

ഇശൽ
വൈത്യകം
ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 31

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 16 print issue 31 December 2022



Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Department of Cultural Affairs
Government of Kerala-India
December 2022

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2022 ഡിസംബർ

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

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മാപ്പിള കലാ അക്കാദമി

കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638

ഫോൺ: 0483 2711432

ഇശൽ പൈത്യകത്തിൽ പ്രസിദ്ധീകരിക്കുന്ന രചനകളിലെ ആശയങ്ങൾ മാപ്പിളകലാ അക്കാദമിയുടെതോ, സംസ്ഥാന സർക്കാരിന്റേതോ, സാംസ്കാരിക വകുപ്പിന്റേതോ ആയിരിക്കണമെന്നില്ല. - എഡിറ്റർ

Ishal Paithrkam

ISSN: 2582-550X

Peer-Reviewed

UGC Listed

Quarterly

Bilingual

Issue: 31

Online issue: 16

Devenember: 2022

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Editor

Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Publisher

Mahakavi Moyinkutty

Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Kondotty, 673638

India.

Ph: 0483-2711432

www.mappilakalaaacademy.org

www.ishalpaithrkam.info

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Rhetoric Silence and Endemic Violence in Postmillennial Palestinian Fiction: A Critique of Adania Shibli's *Touch* and *Minor Detail*

**Sherin. K. Rahiman
Dr Faisal.P**

*Fictional writings on Palestine in the postmillennial cultural context are arguably characterised by a major shift towards multivocality. These writings, emerging from different parts of the globe, of writers residing inside and outside the geographical borders of the Pre 1948 Palestine include Palestinian writings and solidarity literature by non-Palestinians. Most of these works are linear narratives, offering a panoramic view of Palestinian life and culture, reflecting and refracting the major political events in Palestinian history. Marking a departure from the prevailing styles of literature with highly contextualized narratives, some writings present Palestinian experience in a detached and covert way. In this context, this paper attempts to critically analyse how Adania Shibli's *Touch* and *Minor Detail* become representative of the post millennial Palestinian fictional writings which depart from the norms of the conventional writings by implicitly presenting the gruesome social realities of occupation, offering an insiders' view of the mundane Palestinian life dotted with inexplicable instances of endemic violence, and thereby posing resistance to the geographical and historical erasure initiated by the Settler colonialism.*

Keywords: Palestine ,Multivocality, Resistance, Trauma, Violence, Silence

Palestinian fictional writings in the postmillennial cultural context are arguably characterised by a major shift towards multivocality. Writers from different parts of the globe, residing inside and outside the geographical borders of the Pre 1948 Palestine gave voices to the Palestinian plight. It includes Palestinian writings and solidarity literature by non-Palestinians. These writings present different aspects of the Palestinian experience, thereby posing resistance to the geographical and historical erasure initiated by the Settler colonialism. Having been exposed to the incessant violence and unparalleled dispossession since the massive expulsion of the Nakba, fictional writings on Palestine, in general, seek to recreate the fundamental temporal points of reference in Palestinian history like the Nakaba and Naksa and Lebanon Israel war. Most of these works are linear narratives, offering a panoramic view of Palestinian life and culture, reflecting and refracting the major political events in Palestinian history. Marking a departure from the prevailing styles of literature with highly contextualized narratives, some writings present Palestinian experience in a detached and covert way. In this context, this paper attempts to critically analyse how Adania Shibli's *Touch* and *Minor Detail* fictionally present the experience of violence and horror that the Palestinians encounter and endure daily, especially after the new upheavals in the twenty-first century, "making trauma an ever-present reality in Palestinian life and a defining feature of their existence" (Moore and Qabaha 19)

