

Transgenerational Trauma in Adania Shibli's Minor Detail: An Atkinsonian Reading of the Poetics of Affective Transmission

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ABSTRACT

The research article investigates the representation of trauma in Palestinian English literature. The Palestinian English literature created by the Palestinian and diasporic writers is rich in trauma. The current study examines how some traumas do not end; they echo as if the past is breathing in present. In Adania Shibli's Minor Detail(2017), a silent murder committed in the Negev desert in 1949 resonates decades later in the body, thoughts, and movements of a woman who never witnessed it, revealing how the past continues to breathe inside the present. Through the lens of Meera Atkinson's The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma (2017), the study argues that Shibli's mirrored narrative; juxtaposing the assault of a Bedouin girl in 1949 with a present-day Palestinian woman's obsessive investigation performs the very processes of affective transmission, recurrence, and embodied haunting that Atkinson identifies as central to inherited trauma. In Minor Detail, trauma moves "rhizomatically" through affective channels rather than biological inheritance. The researchers examine how the two narrative halves resonate despite temporal distance. The narrator's physical fragility and her bodily responses to fear illustrate how Shibli renders inherited trauma somatically; enacting Atkinson's insistence that transgenerational trauma operates through the body as much as through memory or narrative. Drawing on key textual moments, such as the narrator's recognition that the girl was killed twenty-five years ago exactly before her birth date, and her admission of the truth that past will never stop chasing her, the researchers demonstrate how Shibli's formal design performs the very mechanisms Atkinson theorizes: trauma returns not as remembered content but as an insistent echo, a rhythm carried through silence, repetition, and bodily vulnerability. It artistically constructs a poetics of transgenerational trauma revealing how the text transforms historical violence into an affective transmission that binds many generations together, exposing the consistent, gendered, and embodied nature of Palestinian trauma under occupation.

Keywords: Transgenerational Trauma, Affective transmission, Diasporic writers, Palestinian English literature, Nakba

INTRODUCTION

Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* published in 2017 has quickly become a central text in discussions of how contemporary literature represents trauma, particularly within the context of Palestinian history and ongoing occupation. *Minor Detail* is split into two mirroring halves; the narrative first exposes the horrific story of the Israeli rape and murder in 1949, presented through the cold, distanced perspective of a military officer. The second part follows a contemporary Palestinian woman who becomes fixated on this forgotten crime. Her pursuit to overhaul the details of the incident leads her across borders,

checkpoints, and landscapes unveiling the difficulties of accessing suppressed histories in a terrain shaped by occupation. Shibli's austere style, attention to minutest sensory details, and refusal of closure illustrate the difficulties of narrating trauma, especially when the historical record is incomplete or controlled by the perpetrator. While critics have examined *minor detail* through the lenses of colonial violence, archival absence, and narrative fragmentation, the novel's engagement with the afterlife of trauma across generational lines provides a clear ground for study. This study approaches Shibli's text through Meera Atkinson's theory of transgenerational trauma, which conceptualizes trauma as an affective and atmospheric force that moves through time, imprinting itself upon descendants who may not directly witness the originating violence. Ultimately, this paper contends Atkinson's notion of affective transmission that trauma is carried not only through memory and narrative but through the body, the environment, and the ongoing political conditions that reproduce fear and vulnerability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adania Shibli, a Palestinian novelist has emerged as one of the most influential contemporary voices writing on Palestinian life under occupation. Shibli's work has received significant international recognition: her novel *Minor Detail* (originally *Tafṣīl ṭānawī*) was long listed for the 2021 International Booker Prize, consolidating her position within global discussions of Palestinian literature and trauma. *Minor Detail*'s fame and symbolic weight further got increased after the cancellation of Frankfurt award ceremony 2023 due to the latest Israel-Hamas War where Adania Shibli was selected for the LiBeraturpreis 2023 by the jury for the Frankfurt Book Fair ceremony. This cancellation attracted more attention and encouraged more teachings, critical readings in universities, panel discussions and huge interest of the researchers in the novel's explorations of its themes and multiple literary angles. Shibli's work *Minor Detail* offers a key site to examine how contemporary Palestinian women writers narrate trauma, dispossession, and intergenerational affect not through explicit testimony alone but through silence, repetition, and the fragile movements of an unnamed female narrator.

