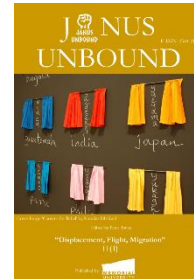


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Suppressed Narrator, Silenced Victim in Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail*

Hania A.M. Nashef

Introduction

T*erra nullius*, a term derived from the Latin, loosely meaning nobody's land, was a tenet in international law often employed to justify claims of occupation and settler-colonialism. The phrase was also used by some settler nations to allow them to designate areas as empty lands, in order to justify occupying and emptying territories of their indigenous populations. In addition, the term was “not only legal but also cultural, historical, and ultimately political,” allowing for “stripping the indigenous people and their culture of their status as rightful owners of land, resources, and political power and legitimating such dispossessions by presenting the land as empty” (Kedar, Amara and Yiftachel 2018, 9). The Palestinians have long been at the receiving end of a 19th century Zionist slogan, perpetuated by British author and Zionist leader Israel Zangwill, which claimed that Palestine was empty, a land without a people, to be given to a people without a land. Not only did this rhetoric render the Palestinians invisible but it also pitted them against “a powerful story of erasure propagated by a Zionist settler project” (Nashef 2019, 1). Although the systematic eviction of Palestinians from their homeland has been recorded at length since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, documentation of the latter practices has for the most part concerned itself with urban centers and villages. Thus, expulsion and removal of marginalized communities, namely those of the Bedouins, from their ancestral encampments or homes have been given scant coverage by mainstream media or even academia. By the end of the British mandate, between “75,000–90,000 Bedouins, belonging to 95 different tribes grouped into eight tribal confederations (*qaba'i*), lived in the Negev” (Kedar 87). However, a nomadic life is often stigmatized by the notion of constant movement, impermanence, and rootlessness. Such a life is rarely considered valuable when compared with other lives, its customary practices and laws rarely recognized. In societies where nomadic people exist, a “hierarchy of personhood” often relegates the nomads “to an inferior status marked by devalued cultural identities, livelihood strategies, and capabilities” (Kingston 2019, 129). According to Kedar *et al.* (5):

Most Bedouin localities in [Palestine] are officially classified as “unrecognized” and “illegal,” and their populations are considered “trespassers” on state land. The lack of recognition of dozens of villages, though their inhabitants common-

ly live on their ancestors' land, derives from state denial of the indigenous land regime that existed in the Negev before the establishment of Israel in 1948 and from Bedouin indigeneity.

Even though the Negev “was never officially designated as *terra nullius*,” policies to empty the territory were initiated “through the distortion of the Bedouin past and the subsequent denial of their customary law, property regime, right to return, land control, freedom of movement, and collective culture” (Kedar 11). Israel’s tactic towards the lands of the Bedouins, especially in its early years, “resembled the colonial legal geographic concept of *terra nullius*” (Kedar 9). Although the exact definition of *terra nullius* is complex, “the doctrine derives from the Roman legal concept of *res nullius* and evolved to represent lands belonging to no one, emptied of sovereignty, ownership, or long-term possession rights” (Kedar 9). In addition, the notion represents “practices used by European powers and settlers to dispossess indigenous populations, exploit their natural resources, and settle their lands” (Kedar 9). Meanwhile, the land was given the designation of *mawat*, which is derived from the word “death” in Arabic.¹ For centuries, the southern part of Palestine “had been inhabited [almost entirely] by Bedouin tribes, mainly seminomadic pastoralists,” as noted in British archival reports stemming from 1933 (Nasasra 2017, 42). The establishment of the state of Israel not only led to the “the destruction of 531 villages, a minimum of 12 towns and urban centers, and the eviction of nearly one million Palestinians from their homes [causing them to become external and internal refugees]” but also to the appropriation of land, through erasure and deliberate concealment of atrocities (Nashef 2019, 6). A recent example of hidden massacres and ethnic cleansing is a film on Tantura, directed by Israeli filmmaker Alon Schwarz (Efrat, Schwarz and Schwarz 2022). Several Israeli veterans who served in the Alexandroni Brigade are interviewed in the film; their narratives reveal how Palestinians were forcibly evicted from their village: many of the inhabitants were massacred and buried in mass graves, which were turned into a parking lot to conceal the atrocity (Rubeo 2022). Many Palestinians have spoken of these atrocities but their narratives were always silenced. Like the rest of the Palestinians, Bedouins have been facing “repeated acts of house demolition, of expropriation, the systematic denial of tenure rights” (Kotef 2015, 3). According to Hagar Kotef, “Israel also annually demolishes approximately 1000 homes of Bedouins (who are state citizens), who live in the Negev/Naqab region within Israel’s recognized international borders” (2020 121-39). In this paper, I will argue that Palestinian writer Adania Shibli’s latest novel, *Minor Detail*, which was translated by Elisabeth Jaquette, a finalist for the National Book Award and longlisted for the International Booker Prize, is an important work that not only challenges the suppression of the Palestinian story and the erasure of a country but also sheds light on the precariousness of Bedouin lives, a maligned and marginalized group of people.