Shibli's novels present the newly emerged consciousness in Palestinian fiction about catastrophes like the separation wall and never-ending checkpoints. In an interview, Shibli says that "realization of the repeated injustice that one cannot escape in the context of Palestine was the first force to push me early on into literature." (Shibli 81). Thus, unlike the larger panoramic frame of violence, she resorts to "the quotidian and mundane" (Shibli) experience of violence in the Palestinian life, which is more disquieting. The trauma of loss and dispossession, thus, in her novels, is substituted with perpetual fear and constriction which is a present-day Palestinian reality. The political power and authoritarianism of the Israeli government present be-

fore them varied forms of violence as part of the occupation which undergo transformation over time due to the resistance of varied forms from the Palestinians. As Ayyash states, “[...]violence and politics are not two separate entities; rather, they form a continuum in which relations of domination and power are established, but also continuously resisted, modified, inverted, and negotiated” (354). In the new millennium, the changed socio-political context of the conflict has necessitated a new mode of resistance which is reflected in the fictional writings too. The Post- Oslo, Post- Second Intifada Palestine challenges the writers to think about the present and future along with the past. “The newer generation of Palestinian writers must contend not just with the erasure of their past, but also with how these historical foundations -or elisions- shape an uncertain and ambiguous future”(Fox 14). Adania Shibli’s language is notable for its accurate description of the human life and the nature that survive the erasure ,though exposed to incessant violence.Language can resist violence by resurrecting the erased life and landscape. “But you can write about what has been erased from this landscape—those trees don’t disappear from the language, and that way, they almost exist. People may gain from literature what they cannot get from their own lives”(Shibli). Language, for Shibili, is a means to express the lived reality and so each pause and silence in language serves a purpose. She writes only in Arabic even though she is a multilingual person who knows six languages including English. Shibli writes in Arabic to draw on the immense capacity of the language to express shades of implications.

Both *Touch* and *Minor Detail* are experimental novels which defy the stereotypical fictional norms of Palestinian writings in general.Instead of employing a contextually direct approach, drawing the stories from the contemporaneous events, these novels fictionally present the violence that characterize the lives of Palestinians in an unusually covert but effective fashion. In other words, these novels seem to typify “the rapid pace of the change sweeping through the Arab world over the last few decades , [that] profoundly affected both its various cultural products and its writers' perception of their national identity, social role and the nature of literature” (Hafez 93).

Tracking the trajectory of Palestinian writings, Bashir Abu-Manneh observes that the post 1970 Palestinian writings often adopt modernist techniques, employing a ‘liquidation of individual and collective agency,’ (Abu-Manneh 32) and making a ‘shift from an emancipatory realism to the self-enclosed and privatized aesthetic of modernism’ (24). Instead of presenting a story with well knit plot and syllogistic pregression of events, these novels tend to depict the inherently present violence that form part of Plestinian lives by probing the inner recesses of the minds of the protagonists. Referring to this change in writing, Hafez comments,

The widespread political intimidation made openness a risky endeavour and a new concern for the internal life of the characters and their subtle ways of expressing disapproval changed the orientation of narrative and its structure. The hero who was eager to change the world became entangled in his own critical vision, besieged and unable to comprehend external reality. The structure became not one of plot and action but of probing the inner psyche of the character (105)

Touch and Minor Detail are arguably resistance writings as they attempted to imaginatively reconfigure the socio-political context of Palestine, offering a counter discourse to the official narratives of history. Shibili makes this reimagining of historical and political events through fictional experimentations with plot construction, character building and her unique narrative strategy. These novels, hence, become resistance writings as Harlow says that “to represent the historical, cultural and ideological context that shaped the narrative of choice, a resistant writer challenges certain literary conventions that have to do with temporal chronology and continuity” (Barbara Harlow 80). In fact, it can be perceived that resistance writings in Palestine had a burgeoning in the aftermath of al-Nakba in 1948, which led to the forcible displacements and violent expulsions of more than seven hundred fifty thousand Palestinians from their homelands. These literary articulations, alongside reclaiming the lost land and history, fictionally presented nuances of “the chaotic reality – settler colonialism, refugee camps, military occupation, labour exploitation and others” (Mir 124). Salam Mir, in this connection, further states that, “Whereas