There has been extended research on *Minor Detail* from various literary angles. Critics consistently highlight the unsettling narrative tone of the novel's first half, which recounts the rape and murder of a young Bedouin girl through the perspective of an Israeli military officer. Da Cunha Lewin (2020), argues that Shibli's stylistic restraint exposes "the choreography of violence" in a way that reveals how the novel "forces the reader to confront the silences" surrounding women's suffering within both colonial and nationalist narratives. Similarly, Bhutto (2020), in *the guardian*, notes the "sparse and haunting" quality of the prose, commenting that the officer's flat, clinical tone mirrors the dehumanizing logic of occupation.

One notable reading is by Robyn Creswell 2020 (in "*The Body and the Border (on Adania Shibli)*"). Creswell argues that the novel's narrative spanning a desert massacre in 1949 and a modern-day investigation foregrounds not only the spatial boundaries enforced by the occupier, but also the erasure of bodies and histories, turning landscape and movement into sites of violence, alienation, and structural dislocation. Kareem (2020), in *words without borders*, argues that the novel "turns absence itself into a narrative force," suggesting that the gaps in historical record are not failures but structural consequences of colonial control over memory. This aligns with Nashef's (2022) academic analysis, which examines the text as a story of "suppressed narrators and silenced victims," emphasizing how both women: the Bedouin girl and the contemporary narrator are denied access to voice, security, and historical presence. The novel's engagement with archival absence resonates with contemporary trauma theory, particularly the idea that trauma exceeds the representational limits of language and documentation. Alammar (2022) identifies Shibli's form as a practice of "narrative distancing," where fragmentation and silence expose the impossibility of fully recovering a buried atrocity. Feminist scholars and reviewers draw particular attention to the novel's gendered dynamics. The Bedouin girl remains unnamed, voiceless, and almost

entirely absent except through the gaze of the perpetrator. Several scholars interpret this stylistic coldness as a deliberate narrative mechanism. Elbaz (2023) describes the first part as an example of “sensory documentation” where the emphasis on heat, insects, and movement conveys the material texture of violence more effectively than psychological description. By refusing emotional commentary, Shibli exposes the structural nature of colonial brutality; violence not as anomaly, but as everyday procedure. Semiotic and narratological approaches have also explored *Minor Detail*’s formal encoding of trauma. Ezzine (2023) observes that *Minor Detail*’s oscillation between past and present time illustrates the persisting impact of previous traumatic events continue to result in present collective trauma. Halabi (2023) likewise argues that the narrator’s body becomes a site of inherited, spectral disaster, suggesting that trauma travels across time and is inscribed affectively and somatically. While these readings acknowledge transgenerational suffering, they rely on generalized concepts of haunting and inherited catastrophe without articulating a precise theoretical mechanism. Similarly, Roberts’s (2024) essay on Boundary Poetics in *Minor Detail* read the novel through what they call a “boundary poetics,” interpreting state-sanctioned boundary formations; checkpoints, erasure of villages, restricted mobility as integral to how historical violence and occupation are encoded in narrative form and spatial control.

A further body of criticism by Amanda Siva Saepuloh and colleagues (2025) employ a Greimasian semiotic analysis of *Tafṣīl Ṭānawī* describes the novel’s trauma as structural and repetitive, linking the two narrative halves through gaps, absences, and parallel forms of vulnerability. However, these studies work primarily with semiotics, narrative ethics, or broad trauma theory, without examining how trauma circulates through affect, atmosphere, or embodiment. For instance, Amanda demonstrates how violence under Israeli occupation is embedded in the novel’s sign systems, narrative actants, and structural oppositions. Their work traces trauma through symbolic patterns and narrative structures but it remains grounded in semiotics rather than in affective or transgenerational trauma theory. Consequently, the mechanisms through which the novel’s formal architecture, sensory motifs, and affective patterning enact trauma’s rhizomatic and cross-temporal movement remain underexplored and theoretically diffuse. This study addresses that gap by bringing Atkinson’s model into direct dialogue with Shibli’s narrative design.

In addition, while feminist readings have highlighted the silencing of the Bedouin girl, there is a lack of sustained analysis on how this foundational violence continues to shape the psychic and emotional world of the contemporary narrator, and how her eventual disappearance mirrors the unresolved trauma of the past. Earlier scholarships on trauma in literature build on Cathy Caruth’s foundational work ‘*Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*’ by highlighting that trauma is marked by belatedness and repetition; it does not simply occur and end but return in intrusive images, flashbacks, and compulsive re-enactments that disrupt linear chronology (Caruth, 1996). Building on this model, Meera Atkinson develops a theory of transgenerational trauma that emphasizes affective transmission through bodies and atmospheres. Scholarships have also left largely unexamined the novel’s representation of trauma as environmental or atmospheric embedded in heat, borders, checkpoints, and sensory detail; not merely personal. Therefore, a significant gap exists regarding the exploration of *Minor Detail* through a transgenerational trauma lens, one that accounts for the novel’s recursive time structure, its psychological resonances, and its portrayal of trauma as a lingering, uncontained force that moves across generations.

