"There Will Be No Seepage, No Bleeding": Play with Form and Language in Contemporary Narratives of Violence

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Abstract: This paper deals with the question of how contemporary writers negotiate questions of structural violence in their lives and works, through a formal and textual analysis of Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) and Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2020). Works that represent systematic oppression and violence often fall into the trap of voyeuristic and interrogative readings, that either work to assuage the guilt of the readers through empathy or question the authenticity and truth of the representations, thus discrediting them altogether. I argue that the chosen two novels reflect a foresight of such receptions, and resist them through a play with language and the experimental form of the novels.

Keywords: Experimental form, violence, human rights, representation, Palestine, India, contemporary literature

> I try to erect a wall to keep these stories separate.
> If everything goes to plan, there will be no seepage, no bleeding
> – Meena Kandasamy, *Exquisite Cadavers* 11

The representation of pain and suffering caused due to systematic oppression does not just deal with questions of aesthetics, but also of ethics. While representation of violence and oppression is unquestionably important in the development of human rights, the ways in which these narratives unravel and are received/read also need to be considered. On the one hand, reading these texts as merely representations of violence create a binary of oppressor and victim, which inadvertently results in these narratives being subject to interrogation. This then raises questions of truth and authenticity, placing the burden of proof on the narrator. Focusing on identity and positionality of the characters and/or authors, on the other hand, leads to a voyeuristic reading that reduces these narratives to mere instruments that evoke empathy for the oppressed. In both these cases, there is a tendency for the aesthetic and sociopolitical considerations to be marginalised. This essay closely reads two contemporary novels that foresee such reception—Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) and Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2020)—to understand how writers negotiate with the subject of structural violence through their lives and works. Through a formal and textual analysis of these short novels, this essay discusses how the two writers resist the voyeuristic and interrogative reading of pain and suffering through their use of language and experimental forms.

In the essay "Human Rights in Literary Studies," James Dawes notes the various paradoxes that exist while considering human rights issues in literary studies. One such paradox is the effects of narrating suffering in a coherent manner: transforming pain and suffering into language could be a

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 48, No. 2, Summer 2025 [149-155]
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cure as it allows the person to exercise control over the traumatic memory, or it could inflict new injuries and worsen the effects of trauma (Dawes 408). An artist or writer belonging to a marginalised group is often expected to represent their pain or suffering through their works. This is acknowledged by Meena Kandasamy in *Exquisite Cadavers*, as she says:

> [...] to a Western audience, writers like me are interesting because
> – We are from a place where horrible things happen, or,
> – Horrible things have happened to us, or,
> – A combination of the above.
> [...] No one treats us as writers, only as diarists who survived. (10)

Reducing the lives and work of the artist to their pain and suffering not only intensifies the paradox of suffering by coercing them to represent it, but it also leads to another kind of paradox: one that deals with the questions of truth or authenticity and fiction in the act of storytelling. James Dawes cites the debates triggered by anthropologist David Stoll's accusation of Rigoberta Menchú fabricating the details in her biography *I, Rigoberta Menchú* which had already been a part of a "literary and political controversy" simply by being added into a course reading at Stanford in 1988 (403–404). David Stoll's accusation brought the text and Menchú back into the centre of the controversy, triggering further discussions regarding truth and credibility, as well as "the role of storytelling in human rights advocacy (404). Dawes goes on to quote Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, who bring up the testimony of a Holocaust survivor in Auschwitz, which was discredited by some historians only because she spoke of four chimneys being blown up whereas there had only been three. They note, "It was utterly important to remain accurate, lest the revisionists in history discredit everything" (qtd. in Dawes 404). But how does one ensure a hundred percent accuracy in revisiting memories, especially traumatic ones? Discussions focussing on the authenticity of such narratives therefore only reinforce the oppressive systems by casting doubt on and therefore further silencing the narratives of violence.