Specters of the Past

The author's work, which skillfully pits two equal narratives, although separated by years, exposes a present that remains haunted by unacknowledged crimes of the past. Shibli's novel traces the story of a Bedouin girl in 1949 and her brutal slaying by Zionist gangs through a narrative of another silenced and young West Bank woman from Ramallah, who becomes obsessed with uncovering the burial site of the slain girl. Troubled by the news report she uncovers, the young woman becomes consumed with revealing the atrocity, especially when she discovers that her own birthday coincides with the day the Bedouin girl was killed. The psychologically-disturbed nameless narrator embarks on a difficult journey amidst checkpoints and Israeli designated areas forbidden to her people in an attempt to unravel the circumstances behind the death of the nameless Bedouin girl. Her expedition results in unearthing minor details relating to the ethnic cleansing of the girl's tribe along with their muted history.

The novel, which is divided into two sections, begins with the 1949 crime. The horrific incident is reported in third person through the point of view of a callous commander who, along with other members of his gang, set up a platoon near the Egyptian border. The first narrative, spanning three days from August tenth to thirteenth in 1949, provides a detailed account of the place and records the deeds and intentions of the occupiers: purging the area of its original inhabitants and erecting a settlement. The first part also sheds light on the psychological and physical deterioration of the narrator as he succumbs to bites by spiders, which he devotes much time to crushing. The quashing of the insects mirrors uncannily the actions of these soldiers as they scour the desert for Arabs to kill, ridding the land of its indigenous Bedouin population, despite their repeated claim that this was empty land. The Zionist narrative often portrays that "Palestinians are not only debris-making but are themselves debris, an environmental problem requiring some form of intervention and, eventually, disposal" (Roy 2021, 108). Settler-colonialism has often classified "nomadic peoples as "primitive" subhumans akin to parasites rather than full human beings, viewing them as "obstacles," while "settlers need for land and territory meant that the extermination of nomadic populations created opportunities for the control and exploitation of resources" (Kingston 2019, 132). In Shibli's novel, the officer tries to justify the crimes by citing backwardness of the indigenous population and their supposed neglect of the land:

We cannot stand to see vast areas of land, capable of absorbing thousands of our people in exile, remain neglected; we cannot stand to see our people unable to return to our homeland. This place, which now seems barren, with nothing aside from infiltrators, a few Bedouins, and camels, is where our forefathers passed thousands of years ago. ... No one has more right to this area than us, after they neglected it and left it abandoned for so long, after they let it be seized by the Bedouins and their animals. It is our duty to prevent them from being here and to expel them for good. (35-6)

Between 1946 and 1949, 11 military posts were erected in the Negev, one of which is Nirim. Developed later into a *kibbutz*, it was built “in the spring of 1949 after the conquest of *al-Ma’in*” tribal lands following the eviction and killing of tribe members (Abu Sitta 2016, 314). In *Mapping My Return*, Salman Abu Sitta (263) recalls how these ancestral lands were appropriated:

By the spring of 1949, the invaders of my land decided to settle on the hilly spot of my childhood playground. Prefabricated huts were installed on this piece of land that was precious for me. They called it Nirim. A little to the north, on my father’s land and my mother’s family land, another kibbutz, Ein Hashloshah, was set up.