Ayyed and Abdullah (2025) offer a postcolonial reading of *Minor Detail* and *Enter Ghost*, arguing that both novels function as “combat literature” in Fanon’s sense, where narrative becomes a site of anti-colonial struggle and Palestinian self-assertion. They show how Shibli’s obsessive investigator and Hammad’s theatre practitioners reclaim silenced histories and occupied space through acts of remembering, performance, and everyday defiance. Their comparative framework foregrounds resistance and decolonization, opening room for further work that centers trauma, gendered embodiment, and intergenerational memory in these texts. Walid Abdallah Rezk’s 2025 article published in *Acta Poética* offers one of the first comparative readings of Shibli’s novel through the lens of inter-generational trauma,

race/ethnicity and colonial violence. While Rezk explicitly situates both texts within a framework of historical trauma, identity, and the legacy of colonial oppression, his analysis draws primarily on broadly established postcolonial and trauma theorists such as Ania Loomba, Lois Tyson, and Frantz Fanon rather than on Meera Atkinson's specific poetics of transgenerational trauma. Consequently, although Rezk acknowledges inter-generational trauma in *Minor Detail*, his conceptualisation remains relatively general. He does not engage with recent work on affective and rhizomatic models of transgenerational trauma such as Atkinson's, nor does he examine in detail how Shibli's bifurcated narrative structure formally enacts the mechanisms of transmission that Atkinson theorizes. It is precisely this intersection between Shibli's narrative design and Atkinson's poetics that the present study seeks to address.

Research Objectives

- To analyze how Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* follow the pattern of affective transmission of Meera Atkinson's transgenerational lens bringing the catastrophe of the young Bedouin girl with the contemporary narrator.
- To examine how Shibli's sensorial motifs of landscape, sound, and bodily sensations challenge conventional models of trauma based on eyewitness memory or testimony by emphasizing transmission through atmosphere, the body, and place instead of direct recollection.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does Meera Atkinson's theory of transgenerational trauma illuminate the mirrored structure of Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail*, particularly the affective transmission and narrative repetitions that link the 1949 victim with the contemporary narrator?
2. How does *Minor Detail* use cyclical sensorial motifs of landscape, sound, and bodily sensation to stage trauma as something that circulates across generations beyond direct memory or testimony?

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and text-centered methodology grounded in close reading and theoretical analysis. The primary aim is to examine how Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* formally enacts and narratively performs transgenerational trauma, drawing specifically on Meera Atkinson's *Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* as its central analytical framework. Her framework is particularly relevant to the Palestinian context, where the trauma of the 1948 Nakba persists across several generations. The forced displacement, separation of families, and destruction of ancestral homes created a traumatic rupture that continues to shape identity and memory. By reading the novel's mirrored two-part structure alongside Atkinson's concepts of recurrence, affective transmission, embodied memory, and rhizomatic/nonlinear temporality, the research traces how violence from 1949 is reproduced, re-felt, and re-inscribed in the contemporary narrator's body, movements, and emotional responses. The methodology involves identifying and interpreting key scenes, motifs, and images such as the shared date of the two women, the grass metaphor of regrowth, the dog's repetitive howling and the narrator's fragile bodily reactions to understand how Shibli transforms narrative architecture into a site of inherited affect. Rather than relying on empirical or clinical models, this research reads trauma as a literary, affective, and structural phenomenon. Through sustained textual analysis, the study demonstrates how *Minor Detail* articulates a poetics of affective transmission in which the past circulates through bodies, landscapes, and silences, offering insight into the aesthetic and political dimensions of transgenerational trauma in Palestinian women's writing. Critics have not yet fully theorized this connection using trauma frameworks that focus on intergenerational transmission, such as Meera Atkinson's concept of trauma as an "affective echo" that circulates across time, landscapes, and bodies. Therefore, a significant gap exists regarding the exploration of *Minor Detail* through a transgenerational trauma lens, one that accounts for the novel's recursive time structure, its psychological resonances, and its portrayal of trauma as a

