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ECHOES OF VEILED VOICES, SILENT SCARS: A JOURNEY THROUGH FEMALE TRAUMA IN MINOR DETAILS

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Abstract:
The occupation of Palestine, which began in 1948, has caused immense suffering for Palestinians, confining them in their own land like captives in an open-air prison. This study employs qualitative and close textual analysis to examine the distress and acute psychological traumas that Palestinian women endure, as reflected in Shibli's (2020) novel *Minor Details(Tafṣīl Thānawī),* translated by Elizabeth Jaquette. Shibli expertly weaves together the narratives of two Palestinian women differentiated by decades, their pain intermingling throughout the course of the narrative. Caruth's trauma theory (1996) will furnish as a theoretical framework to deftly explore multiple levels of traumatic experiences embedded in the characters' stories. The study's emphasis on Palestinian women's often-overlooked experiences may resonate with South Asian women grappling with cultural pressures and limited agency. This study emphasizes the vital need to amplify female voices by delving into the characters' various points of view. By lending voice to their narratives, we develop an improved awareness of the challenges which women confront and the societal transformations needed to build a more equitable world.

Keywords: Oriental Literature, ,Feminism, Gender, Intergenerational Trauma, Palestinian Identity ,PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder)

1. Introduction:

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World Health Organization (WHO) has drawn attention to the precarious condition of women in the war torn area of Gaza (Palestine) in fact "As of 3 November [2023], according to Ministry of Health data, 2326 women and 3760 children have been killed in the Gaza strip, representing 67% of all casualties, while thousands more have been injured" (2023). In the broad spectrum of contemporary literature, Palestinian women's voices offer a profound and vital perspective, particularly as they traverse and bring forth the various challenges of life in Gaza. These authors' narratives not only illustrate the disparaging challenges that women experience, but also bridge significant gaps in representation and scholarship, advocating greater scrutiny and recognition within literary studies.

The literary canon of Palestine that arises from this collection of works is still diverse. It is quite likely that none of the names attached to it - Sahar Khalifeh, Emile Habibi, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani– ever met, resided in the same nation, or were employed in the same cultural or political environment. The experiences of those who have lived, loved, and died in Palestine and Israel in past and present are told by Palestinian writers in a variety of styles and voices(Abu-Remaileh, 2019). Shibli is one of the most prominent diasporic Palestinian authors, mainly famous for her work *Minor Details*, originally published in 2017 in Arabic and later translated into English by Elizabeth Jacquette in 2020. This novel was finalist for the National Book Award Longlisted for the International Booker Prize (2021), however the novel and author made international headlines when the award was cancelled for Frankfurt Book Fair scheduled to be given in October 2023 (Goyal, 2024). Multiple authors and publishers signed a letter in favour of Shibli and, thereby, stood for artistic freedom.

Palestinian literature from 1948 till today deals with the themes of loss, exile, homeland, gender; the connection between ideology and politics in multifarious genres such as short stories, novels, poetry throughout various historical periods notably after the Nakba 1948, after 1967 war, first and

second Intifadas (Dec 1987 & Sep 2000), and post-Oslo era, year 2000 onward. Kricorian (2014) explores in great detail the writings of six Palestinian authors, whose primary language is Arabic but whose foundational works have been expertly translated into English: Emile Habibi, Liana Badr, Adania Shibli, Sahar Khalifeh, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Ghassan Kanafani. The significant aftereffects of the 1948 Nakba, a major catastrophe that forced millions of Palestinians to flee their homes during the inception of the tyrant state, are evident in all of their narratives, whether they are prominently featured or delicately woven into the fabric of the book. Furthermore, these authors skillfully incorporate the horrific aftermath of the 1967 War and subjugation of Gaza and the West Bank, known as the Nakba or setback, into the core subject matter of their literary discourse, shedding light on the persistent socio-political environment of their country. (Kricorian, 2014)

Shibli's writings unquestionably reflect on the trauma narratives paradigm in both form and substance. She uses a variety of trauma fiction techniques in her works in order to express the Palestinian trauma that is intersectional in nature; in terms of being both personal and political, personal and collective and much rooted in the present reality of setting of novels in Occupied West bank and Gaza (AlAmmar, 2022). Reading these literary works can reveal psychological concepts, such as the impact that tragic events can have in a person's life. Initially, trauma was mostly described as a physical damage or as an injury to body but later on, its definition changed to include additional concepts, particularly in the fields of psychology and medicine as well as literature.

