

Repression and Reclaiming of Female Voices of War History through Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail*

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Abstract

Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2017) explores the themes of silencing and marginalising the voices of women in the occupied land of Palestine. The novel juxtaposes a story of brutal rape and murder during the Nakba, with an investigation of another woman to uncover the truth. The novel portrays the female body as a site of domination portraying the socio-cultural norms of excluding women's experiences from historical narratives. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, Dubravka Zarkov, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the paper analyses the double marginalisation of women's voice by political power and social norms. It simultaneously will reflect on how the author challenges such norms through the narrative strategies such as minor symbolism, specific narrative decisions, and spectral motifs. Through the novel, the author enacts on using literature as a resistance to reclaim subaltern voices and experiences, challenging historical erasure of suffering and memory of women.

Keywords: Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail*, female body, history, resistance, reclaiming voice, Marginalisation, women in war, violence

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Introduction

Adania Shibli, the Palestinian author of the novel *Minor Detail* (2017), depicts the condition of women in war and history. The novel revolves around a Bedouin woman who is raped and murdered during the Nakba, which remains as a forgotten footnote of history, until years later, another woman dedicates her life to searching for the truth. Shibli portrays the silencing and censorship of women's voices through the social and cultural institutions through the nameless female characters and their tragic fate in a hostile timeline. The paper intends to analyse how the novel proceeds to invoke the idea of marginalisation and weaponisation of the female body as a tool of war and possession, leading to dehumanising the victim into the evidence of destruction. Author Dubravka Zarkov's discussion reveals how the sufferings of female bodies are converted into political or legal narratives, resulting in the dehumanisation of women as symbols or tools of war (Zarkov, 2008). Similarly, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak speaks about the double marginalisation of the subaltern voiced through the oppressive union of patriarchy and colonialism, which collectively represses women (Riach, 2017).

Analysing the two angles of Zarkov and Spivak provides the paper with an opportunity to reflect on how women's voices remain silent in history. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's discussion in his book *Silencing the Past* reflects on how silencing women's voices represents sociopolitical choices, which is contextualized by the novel's details of the erasure of voices and stories. Through theoretical discussions, the paper shows how Shibli's narrative resists the socio-political erasure of women's experience and reclaims subaltern voices. Overall, the paper delves into how Adania Shibli represents the female body as a site of war and violence, highlights the double marginalisation of women's voices, and how the author resists such issues through narrative elements.

The Female Body in War

During any war, women reside in a highly vulnerable state. The prejudice of the patriarchal society becomes even more empowered during wartime, making the female body a site for assault and capture. The geopolitical, cultural, and ethnic conflicts use female bodies as one of the tools of asserting dominance over the enemy side. Often, the vulnerable female bodies are treated as a reward for the military for their sexual desire during war. Jonathan Gottschall, in his article titled 'Explaining Wartime Rape', discussed the pressure cooker theory suggested by Siefert. According to the paper, "The pressure cooker theory, as feminists describe it, suggests that war rapists are the victims of irresistible biological imperatives, and that the chaos of the wartime milieu encourages men to vent their urges to terrible effect" (Gottschall, 2004, p. 130). In Shibli's *Minor Detail*, the rape victim was used as a sexual

element. Shibli's detailed presentation of the victim's body and the behaviours towards him by the soldiers represent the masculinity driven by disdain towards women. Shibli depicts the violence towards the victim as, "He flew at the girl, stripping the black scarf from her head with his left hand[...]He then circled the girl, unwinding the torn dress from her body, and threw it as far as he could, along with other scraps of clothing she was wearing" (Shibli, 2020, p. 25). This narrative describing the soldier and the woman juxtaposes the bodies of male and female and shows how easily women's bodies can be used as a tool in a war. The soldier strips off the woman, rapes and murders her with no waste of bullets, no war strategy, no political intervention, expressing how women's bodies are uniquely targeted to assert power and dominance against the immediate victim and the opposition group simultaneously.