lingering, uncontained force that moves across generations. This study addresses this gap by applying Atkinson's transgenerational trauma theory to demonstrate how *minor detail* represents the Nakba not as a historical event but as an ongoing, inheritable condition.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Employing on Meera Atkinson's poetics of transgenerational trauma, the analysis shows that Shibli's bifurcated narrative, recurrent motifs, and sensory echoes transform violence into an ongoing, affective presence. Through close readings of cyclical sensorial motifs of landscape (tress, grass, desert topography, animal bodies), sound (dogs' howling), and bodily sensation (sweat and compulsive movement in fear), the analysis shows how *Minor Detail* transforms the environment into an archive of harm. These recurring sensory patterns stitch together the unnamed Bedouin girl of 1949 and the later narrator, suggesting that trauma returns not as a clearly narratable story, but as a felt atmosphere that presses on the contemporary body. Through these patterns, the novel reveals trauma not as a closed event but as a force that resurfaces and defies strongly to erasure registering many points to consider that are as follows:

A Bifurcated Structure that choreographs trauma transmission

Minor Detail's bifurcated structure choreographs trauma transmission through nonlinear temporality: Part I plants the trauma; Part II becomes its embodied afterlife. This split is not merely formal; it performs the nonlinear temporality at the heart of Meera Atkinson's poetics of transgenerational trauma as the central premise is itself transgenerational. The first half opens with an atmosphere already vibrating with threat and disturbance: "*Nothing moved except the mirage.*"(p. 7). This trembling mirage introduces an environment saturated with violence even before the assault occurs. The sensory instability of the landscape anticipates the trauma that will later resurface, decades later, in the second narrator's body and perception. Likewise, the first auditory marker of trauma appears immediately: "*There were distant barking sounds, the only signs of life in the area.*"(p. 7). This motif of barking returns in the present-day section, forming a rhizomatic sensory bridge across time. By page 29, when the dog leaps up as the girl is taken toward the hut: "*The dog sprang up on all fours and began to bark...*" (p. 29). Shibli firmly establishes the dog as the first "carrier" of trauma, the non-human witness who encodes the violence in sound. This is the moment that sets the entire nonlinear structure into motion. Part II begins on p. 57 decades later with a sudden sensory echo from the earlier violence highlighting the affective return: "*At that moment, a dog on the opposite hill began to howl incessantly...*" (p. 57). This is not coincidence. It is trauma's return. The narrator does not know what happened in 1949 but her *body* does. Here, Shibli formalizes trauma transmission more than merely representing trauma. Atkinson insists that transgenerational trauma emerges as belated affect, through non-indexical traces; sounds, sensations, dread rather than through memory. The howl that keeps the narrator awake at night is the very same sonic residue that framed the Bedouin girl's death. Shibli reinforces the continuity of violence and memory in the narrator's interior reflections: *The borders imposed between things here are many... I'm not one of them.*"(p 57). The trauma of past violence, occupation, border-making, militarized space has shaped her contemporary reality. Finally, when the narrator encounters soldiers near her workplace "*I glimpsed two soldiers... I must remain calm.*"(p. 61) , her bodily reaction reflects not her own memory, but the inherited fear and discipline of generations who lived under the same structures of threat; trauma, here, is somatic and relational.

Trauma that defies linear memory

Atkinson says trauma can transmit without memory. Shibli shows this: the narrator inherits trauma through a date-link, not memory. "There appears to be some kind of process of transmission that defiesindexical memory." (p. 125). "*The only unusual thing about this killing ... was that it happened on a*

morning that would coincide, exactly twenty-five years later, with the morning I was born.” (Minor Detail, p. 64). This is the *structural hinge* of transgenerational trauma in the novel. Shibli literalizes this: the murder date and the narrator’s birth date align, creating a temporal bridge. The narrator becomes a carrier of a violence she never witnessed the essence of Atkinson’s “affective transmission between bodies.”

Affective Transmission Through sensorial motifs, landscapes and sound

The sensory motifs, environmental echoes, and bodily reactions in Part II recreate the violent atmosphere of Part I, not through plot or memory, but through affective transmission. This is exactly what Atkinson means when she argues that transgenerational trauma: challenging chronological time, moves across bodies and atmospheres, and returns as belated, bodily affect rather than remembered narrative. The opening line of the novel “Nothing moved except the mirage” (p.7) manifests an affective transmission through landscape; the trembling air, the blurred ridgelines, and the uncanny stillness as an atmospheric register of trauma, a space where the past lingers not through narrative recounting but through sensory distortion. The desert highlights an extension of trauma’s persistence, a site where colonial violence settles into the terrain itself. Before any characters are introduced, the environment is already trembling with an inherited disturbance; an affective field that anticipates the violence that will unfold and later return. Atkinson argues that trauma travels through non-indexical memory, emerging not as recollection but as bodily unease and atmospheric disturbance. Here, trauma prevalent in atmospheres is quite significant as the narrator identifies: “...like when a clutch of grass is pulled out by the roots, and you think you’ve got rid of it entirely, only for the grass of the exact same species to grow back in the same spot a quarter of a century later.” (p.65)