1.1 Research Questions:

1: How do *Minor Details* unveil the trauma experienced by central characters, and how are they having shared trauma despite being in different time periods?

2: How do fragmented memories and experiences in the novel depict trauma encountered by the female characters?

2. Literature Review:

A great deal of literature has been produced for centuries about people living under occupation and the continuous agony and sufferings which they encounter, and about genocide survivors; who lost their homes, family, land, and maybe even their culture over many generations and are living under restrictions within their own country. Literature may offer a sense of national belonging to groups and individuals whose lives have been torn apart, spread out, and uprooted by widespread political violence. Writing becomes a place to live for a man who no longer has a homeland.

Kanwal (2024) meticulously investigates the complex experiences that Muslims faced when facing a variety of crimes such as violence, abuse, dehumanisation, cruelty, and genocide in a number of countries where Muslims predominate, such as Palestine, Kashmir, Pakistan, Myanmar, Syria, Iraq, and China. The claim that creative writing plays an essential role in helping people understand the complex dynamics that underlie power dynamics and the politics of mortality is at the heart of her argument. Her work aims to question postcolonial ethical frameworks that have been constructed by analysing how modern injustices are shown and contested as well as how subjecthood is negated in postcolonial English-language Muslim literature.

Aamir (2022) explores Shibli's *Minor Detail* to show Palestinian life being profoundly affected by the harsh reality of settler colonialism, leading to a sense of estrangement and gloomy perceptions about the future. The article examines how Shibli challenges the prevailing historical narratives that the occupiers enforced, however, by employing experimental literary devices and a distinctive narrative style. It is possible to rewrite history and arrive at new meanings and truths, according to Shibli. Her writing undermines

conventional narrative techniques and inspires readers to think about alternate perspectives regarding Palestinian identity and struggle.

Nashef's (2022) extensive scholarly investigation delves deeply into the literary work, focusing on the concept of silence as it is embodied by the narrator and the sufferer in Shibli's *Minor Details*. She explores the complex relationships underlying the woman from Ramallah's attempts to bring the Bedouin girl's hushed story back to life with the ultimate goal of breaking through her forced muteness. However, Nashef (2022) explains that The Woman from Ramallah faces enormous challenges along the way because of her own psychological issues and the ongoing oppression that the occupation imposes, making her attempts to oppose these powerful forces ineffective.

The article written by Badareen & Eisheh (2020) scrutinizes Shibli's *Minor Detail* as a case study to examine how colonialism has shaped Palestinian identity. It looks at how the book depicts power relations and resistance and highlights the importance of literature in conveying Palestinian perspectives. It highlights the significance of recognising hidden realities and encouraging resiliency while illuminating the ways in which colonial legacies continue to influence Palestinian culture and identity.

Silmi (2023) explores the ways in which Arab writers such as Shibli and Djebar use silence as a tool of oppression as well as resistance. It makes an argument that silence, along with other expressive forms like cries and unintelligible voices, destroys prevailing narratives by defying conventional undetrstanding.When Djebar searches for the voices of colonised women, voice and silence go hand in hand, but in Shibli's *Minor Detail*, silence becomes a potent means of expression itself. Silence serves as a symbol of resistance in both situations, serving as a reminder of the transformational power of writing.

