26-10-2023

Who’s Afraid of (a) Minor Detail?

Adania Shibli and Specters of the Disaster on Literature and the Body

Zeina G. Halabi

The article is simultaneously published in TRAFO-Blog and MadaMasr.
It was translated by Rusted Radishes: Beirut Literary and Art Journal.

> It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness or silence.
> — Maurice Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster

In Minor Detail (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017, Eng. 2020), Palestinian novelist Adania Shibli fictionalizes a crime that happened a year into the Nakba, when an Israeli battalion raped and killed a Bedouin girl in the Naqab desert. Shibli's contemporary Palestinian narrator investigates the details of that incident, to no avail, and will soon feel the disaster speak as a specter inhabiting her body, wreaking havoc on it.

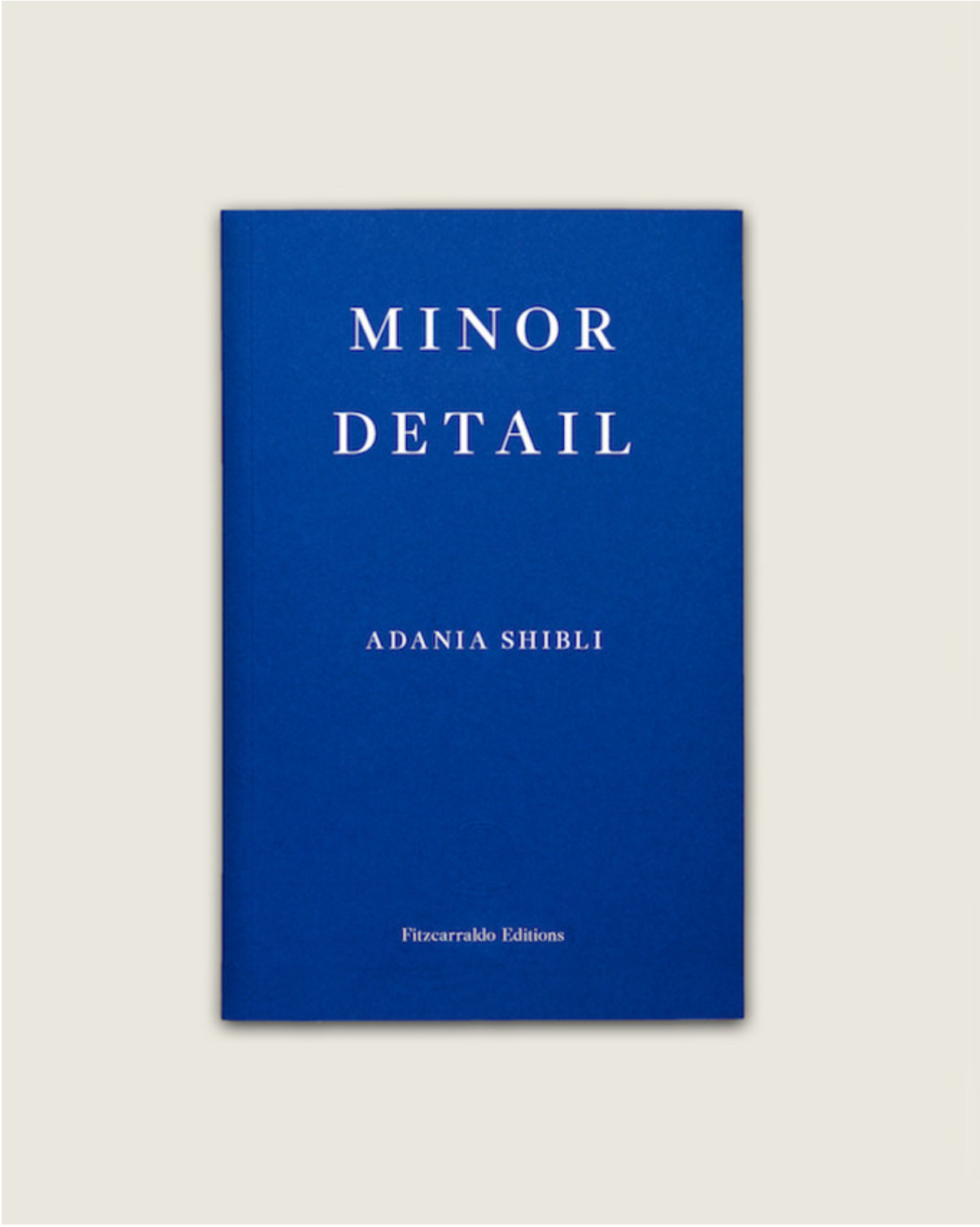
Since its publication, the novel has received a wave of praise in international literary circles. It was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize awarded by the Booker Prize Foundation in London, and translated into more than 11 languages. The tragic fate of the raped and killed Bedouin was told in 11 languages, but not in Hebrew, a curious fact considering the recent surge in Hebrew translation of Arabic literature, particularly of fiction about the Nakba.