In the meantime, the narrator in the first part of *Minor Detail* tells us in the early pages: “When they had arrived, they found two standing huts and the remains of a wall in a partially destroyed third. It was all that had survived in this place after the heavy shelling the area had experienced at the beginning of the war” (7-8). Representing the place as empty, with only deserted, destroyed shacks, re-emphasizes that this place is uninhabited and in need of populating by another people. During her quest to this location in the second part of the novel, the Ramallah woman later discovers that the person in-charge of the museum in Nirim settlement (constructed on the remnants of the destroyed Bedouin village) is an Australian. The recently created archives he was in charge of endorse the Zionist settler-colonialist project. The documents not only provide a record of the post-1946 *kibbutz* construction but also mark the beginning of a place by erasing an earlier time. The settler tells the Ramallah woman that he is “just fond of photography and history ... that’s why he founded this simple museum, in an attempt to preserve Nirim’s history and archives” (84). Typical of settler-colonialist projects, history begins with the time of occupation and settlement and all previous history is erased or rendered irrelevant. The man tells her:

Nirim’s cornerstone was laid on the night of Yom Kippur in 1946. It was one of the 11 settlements established by members of Hashomer Hatzair and young Europeans who had arrived in the country at the end of the Second World War. They began constructing settlements in the Negev. (84)

Earlier narratives are silenced to allow for the one story to be told. Additionally, in his account of history the relationship with the Bedouins was cordial, even though “clashes did [occasionally] occur between members of the settlement and the few Arabs left in the area” (87). He adds that he only encountered one violent incident:

[it happened when] he volunteered in a military unit formed after the end of the war, whose primary mission was to search for infiltrators in the area ... one day, during a patrol, they found the body of a young Bedouin girl in a nearby well,

and explains to me that when Arabs are suspicious about a girl's behavior, they kill her and throw her body in a well. (87)

Not only is his version of the incident in line with Israel's myths that its army is "incapable of atrocities, and massacres involving rape," but it is also the occupier's way of blaming the victim for their crimes (Nashef 2021, 3). In spite of her fear, the Ramallah woman is determined to pinpoint the precise place at which the violation was committed. She hesitates at first, but eventually she uncovers the location of the crime, which now resembles "a little park" (89). The changing of "the Palestinian landscape has been the prerogative of the Israeli state ever since its inception" (Nashef 2020, 321). The excuse often cited is that the original inhabitants have neglected the land. The Zionist claim of making the desert bloom is not only part of the so-called civilizing project of the settlers but is "also a method of changing the natural vegetation by introducing foreign species to its soil" to conceal the earlier crimes committed against the indigenous people and their livelihood (Nashef 2020, 323). Canada Park, which extends over an area of destroyed and ethnically cleansed villages, is a blatant example [a point I will return to] of suppressing the crime. Basem L. Ra'ad (2010 189) writes:

The old stones from the villages were sold to Jewish contractors to lend local tradition and age to new buildings elsewhere, and the whole area was turned into the tragic Canada Park, made possible by millions from a Canadian donor. These are only three of the more than 450 villages in geographic Palestine that were destroyed or emptied of their Palestinian inhabitants by the Israelis in and after 1948.

The "little park" the woman unravels is constructed on uneven and sandy ground (89). This exposes a troubled history. The eucalyptus trees and wooden benches scattered around only partially succeed in concealing the offence. Such landscaping is a form of green colonialism; according to VisualPalestine.org, "Only 11% of trees in Israeli forests are indigenous species due to Zionist groups planting vast areas of non-native trees," and "182 Palestinian villages depopulated by Israel are concealed in Israeli parks and forests, preventing refugees from returning" (VP 2022). Meanwhile, Ariela Azoulay (2013 215) writes that different labels are given to the demolished sites to hide the crimes, " 'Forest of the Righteous,' " and so on—that conceal the violence of " 'ruination' as an active, ongoing process." On the other hand, the vast scene that unfolds before the Ramallah woman is composed of "sandy plains," an attestation to the earlier place (Shibli 89).