Nawaz, Qasim, and Qasim (2023) undertake a scholarly investigation using an analytical framework based on trauma theory, taking theoretical postulates of Caruth, LaCapra, and Herman, to analyse the complex experiences of

characters coping with the severe psychological effects caused by warfare and coerced expulsion in *The Shadow of Crescent Moon.* The portrayal of people who were forced to flee to the fictitious Pakistani village of Mir Ali, amidst the chaotic post-9/11 backdrop is central to their research. The psychological pain and resiliency that these characters displayed in reaction to the demands of conflict-induced migration are thoroughly examined in this investigation. Additionally, the research provides a thorough analysis of the complex trauma experienced by refugees who are compelled to enter conflict zones. Ultimately, this research project helps to better understand the complex human costs linked to trauma and forced migration while illuminating the incredible flexibility and fortitude shown by people and communities in the face of hardship.

Most recently Arodes (2024) examines the complex tactics used by oppressed groups in Palestine and Syria to manage power relationships, challenge repressive institutions, and develop their identities. Using subaltern theory as a theoretical foundation, Arodes (2024), carefully examines Syria's and Palestine's sociopolitical environments via the prism of postcolonial thought. Theorists like Juan R. Cole, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ranajit Guha made groundbreaking contributions, which Arodes uses to highlight the marginalised viewpoints and underappreciated realities of Syrian and Palestinian residents, hence deepening our comprehension of their everyday situations in current contexts.

2.1 Trauma Theory:

The word “trauma” has a Greek origin meaning “wound”. Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist, modified the concept and redefined it as harm ‘inflicted not on the body but on the mind’ (Caruth, 1996, p.3). It can be defined as a wound that is “inflicted by an emotional shock so powerful that it breaches the mind’s experience of time, self and the world” (Eyerman, 2013, p. 42). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the most prevalent psychological response to the trauma. Any individual who has experienced a stressful

incident may acquire post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with symptoms being anxiety, despair, nightmares, flashbacks, and avoiding situations, people, and activities that trigger the trauma are some of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD symptoms can cause social and emotional issues and last for years. Additionally, this situation causes victims to stay silent and cut off from their surroundings (Kurt, 2024).

The area of traumatic study started to flourish in the literary sphere around the start of 20th century, along with Freud's formulation of Psychoanalysis theory. Freud (1895) investigated how the excessive processing of traumatic experiences by the mind might result in neuroses. He proposed the idea of "repressed memories," in which upsetting incidents are forced into the unconscious, leading to symptoms that surface at a later time. The foundation for comprehending the psychological effects of trauma and the significance of bringing suppressed memories to conscious awareness for healing was established by Freud.

LaCapra (2014) views trauma as a deeply upsetting experience that radically alters a person's perception of memory, time and identity. He highlights how crucial it is to distinguish between "acting out" and "working through" trauma. "Acting out" refers to a person's reliving of the trauma through recurrent actions and memories, flashbacks, which keeps them mired in the past. On the other hand, "working through" entails approaching the traumatic event critically and incorporating it into one's story, which can aid in the healing and forward moving processes. According to him, this procedure is necessary to turn traumatic memories into a more controllable and cohesive aspect of a person's life narrative.

Felman and Laub (1992) explore the intricate connection between language and trauma. They contend that since traumatic events are so overpowering and inexplicable, they sometimes resist language expression. The notion of "testimony" is introduced by Felman and Laub as a way to document trauma, highlighting its significance in breaking silence around these occurrences.

They investigate literary works to show how survivors find it difficult to express their experiences in words, such as Holocaust narratives and testimony literature. From the viewpoint of the authors, the reason why trauma is so inexplicable is that it may shatter the coherence of collective and individual narratives, prompting victims to deal with fragmented memories and feelings.

American trauma theorist Cathy Caruth influenced by the Freudian school, advances the theoretical ideas surrounding Trauma and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) via her writings.

3. Methodology:

This study uses qualitative method to examine the experiences of two unidentified female characters, a young girl and an older woman, in Shibli's novel *Minor Details*. Caruth's theory (1996) acts as a prism that allows us to investigate female response to trauma in the war zones. The research attempts to develop an improved awareness of the psychological effect of trauma on the characters under examination by carefully reviewing key scenes and dialogues from the primary text. This study uses a variety of academic journals, scholarly articles, and books to expand its examination of female characters and trauma in the novel.