the historical outcome has been total denial of Palestinian existence as a people and the establishment of another state on their homeland, the literary output has reclaimed the lost land, albeit in words, reconstructed the denied history, and emphasized the Palestinian voice” (124). Referring to these writings, Chahaandreyi Mukherjee states, “this literary transgression highlights the implications of neo-colonization, insidiousness of neo-imperialism, the pervasiveness of racism and the vicious circle of exile, abandonment and return” (Mukherjee). These narratives, it can be seen, are highly political in nature and seek to problematize issues related to identity, belonging, cultural hegemony and the legacy of loss and dispossession. Nonetheless, Shibli often in her interviews, stated that she preferred not to have a positioning in the case of Palestine which she considered to be a privilege. Palestine for her is a position of suffering, experiencing and witnessing which ultimately points towards similar human experiences elsewhere. In an interview with Claudia Steinberg published in *World Literature Today*, Shibli stated,

In fact, to “think about” Palestine is already a position of privilege that I would not like to engage with. My concern with Palestine is a personal one, not a literary one. It forms my literature; but my literature is never about Palestine. It is rather within and from Palestine as a condition of injustice; of the normalization of pain and degradation. It reveals the limits of language. Whoever is concerned with how humans are deprived of their humanity from the first day they are born, can certainly find ways to unravel this pain beyond forcing those suffering to convince them of how painful it really is. There are also people who see this and do not want to know. Slavery, colonization, the Holocaust, to name a few ... these are acts that happened over a prolonged period of time and people managed to turn a blind eye (Shibli 81).

Shibli’s distanced mode of narration thus serves to impart a universality to the suffocation and deprivation of the characters, at the same time it amplifies the horror and emotional trauma inherent in the situation.

Language, in Shibli’s novels, is a means to express the inexpressible traumatic experiences of people in Palestine. The charac-

ters seem to engage in an internal dialogue with the world than speak their minds to those who interact with them in everyday life. Shibili is meticulous about the language she writes in and she writes in classical Arabic. In her interview Shibili reflected on her language,

I may be conservative, but I write only in classical Arabic, and when I speak, I only use the demotic form: I can never mix the two. In emails, people are writing to you as if they were speaking. For me, it's a huge struggle—I spend so much time with emails, trying not to betray my classical Arabic. Not that I worry I could hurt it, but to me the written word is its very own domain(Shibili,81)

Shibili's language seems to transcend the written word to a realm of meaning that often elucidates the violent transactions hidden within the ordinary lives not only in Palestine but elsewhere also. Elisabeth Jaquette, the translator of *Minor detail* commented on the language, "As the title suggests, the details which one might consider 'minor' – a dog barking, shadows moving across sand – are in fact the book's most constitutive elements. So I strived to be even more attuned than usual to subtle choices in language, and even more precise in how I recreated those elements in English." (Jaquette)

Shibli uses language sparingly in a fragmented form in both the novels and language goes beyond the spoken word to the level of something organic, inherent in the mundane and the repressed. In the fragmented form, it seems to bring out violence unacknowledged by the people who go through it in their every day life. The reader is apparently left with the horror the characters live each day in oblivion. The constriction of their experience leave silence or fragmented words which Shibli articulates and shapes into a narrative strewn with violence. The physical violence or the experienced violence is replaced by the traumatic memory of the characters, often dissociated from the consciousness. Thus, Shibli chooses language as medium to expose the psyche of the characters who succumb to the violence inherent in their physical and mental landscape. Hence the silence of these characters tend to evade the discourse of violence in their lives but produce it in the due course.