The first sentences of the novel state that "Nothing moved except the mirage," in "a great expanse of the arid Negev desert, over which crouched the intense August heat" (7). The latter description stresses the need to see the land as empty, and shows that any potential life is but a fleeting presence. Nonetheless, the assault on the *ephemeral* inhabitants of the desert disturbs the serenity of the place. Even though Shibli's account of the crime is told through the perception of the officer and later confirmed by the museum guard, the deed

that was committed is an actual event. The perpetrator of the murder said in a report, “I killed the armed Arab and I took the Arab female captive. On the first night, the soldiers abused her, and on the next day I saw fit to remove her from the world” (Abu Sitta 264).² Abu Sitta reports the incident drawing on his sources and a report by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*:

The girl, between ten and fifteen, was captured by the Nirim platoon on 12 August 1949 and held captive in a hut. The soldiers, with the approval of the platoon commander, decided to rape her. They washed her, cut her long hair, and placed her on an army bed. Each of the three squads, A, B, C, and the drivers and medics, seventeen in total, would take her for a day. (263)

The above details are in concordance with the version of the story in *Minor Detail*. In the novel, the silence of the desert is often accompanied by the groaning of camels or the barking of the dogs, which form a part of its immense landscape. However, the stillness of the place is disturbed by the sound of a platoon’s gunfire as they search for Arabs to kill. In the novel, we learn that the intended mission is to “cleanse” the territory “of any remaining Arabs,” and when the “Air Force sources . . . reported movements,” the commander set out with his soldiers to exterminate them like insects (8). The “slender black shadows,” (15) which he could not capture at the beginning, eventually “yielded to reveal a band of Arabs standing motionless by the spring” (24), which he proceeded to eliminate along with their camels using heavy gunfire. The officer’s inspection revealed that the blood of the six camels was sucked languidly into the depths of the sand, a symbolic return to the motherland (25). Towards the end of the first section, the girl’s blood is absorbed by the sand in a similar manner: “Blood poured from her right temple onto the sand, which steadily sucked it down, while the afternoon sunlight gathered on her naked bottom, itself the color of sand” (50-1).

Earlier, upon the commander’s instructions, a medic sterilized the girl with gasoline and cut her hair. Her body epitomizes dirt, on which “order” has to be imposed (Douglas 2002, 161). Dirt has to be dealt with first (Douglas 161). Metaphorically, the girl may still retain “some identity” and this could be construed as “dangerous: [her] half-identity still clings to [her] and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by [her] presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt” (Douglas 161). In order to deal with this “dirt,” one has to recognize it as “out of place” and “a threat to good order” (Douglas 161). Therefore, their “unwanted bits,” such as hair or clothing have to be destroyed, and ultimately “all identity is gone . . . having entered into the mass of common rubbish” (Douglas 161). The Bedouin girl, who was discarded as rubbish, may have been buried in the two-meter sandy shallow grave, but given the nature of the sand, the unmarked site would be difficult to locate. Moreover, it “is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity” (Douglas 161). As long as “identity is absent, rubbish is not

dangerous” (Douglas 161). Having an unmarked grave prevents the identity being known.

Signifying the girl’s body as dirt affirms that the such a life is not worthy of proper burial; and “will not even qualify as ‘grievable’ ” (Butler 2004, 32). According to Judith Butler, “life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life, [which is] the means by which a life becomes noteworthy” (34). The Bedouin life “is not grievable, it is not quite a life; it does not qualify as a life and is not worth a note. It is already the unburied, if not the unburiable” (Butler 34). For a life to count as one, Homi Bhabha (2019 27:24 mins) argues that one needs to equate “burial rights” with “human rights,” as “corpses are people who have human rights.” Deserting the corpse in this manner emphasizes that her life was not considered a human life; she lacked human rights and is not entitled to a proper burial.