3.1 Through the Lens of Trauma: Caruth's Theory

Caruth (1996) states, trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'' (p.11).

Caruth (1995) asserts that trauma is a delayed process in which the traumatic event "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (p. 4). Here, the victim experiences a haunting recurrence of the ghostly incident or anything associated with it, even when he or she only realises the traumatic event

belatedly, as a result of "its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (Caruth, 1995, p. 8). She focuses on how trauma has an unspeakable and amnesic nature. Her words "Survival itself can be a crisis," delineate the plight of victims globally(Caruth, 1995, p. 9).

The traumatic event may become so intense that it breaks through the person's sense of self, making it more difficult for them to comprehend and incorporate the event into their own story. As Balaev (2008) asserts “trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity” (p. 149). As a result, trauma instills a crippling fear that might prevent victims from speaking about their experiences, leaving them feeling profoundly silent within. In addition to making people feel cut off from who they were before the trauma and making it difficult for them to recognise themselves, this can shatter or even completely destroy their sense of identity. In extreme circumstances, it can totally upend and ruin their sense of self, leaving them feeling disoriented and alone.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion:

In Shibli's (2020) novel *Minor Detail (Tafṣīl Thānawī)*, female trauma is depicted in various ways through the two unnamed characters in the novel — a Bedouin girl in first part and a woman in second part.

The traumas include the victim's personal trauma from being gang-raped and subjected to physical and psychological abuse in first part, as well as the trauma suffered by the woman who discovered the rape and murder of the first girl and attempted to investigate the incident but ultimately met her tragic end. As mentioned by Caruth (1996) , trauma is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’’ (p.11).

4.1 Trauma of the girl:

In the first half of the novel *Minor Details* by Shibli, there is a traumatized girl who experiences physical and psychological abuse, yet she remains silent

throughout. As Caruth also uses a neurobiological theory to explain how trauma affects consciousness and memory. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's research supports this theory, arguing that trauma triggers a universal neurobiological reaction that is a "speechless terror" that prevents the story from being "organized on a linguistic level,"(Caruth, 1996, p. 172).

The girl was left alone with her dog when she was first featured in the book, having just lost her family in an attack by oppressive forces. Even in the face of such intense loss, she remained silent, expressing her sorrow only via ‘muffled weeping’ (25). She was traumatized mentally and psychologically from the very beginning. Her cries were muffled as he; the officer, put his palm over her lips and pressed her ‘head down’. ‘Mucus and tears’ clung to his hand, yet he gave her the silent gesture and met her gaze (26). The whole atmosphere was traumatizing for her, alone in between group of soldiers who were leaving no chance to torture her.

In another traumatizing incident, when they brought her to their tent, they gave her a public shave and shower. She was described as having ‘curled into a ball on the sand, shivering’ (31) but remained silent and ‘motionless’ (31) and the soldiers kept on laughing at her and making fun of her. They poured petrol over her head and cut her hair which fell to the ground ‘silently’ (34). She just sobbed and babbled ‘incomprehensible fragments’ (36). She was moved, without her consent, to the officer’s tent where she remained ‘motionless’ and ‘quiet’ (45,46) underneath him with her ‘tense breaths’ (44). The next traumatic event which she went through was her being gang-raped by soldiers, but even then she didn’t utter a single word. The only response of her is (screaming and sobbing). She was there, alone and helpless, and silent. She was undergoing a lot of pain, suffering, physical and psychological abuse but she was not able to put her distress and agony into words. In the end, gun fires could be heard entering her body and silencing her wailing (53).

4.2 Interrelation between Girl in Part 1 and Woman in Part 2:

As *Minor Details* is split into two parts with time gap of 25 years between both but both females in two parts are interlinked. Apparently, they are two different women being in two different time spans, but through certain hints and images in the novel they are made interconnected; as if woman is serving as voice of the girl and is her mature, elderly version.