The novel foreshadows how the women's bodies are used as a systemic site of exploitation in a battleground where the men of different sides in a fight benefit equally. In a sense, the battle for any cause turns into a masculine showcase of disdain and domination over women, while the fight turns into something for the power and control over the female body (Gottschall, 2004). When the second woman reaches the archive to learn about the death of the first woman, the speculated information that was given by the man from the archive was the opposite of what happened to the rape victim. "He said that one day, during a patrol, they (military) found the body of a young Bedouin girl in a nearby well and explained to me that when Arabs are suspicious about a girl's behaviour, they kill her and throw her body in a well. Such a shame that they have such customs" (Shibli, 2020, p. 82). It can be interpreted through Zarkov's discussion of how female bodies, and specifically the bodies of Muslim women, are defined by certain socio-cultural norms as honour or purity (Zarkov, 2007, p. 129). Such social regulations keep women's bodies in a state of ambiguity in matters of nationalism, representation, and suffering. For this very reason, the author placed such a statement, which engages with the discourse of women's victimisation in both war and peace.

In her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Lila Abu-Lughod discusses the customs of the Islamic world against women in the name of 'Honour'. She included many examples from Palestine against Palestinian women of being burned alive by their own community for being raped or pregnant out of wedlock (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Lughod's engagement with the idea of women being unsafe, regardless of war or peace, also grapples with Shibli's perspective in the novel through the experiences of the protagonists. In societies where women are once valued as tools of representation and appropriation, war crimes against women's bodies remain barely as legal discourse or quantitative narration. Spivak argues that the group rape by the conqueror is metaphorical to the celebration of territorial acquisition. Spivak discusses the

glorification of women's heroism when they burn themselves as *sati* or do *Jauhar* to save themselves from rape following a lost battle by the male soldiers (Spivak, 2023, p. 207).

Therefore, the lives of the women only become a tale of heroism when they silently cease to exist as a result of the structural failure designed and nurtured by patriarchy. These social constructions make the narratives of the crimes against women during such a hostile period of history ambiguous, leading to the silencing of the voices overall. The lack of any witness to the event from the Palestinian side makes the narration of the event a silenced history by both the Israeli soldiers and the Palestinian testimonies. Ella Elbaz's journal Documenting the unarchivable refers to an Israeli article that mentioned such an incident during the 1949 Nakba against Palestinians. The article by Aviv Lavie depicted the rape and abuse of an Arab woman, with the information of the woman being raped multiple times and her body being disrespected and dehumanized (Elbaz, 2023). Shibli presented the sidelined history through the minor details from the perspective of an Israeli army officer finding, raping, and murdering the woman, and later, the interpretation by the archivist from the soldiers of the incident being an Arab 'custom'. In between the passing of blame to two sides, the voice, the suffering, and the existence of the Bedouin woman get reduced to just a 'shameful' incident and a minor detail. Though it was insignificant to record the death of a woman or to consider her existence for the historians in the novel, the insignificance indicates the exclusion and dehumanisation of a female body.

The Double Marginalisation of Female Voices

Spivak has shed light on the crucial layers of factors behind social hegemony against those she referred to as the subaltern. In this context, with the matter of women's voices at the centre, Spivak's account of the parallel layers of oppression corresponds fundamentally. Colonial repression and patriarchal institutions complement each other in society. In the colonial context, the voices of subaltern women get lost in the spectrum while being "spoken about" or "spoken for," but are never allowed to speak for themselves (Spivak, 2023, p. 201). The portrayal of the subaltern through Shibli's book is an immaculate example of voicelessness. The novel remains nameless, like the article she mentioned, until the end, with only pronouns used to address characters, which represents how the lives of the victims become insignificant to the collectors of history. The military takes the responsibility of deciding the fate of the Bedouin-Palestinian woman whom they 'found' in the Palestinian land. Again, they came up with the social gender construction of either her working in the kitchen or making her a sexual commodity for the soldiers. The author narrates the woman's fate as, "Either they send the girl to work in the camp's kitchen, or they all have their way with her" (Shibli, 2020, p. 33). This is a socially intricate and normalised role of women to be the provider of nourishment and sexual

pleasure. The statement exposes how a female body becomes a resource that reduces the humanity of a woman into gendered and sexual labour. This illustrated speculation about women is found on both sides of a war: the enemy and the victim. One pattern of gender in the war-torn lands can be seen; it is often mostly about the masculine demands of freedom, the macho image of the male soldiers who supposedly protect the land, and the male prisoners.

In contrast, the women of the land are discussed only in relation to men. They are linguistically addressed only as wives, lovers, mothers, or sisters of the male soldiers, as Shibly also portrayed through the nameless victim and her muffled, downcast weeping (Hawari, 2019). According to Yara Hawari's article *The Political Marginalisation of Palestinian women in the West Bank* the social stigmatisation of female bodies in Palestinian society left the Palestinian women vulnerable to the weaponisation of their bodies through sexual violence. Hawari also mentioned that the Palestinian Authority marginalised the active female political voices through gendered violence, which also encouraged the Israeli military to repeat the pattern of violence against women as a form of power.

Taking Zarkov's observation over the legal dispute over raped women during war becomes a debate between the opposite sides into consideration from the lens of Spivak, adding to the argument of women being lost in the spectrum. So, the life of the Bedouin woman, being insignificant to the history of Palestine and Israel, represents the collective experience of being a woman in a war zone or in society in general. Regardless of whether there is a war or peace, women have to find themselves hostile in society. Still, the war or foreign colonial occupation prevails a double layer of misogyny from home and the enemy equally. To discuss the marginalisation in the pages of history, Trouillot's (1995) argument becomes relevant. The author suggests the ways the voices of the subaltern can be silenced in history.

History surely depends on who documents the events and who preserves them, and often on speculation (Trouillot, 1995). Similarly, there were no witnesses or evidence to oppose the hypothesis of the man in the archive. So, the story retrieved from the Israeli soldiers became the truth. Being a 'minor' inconvenience beyond the masculine resistance or war, the identity or the voice remains unclaimed, even by the Palestinian side. The second woman, with her passionate search for the truth, does put effort into unraveling the voice of the woman, almost as a form of resistance against the marginalisation of women's voices in history. Trouillot also suggests that "History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility" (Trouillot, 1995, p. xxiii). This resonates with the archivists' attitude of overriding one's experience with the invisible power conferred by society while entirely denying the need for truth to unfold through cultural speculation. The unfolding story of the Bedouin woman in the novel represents how women's

voices remain as historical footnotes in Palestinian history under Israeli occupation and overall invisible patriarchal burdens.

***Minor Detail* as a Resistance and Reclamation of History**

The denial of responsibility for violence against women almost works as a historical pattern, which Shibli hinted at in *Minor Detail*. The second woman, while conducting her investigation, remains sceptical about her step towards the unclaimed voice of a woman. To research the incident of gang-rape, the woman had to put herself in a position of extreme vulnerability, as she mentions, "every day since I learnt about it, I try to convince myself to forget it entirely, and not do anything reckless" (Shibli, 2020, p. 56). This account of the character portrays how the knowledge of violence becomes an inescapable burden and, by attempting to reinvestigate it, is a 'reckless' act of resistance against domination. Zarkov's observation presents a similar dynamic of the Bosnian war crimes against women, which were allegedly ignored and denied by all the involved parties using female bodies as a metaphorical battleground (Zarkov, 2008). The rapists' sides are talked about through media and publications, blaming them, creating political narrations, cultural and ethnic speculations, and so much more in the countries. The political powers claim the raped bodies as war damage, they ask for compensation and legal exaggeration, but the women's voice remains dimmed.

Though history marginalises the voices of the subalterns, the attempt to reclaim and rewrite history is reflected in Shibli's *Minor Detail*. Though many women have been and still are being sexually violated following the geopolitical conflict of Palestine-Israel, the attempt to illustrate the violence through literature is a symbol of resistance against the agency of silencing women's history. The second woman's journey comes to an almost dead end in the investigation due to a lack of evidence. Still, Shibli uses the nonhuman spectrality to connect the history with the present. A dog appears throughout the novel as the bystander from the time of the first woman's murder to in front of the house of the second woman, and then on her journey of the investigation. When the first woman of the novel is being raped and murdered, a dog keeps howling. It is to be argued that the author carefully placed the nonhuman element in such a situation to symbolise the silencing of history. It can be rendered as a nonhuman witness of the brutality against the woman, providing a sense of reality rather than speculation about such forgotten and silenced history. The author writes, "The dog's howling finally stopped, and a degree of calm settled over the place. Now the only sound was the muffled weeping of a girl who had curled up inside her black clothes like a beetle" (Shibli, 2020, p.20). This dog's howling remains relevant to the narrative as the second woman continues to hear it, almost as an echo from the story. She often wakes up to the sound of a dog howling, and the dog's

presence intensifies as the character is followed by a dog throughout her investigation, as an uncanny shadow from the past resisting the silence of history. "All of a sudden, I glimpse a dark black mass walking across the grass, heading towards me, and then it stops in front of the hammock. It is a dog (Shibli, 2020, p.87). The dog here can be interpreted as a narrative return to engage with the revelation of true history as a witness. The dog in this context functions as a carrier of history, which the second woman proceeds to unearth. While society fails to archive the voices of the oppressed, in Shibli's narrative, this minor spectrality is echoed. Even the silent woman in her seventies, whom she gives a ride to and who leads her down the path towards death, reflects the woman from 1949. She proceeds thinking, "She is probably in her seventies. The girl would have been around the same age now, most likely, if she had not been killed." (Shibli, 2020, p. 96). This reflects how the narrative depends on such symbolic elements, which eventually lead towards the possibility of revealing the truth.

The eerie older woman vanishes into a military firing zone. She might have almost led the narrator to her answer, symbolically, about what might have happened to the woman she was investigating, who might have lost her way, been caught by the military, and been put to her last breath, just like the investigator. However, unfortunately, again, the history and the experience she gathered while looking for the history could never be spoken about outside. While she could not get any fruitful information about the incident, her limited exploration was also repressed by the system (Amir, 2022). However, metaphorically, the fragmented and risky journey in search of the truth symbolises a substantial reclamation of the silenced voice, despite the journey's eventual outcome. Moreover, the spectral figures are strongly evident in the second woman, making her absence impossible to ignore, despite the systematic and oppressive censorship of narratives and oral history. Throughout her journey, the woman kept having internal conflicts about her venture based on a minor detail. However, despite the structural, ritualistic retreat from the exploration of truth, a footnote of history became so significant in the novel, challenging the idea that women are reduced to mere details of history.

Conclusion

In *Minor Detail*, Shibli aims to reflect on the systemic silencing of women's horrific experiences in war. The novel depicts the function of female bodies in a war and how they are used as a site of violence and torture in a warzone, and how the socio-political forces overlap, suppressing the voices of women. Shibli, through her style and narrative elements, challenges the norm of rendering women's suffering invisible in history.

By combining the detailing of the environment and minor symbolism, the author has created a bridge between truth and silence through her bizarre, open-ended narrative of spectrality by the end of the novel. While the culture, politics, and society of Israel and

Palestine equally repress the body, voice, and authority of women, the individual venture of a woman in search of another's voice holds a powerful representation of the longing for including women's narratives within the war histories. In the broader context, the text sheds light on the internal socio-cultural space for women in the modern world, which is disrupted by numerous factors, including patriarchy, colonialism, culture, honour, history, and many subliminal narratives within society. The novel challenged the immensity of events like war or ethnic cleansing, which easily cast a shadow over women's narratives by narrating the stories, journeys, and spectrality of women. The narrative highlights how silence traces the systemic distortion of history and how the frame of something minor in history keeps haunting the present and future.

About the Author

Dola Saha is a graduate of the University of Liverpool with an MA specialising in Modern and Contemporary Literature. Her academic interests focus on interdisciplinary literary analysis, particularly at the intersection of literature, history, and cultural theory, with a strong emphasis on close reading and critical interpretation. <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1932-1815>

AI Statement

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Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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