

## تفصيل ثانوي (Tafṣīl Tānawī)

### Minor Detail

Presented by: Ivana Perica

*Minor Detail* is a novel about borders, crossing borders and the danger that these borders represent. However, it is not just a general meditation on borders; its main focus is on the Israeli-Palestinian divide. Following its international success, the novel became the subject of a major literary controversy in Germany at the end of 2023. After winning the LiBeratur Prize, the award ceremony at the Frankfurt Book Fair was postponed (and later suspended altogether) due to the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. This postponement sparked a public outcry from literary critics who spoke out in favour of the novel's high literary quality and the author's right to publicly receive the award. Those who attacked Shibli, on the other hand, stopped reading *Minor Detail* as literary fiction and examined it primarily through a non-literary lens. This uniquely German controversy illustrates how a novel can take on multiple political dimensions depending on the context: while *Minor Detail* was recognised worldwide as a powerful literary reflection on the lingering shadows of the Palestinian Nakba, a small but influential segment of the German literary community criticised the book and its author for perceived antisemitic bias.

*Minor Detail* was first published in June 2017 in Beirut in Arabic under the title *Tafṣīl Tānawī*. It is divided into two parts: the first part is based on an actual and documented crime. The story, set in the Negev (Hebrew) or Naqab (Arabic) desert, begins in the summer of 1949 after the expulsion and disenfranchisement of the Palestinian civilian population during Israel's War of Independence and the Palestinian Nakba (1948–1949). An Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) unit is stationed in the middle of the desert to prevent Arab invaders from trying to return to their villages and repopulate the land. Occasionally, the unit comes across a group of Bedouins resting in an oasis. Without hesitation, on one occasion, the soldiers shoot the male members of the group and their camels, capture a Bedouin girl and abduct her to their camp at the behest of the commander (through whose eyes this first part is focused). There, the abuse of the girl culminates in a gang rape and ends with her murder and the burial of her body in the desert sand (see Lavie and Goral).

In the second part of the novel, a first-person narrator travels to the scene of the crime exactly 25 years after the girl's death. She admits to being reckless with boundaries, often intruding on things that should not be violated and rebelling against norms that should not be touched. Spurred on by reading a newspaper article about the crime described above, she sets off for the northwestern Negev/Naqab to search for traces of something that happened so long ago. As the political landscape has changed considerably in the decades since the war, the location is difficult to find. Among other things, the narrator visits an IDF historical museum, but cannot find any documentation of the violent act committed on 13 August 1949: "Actually, there's no need for me to spend any more time in this city. Official museums like this really have no valuable information to offer me, not even small details that could help me retell the girl's story." (Part II) Near the settlement of Nirim, formerly called Dangour, she is indirectly led by an elderly woman to a military

compound, where she is seen by the soldiers guarding the border. As she reaches for a pack of chewing gum to calm down, she is shot: “And suddenly, something like a sharp flame pierces [her] hand, then [her] chest, followed by the distant sound of gunshots.” (Part II)

There are dimensions of the Shibli controversy that are essential to a deeper understanding of what makes some novels political. It shows that when a literary text (or its author) is accused of political bias, it cannot simply be isolated from its context – at least for a time. Moreover, it is thanks to this tense interplay between the text, its interpretations and defamations that some novels become political in the first place. For this reason, this text portrait takes a closer look at the controversy. In addition to the attacks on Shibli as a perpetrator of antisemitism, it is the discourse of her defenders that is perhaps even more fascinating. While a handful of German critics claimed that Shibli represented an anti-Israeli agenda, her supporters did their best to defuse these attacks; while the latter insisted on the aesthetic quality of her novel, the former believed they detected literary propaganda in it.

In Germany, Adania Shibli's reputation was severely damaged by her critical stance towards the policies of the state of Israel, which earned her the label of a “BDS supporter” and even a “committed BDS activist” (see Otte). (BDS is the Palestinian-led transnational movement or campaign for ‘boycott’, ‘divestment’ and ‘sanctions’ against the state of Israel.) Previously, there were resolutions in the parliaments of Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic calling on governments not to fund groups that call for or support a boycott of Israel (see “BDS-Beschluss”). Importantly for the reception of Shibli in Germany, BDS is perceived not only as a critique of Israel, but also as directly opposed to the specific German *raison d'état* ('Staatsräson') – which is increasingly seen as synonymous with support (including military support) for Israel's right to self-defence (and the Israeli government justified the relentless attacks on Gaza as ‘self-defence’). In this heated context, some zealous guardians of German *raison d'état* have recognised that the novel *Minor Detail* counters and challenges both states – and should, therefore, be considered propaganda rather than literature.

Carsten Otte, a critic writing for the German daily newspaper *taz*, even went so far as to claim that Israel is portrayed by Shibli as a “murder machine” and the Israelis as “anonymous rapists and killers”, while the Palestinians and Bedouins appear as victims. Those who emphasised the special literary value of *Minor Detail* saw the novel's outstanding achievement in its “existentialist style”, which is “much closer to Albert Camus than to autofictional testimonial literature” (Trojanow). To defend the author against accusations of anti-Israeli propaganda, Ilija Trojanow justified his recognition with the following lines: “I have rarely read a text in which the nationality and religion of the characters play such a minor role.” Another defence strategy was to emphasise the novel's particularly bold view of the sexualisation of violence in times of war: “*Minor Detail*”, says Nora Karches, “is a novel about how in war and military operations, women's bodies become a battlefield, a theatre of war. Sexualised violence against women is an integral part of armed conflicts. Be it in Ukraine, in the Bosnian war of the 1990s, in connection with the war crimes of the terrorist militia Boko Haram. Or in Israel, where the latest images of raped women reach us.” (See Karches)

Whether this novel is propaganda or not remains open to debate (see Perica, Schmitt and Uebachs). At this point, it is important to point out that the negative value judgments about it were obviously made in accordance with the guidelines of state policy – primarily the BDS resolution of the Bundestag. This is not to say that the author and her novel could not have sparked controversy without the Bundestag resolution. Rather, it is to say that the resolution and the political leverage it provided lent additional weight to the arguments of Shibli's critics.

The controversy surrounding Adania Shibli is a lesson for anyone thinking about the political significance of contemporary literature. The controversy shows that the hardening of political fronts makes an unbiased reading of literature as literature almost impossible. It also shows that the political novel cannot be reduced to the fictional *as if* that is otherwise considered constitutive of the aesthetic sphere. As this case shows, the politics of a novel are much more immediate: whenever a text becomes or has become political due to controversial public reactions, the protected space of the literary *as if* is no longer sought out exclusively by those interested in the nuances of word choice and writing style. Rather, such a novel is literally torn apart by mutually hostile camps, each claiming to have seen through its programme and the dangers it holds.

**Note:** A more detailed elaboration on the novel as ‘propaganda’ and on the use value of this concept in literary studies can be found in the essay “Keine Nebensache: Adania Shiblis politischer Roman’ (No Minor Detail: Adania Shibli’s Political Novel) published in a special issue of the ZfL series “Interjekte”, edited by Eva Geulen and with contributions by Stefani Engelstein and Alma Itzhaky. The author of this text portrait signs her essay in collaboration with Gabriel Schmitt and Ella Uebachs, students of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Humboldt University in Berlin, who moderated a seminar discussion on *Minor Detail* in December 2023.

**LANGUAGE:** Arabic/العَرَبِيَّةُ

**This title was not censored before publishing**

Article

## **Keine Nebensache: Adania Shiblis politischer Roman**

By: Ivana Perica