The interpretations and extrapolations on the conflict and violence as they appear in other fictional outputs are apparently ab-

sent in Shibli's novels. Shibli attempts to unravel the Palestinian suffering from inside as people experience it, at the same time, endeavours to connect to the rest of the humanity who suffer because inequality is normalised by the privileged. "Palestine is a mode of living, an experience. But it's also a position of witnessing, from a position that can teach us. If you are listening, it becomes so natural that you care, and you create a connection of care toward others that is not limited to the borders of the nation-state or to Palestine as such" (Shibli 82). In fact, the muted, isolated characters in both novels along with the fragmented narratives bring in a political commentary which defies the overt and redundant stories of violence.

The novels achieve an obscurity that unveils the subtle violence which is alarmingly mundane. The novel *Touch*, published in 2002 in Arabic and translated into English in 2010 tells the story of a little girl, youngest of eight girls in the family, living in an unnamed Palestinian village. The novel delineates the profound impact of living with violence, whether it occurred in the past or is happening contemporaneously. The novel offers no linear narrative with a typically smooth progression of events and character development. Instead, six chapters, are arranged unnumbered and are titled with 'Colours,' 'Silence,' 'Movement,' 'Language,' and 'The Wall', referring to different sensory episodes and each further divided into short subsections, fusing the mundane and the extraordinary as experienced by the girl. *Touch* narrates the coming of age story of a little girl who is described as 'little girl' at the beginning of each chapter and 'girl' at the end. The readers follow the growth of the protagonist from infancy to her time of marriage in each episode.

Touch covertly depicts the ubiquitous presence of an inherent violence that marks the life experiences of Palestinians on a daily basis. According to Kaelen Wilson Goldie, "*Touch* purrs along like an extended prose poem - all words and sounds and images - as Shibli picks up the glinting fragments of the girl's experience, then turns them over in her hand to see how they refract the light of a world so radically constricted and reduced" (Goldie). Shibli purposefully employs a decontextualized presentation so that the intensity and the minute details of the of varied kinds of violence that permeate the

lives of Palestinians are fictionally conveyed effectively. The name of the place Palestine does not appear till the end of the novel. The protagonist is not even given a name. Instead, the author refers to her throughout the novella as a 'little girl,' or 'girl', thereby making her an 'every-girl'. The girl's perceptions on political social, and even economic events in Palestinian history are more gripping than the graphic ones seen unsettles the readers by making the protagonist both visible and invisible simultaneously.

At the very outset of *Touch*, Shibli, presents the little girl as incapacitated and lacking in autonomy, standing by a "big brown water tank that stood on four legs, appearing from a distance to be an ant standing perfectly still" (7). She wraps one of her hands around one of the tank's legs as the flakes of rust glitter like gold on her palm. She attempts the same with the other hand, but rubs too hard and hurts herself. Hence, without either hand free to lift her dress, she wets herself, and so the novel begins with a stream of urine sliding down the little girl's legs. Apparently, the novel sets out to create a sense of fear, horror and vulnerability surrounding the location and the life of the little girl in the beginning itself. This depiction of a gruesome private allows the reader to universalise the experience of the whole nation alongside responding to the political changes in Palestine.

Shibli, in *Touch*, revisits the nascently promising, but ultimately ill-fated, period just prior to the First Intifada (1987–93). Written as a palimpsest, wherein each episode describes a different set of experiences from the same period, *Touch* follows the (traumatic) development of a little girl. Rather than foregrounding the bloody violence endemic to the First Intifada milieu, it gives an intimate portrayal of childhood and adolescence as discreetly violent. This focus on the private allows the reader to discover how the violence of living under occupation is present in seemingly innocuous, yet irreparably damaging ways; delineating Palestinian life in the recent past provides a critique of the ongoing crisis in the early twenty-first century (Fox 120)

Though her novels hint about the political or historical context of the events, Shibli seems to hint at the continuity or looping of the violence which erupts in the everyday life of a Palestinian without

a warning and how the people cope with it or make sense of it.