Unworthy Lives

The Bedouins’ lives are not worthy. The Arabs in the first part are presented as faceless entities whose existence is often juxtaposed against the presence of insects; when the surviving girl was found, she is described as “curled up inside her black clothes like a beetle” (Shibli 24). Butler argues that those “who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil [in this case, the claim that the Arabs were armed and infiltrators] authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated” (xviii). To justify the killings, the officer has marked the lives of the Arabs both precarious and vulnerable, giving himself the right to define “the meaning of this precariousness” (Butler 135). The lives of these Bedouins are deemed superfluous and insignificant. Defining the land as empty entails the claim that the land is devoid of people; however, in the event that some may populate it, they are considered mere shadows and not fully human. They have been classified as *homo sacer*. The land must be cleared of them to allow for a *superior* people to inhabit it. According to Kedar *et al.* (10), “a parallel process to Judaization has been the de-Arabi- zation of the Negev land, through eviction, destruction, renaming, legal denial, and coerced urbanization and spatial concentration, which continue to this day.” Eradicating the original population allows the settler-colonial project to succeed; it empties the land of its inhabitants through “the creation of a ‘sterile zone’,” which is “emptied completely of Arabs” (Azoulay 2013, 198). This form of ethnic cleansing becomes “an ultimate solution for the creation of such a world because it strives toward a complete removal of difference and the eradication of that which is left” (Azoulay 198). Additionally, the “displaced and dispossessed are not perceived as a part of the body politic, and therefore what the regime does to them is not perceived as a part of the regime” (Azoulay 207). They are depicted as other, and not worthy of the status of being human.

The phrase “Man, not the tank, shall prevail” is repeated four times in the novel; it is ironic that the gunshots that disturbed the serenity of the place prevailed over the human, enforcing a second level of emptying and a redrawing of reality (36, 86, 89, 97). According to Kedar *et al.* (32):

Terra nullius and the related terms *res nullius* (object belonging to no one) and *territorium nullius* (territory belonging to no one) were used to denote several intertwined and sometimes contradictory justifications for colonial dispossession of indigenous land, territory, and sovereignty.

Defining a land as empty with support of legal geography has long aided settler-colonialism in its endeavors; the maps reify an “abstract space,” and redefine the “tenurial relations in newly colonized territories” (Blomley 2003, 128). Through these imposed definitions, voices are silenced, and people are removed from history. Edward W. Said (1994 416) argues that “In the history of colonial invasion, maps are always first drawn by the victors, since maps are always instruments of conquest; once projected, they are then implemented. Geography is therefore the art of war but can also be the art of resistance if there is a counter-map and a counter-strategy.” Armed with maps from different epochs, the silent narrator embarks on a journey to locate the murder site in the second part of the novel. As the land composition has much changed, she can only rely on flashes from her memory of the place from earlier times and the descriptions afforded to her by her colleagues in Ramallah who were exiled from these villages and towns, many of which have been eradicated. She must resort to a number of maps to reach her intended location; her maps reveal a fragmented land and contradictory renditions of the same place:

I take the maps I brought with me out of my bag and spread them over the passenger seat and across the steering wheel. Among these maps are those produced by centers for research and political studies, which show the borders of the four Areas, the path of the Wall, the construction of settlements, and checkpoints in the West Bank and Gaza. Another map shows Palestine as it was until the year 1948, and another one, given to me by the rental car company and produced by the Israeli ministry of tourism, shows streets and residential areas according to the Israeli government. (Shibli 70)

Maps created by settler-colonialists enforce another reality on the ground; mapping is a way of fabricating a history to impose another narrative and to legitimize a presence. Israel has long claimed that Palestine “was never actually inhabited by Palestinians;” hence, “maps play a critical role both in the legitimation of Israel’s settler-colonial practices and in the presentation to the world of a false image of the land in question” (Palumbo-Liu 2021, 138). Furthermore, as Eyal Weizman (2017 140) argues:

the mode of operation of contemporary colonialism is to erase and cover up the traces of its own violence, to become so invisible as to no longer appear as power at all. To remove traces is also to erase the traces of erasure. Mapping is not only about plotting a crime built into a material reality, but about uncovering such acts of double erasure.

