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Thesis Summary

Fact Through Fiction: How Orly Castel-Bloom Uncovers The Myth Of Feminism

In Israel explores the role of women in Israeli society through the lens of Orly Castel-Bloom's short stories. It consists of two chapters. The first chapter, "Setting The Scene – The Life And Writing Of Orly Castel-Bloom," is divided into eight categories: "Feminism in Israeli Society," "Biography of Orly Castel-Bloom," "Orly Castel-Bloom's Writing Style," "Post-Modernism," "Post-Zionism," "Feminism," "Writing Style and Language," and "Conclusion." The second chapter is a translation and analysis of Castel-Bloom's short story, "*Mekupellet*" (Folded). It is divided into seven categories: "Introduction," "Translation of *Mekupellet*," "Identification of Characters," "Motherhood," "Victimhood," "Writing Style," and "Conclusion." The goal of this thesis is to understand the meaning of Castel-Bloom's bizarre stories, and how her stories depict reality in Israel. In addition to some of Castel-Bloom's stories (mainly in Hebrew, but some in English), I also used reviews from Modern Hebrew Literature and newspapers such as Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post, Eilat Negev's book, Close Encounters With Twenty Israeli Writers, and Mapping Jewish Identities.

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FACT THROUGH FICTION:
HOW ORLY CASTEL-BLOOM
UNCOVERS THE MYTH OF FEMINISM
IN ISRAEL

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Introduction

When I was searching for a thesis topic in the spring of 2003, I had never even heard the name Orly Castel-Bloom. Nor had I ever heard anything about the need for feminism in Israel, or the term "post-Zionism." But after meeting with my advisor, I decided to write about feminism in contemporary Israeli fiction. Two different professors of Hebrew Literature suggested the Israeli author, Orly Castel-Bloom. So, I went to the library and checked out Miriam Glazer's Dreaming The Actual: Contemporary Fiction and Poetry by Israeli Women Writers,¹ because it contains three short stories by Castel-Bloom in addition to a short biography. Initially, I did not understand two of the stories in the collection ("A Thousand Shekels a Story" and "The Woman Whose Hand Got Stuck in the Mailbox"). But the seemingly senseless story, "The Woman Who Went Looking for a Walkie-Talkie," made perfect sense to me.

The story has an absurd plotline: It is about an Israeli woman who longs to buy just one walkie-talkie. Although everyone knows that walkie-talkies come only as a pair, she wants only one because she doesn't have a husband or companion of any kind to share a walkie-talkie set with her. Eventually, she actually finds a seller willing to offer her just the one walkie-talkie. The moment after she purchases it, she turns it on and begins to talk to anyone who would listen. She talks into it so much, in fact, that the walkie-talkie itself asks her to stop talking because she was driving it crazy.

Even without knowing more about Orly Castel-Bloom at the time, it was clear to me that the point of this story was to show that Israel has contempt for single women, and

¹ Miriam Glazer, editor. Dreaming The Actual: Contemporary Fiction and Poetry by Israeli Women Writers. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000). pp. 200-211.

believes that all women should be married. They should be part of a pair, just like walkie-talkies, socks, shoes, and gloves.² This premise shocked me. I had always believed that Israel was (already) a feminist society. After all, women are required to join the army and one had even become prime minister. This story triggered an interest in Orly Castel-Bloom as a feminist writer. I wanted to use her writings as a window on how women are viewed in modern Israeli society.

In order to really understand her work, I realized that I needed a Hebrew tutor to assist me in translating Castel-Bloom's stories into English. My advisor put me in touch with an Israeli woman named Michal Nachmany. Born and raised in Israel, Michal now lives in New York City with her husband and 3 children. In addition to being a Hebrew tutor, Michal also teaches Hebrew at Hebrew Union College. Not only did Michal help me translate each story, she helped me to analyze them. For every story we translated, I was required to write a one paragraph summary and analysis in Hebrew (so as to further my Hebrew language capabilities). She helped me find recurring themes and common characteristics among the different stories. We discussed both the feminist issues and the post-Zionist issues Castel-Bloom raises in her works. She even helped me to understand Castel-Bloom's point of view [as Michal is an Israeli woman as well]. She also encouraged me to try to understand Castel-Bloom's unique writing style. One of the ways in which she did so was by pointing out words that seemed either too formal for everyday language or slang. In addition to reading Castel-Bloom's short stories, we read and discussed all of Castel-Bloom's novels that are available in English.³ Moreover,

² Ibid. p. 206

³ Orly Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City* (London: Loki Books, 1997), and Orly Castel-Bloom, *Human Parts* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2003).

Michal read the novels that are not available in English, and she summarized them for me so that we could discuss them as well.

Besides my weekly meetings with Michal, I spent a lot of time researching Orly Castel-Bloom both in the library and on the internet. My on-line research enabled me to get in touch with a small number of people who have written essays and articles about her. Eventually, to my delight, I was even able to reach Castel-Bloom directly.