The very first symbol of them being interconnected is the similarity between date of girl's rape and woman's date of birth. The woman is shocked to learn that the first event's date coincides with her birthday when she reads it in news article. This minor detail, seemingly insignificant, is what inspires the Woman to go on her mission to delve deep into the details of the incident and get to know about "the complete truth" (Shibli, 2020, p.61). As stated by the Woman, it "cannot be more than a coincidence" (Shibli, 2020, p.61). Nevertheless, she maintains that there an organic, fundamental connection. Both organic and unexpected qualities may be seen in the picture of the grass. So, the Woman connects the girl's experience with her own lack of experience with the incident. Her birth automatically makes her a later manifestation of the same being, therefore, she need not have been present for the original occurrence to have any connection to it.

The image of grass has been mentioned multiple times in the novel, in both parts as 'Clutch of Grass' (Shibli, 2020, p.35,65), 'Cane grass' (Shibli, 2020, p.25,110), at the place where the girl was first appeared and later on at the places where the second woman went in search of 'complete truth' (Shibli, 2020, p.61). This connection may also be interpreted allegorically: even if the Palestinians are uprooted from their land, like grass, they would still lie dormant underneath it, remaining a part of it, only to reappear decades later in a different place (Ramallah), yet belonging to the same one cohesive entity. The grass clutching cannot be thrown away, removed, or recorded in history. The Bedouin girl is saved from obscurity and given the opportunity to reemerge in the Woman's role by a small detail.

Other repetitive images include image of thorn acacia — "thorn acacia and terebinth trees appeared in the distance, preceded by cane grass" (24), and later at place where Woman was shot dead by soldiers, "thorn acacia, terebinth trees, and cane grass suddenly appear" (103), repetitious hearing of dog howling by the officer (12, 16, 22), and the dog was with the girl when she was brought to camp ,dog howling is mentioned multiple times (24, 25, 28, 30, 31, 34, 38, 42, 44, 48, 49, 52); then at night the Woman was awakened by a "dog's endless howling" (53) .

Another image which connects the two is of gasoline smell. Girl's hair were washed with petrol but the fragrance clings on her. The woman awkwardly filled her tank with petrol but its aroma stuck to her even after taking a shower (92,94). The connection that has been created by Shibli through repetition of certain images depicts that how the second woman was experiencing the trauma of the girl in first part and was serving as her voice, discovering the event as it has been experienced by the girl. Moreover, in second part, narration is in first person and woman herself is a narrator, as being the voice of Beduin girl. It seems that Bedouin girl was re-experiencing her trauma decades later in face of second woman.

4.3 Trauma of the Woman (Counterpart/ Echo of the Bedouin girl):

As it has been previously explained that how the Bedouin girl and the Woman are interconnected and how the second female appears to be an echo of the first. The Woman is from Ramallah and is living twenty-five years after the horrific incident that befell the first girl.

When she happened to know about the tragic incident of the girl, she felt a sense of belonging to her. Although she acknowledged that such incidents of rape and murder 'aren't out of the ordinary', they frequently occur 'in contexts like this', happen so commonly that 'I've never paid them much attention before' (Shibli, 2020, p.60) yet the news caught her sight because the horrible incident happened on the same date, she was born. She was accustomed to soldiers pointing gun at her for minor things like to give the