Colonial maps with their “cadastral grids, blocks, and parcels as well as ‘keep out’ signposts, barbed wire fences, and planted trees carve distinctive and de-

financed properties out of indigenous space” (Kedar 36). The erected settlements and military posts “deny previous land relations and legitimate current ones” (Kedar 36). In her quest to find the burial site and the location of the crime, the Ramallah woman encounters many obstacles; she tells the reader that “after crossing so many borders, military ones, geographical ones, physical ones, psychological ones, mental ones [she] look[s] back at the Israeli map, searching for the first location [she] wish[es] to head to” (Shibli 75). She tries “to determine the best route there, relying on the various maps,” and reflects that “in principle, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line,” but this cannot be achieved, “not because the roads aren’t straight but because, as several maps confirm, there are at least two checkpoints on the shortest route leading to Yafa” (70-1). By referring to Jaffa by its original Arabic/Canaanite name, the woman introduces a mental map she has of the city prior to its occupation and emptying of its original inhabitants. Yet, none of the maps in her possession can reflect the geopolitics on the ground, because of their inability to pinpoint “the locations of flying checkpoints, or are updated with the ongoing construction of the Wall, which continually leads to more road closures” (71). Negating the Palestinian space has been a priority for the settler Zionist project (Nashef 2020, 313).

Eventually, she rejects all the maps and relies on oral histories of these places by her acquaintances, which permit her “to have a sense of how many villages and cities there used to be between Yafa and Askalan, before they were wiped from the earth’s face not long ago” (Shibli 80). The practice of depicting Palestinian lands as barren and empty continues to this day, albeit virtually. Both Google and Apple maps “show Israeli settlements and outposts ... while erroneously depicting an empty countryside that in reality contains hundreds of Palestinian villages” (Palumbo-Liu 138-9). Meanwhile, during her trip, a new reality emerges as “names of cities and settlements appear along the road, as do shapes of houses, fields, plants, streets, large signs, and people’s faces” (Shibli 80). Initially, settler-colonialists created maps “as a form of organized forgetting ... a conceptual emptying of space”; yet, “a native space” is forever “dense with meanings, stories, and tenurial relations” (Blomley 2003, 129). Picking up the 1948 map uncovers another reality, however; the narrator tells us:

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 Israeli map appear to have been swallowed by a yellow sea, appear on this one by the dozen, their names practically leaping off the page. (Shibli 81)

In his discussion on space, Henri Lefebvre (1991 299) argues that the “*concept of space is not in space*. ... The content of the concept of space is not absolute space or space-in-itself; nor does the concept contain a space within itself.” The woman’s understanding of space unfolding around her is an imagined one that recalls an erased presence. Even though she notes that currently the “only two visible Palestinian villages are Abu Ghosh and Ein Rafa,” the Palestinian map from 1948 tells another story, and she proceeds to list all the destroyed villages

that now lie beneath Canada Park (Shibli 73). Through a reference to history and a pre-1948 existence, she was able to engender and produce a “(mental) space” of an obliterated country (Lefebvre 300).

Compulsion With Detail

The obsession of the Ramallah woman with minor details manifests itself in her fixation to uncover the location of the burial site. Before she embarks on her journey, she describes how she is more concerned with dust particles landing on her desk than with the bombing of a building nearby. Indeed, dust is also evocative of another reality, as it is “the precarious hanging-together of remnants, particles, fragments ... the community that survives after an organic unity has faded away” (Marder 2016, 68). The narrator’s obsession with dust is another manifestation of the fragility of her existence, as she holds onto the fragments of her life. She reflects that she is unable:

to identify borders between things, and evaluate situations rationally and logically ... to see the fly shit on a painting and not the painting itself ... which could compel someone, after the building next to their office at their new job is bombed, to be more concerned about the dust that was created by the bombing and that landed on their desk than about the killing of the three young men who had barricaded themselves inside. (Shibli 59)

Her compulsion with detail may appear insignificant, but it is through the detail that she tries to locate her own presence and feel less ashamed of her affliction. The woman is constantly resorting to chewing gum when she is nervous, and while shame “takes place in the mind ... it is communicated in and by the body” (Bewes 2011, 22).