Human rights issues are often represented in a way that evokes the emotions of the readers. Empathy becomes an important tool in calling for action against atrocities. While empathy is generally considered to be a good and helpful trait in building and maintaining human relationships, allowing us to trespass the boundaries of the self to understand the joys and pains of the other, Paul Bloom invites us to consider the problems of empathy just as we do with other human capacities (16). The focus on particular incidents of violence being inflicted towards a particular subject/character in the work of art would garner empathy and sympathy from the readers, but this need not always be positive. Such a focus on particularities and details of violence is easily fetishized to assuage the guilt of the readers in positions of power, allowing them to turn a blind eye to the systemic nature of the violence. As Namwali Serpell eloquently notes in her essay "The Banality of Empathy," empathy is "a gateway drug to white saviorism, with its familiar blend of propaganda, pornography, and paternalism." It is this kind of empathy that leads to artists belonging to marginalised groups being treated as "diarists who survived" (Serpell).

Contemporary writers then must deal with overcoming these paradoxes through their works and actively resist these attempts to generalise and scrutinise their works, or even find solace in shedding tears over these stories of violence, while not seeing the structural and systemic ways in which they are marginalised. There is a need for writers to refuse the reduction of themselves and their characters to helpless victims of violent incidents through their narratives. The realist novel form, which classically follows an individual character's journey through conflicts and ends in a neatly tied resolution, conventionally enables the voyeuristic gaze of its readers into the lives of the author/character, making way for characterisations that invoke pity and guilt in the readers, which is then assuaged when the conflict is resolved. This realist form is therefore no longer a viable form for contemporary writers. Furthermore, there is also a need for the writers to distance themselves from the text to avoid being reduced to "diarists" and hence be held accountable to measures of authenticity. The two novels selected for study—Meena Kandasamy's *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019) and Adania

Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2020)—reflect a foresight of the harmful reception of the text and the authors' lives. The rest of this essay will closely read the two texts to understand the ways in which these authors play with content, form, style and language to negotiate the questions of violence without falling into the trap of authenticity or empathy.

Meena Kandasamy is an Indian poet, writer, and translator whose works often deal with Dalit and feminist politics. Her third novel, *Exquisite Cadavers*, has been written in response to the reception of her previous novel, an auto-fictional work drawn from her experiences of being in an abusive marriage: *When I Hit You: Or, the Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*. While she had explicitly called this work a novel, the reviews "side-stepp[ed] the entire artistic edifice on which the work stood" (Kandasamy 1) by repeatedly calling it a memoir and reducing Kandasamy to this experience as a raped Indian woman and a beaten-up wife (2). *Exquisite Cadavers* is the product of her experimentation to remove herself as much as possible from the narrative by confining herself to the margins of the paper – literally – where she presents "each influence, each linchpin behind every freewheeling plot-turn" (2). Inspired by the surrealist tradition, she allows the narrative to be veered "purely in tandem with the ideas and templates [she] had chosen" (2). The resulting story is the domestic life of a young couple, the "suitably English" Maya (5) and her immigrant-filmmaking-student husband Karim, as they navigate through their work, marriage and an unplanned pregnancy in present-day London. Kandasamy as the author of this text is a hovering presence throughout as she relegates herself to the margins of the novel by cataloguing and confessing each inspiration and thought she had in the making of this story, whether it is the short film whose artist inspired the character of an immigrant filmmaker (5), the pathetic fallacy in Tamil poetics that led to "sentences burgeoning with a wet bleakness" (8), a justification for why she can write a story that is not of "her own" people in "her own" land (14), or even how an entire chapter needed to be dedicated to the question of mixed marriages and racism as Brexit flooded news headlines (48–58).

One of the questions Kandasamy hopes to answer through her experimental writing is if the margins exhibit "any tendency to respect [her] decision to cautiously separate the fictional and the real" (2). She begins her experimental writing with the intention to keep the story mundane and domestic: "Is it political?" Her husband asks in the margins, to which she confidently replies, "No, love. It is very domestic" (6). However, the political – along with the violence and the pain it inflicts – seeps into the text from the margins as the novel proceeds.[1] Questions of race and nationality make way into the *domestic* narrative as it becomes impossible not to deal with these topics in the political climate of the story being written. As political unrest becomes more and more rife in India, with her friends and comrades being arrested (and, to her relief, not killed), Kandasamy writes on the margins: "As all of this unfolds around me, I feel conflicted about keeping Maya and Karim in the safe cocoon of domesticity" (76). Immediately, the tone of the narrative shifts and an anxious Maya, waiting to break the news of their unplanned pregnancy, arrives at a locked home with her husband nowhere to be found. She only receives a text from him a while later which simply mentioned that he had to urgently leave to Tunis and could not give her any more details at that moment (79). Maya then recollects his "political, visionary, emotional" talks about necropolitics in the context of Tunisia, making her more scared for his life (88). These pages also narrate, albeit in the margins, the horrors of rising hate crimes in India since Narendra Modi was elected to power in 2014. This drastic shift in the plot through her experimental writing attests the inability of the figure of a writer/activist such as Kandasamy to escape questions of violence. The expectations of representation and the need to communicate the existence of injustice haunts the author despite her attempts to refrain from them.