Castel-Bloom agreed to meet with me during her trip to New York City, as she was scheduled to speak at Makor (a division of the 92nd Street Y that reaches out to people in their twenties and thirties) about her new and recently translated book, Human Parts.⁴ As soon as I met her, I realized that she acts like she writes; she is not afraid to speak her mind. For instance, before our meeting, I called her hotel to work out the logistics. When I did not receive a return call from her, I simply went to Makor to hear her speak. A few minutes before her lecture I ran into her in the hallway and mentioned to her that I had left a message for her at the hotel. She responded quite abruptly (by polite American standards). She said that it was "dumb of me to call her hotel." I was surprised by her response. However, both Michal and my advisor pointed out that my encounter with Castel-Bloom could easily be mistaken for one of her stories. Apparently, her personality naturally comes through in her stories – no holds barred!

While her "no holds barred" personality shocked me -- both in her behavior and in her writing -- it has helped me to better understand Israel as a modern society. Castel-

⁴ Orly Castel-Bloom. Human Parts. Translated by Dalya Bilu. (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2003).

Bloom does not hesitate to describe the realities of day-to-day life there. I only wish I had had the opportunity to read some of her stories before I went to Israel.

Before I began rabbinical school, I had never been to Israel. But I certainly had many expectations as to what life must be like there. I had envisioned Israel to be this wonderful, almost perfect place. In the words of Orly Castel-Bloom, I imagined it as "a heaven and a haven for all Jews."⁵ I thought that the only problem Israel faced was the constant warring with Arab nations and Palestinians. Little did I know that in addition to the wars, Israel also had problems like we have in any nation, such as theft, rape, prejudice, murder, etc. I also did not expect Israeli culture to be so different from my own American culture. I was not prepared for the difficult lifestyle Israelis lead (even standing in line in the grocery store there is hard work). There was no way for me to know that my love of Israel would be so severely tested.

During the first several months of my year in Israel, I ignored the reality of Israel as a modern nation. I was so desperate to see it as the perfect place I had dreamed of that I failed to notice what was really going on around me. The day I could no longer deny this reality was the day my apartment was burglarized. Up until this point, for instance, I somehow managed to ignore the harassment I received from men on the street every day. But this burglary was the straw that broke the camel's back. The reason for this is that my apartment was my personal space, and now it had been invaded. The harassment from the men on the street (at this point) had only been verbal, so it seemed much easier to ignore. This, together with the harassment, as well as the fact that a number of people

⁵ Orly Castel-Bloom. "Reflections on Literature and Identity." Writing for the Jewish Future. (www.jewishculture.org/publications/wtjf/publications_wtjf_castelbloom.html).

there did not see me as Jewish because I am Reform, made me realize that Israel is not the heaven I thought it was.

What upset me most was the realization that Israelis, too, can be prejudiced, especially against Palestinians and Arabs. While I know that this can be a mutual prejudice, and that this prejudice is the result of nearly perpetual antagonism, this is not the Israel I dreamed of. I realized how strong this prejudice is during a school *tiyul* to Givat Haviva. There, we were introduced to an Israeli Arab who could not get a job as a lawyer in Israel, despite his qualifications. It made me wonder how Israel had gotten to this point. As a people, we Jews have always been the victims of prejudice and hate, and yet here we were perpetuating hate. Was Hillel's credo of "Do not do unto others that which you would not want done unto you,"⁶ being ignored in this case.

In addition to the discrimination against Palestinians and Arabs, modern Israeli society is often sexist. While this may not be nearly as obvious, it is there.

No one had ever brought any of this to my attention before. I felt as though I was the only Jewish person in the world who saw how prejudice Israeli society can be. Back in the United States, it seemed to me that Hebrew schools were teaching about an Israel that doesn't exist – a perfect Israel. But now, after reading Castel-Bloom's stories and researching about post-Zionism, I don't feel alone anymore. Nor do I feel like a bad Jew for disagreeing with the way Israeli society is today.

While I feel that Castel-Bloom's works helped to justify my feelings, I want this thesis to do more than that. As my research for this topic began to expand, I had some questions that I hope this thesis begins to answer. Why does Castel-Bloom write such

⁶ Tractate Shabbat 31a

bizarre stories? Why is Castel-Bloom's portrayal of women significant? Does it show a change in the role of women in Israeli society or does it cause the reader to want to change the role of women in Israeli society? How does Castel-Bloom view Zionism? How is this expressed in her stories? Is Castel-Bloom's unique writing style significant? If so, how?

Chapter 1: Setting The Scene - The Life And Writing Of Orly Castel-Bloom

Feminism in Israeli Society

For a long time it seemed as though Israelis did not need to confront feminism. After all, from its inception the Zionist movement promoted sexual equality, bolstered even by "popular images of ... gun-toting pioneer women."⁷ However, the photographs of women working the field or preparing for service in the Hagana (the Jewish defense organization) were rare indeed. Although a small number of women took on roles conventionally assigned to men, most played stereotypical roles in the kitchen, in the infirmary, and in the laundry room. Yet, the few women who took on the "men's roles" gained enormous publicity, and thus it seemed as though men and women were equal.⁸ Recently, however, the myth that Israel is a feminist country has been shattered. One of those responsible for this transformation is the fiction writer, Orly Castel-Bloom.