The voiceless woman is in search of a space from which she can metaphorically and physically speak. If her quest to track down the burial site is understood to be in one sense a “human expression,” in effect she is “putting [her] body on the line,” and these “elements of space” form her “sense of belonging” (Palumbo-Liu 2). It is her way of reclaiming “the ‘place’ of speaking” for the muted victims of the Nakba and ultimately herself. Uncovering and marking the burial site allows her to “symbolically ‘fill’ ” the actual place “with meaning” (Palumbo-Liu 2). The meaning she seeks is multi-layered, rendering a presence to the unnamed corpse of the Bedouin girl and a larger voice for the silenced tribe of the victim. In the event she succeeds in her endeavor, locating the burial site and linking it to the date of the murder, which coincides with her birth date, it may help her regain her own ability to speak. She remarks: “The incident took place on a morning that would coincide, exactly a quarter of a century later, with the morning of my birth” (Shibli 58). Linking the events both emotionally and mentally provides her with an impetus and desire to stay alive. She explains: “But since I do not love my life in particular, nor life in general, and at present any efforts on my part are solely channeled toward staying alive” (Shibli 58-9). Likewise, the memory of the Bedouin girl should be preserved. As she reflects on the shared date, she echoes a verse from Palestinian poet Mahmoud Dar-

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wish's poem "On this Earth," in which he writes "we have on this earth what makes life worth living" (Darwish 2003, 6), an insinuation that an insignificant presence, such as hers, or that of the Bedouin girl's, is worthy of acknowledgement and of life. Hence, if she is successful in locating the unmarked grave, this minor event could grant her own existence some meaning, enabling her to enunciate in order to assume a place in the world. Her own suffering "has stripped" her "of the tools for speaking" (Bewes 20). Timothy Bewes argues that shame "has a paradoxical structure born of the fact that, while it is intensely focused on the self, it is experienced ... before the 'Other'" and "its experience is intensely isolating" (21). Even though the narrator feels her exploration is beyond her and "the fact that the girl was killed 25 years to the day before [she] was born doesn't necessarily mean that her death belongs to [the author], or that it should extend into [her] life"; nonetheless, she remains preoccupied with the death of this "nobody [who] will forever remain a nobody whose voice nobody will hear" (Shibli 65).

Hannah Arendt (1998 20) argues that those "without word," *anew logou*, are according to Aristotle deprived of a place in the world. She claims that Aristotle:

formulated the current opinion of the *polis* about man and the political way of life, and according to this opinion, everybody outside the *polis*—slaves and barbarians—was *anew logou*, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense. (27)

The woman is struggling with an impossibility; she has to render speech to those who have been deprived of it because of their status as occupied people. They are akin to the "plebs" or "barbarians" and denied the right to narrate or speak. As victims of both ethnic cleansing and occupation, the Palestinians cannot speak because "they are beings without a name, deprived of logos—meaning," and whoever "is nameless cannot speak" (Rancière 1999, 23). With her agency and "revitalized political will" silenced, the Ramallah woman is attempting to "redesign political space," and find her place within her discovered space (Palumbo-Liu 22). She is in the process of a Deleuzian becoming. She needs to metaphorically give a name and a voice to the murdered Bedouin girl, as well. Bewes writes:

The powerless ... are those for whom no names exist, for whom ontology has not cleared a space. To speak for the powerless ... the mute—is not to speak on their behalf, or in their place, but to speak, to be responsible, before them. (28-9)

The Ramallah woman feels responsible for the slain Bedouin girl.

In the novel, the Bedouin girl is silenced symbolically and physically. Traditionally, rape as a form of genocide and ethnic cleansing "has long been absent from Israeli and Palestinian retellings of the Nakba and its aftermath" (Nashef 2021, 18). During the rape scenes, we learn how the officer's right hand would seal the mouth of the Bedouin girl to subdue her cries and screams. For the