The haunting of the expectations of representation can be seen in Kandasamy's guilt of living in London, as she asks herself if she is evading activism by staying in the margins (2). This guilt is betrayed multiple times in the novel, most notably when she narrates the incident where her husband, Cedric, asks her if she was planning to write about her friend Rona Wilson being arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case, to which she goes on about how that would be too much of a stretch as Karim

in this novel is Tunisian and the events would not be believable. Cedric clarifies that he meant if she would be writing about the arrests for a magazine or newspaper to help his case, and she writes, "I nod in vague agreement. / I'm ashamed that I've become so obsessed about this novel" (71). Kandasamy seems to hint at the sense of responsibility she carries as an artist and writer to bring to light the injustices in her home and towards her kin, whether it is in India, Sri Lanka, London, or Tunisia; "anywhere is home, everyone is kin," she notes in the novel (14–15). This is further reiterated towards the end of the novel as she confesses that the process of writing and telling stories to keep readers entertained feels like "pressing Ctrl+Z a thousand times" (88), in an attempt to undo all the hate around us. She then writes: "Even if all the hate around us comes undone, what will become of those who were killed? They will never be brought back to life. And if we do nothing to challenge this atmosphere of hate, they will have died in vain. Their inert corpses will mock and mock our inaction" (88). This statement marks the end of her writing from the margins, and in the final chapter, we are confronted with the ramblings of Karim breaking down over a phone call about his brother being arrested in Tunis and of Maya going over the possible outcomes of this situation, with the refrain "What is the worst that could happen?" repeated incessantly (95–99). The anxiety of the possibilities of violence is rife within these pages. The absence of Kandasamy at the margins of this highly dramatized final chapter of the novel leaves the readers alone to deal with the feelings of abandonment and uncertainty, just like Karim and Maya (Wadsworth 23).

While *Exquisite Cadavers* explicitly states its refusal to be reduced to the experiences of a woman of colour, Palestinian author Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* narrates the horrors of the war in Palestine from the silences in between its lines (Cummins). Originally written in Arabic and translated into English by Elisabeth Jacquette, this novel is neatly divided into two different parts: the first follows the Israeli commander in Negev who, along with his troop, rapes and murders a Palestinian woman in August 1949; the second is narrated by an unnamed woman in Ramallah decades later, as she becomes obsessed with the story of the raped and murdered Palestinian, and sets on a journey to find the "whole truth" regarding this incident. The two narratives are set apart not just in space and time or by the existence of a page break, but the difference is also starkly presented through a shift in narration. The novel moves from a third-person narrator presenting the commander's perspective to the rambling, stuttering, anxiety-ridden first-person narration in the second part. The third-person narration in the first part peacocks as the authoritative and objective truth, impassively narrating the minutest of details of sights, sounds, and smells of the Palestine that has been occupied by the troops. This forces intimacy with the commander as readers follow his every moment and movement for the span of those four days, but are denied any sort of perspective on others, especially the girl he rapes and murders. In contrast to this, the first-person narration in the second part betrays the irrationality of its narrator right from the beginning. We see the narrator – keeping true to her inability to intuitively know which borders can be crossed and which cannot – attempting to breach the rigidly constructed boundaries between the two parts in her quest to break through the "objective" narrative of the first part for no rational reason other than the date of the murder, which coincidentally was exactly a quarter of a century before she was born (Shibli 64). These contrasting details makes the erasure of truth and the girl's narrative more apparent throughout the novel. As Mireille Juchau rightfully notes, "Shibli's precise language and formal innovation create a palimpsest—the real hovers (almost imperceptibly) above the imagined, just as the past shadows and irradiates the present" (Juchau).

