

# Why have right-wing forces attacked Adania Shibli's novel *Minor Detail*?

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The internationally acclaimed short novel *Minor Detail* (*Taf??l ??naw?*) by Palestinian author Adania Shibli was highly praised when it was first published in Germany in 2022. After the outbreak of the most recent Israeli war against the Palestinians, however, a number of critics suddenly discovered antisemitism in the book and denounced Shibli as a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) activist.

A ceremony honouring the novel, which received the 2023 LiBeratur Award, was planned for the Frankfurt Book Festival in October, but then canceled at the last moment. What is Shibli's novel about and why has it come under attack?

The book's opening section deals with an actual crime committed by Israeli soldiers in 1949. After the end of the first Israeli-Arab war, the Israeli military build a military base in the Negev Desert with the aim of "enforcing the new border with Egypt and preventing infiltrators from penetrating it." An Israeli military patrol encounters "infiltrators." Bedouins, who were moving to camp by a spring not shown on maps, are shot dead. Just one girl is spared.

The military success is celebrated with a feast. The commander gives a speech, praising his soldiers who helped defend and secure the area, and at a late hour he puts the girl's fate to the vote. A meticulous three-day plan is drawn up for a gang rape. After that, the girl is shot and buried in the desert.

The speech declaring Arabs to be uncultured barbarians is one of the most striking passages in the novel: "We cannot stand to see vast areas of land, capable of accommodating thousands of our people in exile, remain neglected (...) No one has more right to this area than us, after they (the Arabs) 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."

It is a classic colonial speech that could have come from the time of the wars waged against Native Americans in the US, the colonial wars in Africa or the Nazi occupation of Poland and the USSR. It ends cynically with a sentence that settlers left as an inscription in Hebrew on a shell-pocked wall during the last war at the unit's current military base: "Man, not the tank, shall prevail."

The second, fictional section of the novel is set in an unspecified present. A Palestinian journalist from Ramallah in the West Bank, born in 1974 like Shibli, comes across an article about the 1949 incident. It arouses her interest because the girl was murdered exactly at the time of her own birth, decades earlier.

To find out more, the journalist travels to the Israeli army museum in Jaffa, then to the southwest to the site of the crime. She gets no answers from official sources. She looks at weapons, uniforms, old cutlery and watches Zionist propaganda films from the 1930s and 1940s showing young Jewish migrants from Europe doing cooperative farm work. One film shows the construction of a kibbutz—a fortified settlement, as a watchtower reveals.

She realizes too late that she has to ask locals, older people, relying on their memories. In the end, she meets a tragic fate on the spot where the Bedouin girl was murdered. She ends up there by chance and, underestimating the danger of the situation, ignores the military restrictions in the area.

The journalist-narrator has always found it difficult to identify situations and boundaries.

Shibli's gaze in the novel is directed toward small "minor details," and not the "big picture." She shares this approach, for example, with the Austrian author

Peter Handke, whose nonfiction work *Asking through the Tears: Belated Chronicle from two Crossings through Yugoslavia During the War, March and April 1999* describes the tense borders in the fragmented entity that was once the multi-ethnic state of Yugoslavia. After condemning the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, Handke was abruptly denounced as a supporter of a “second Hitler,” the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic.

Shibli’s novel reveals how the dismembering of Palestine and the Israeli occupation have burned themselves into the psyche of its inhabitants. The journalist is constantly afraid of doing the wrong thing. Suddenly, access to her workplace is a no-go area. Israeli soldiers lay siege to the house next door (although Ramallah is under Palestinian administration). She takes a surreptitious route, without enough time to consider whether it is dangerous or not. She has to go to work.

As a resident of Zone A, is she even allowed to drive to Jaffa, far outside Zone C? Many people don’t cross the Qalandia checkpoint (the principal IDF checkpoint between the northern West Bank and Jerusalem) from Zone A to B out of fear. Her Arab colleague lends her an Israeli passport with the reassuring words that, anyway, the soldiers won’t look her in the face out of contempt. She also only manages to get a rental car with a trick and some help.

Shortly after leaving Ramallah, she becomes disoriented. Along the desolate concrete wall by the airport where there used to be “only” barbed wire, are new settlements instead of Palestinian villages, new names and references. Can you take this route or do you have to take a detour? Cars jam up in front of the checkpoint, people trying to get to work or to the market. The reader also loses his or her bearings. Which side of the wall is one on?

The accusation that the novel depicts Israeli troops as anonymous rapists and killers instead of three-dimensional characters, that it presents the state of Israel itself as a “murder machine,” has a background. Even when the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* first reported on the 1949 crime in 2005, contemporary military witnesses rushed to dismiss the episode as a terrible aberration.

The current insistence on depicting soldiers “with features” serves to perpetuate the same relativization.

Shibli's matter-of-fact depictions of military rule, under which soldiers are simply fulfilling the state’s orders, only began to arouse opposition when the Palestinians launched an uprising against their decades of oppression. Basically, the book describes the many “minor details” that make the October 7 episode all too understandable.

The strength of Shibli’s novel lies in its sober depiction of the present unbearable circumstances, which she presents correctly as the continuation of conditions prevailing decades previously, at the time of Israel's founding, rather than the book’s existentialist and pessimistic speculations.

Given the Israeli defence minister's recent equation of Arabs with “animals,” what reader of the novel will not recall the rabid commander's equation of Arabs with vermin in 1949? His speech to the troops could just have well have been delivered by Biden or another contemporary great power politician. The rapid development of militarism and neo-colonialism virtually obliges historical comparisons.

The dogs in the novel are a successful metaphor for the permeable border between yesterday and today. Their howling and barking is omnipresent. They are everywhere, they are contemporary witnesses and protest against any forgetting. After the death of the Bedouin girl, her dog approaches the bed of a sick officer and sniffs his hand. Will he bite or lick the hand?

The right-wing critics of the book, which is well worth reading, demand submission from the Palestinian population that has been oppressed for 75 years. On the now restored wall of the 1949 crime scene, one of the first Palestinian targets of attack, the inscription is still emblazoned as if in mockery: “Man, not the tank ...”



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