Minor detail was the result of twelve years of her ruminations on what to write or how to write in a time there was a great loss of Hope. In her interview with Fathima Bhutto at Edinburg book festival Shibli stated that the novel was an attempt to “react without being revengeful” when “the possibilities to live in dignity”(Shibli 07:20–07:55) is lost. Originally published in Arabic in 2015 and was translated to English in 2020, *Minor Detail* can be considered as a ‘dyptique’, a novel with two nameless characters. The novel is written in two parts and each narrates the minor details of the lives of these two women characters. The first woman is a young Bedouin Arab woman who was raped and murdered by Israeli troops in 1949, a year after the Nakba, as an Israeli officer oversees the clearing of the Negev Desert and the establishment of the border with Egypt. While undertaking routine patrol, some soldiers encounter a group of Arabs and immediately kill the men in the group. The other character is a woman in Ramallah who happens to read the story in a newspaper decades later and becomes haunted by the fact that the girl’s assault happened twenty five years to the day before she was born.

Minor Detail is oddly filled with countless mundane details of the daily life in repetitive way, creating a resemblance of normalcy in an otherwise worthless and unruly world. Opening with the detailing of the routine activities of a commander and his monomaniac obsession with cleanliness, the novel repetitively presents the daily activities of the commander in such a way that a mood of fear and foreboding is evoked throughout, symbolising the infinite loop of fear the Palestinians are trapped in. The first part of the novel is primarily based on a report published in Haaretz in October 2003 which described the gang rape of a young Bedouin girl by a unit of IDF soldiers in August 1949. In the report to the Commander of the Company, the officer states, “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” (Lavie). Based on the report in the article, Shibili chronicles the history of Palestinian day today life and

explores the inhuman side of military power. Reviewing *Minor Detail*, 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. This is the political novel we have all been waiting for. (Kandasamy)

In fact, Shibli's *Bedouin girl* is perhaps a representative of millions of people whose stories are suppressed, dismissed and erased. The girl's bitter experience of being gang raped and then killed is arguably depicted as a 'minor detail' which is erased from the pages of history. In other words, Shibli seems to initiate a post-modernist subversion of history by elaborately and meticulously describing the life of the girl which is otherwise erased from the mainstream narratives. In a way, the title 'Minor' is emblematic of the possibility of multiple histories and subjective pasts as Linda Hutcheon states that "there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of 'genuine historicity'" (89).

The second part of the novel is a first person narrative of a Palestinian woman living in Ramallah who stumbles upon an article in a newspaper about the incident which attracted her attention because it occurred exactly twenty five years before, on the exact date as that of her birth. This 'minor detail' of an odd coincidence fascinates the woman to take up an adventurous journey to find the repressed truth, recreating the past and re-narrating the history, possibly from the victim's point of view. The sheer apathetic attitude of the narrator in detailing things in detached manner seems to underscore the normalization of horrors happening in Palestine on an everyday basis. Shibli states on 'minor details', "...there are some who consider this way of seeing...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” (41).

To conclude, both *Touch* and *Minor Detail* are representative of the post-millennial Palestinian fictional writings which depart from the norms of the conventional writings by presenting the gruesome social realities of occupation from a detached stance, offering an insiders' view of the mundane Palestinian life dotted with inexplicable instances of endemic violence. They also attempt to give voice to those characters who are silenced or rather doomed to communicate within the constricted environment in a way that only a victim can make sense of. Shibli makes use of varied linguistic and narrative strategies like non-linear plot with anonymous characters, fragmented sentences, nuanced depiction of the landscape with its sights and sounds and tracing the trajectories of power and fear operating through the psyche of the protagonists. Thus, Shibli succeeds in presenting the trauma and violence that permeate the lives of the Palestinians in particular and the underprivileged humans living under occupation and injustice in general. By fusing both the private and the public, these novels protest against normalising the systemic violence endemic to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories without using specific chronological or political details and addressing the question as to how a writer can transform it into a literary resistance with greater effectiveness.

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