Both the authors explicitly refuse to let their works be received as representative of the groups they speak for. Adania Shibli rejects the idea of being ascribed a representative of Palestine through her works, especially for the Western audience, in an interview with Mireille Juchau: "I really don't care how people in Germany or elsewhere think about Palestine" (qtd. in Juchau). As opposed to Kandasamy, who insists on her engagement with questions of violence being literary, Shibli states that her "concern with Palestine is a personal one, not a literary one. It forms my literature; but my literature is never about Palestine. It is rather within and from Palestine as a condition of injustice; of

the normalization of pain and degradation" (qtd. in Juchau). By asserting her personal relationship with Palestine and its related pain and injustice, Shibli refuses to be the spokesperson for her land and people. This issue is addressed by Kandasamy right from the epigraph to her novel, where she quotes M. NourbeSe Philip: "The purpose of avant-garde writing for a writer of colour is to prove you are human." She then sets out to narrate the story of "other people other lands" (14), having justified her ability to do so in the margins by citing a Tamil poet and philosopher: "Anywhere is home, everyone is kin" (14). She goes on to support her endeavour through the character of Karim, who wishes to make a British film for his student project, but is unable to do so as his professors want him to represent his Arab ancestry through his film. The expectations of representation, however, does not end here, as they want him to go "only so far, no further" when he suggests traveling to the poorest suburbs of Tunisia with the highest number of ISIS recruits to make a film that he wishes to (38–41). This paradox of representation is addressed by Shibli in her novel as well, when the narrator is apologetic towards the readers for narrating violence: "By the way, I hope I didn't cause any awkwardness when I mentioned the incident with the soldier, or the checkpoint, or when I reveal that we are living under occupation here" (Shibli 59–60).

It is also interesting to note that both these novels present two different narratives side-by-side. While the two parts are laid out one after the other with a clear boundary through a page break and being set decades apart in *Minor Detail*, they are connected through motifs of barking dogs, smell of petrol, and the description of the Palestinian landscape. The connection however resists rational explanations, as mentioned above. In *Exquisite Cadavers*, the story of Maya and Karim is accompanied by the author's notes on the margins of the same pages, forcing a break in the flow of reading as readers go back and forth the same page to read Kandasamy in the margins. Both the authors refuse to allow the readers to arrive at completion through their experimentation with the form of the novel: the process of reading itself becomes fragmented with the two narratives laid out simultaneously in *Exquisite Cadavers*, whereas *Minor Detail* refuses to let the female narrator find closure in her quest for the whole truth, leaving her and hence the readers with just the narrative presented from the perspective of the Israeli commander and the official records of the incident. The concept of historical truth is thus challenged by avoiding the "museumification" of the events that transpired years ago in the dark history of Palestinian occupation (Aamir 27). This fragmentation and distance created through the form hinders readers from empathising with the characters.

It is not just the existence of multiple, fragmentary narratives that resist the classical realist structure of the novel form in these two texts; both these authors play with language to highlight of the limits of linguistic expression and the inability to present a coherent narrative. Kandasamy metafictionally refers to this inability in the opening chapter of her story, using the metaphor of home objects that hide the problems of a marriage-in-shambles: "Order creates the semblance of domestic peace," she writes, and that "The space imposes conformity, demands signing up to obedience. To break the silence, it becomes imperative to break the pretence of peace" (Kandasamy 5). Applying this observation to the novel itself, it can be argued that the dominant structure of the novel needs to be broken in order to uncover the blanket of silence over it, and present narratives of pain and suffering. The pretence of peace constructed by stringing together signifiers to impose a comprehensible and palatable narrative must be unravelled by contemporary authors in order to be able to lay bare the violence inflicted upon their lives and communities. Shibli's text, too, is a play with the possibilities of what can be conveyed through silences between the lines. In fact, silence remains a central motif throughout the text. There is always a mention of deafening silences where marginalised narratives could have been: when the commander explains their mission in Negev, "[n]one of them commented on what was said, and silence filled the tent for several seconds" (Shibli 8); just before the commander puts to vote whether the captured girl would be raped by the troop or "kept safe" by assigning kitchen duty, "[a] thick silence prevailed" (39); and when the narrator in the second part comes across an old woman who could have heard about the incident, "the words do not emerge from my

mouth. The silence between us stretches on, as vast as nature's silence expanding around us, and tightens its grips" (109). These moments engulfed in silence hint at the processes of systemic erasure, along with other signifiers such as the differences between the Israeli map and the map of Palestine before 1948, both of which are often referenced by the narrator throughout her journey. The linguistic erasure on maps, according to Shibli, is one of the first experiences of "the betrayal of language" (Juchau). The recollection of this betrayal of language allows the novel to "break the pretence of peace" and thus reveal more than what language can express.