signal of changing path towards office but she was able to keep herself calm and composed in such situations. But her behaviour was changed after learning about the girl's story. She felt like the incident belonged to her. As Caruth (1995) puts it 'to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event'. (p.4). When she went through the news of the girl in newspaper the sameness between her date of birth and date of incident haunted her. 'The incident took place on a morning that would coincide, exactly a quarter of a century later, with the morning of my birth…. what made it begin haunting me' (Shibli, 2020, p.62). She felt like she was the survivor of the very incident and somehow counterpart of that girl. She thought that it is impossible to completely 'rule out' any likelihood of a 'connection' between both occurrences or the 'existence of a hidden link', as is occasionally the case with plants. For example, even after pulling out a 'clutch of grass' by their roots, you may find that the exact same species of grass reemerges in the same location, a quarter of century afterwards (Shibli, 2020, p.64). As Angelo (1994) asserts, " You may write me down in history/ With your bitter, twisted lies,……But still, like dust, I'll rise"(lines 1-4). Although the complete truth about girl's tragedy was kept hidden and was told incompletely in newspaper but she reappeared years later in face of the woman. Hence, even though the woman tried to ignore and forget whatever she read in newspaper but acknowledged that 'it's inevitable for the past to be forgotten, especially if the present is no less horrific'(Shibli, 2020, p.65). The Woman felt traumatized as if she was reliving some past trauma. As Caruth opines that the agony of going through the trauma again is worse than the initial experience. Because the traumatic incident cannot be accessed during consciousness, it will remain in the unconscious mind in a wordless, timeless condition that will cause continual pain and psychological damage (Caruth, 2016, p.160-63). She felt as though she was living in the past, where the terrible incident occurred and she was suffering at the time. The trauma got intensified when she embarked on her journey. Before knowing about the

girl, although she was afraid of soldiers but her fear multiplied after learning about the incident. Throughout her way towards finding the ‘complete truth’, she was undergoing intensified fear and anxiety. She felt waves of numbness going through her body as the checkpoint drew near, her heart was breaking at the sight of the soldier going through paperwork. ‘It’s the barrier of fear, fashioned from fear of the barrier. The checkpoint’ (68). She felt herself in a state of feeling ‘the fear, anxiety and agitation’ (73). As Caruth (1996) mentions that the ‘trauma is defined by as "catastrophic events (11) in which the response to the events occurs in the frequently delayed, uncontrollably recurring appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (12), it seemed that the woman was reliving the Bedouin girl’s trauma as a delayed response to her trauma. Woman in second part seems to be the counterpart and voice of the girl. So, her trauma appears to be the delayed response to trauma of first girl that resurfaced.

Some of the instances of the Woman’s hallucinations in the novel are as follows: the woman gave lift to an elderly woman who didn't say anything to her and left the car on a path that leads nowhere; she used to hear the dog howling a lot and was even woken up by it several times; she saw a mysterious dog around her everywhere she went, but the dog vanished every time as if it was never present there; and she saw a mysterious shadow of a girl but it vanished when she called it.

In consonance with Caruth (1996) , trauma is an experience that is impossible to completely comprehend or incorporate into consciousness as it frequently entails overwhelming, fragmented experiences that are difficult to explain and give meaning to, as happened to the Woman in second part.She states that trauma may cause a person's sense of self and time to become disjointed, and it can also haunt the person in the form of recurrent symptoms like dissociation, nightmares, and flashbacks. In this novel, it happens with the woman, being inherently connected to Bedouin girl. Caruth places a strong emphasis on the value of bearing witness to painful events as well as the way

that literature and other artistic mediums may provide voice to people who have been silenced by trauma.

5. Conclusion:

The purpose of this study was to investigate and bring forth the imapct of traumatic incidents on a psyche of a female character. In this novel, Shibli has employed a distinctive plot technique where plight and suffering of two female characters are juxtaposed. The girl in first half of the novel was captured,physically and mentally assaulted and murdered by Israeli soldiers in just a day or two. The woman in second half came across story of the girl. She was traumatised, and felt like she herself has gone through that suffering. Agonized, she embarked on a journey to uncover hidden truth regarding the tragic demise of the unknown girl. However, her painful ordeal came to a bitter end when she was ruthlessly murdered by Israeli soldiers. Although the girl and woman are separated by decades, still their traumas are interconnected just as Caruth (1996) aptly delineated that the shared trauma is not only an individual experience but it is also a collective one, transmitting across generations having painful repercussions for generations to follow.

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