What is it about the novel that might have stirred translation anxiety? It is perhaps the same reasons that prompted the organizers of the Frankfurt Book Fair to cancel the ceremony in which Shibli was to be awarded the German Litprom Prize, designated for women writers from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Arab world. The director of the Frankfurt Book Fair linked the cancellation of the ceremony to what he claimed is "Hamas's barbaric terror against Israel," which led the fair's organizers to

“spontaneously decide to create additional stage moments for Israeli voices.” Contrary to alleged claims by the organizers, this decision came without Shibli’s approval.

The cancellation of the ceremony honoring Shibli, as well as the outcry that followed in the German press, sparked a number of positions in support of Shibli, such as the open letter signed by hundreds, including Shibli’s translators and the publishers of her translations. A solidarity statement was signed by hundreds of workers in Arab and international cultural circles, in addition to statements by Arab writers announcing their withdrawal from the fair’s events in protest against oppressive practices that obscure the Palestinian novelist as well as the narrative of her novel. PEN Berlin published a press release on October 12 in support and defense of the prize and arranged a reading at the Frankfurt Book Fair, to which Shibli responded with a brief message that speaks of literature “as a lifeline for many of us.”

This is not Shibli’s first novel, and certainly not the first translated Arabic novel that narrates the Nakba with the narrative of disaster. Why then does Minor Detail trouble the pro-Israel European cultural field, particularly following the events of October 7?



A scene for a crime

Shibli begins Minor Detail with ruin and surveillance. We are in the Naqab desert, and “nothing moved except the mirage.” The space has been emptied of people, except for an Israeli officer with binoculars overlooking the hills to make sure that no “Arab infiltrators” are trying to return to

the devastated area. The officer calls the battalion's soldiers to a meeting and reads them a speech touting the pillars of the Zionist doctrine: a land without a people for a people without a land; the importance of agricultural labor; the necessity to sustain armed struggle to protect the borders of the nascent Zionist state. In the Naqab desert, now emptied of humans, there is a narrative about what the future will bring, and it is guarded by guns.

In this first part of the novel, the meticulous description of the Israeli officer's movements as he circles the camp brings readers up close and personal with the details of his body. Even though the officer is the master and commander of the place, he is wary of the natural world, which never ceases to unsettle him: He sweats under the blazing August sun, to which he is not yet accustomed, as he struggles to breathe due to the desert sand and the sandstorms. Though devoid of inhabitants, the desert offers no safe space for the officer, who is pursued by a nervously barking dog and stung by ants, insects and spiders, which he triumphantly exterminates. Even if the people of the Naqab are defeated, nature will ultimately triumph over the officer, who is bitten by an unknown desert creature that slows his movement and leaves him trembling in pain. If no humans can avenge the violence of the new occupiers, nature certainly will.

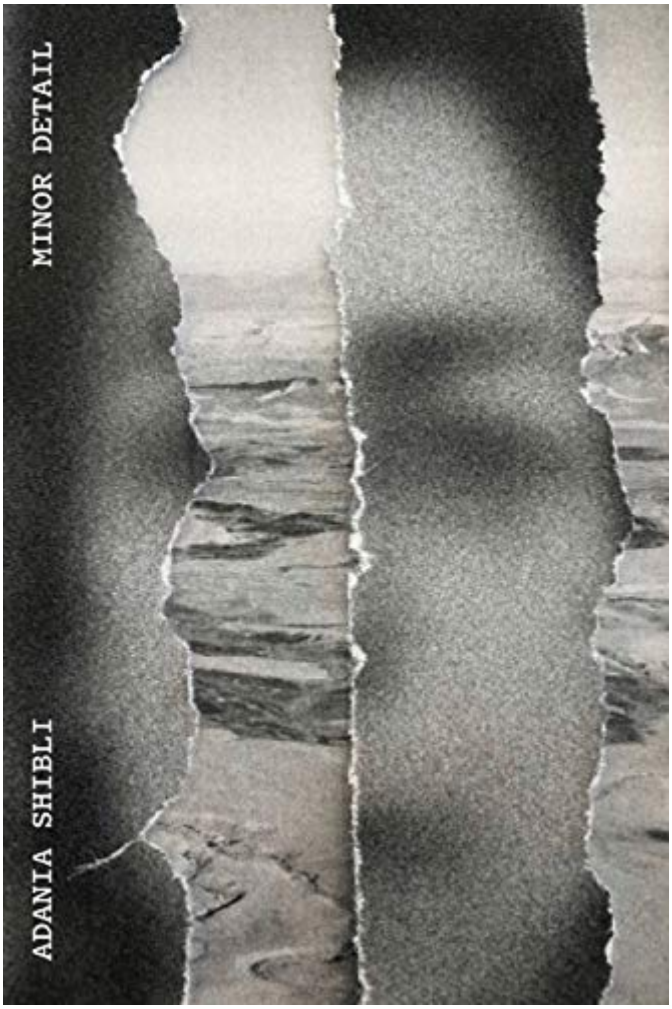
The portrait of the Israeli officer is drawn from the point of view of an observant narrator who dispassionately describes every detail of the incident in a withdrawn, cold and monotonous tone. The narrator is diligent in keeping note of the historical moment that frames the scene. We know, for example, that we are between August 9 and August 13, 1949 — one year after the Nakba.

The elements of the first part of Minor Detail harken to the cold language of forensic reporting, charged with the task of conjuring up the temporal, geographic and human circumstances of a soon-to-be crime. And so it was: The soldiers found “a band of Arabs standing motionless by the spring,” so they shot them, before they heard the suppressed sobs of a girl “who had curled up inside her black clothes like a beetle.” Neither the narrator nor the soldiers who arrive at the scene understand the language that the girl speaks, but the narrator describes the scene with consistent accuracy as the girl winds up in the hands of the Israeli officer:

> Eventually he turned to the still moaning black mass and lunged at her, grabbing her with both hands and shaking her vigorously. The dog barked louder, and she wailed louder, and the sounds merged as he pushed the girl’s head into the ground, clamping his right hand over her mouth, and her sticky saliva, mucus, and tears stuck to his hand. Her smell invaded his nose, forcing him to avert his head. But a moment later he turned back toward her, then brought his other hand to his mouth, raising his index finger to his lips, and stared directly into her eyes.

The nameless, voiceless Bedouin girl is now held captive by the camp’s soldiers under the command of the officer, who is chased by a dog, nervously barking and howling. Aggravated by the smell of the captive woman, the soldiers

tear her clothes off, drench her hair with gasoline, and throw soap and water on her naked body to clean her. They proceed to cut her hair and dress her in an Israeli military uniform. Then the officer of the battalion rapes her and orders his soldiers to dig a hole, kill her and bury her in it.



The elements of the crime are now complete in what resembles a forensic report that has gathered all the necessary facts: Near a camp built by Israeli soldiers in the Naqab desert, one year after the establishment of the state of Israel, and on the ruins of a Bedouin camp in which the majority of its residents were killed, an Israeli battalion captures a Bedouin girl, then rapes and kills her.

The first part of Minor Detail describes a crime scene: There is a corpse, a perpetrator and witnesses. Except the

victim’s voice is unheard, unintelligible, and her story will remain untold.

Investigation as method

The second part of the novel jumps over seven decades to the contemporary moment and switches to first person narration. We are in Ramallah and the scene, as in 1949, is predicated on ruin and surveillance. An Israeli patrol chases three Palestinian activists, surrounding the building they shelter in, before blowing it up. An unnamed narrator recounts the events of the chase and then the bombing, but seems unfazed by the violence surrounding her. She becomes preoccupied with an article in a Hebrew newspaper recalling an “incident” that occurred with an Israeli military battalion whose soldiers suffered casualties in confrontations with Egyptian forces in the Naqab desert in 1949. The article mentions the killing of a Bedouin girl in one solitary line that strikes the narrator: She was born on the same month and day that the Bedouin was killed. This detail is sufficient enough to pull the narrator out of the surrounding upheaval and draw her to the Bedouin girl, marginal as she is to the grand Israeli narrative of defeat and conquest. Reflecting on the sudden established connection with the murdered Bedouin, the narrator says:

> [T]his minor detail, which others might not give a second thought, will stay with me forever; in spite of myself and how hard I try to forget it, the truth of it will never stop chasing me, given how fragile I am… There may in fact be nothing more important than this little detail, if one

> wants to arrive at the complete truth, which, by leaving out the girl's story, the article does not reveal.

What really happened to the Bedouin girl, the narrator's newly discovered twin? Had the narrator been able to hear the girl's voice, what more could she have learned about the Palestinian disaster?

Shaken by the silenced fate of the girl killed on the same day and month she was born, the narrator decides to begin her investigation. She reaches out to the Israeli journalist who published the piece but gets nowhere with him because, at the end of the day, the Bedouin's story is merely a minor detail in the grand narrative of things, of how Israeli forces braved the battle against the Egyptian army, lost a few soldiers, but eventually vanquished the Arabs from the desert. The narrator soon understands that she must search the archives of the Israeli army outside Tel Aviv and later in the archives of the Naqab settlement where the incident occurred.

The narrator crosses the Qalandiya checkpoint and enters Israeli territory using an Israeli identity card that she borrowed from her friend, betting on the open secret that Israeli soldiers cannot distinguish between the faces of Palestinian women. In Jaffa, she visits the Israeli army archives, heavily guarded by soldiers, and watches a documentary about the construction of Jewish settlements in the 1930s and 1940s. The narrator turns to one of these films in which settlers are building a hut, one wooden plank after another, until the construction is complete. Then, the settlers gather in a circle and begin to dance, hand in hand, with the joy of those who have finally managed to subdue

both nature and humans. The cognitive dissonance between the joy and solidarity the scene displays and the ideological and military violence it implies will drive the narrator to press her finger to the screen and replay the scene in reverse:

> The settlers break the circle, then go back to the huts they've just finished building, dismantle them, carry the pieces off in carts, and exit the frame. I fast-forward the tape. Then I rewind it. Again and again, I build settlements and dismantle them (…).

"I build settlements and dismantle them." The narrator suddenly realizes that visual technology has given her almost divine power over modern colonial propaganda, and she does not hesitate to use her newly acquired power. She rewinds the video to the starting point, dismantling settlements, tampering with the historical sequence that led to the colonial moment she continues to inhabit. The narrator toys with colonial temporality and reverses — if only metaphorically, if only in her imagination — the traces of seven decades since the disaster.

In her forensic investigation into the Bedouin girl's narrative, the Palestinian narrator must overcome an additional epistemic barrier, especially in her movement across the space of colonial geography. In exactly which eradicated Palestinian village is she? How does one investigate a crime scene whose site has been completely erased? She holds an Israeli map and another of historical Palestine, destabilizing Israel's ideological claims by holding one map against the other, colonial geography against

national history. And yet, she gets nowhere.

But the narrator keeps going, without really knowing where or why. She proceeds with her investigations to the Naqab desert, arriving specifically at the Nirim settlement near the site of the incident, which is only a few kilometers away from the southern border of the Gaza Strip. The settlement's archivist tells her that he remembers a similar incident involving a Bedouin woman killed by her relatives and buried in a nearby well, as Bedouins have always done to their unruly women. The narrator understands that no truth will come out of the colonial archives, not only because they conceal it, but also because the archives deliberately construct a counter-narrative that suspends narration.

The narrator has come to know that colonial epistemological tools — whether maps, newspapers, military or settlement archives — obstruct her search, oblivious as she is that her body will become the sanctuary of her Bedouin ancestor, her twin.

The disaster as specters

The narrator confesses her inability to come to terms with the imperatives of borders. She admits that she knows no limits to her affective reactions in daily communication; that she can rarely recognize danger and approaches it recklessly, often venturing through borders guarded by Israeli crossings and checkpoints. The narrator's disdain for the notion of borders drives her to move between Ramallah, Haifa and the Naqab Desert with simultaneous dread and ease. She flows almost as a transparent creature, passing without being seen, breathing without making a sound, as if

she were one of the same desert creatures too familiar with the space and whose mere presence poses a threat to those, like the Israeli officer in 1949, who have occupied the space.

It is as though what pushes the narrator towards borders — geographical, military and, most importantly, the borders preventing her from reaching out to her past, to her murdered ancestral twin — is a specter that has occupied her body and now controls her movements.

The secret of the Bedouin girl's death, along with the pain she endured, constitutes a ghostly entity, a specter that rises from the ruins of the suppressed secrets of previous generations, the memory of unacknowledged violence and unmourned deaths. If the Palestinian woman cannot investigate the murder of her twin in the fortified Zionist settlement and military archives, then spectral haunting will turn her body into a makeshift memorial site, the last remaining space for mourning ancestral losses.

Thus, the narrator's body becomes a stage for her twin's specter, whose voice can now be heard through the devastation she recreates in it. The trembling narrator is all sweat, tears, saliva — bodily fluids that carry the voice of the murdered Bedouin girl. The narrator's hands, as well as her clothes and hair, exude a stubborn smell of gasoline, the same substance that the Israeli soldiers poured over the Bedouin's hair.

The specter of the murdered Bedouin announces itself through the bodily secretions of the contemporary narrator, but it does much more: It dictates her steps. The specter drives her to cross guarded borders, to the Israeli army

archives, to the site where the Bedouin was executed, even to the Bedouin's grave, which must be somewhere, unmarked. It is as though the specter plays a parasitic role, revealing itself only through the devastation that it once experienced, which it now reinscribes on the body of the oblivious narrator.

A gamut of affective reactions controls the body of the narrator. Throughout her investigation, the narrator appears fearful, anxious, apprehensive and suspicious to the point of delirium. She discerns the shadow of a woman staring at her behind a closed door. Is she a Bedouin? Is she the same Bedouin woman? The narrator then offers an elderly Bedouin a ride to her destination without asking her if she knows anything about the murdered girl, seven decades ago. She silently observes the face of an elderly Bedouin woman and tries to read her palm and the protruding arteries of her hands, in the hope of finding answers there. There is a dog barking from afar, persistently following the narrator, as though it were the same dog that witnessed the first crime, returning to remind the narrator, who is oblivious to borders, about the fate of her spectral twin.

The narrator is so overwhelmed by emotion and bodily secretions that she can no longer speak — perhaps because she inhabits the liminal space between the world of the living and that of the dead. The closer she gets to her twin's burial site, the closer she is to death.

As in both parts of the novel, Shibli concludes Minor Detail on the same eerie note of devastation and surveillance. A dog follows the narrator anxiously, aimlessly, and howls at her just before she enters a military training camp outside

the settlement. The narrator hears the calls of Israeli soldiers ordering her to turn back. But the haunted narrator, oblivious to borders, does not adhere to the calls and proceeds to walk. She feels a burning sensation in her leg and then in her chest, while the sound of gunfire rattles behind her. At the end of her investigative journey, the narrator hangs in a contemporary moment suspended between the past, where her twin was murdered, and her own future as another soon-to-be killed Palestinian woman.

The narrator falls silent at the end of Minor Detail, as though her silence is, too, a minor detail.

The danger of (a) minor detail

The investigation into the Bedouin's murder in Minor Detail probes colonial historiography, whose hegemony is commensurate to its ability to distort and erase, by means of memory institutions such as museums and archives. If truth is missing within the walls of the fortified Israeli archive, then the infiltration of a Palestinian woman and her manipulation of the temporal flow of the archive's narrative becomes in and by itself an act of sabotage. This is how a haunted body dares to dismantle the disaster: She plays and rewinds, one settlement at a time.

But the narrator's subversive and deconstructive fantasies have reached their limits. She has come to realize that the rape and murder of her Bedouin twin, whose body is merely a minor detail at the margins of the colonial narrative — and perhaps also at the margins of the Palestinian nationalist narrative — will remain unresolved, erased from memory, and therefore impossible to mourn.