Biography of Orly Castel-Bloom

Orly Castel-Bloom was born in Tel Aviv on November 26, 1960. Her grandfather had lived in Hebron until 1905, when he moved to Egypt in search of love. He succeeded in his mission and met his wife there. Indeed, both of Castel-Bloom's parents were born in Egypt, and French was her first language. Her father, Salvo Castel, who was an accountant for El Al Airlines, died an early death on October 1, 1985, as a result of lung

⁷ Daniel Belasco. "Shattering Myths: Slow to emerge, women and gender studies now thrives in Israeli universities." The Jewish Week. December 20, 2000.

⁸ Lesley Hazleton. Israeli Women: The Reality Behind the Myths. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), chapter 1.

cancer. Her mother, Bertha Castel, worked in a bank for over forty years.⁹ They emigrated from Egypt to Israel in 1949, where their two daughters were born and raised (Castel-Bloom's sister, Anat, was born on October 10, 1963). During a lecture at New York City's Makor on November 3, 2003, Castel-Bloom fondly recalled growing up in a Tel Aviv neighborhood in which all of the streets were named after the prophets.

After serving in the military (all Israelis, both male and female, are required to join the army when they are eighteen years old), Castel-Bloom studied film at Tel Aviv University from 1981 to 1983. However, she never completed her studies. Instead, she dropped out and applied for a job as a copywriter, but was rejected. Shortly thereafter she became pregnant. At approximately the same time, her father was dying of lung cancer. In an attempt to try to make things "right," she married the baby's father, a journalist she met at film school named Gadi Bloom (who currently works for *Yediot Tikshoret*, a division of *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's largest newspaper). They were married on June 18, 1985. She sensed the marriage wasn't right from the start, as the groom injured his foot while performing the customary breaking of the glass at the end of the wedding ceremony and had to be rushed to the emergency room.¹⁰ However, they remained married for a number of years until after the birth of their second child.

A difficult pregnancy with her first child led Castel-Bloom to a career as a writer. She told Dr. Wendy Zierler in an interview for *The Jerusalem Post* that she did not want to be a writer when she was a little girl. Rather, she wanted to study the habits of the tribes of the African jungle. It was not until her doctor prescribed bed-rest that she became interested in writing. "I didn't know what to do with myself," she told Zierler.

⁹ Eilat Negev, *Close Encounters with Twenty Israeli Writers*. (Portland, Or.: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), pp. 164-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

"I was doing nothing and could think of nothing to do. My husband said, 'Maybe you should start writing stories.' And that was it."¹¹ While her husband was the one who encouraged her to write, her mother was, and remains, unsupportive of her chosen career.

Her mother

"says that books are only dreams, that I should stop dreaming and start working. She thinks I am spoiled, and that my dark moods sprout out of boredom, because I think too much. She urges me to find a proper job, be busy all day long, so I won't have time to think. I'm a bit hurt that she does not acknowledge me, but perhaps it also liberates me."¹²

After the birth of her daughter, Osnat, in the mid-1980s, she decided to continue writing so that she could be at home to raise her child and be her own boss.

"It seems to me rather dreamy: what could one want more than to write a not very thick book once in a while, a book that summarizes your emotions, opinions and internal world."¹³

Her first book, Not Far From The Center Of Town (Tel Aviv: Am Oved), was published in 1987. After completing this book, she went on to write:

- Hostile Surroundings. Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1989. (collection of short stories).
- Where Am I. Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1990. (collection of short stories).
- Dolly City. Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1992. (novel).
- Involuntary Stories. Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1993. (collection of short stories).
- The Mina Lisa. Jerusalem: Keter. 1995. (novel).
- Let's Behave Ourselves. Jerusalem: Keter. 1997. (children's book).
- Taking The Trend (literally: The New Book Of Orly Castel-Bloom). Jerusalem: Keter. 1998. (collection of short stories).

¹¹ Wendy Zierler. "Orly City." The Jerusalem Post Magazine. June 12, 1992.

¹² Negev, p. 164.

¹³ Ibid., p. 165.

- Free Radicals. Jerusalem: Keter. 2000 (collection of short stories).
- Human Parts. Kinneret Books. 2002. (novel).

She is currently in the middle of writing another book.

In addition to being published in Hebrew, many of her books have also been translated into other languages, such as Dutch, French, English, Swedish, Greek, Chinese, German, Italian, and Portuguese.

Her many accolades include:

- The 1990 Tel Aviv Prize for Literature for Where Am I
- Dolly City has been included in the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works
- The Prime Minister's Prize for Literature in 1992, 1994, and 2001
- The Natan Alterman Prize in 1993 and 1996
- The Newman Prize in 2003
- The Bar-Ilan Prize for her contribution to Hebrew literature
- One of the Fifty Most Influential Women in Israel in 1999

Some of her literary models include Raymond Carver, