a report by Aviv Lavie and Moshe Goral, published in the newspaper *Haaretz* in October 2003, the capture and gang rape of a young Bedouin girl by a platoon of IDF soldiers is described. The incident had happened in August 1949. The Company Commander's report has the statement of the Officer in command. He says, "In my patrol on 12.8.49 I encountered Arabs in the territory under my command, one of them armed. I killed the armed Arab on the spot and took his weapon. I took the Arab female captive. On the first night the soldiers abused her and the next day I saw fit to remove her from the world"

(<https://www.haaretz.com/2003-10-29/ty-article/i-saw-fit-to-remove-her-from-the-world/0000017f-db62-d856-a37f-ffe2fa5b0000>) The power that an individual imagines he wields over the life of another and the insignificance of that life in the eyes of the killer and those responsible for these hostile states of life is brought painfully close by Shibli who through the pace of her writing, slow and undulating like the landscape she locates her novel in, reveals it beautifully. Meena Kandasamy writes,

Adania Shibli's exceptional novel *Minor Detail* belongs to the genre of the novel as resistance, as revolutionary text. Simultaneously depicting the dehumanization that surrounds rape and land-grab, it is a text that palpitates with fear and with outrage. As we join the nameless young woman in her quest to find a long-forgotten atrocity, we realize how dangerous it is to reclaim life and history in the face of an ongoing, systematic erasure.

The narrative tempo, that eventually reaches a crescendo, astutely captures how alienation and heightened anxiety are elemental states of living under Israeli occupation.

The author indeed makes the incident out to be a forgettable one, an incident that is buried in the sands of time and erased from history. The commander of the platoon is a complicated man whose true colours are gradually revealed. He first comes across as a methodical man, which then goes on to reveal the sinister, psychosocial tendencies that lie beneath. He is obsessed with cleanliness and is stubborn in his defiance of pain and the festering wound which is the result of an insect bite. He wishes to wipe out all existence of Arab life like how he desires to keep his surroundings clean and neat. After the girl is captured and the Bedouins eliminated, the commander holds a congratulatory dinner for his men and gives them a choice of what they want done with the girl, whether she is to be a kitchen maid or if she was to be shared amongst them all. The soldiers drench her in petrol, throw soap and water on her and dress her in a spare uniform of one of the soldiers. The commander in a frenzy of pain and restlessness rapes her and then gives her over to men to do with her as they pleased and then to shoot and bury her. Though initially it seemed as though he would protect the girl, the situation soon unravels into a tragedy that leads the girl to be buried in an unmarked grave.

Twenty-five years later, the protagonist reading about the incident is struck by the fact that the Bedouin girl died on the same day that she was born. This leads her to want to investigate this incident that is generally ignored by all those who talk about the activities in the Naqab desert.

This very detail about the date of death of the girl makes the narrator reach out to try and discover the details of the girl, however marginal she be to the grand narrative of the Israeli victory.

The narrator sets off on her journey across Israel, outside Tel Aviv towards the archives of the Naqab camp. She travels by car and reaches Qalandiya check post using the ID card of a friend on the banking on the fact that Israeli men cannot differentiate the faces of Palestinian women.

As she watches documentaries especially the ones about Jewish settlements that were being set up in the 1930s and 1940s. As the huts come up, the settlers celebrate with joy and a sense of completion. There is a significant contrast between the celebrations of the settlers and their notion of the permanent home that is built on land obtained through displacement and the fear and sorrow of the people who have been displaced and who cannot fight back and who are not featured on the video and thus are edited out of the history that was rewritten.

The narrator realises that she has the power to control the modern colonial propaganda by rewinding the video which then makes it seem like the settlers are dismantling the huts rather than assembling them. This is a strong act of writing back to the colonisers or the usurpers regarding the occupation of the land that was clearly not theirs to take. Shibli's protagonist says,

There are some people who navigate borders masterfully, who never trespass, but these people are few and I'm not one of them. As soon as I see a border, I either race towards it and leap over, or cross it stealthily Neither of these two behaviours is conscious, or rooted in a premeditated desire to resist borders; it's more like sheer stupidity...once I cross a border, I fall into a deep pit of anxiety. (58).

In the course of her investigation, she witnessed Palestinian villages that had been destroyed and there was no way of knowing which village she was passing through at the point. She carries two maps, one of the new Israel and one historical map of Palestine.

Next, I pick up the map showing the country until 1948, but I snap it shut as horror rushes over me. Palestinian villages, which on the Israel map appear to have been swallowed by a yellow sea, appear on this one by the dozen, their names practically leaping off the page. (87)

While she keeps going, she comes across the Nirim settlement, just near the Gaza strip. She realises that she cannot trust the maps or the archives or the people manning them. To get to the truth, she will have to rely on her body and her on intuitions.

She transforms herself into an explorer, cartographer and a seeker of the truth. She thinks of the past and wonders if there was

no point in me feeling responsible for her, feeling like she's a nobody, and will forever remain a nobody whose voice nobody will hear. Besides, people have to deal with enough misery in the world today; there's no reason to go searching for more.... (69)

Shibli investigates the implications of fear through discussions of political interference, cultural and linguistic hegemony. In an interview at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, when asked about the lack of names in the novel, Shibli noted that names become “indictments in the context of racism”, as revealing them can foreclose any possibility of communication by immediately highlighting the conflicts of the speakers. Arabic itself becomes a language of anxiety.

The presence of the dog in the first part of the novel is a very palpable one. It is a physical presence, the dog howls as each soldier enters or leaves the commander's tent and when the girl is being driven out to the desert to be shot. Fifty years later, the narrator, during her investigation checks into a hotel and lays down to rest and is vaguely aware of the howling sounds a dog though she cannot spot any. This technique of reaching out across time further establishes and strengthens the connection between the two women and foregrounds the relentless oppression and the resistance to that oppression. Egina Manachova in her review of the novel in *Chicago Review* points out that in the second half of the novel, the Commander's cleansing mission seems to have borne results as the narrator is a seeming far cry from the dirty Bedouin girl.

The narrator is an articulate, educated young woman who speaks Arabic and Hebrew, works in an office and can drive. The country has assimilated artillery and tropes of military control into its daily activities and in the need for survival has managed to find a way around all the roadblocks and security instituted by the IDF. There is life amongst the rubble left behind by the army, as small groups of Palestinians manage to eke out fragile lives in the wake of the destruction of remote villages.

The protagonist's ability to speak Hebrew and her assimilation into a narrative of Progress cannot save her. She is executed by the IDF on the same spot as the Bedouin woman. What these two women have in common, then, is that both are ultimately marked for exclusion because they exist. Their very existence impedes the expanding borders of a settler colonial state. Shibli's choice to keep the characters unnamed and list the changing names of places emphasizes that these characters are not singular individuals but fragments that reflect the larger whole of settler-colonial society and the temporal narratives it wields like a weapon. Past and present are layered over each other across the landscape like a palimpsest that reveals Israel's colonial trajectory. The characters navigate the ever-expanding material, temporal, and psychic borders that shape a nation-state by focusing on minor details. The particulars, however, are a double-edged sword: on one hand, they allow us to unearth the past; on the other, they sentence us to be buried by it.

(<https://www.chicagoreview.org/adania-shibli-minor-detail/>)

Minor Detail is a novel that through the agency of translation ensures that the tragedy of the Palestinians, their displacement, the systemic violence, discrimination that they are subjected to is heard. It makes the readers a part of the narrative and ensures that the culpability is a moral one. the owling of the dog persists to this day. Dr Chaandreyi Mukherjee writes,

In the harrowing past constructed by Shibli, as well as in the chaotic present, the idea of freedom is hypothetical and arbitrary. *Minor Detail* exists not just as a Palestinian resistance literature but a poignant reminder of the propensities of absolute terror and incomprehensible violence which human beings are capable of.

(<https://www.inversejournal.com/2021/03/16/nothing-moved-except-the-mirage-analysing-fear-and-freedom-in-adania-shiblis-minor-detail-by-dr-chaandreyi-mukherjee/>)

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