As colonial memory institutions fail the Palestinian narrator,

her own body will step up as a receptacle for her ungrieved twin's soul. The disaster that the narrator could not have witnessed will resurface as a specter that wreaks havoc on her senses, emotions and movements, demonstrating how transgenerational memory travels, how it sits in the body and the pain with which it inscribes the stories of ungrieved losses.

Such minor details as the murdered Bedouin girl, spectral hauntings and affective reactions are to Shibli's narrator a gateway to salvation: "focusing intently on the most minor details, like dust on the desk or fly shit on a painting, as the only way to arrive at the truth and definitive proof of its existence." Failing to find the truth in colonial narratives, the narrator is set on searching for salvation in the details.

Minor Detail is not the first award-winning novel that destabilizes the centrality of the word, the archive and the flow of colonial time. How do we read, then, the anxiety surrounding the celebration of its author? Why the anxiety in honoring a writer whose novel is invited to sit within the contested but highly guarded corpus of "world literature"? Perhaps the answer is in what Minor Detail performs.

Adania Shibli foregrounds minor details as epistemological tools. The very shortcomings of minor details, their irrelevance and indiscernibility, become a subversive device for counter-discourse and processes of excavation. She suggests to us a methodology for investigating the fate of women whose tragic lives can only be told by means of identification, projection and details that are immune to the hegemonic power of regimes of truth.

Shibli writes in Minor Detail with the caution of a writer who

knows that no single narrative can give voice to minor details, those marginal subjects have no place in hegemonic articulations of history. She toys with the dispassionate language of forensic investigations rather than the aesthetics of metaphor, perhaps because there was a crime with no culprit, and perhaps because metaphor is as lacking and sterile as forensic reporting.

As such, we can read Shibli's Minor Detail with an eye on other contemporary novels that deploy the narrative tool of the search for incomplete, suspended and amputated narratives. It invokes other works in which a woman searches for her tragic twin, not in private and state archives, or in oral history, but rather in what lies at their margins, in the outlier of their consciousness. It is as though Shibli's Minor Detail conjures Iman Mersal's Traces of Enayat. In the two novels, there are no institutions of memory — no archive, no museum, or a marked grave — to which Shibli's and Mersal's narrators can resort as they search for their dead twin. While Shibli's narrator searches for her twin in the crypt of colonial narratives, Mersal's narrator searches for hers in the aporias of the Arabic literary canon. In both novels, specters return to leech onto women narrators whose psyche becomes as fragile as a crime scene, as haunted as a cemetery, disturbing the quietude of the contemporary moment.

What may be equally disturbing about Minor Detail is how it articulates a sense of disenchantment with conventional approaches to preserving collective memory. Eight decades into the disaster, no witnesses remain. And those who did not experience the disaster know better than to resort to colonial archives. As it bases its investigative approach on haunting and bodily inscriptions, the novel displaces oral

historiography as a method that has been instrumental to race, queer and feminist methodologies.

Since there seems to be no liberating possibility for oral history about the 1948 disaster in the contemporary moment, bodies, affect and senses emerge as new epistemological tools of insurgency, whose disruptive and destructive power is difficult to fathom and restrict. And herein lies their danger.

Shibli's caution and her unique take on the outliers of history is what is so dangerous and unsettling about Minor Detail: It seems to say that the Nakba is not merely a historical event that can be narrated through conventional or critical historiographic tools. Rather, it is very much a contemporary question, a present force that bursts from the faultlines of these very tools, outside discourse and language. This is perhaps why it unsettles and disturbs.

Minor Details has stakes not only in contemporary Nakba literature but also in how the Palestinian disaster can be inscribed as "world literature." It poses universal questions about women, war and colonial violence; about the limits of logocentric epistemic tools; about how literary canons are constructed and how they are shielded. The novel is contemporary in as much as it pushes the boundaries of the content and form of disaster literature, and so it will certainly disturb those who wish to confine the narrative of the Palestinian disaster to Israeli memory institutions or conventional narrative forms, preventing it from sitting comfortably, as it should, at the table of "world literature."

Those who celebrate Minor Detail and those who prefer it forgotten will ultimately converge on the unavoidable truth,

that the specters of the disaster are still searching for a voice, and that they will not rest until their story is told. We know too well the specters’ appetite for havoc, how they keep returning, like that nervously barking dog, to disturb the gatekeepers of maimed narratives. This is what makes them terrifying.