most part, her utterances are muted with intermittent sobs: “Suddenly, the door opened and the girl stepped out, crying and babbling incomprehensible fragments that intertwined with the dog’s ceaseless barking” (Shibli 34). The sounds emitting from the girl “are not recognized as speech but heard as mere noise”; considered less than human, her voice is equivalent to “noise produced by animals” (Palumbo-Liu 21). The emphasis on the distinction between the “human voice and nonhuman sound” (Palumbo-Liu 28) is evident in *Minor Detail*. In the novel, the incessant barking of the dog not only disturbs the sought-after stillness of the barren hills by the soldiers who want to use it as a justification for their actions but it is also a sign of revolt against this hegemonic narrative and a reminder that these territories belong to another people. Ironically, the barking of dogs in *Minor Detail* serves as a voice to those who have been silenced by history and occupation. It also serves as a revolt against the atrocities that the animal witnesses.³ Towards the end of the novel, the Ramallah woman provides a lift to a woman in her seventies, who like herself remains silent throughout the ride; “both taking refuge in the silence,” she wonders if “this old woman has heard about the incident, since incidents like that would have reached the ears of everyone living in the Naqab” (Shibli 102). The silence renders her mute, “tightens its grip” on her, as she finds herself unable to ask her “about the incident” (102-3). After the old woman gets out, retreating “toward a sandy path to the left, which no one traveling on the asphalt road would notice or imagine might lead somewhere. The old woman continues to walk on the path until every trace of her vanishes into the sandy hill” (103). The story of the Bedouin girl is submerged metaphorically by the sands, and the Ramallah woman once more finds herself unable to narrate.

Conclusion

According to Sara Roy (2021 108),

In the context of Israel-Palestine, the act of ruination has come to be defined by something more malevolent: it is not damaged personhood that is primary (although it is created as fundamental to colonial order and control), but the denial of personhood and the psychological eradication of the person.

Stories of Israeli demolitions of Bedouin villages and denials of the right of their inhabitants continue to this day. Recently, Al-Araqib presents an example of a Bedouin people who reject expulsions and insist on rebuilding their homes following every destruction. They refuse to be eradicated as a presence and a people. According to press agencies, the village, which Israel refuses to recognize, has been demolished 199 times.⁴ In *Minor Detail*, on the contrary, despite all her efforts to resurrect the story of the silenced Bedouin girl and in turn unmute herself, the Ramallah woman fails. Her psychological problems and the voice that she has long been denied by the occupation are forces that she is unable to contend with. By rendering her “memory incoherent or vacant,” she is incapable of recalling both histories, hers and the girl’s, becoming a “disembodied” soul “unable to locate” or secure her “place in the world” (Roy

109). Nonetheless, she resurrects a minor detail of a narrative that has long been suppressed. Even though by the end of the novel, we learn that the gunshots have won and the tanks have prevailed, a minor detail in a long story of erasure has been conveyed.

Biography

Hania A.M. Nashef is a professor at the Department of Mass Communication at the American University of Sharjah, UAE. She has 16 years experience in broadcast. Her publications include *Palestinian Culture and the Nakba: Bearing Witness* and *The Politics of Humiliation in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee*. She has also published and presented on the novels of J.M. Coetzee and José Saramago, Palestinian literature and film, Arab film and media representations, and on the plays of Samuel Beckett.

Notes

1. The Ottomans used the term *mawat*, which the Israeli legal authorities used to formulate the Dead Negev Doctrine, which involved “a set of legal assertions, based on putative geographic and historical assumptions, under which virtually all land held, used, inherited, purchased, inhabited, grazed, or cultivated by Negev Bedouins is considered ‘dead,’ with its ‘rightful’ owner being the Jewish state” (Kedar 11).
2. In a special report by Zena Tahhan to Al Arabiya News, the journalist writes, “She was abducted on 12 August 1949, 66 years ago this month, by Israeli soldiers near the Nirim military outpost in the Negev desert, close to the Gaza Strip. The unnamed Palestinian Bedouin girl, in her mid-teens, was then raped and executed” (2020).
3. Bhabha (4:45) argues that silence and stillness should never be underestimated, for they are also “a kind of movement” that “needs to be acknowledged.”
4. On 26 March 2022, many Palestinians joined the villagers of Al Araqib in planting olive trees on the demolished site in solidarity as they marked land day (SAFA 2022).

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