By comparing trauma to grass pulled up by the roots only to return decades later, Shibli encapsulates what Meera Atkinson describes as trauma’s rhizomatic persistence; its ability to re-emerge after apparent erasure, resurfacing in unexpected temporal and bodily forms. The narrator’s reflection that the past “grows back” precisely where it was uprooted mirrors Atkinson’s notion of nonlinear, belated affect, in which trauma returns not through memory but through atmospheric disturbance, sensory repetition, and inherited vulnerability. Through this organic image, Shibli transforms trauma from a historical event into an ongoing living force, one that survives extraction and attempts at forgetting, returning insistently through affect, environment, and the body. This metaphor perfectly matches Atkinson’s concept of trauma as recurrence; trauma that regrows, even when violently uprooted. Shibli uses the desert’s ecology to express what Atkinson calls trauma’s “*living-on in atmospheres.*” The girl’s murder resurfaces in the narrator’s life just as grass returns to the same soil.

Embodied Trauma and Bodily Memory

Bodily fragility and sensory overload reveal how occupation inscribes trauma directly onto the body, turning embodiment into a site of inherited fear, memory, and resistance. The narrator’s bodily weakness mirrors Atkinson’s idea that trauma enters the body even without direct experience. Like war, terrorism means to ideologize, kill, and traumatize. Its effects are not just the stuff of textbooks and memorials; they are emotional, psychological, and contagious, and the bodily memory never quite fades, no matter how distant the events become.(p.127)

The narrator experiences the event in her body “Given how fragile I am, as weak as the trees...” (p. 65), just as Atkinson says post memory is felt somatically. Shibli maps trauma’s movement through bodily sensations and environmental textures, revealing how affect circulates between bodies, landscapes, and historical moments in ways that exceed memory. The narrator is pulled toward the trauma by an affective force beyond her control. The narrator’s admission that “*My interest in this incident... means I’ll*

inevitably end up trespassing borders again.” (p. 65) She further adds: “This minor detail... will stay with me forever; in spite of myself and how hard I try to forget it, the truth of it will never stop chasing me.”(p.65).

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Here, Shibli’s minor detail refuses to remain minor. The narrator articulates trauma’s pursuit, a central concept in Atkinson’s poetics of transgenerational trauma. The language of being “chased” transforms trauma into an active agent that enters the present through somatic unease, this passage captures the poetics of transgenerational trauma: a past event that continually re-emerges, refusing closure and returning affectively into the present. Even though the narrator never witnessed the 1949 murder, the event “chases” her; an involuntary, cyclical recurrence that aligns with Atkinson’s insistence that trauma reappears belatedly, affectively, and somatically. The phrase “*will stay with me forever*” emphasizes the ongoing, recursive nature of inherited trauma, exactly what Atkinson describes as trauma’s tendency to return across temporal and bodily boundaries rather than remain anchored in its original moment. This final insight invites us to read Palestinian experience in the novel not only through what can be spoken or remembered, but through the quiet, repetitive ways that bodies and places continue to register what official histories would prefer to forget.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal the mirrored structure of Adania Shibli’s *Minor Detail* through Meera Atkinson’s theory of transgenerational trauma showing that the affective transmission and narrative repetitions linking the 1949 victim with the contemporary narrator are not merely formal choices, but mechanisms through which trauma circulates across generations. It validates the researchers’ contention of affective transmission across generations revealing that the past continues to pulse within the present; trauma persists as a rhizomatic force, moving affectively across bodies and temporal layers, insisting quietly yet unmistakably with resolution of unfinished grief, reminding us that the past does not fade; it breathes in the present, settles into the air we breathe, the bodies we inhabit, and the silences we inherit urging us to listen to the quiet tremors through which the past insists on being felt. Ultimately, by foregrounding sensorial, rather than confessional, modes of witnessing, *Minor Detail* reimagines how Palestinian violence is inherited and registered, contributing to broader debates on trauma, memory, and representation in contemporary Palestinian women’s writing.

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