While speaking about language, it is important to address the question of translation in *Minor Detail*. Shibli mentions that the novel "started from this contemplative inquiry on how the complacency of language can inflict pain—and also how the complacency of language can deflect pain. These two base ideas were all that I started with, nothing else" (qtd. in Juchau). The primacy of language, she confesses in her interview with Mireille Juchau, made the translation process into English challenging. The linguistic experience in Arabic forms an important space within the text due to the history of violence and colonisation of the land, which becomes difficult to retain in the translated text (Juchau). However, the translation by Elisabeth Jacquette is able to bring in these intricacies in terms of what is written or spoken out and what is not. Speaking more about the use of Arabic in the novel in another interview with Claudia Steinberg, Shibli mentions the difference between spoken and classical, written language. According to her, written language belongs to its own domain (Steinberg). The domain of the written language can be studied within the novel – even in the English translation – as it is descriptive and the voice of the narrator is glaringly predominant in both parts. There is barely any dialogue within both the parts of the novel; there are two long direct, quoted speech: first, when the commander gives a speech to the soldiers during the celebration after they shoot the Arabs and capture the girl (Shibli 37–38), and second, when the owner of the museum narrates the history of Nirim to the narrator in part II (90–92). Both these speeches reinforce the official narrative, as they come from positions of power. These speeches, spoken in a clear and calm manner, are contrasted with the narrator's stuttering voice and rambling narrative style: "And he begins speaking in a voice so calm and clear, so untouched by stuttering, stammering or rambling, that it feels as if he is smoothly unravelling a delicate thread, one which cannot easily be cut" (Shibli 90). This contrast is addressed by Shibli as well: "In *Minor Detail*, the tension lies not between the spoken and the written word but between eloquent language with its clarity, which originates in a position of power, and its opposite: a broken, fragmented language" (qtd. in Steinberg).

In addition to revealing the existence of violence between the lines, the silences penetrate through the otherwise linear narrative structure of the novel. In her interview with Juchau, Shibli confesses her repulsion by linear narrative structures. Experimental writing, she says, is:

> […] where suddenly language can liberate itself from its functionality and instrumentality. Over the past few years, I moved from genuinely not caring about the narrative form, which probably shows in my writing from early on, to being deeply disgusted by the narrative form. I say disgusted because I have this very physical reaction to linear structure. It is within such structures that I feel a grand narrative can exist, like a dictatorship—solid, like the worst tyrant. And I try to use it in cases where tyranny is at stake, so the form dictates the content. Linear narrative structure is a dictator. (qtd. in Juchau)

It is this understanding of linear structure as a tyrannical dictator that allows *Minor Detail* to coldly refuse to narrate the "whole truth" of what transpired on the 13th August 1949. The narrative from the perspective of the Israeli commander is presented in a tone that seems to claim wholeness and truth, but the readers are soon confronted with the fact that there exist other perspectives that are denied to us through the unfruitful quest in the second part.

Having seen the ways in which these two novels deal with questions of violence through a play with form, style and language, the paradox of truth and authenticity as well as that of relaying pain and suffering needs to be revisited. On the one hand, the inability to arrive at the whole truth forms

the central theme of *Minor Detail* as seen above. Violence is rendered visible using the motif of silences that speak loudly amidst the rambling focus on minor details and act as signposts of erasure of narratives. Kandasamy, on the other hand, strips herself away from the narrative by relegating herself to the margins, but is unable to divorce the political from the mundane or the personal. Despite the stark difference in their approach to representing violence, what remains common to both these texts is the resistance to questions of authenticity by citing the processes (from the margins or through silences that indicate omission and erasure) through which the story came to be just that – a constructed story – and not a testimony that seeks the empathy of the readers.

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Notes

[1] While this essay is more concerned with *how* the questions of violence are dealt with than whether or not a woman of colour can narrate a tale that is merely domestic, it becomes important to understand the literary processes through which Kandasamy arrives at writing violence despite her attempts not to do so.

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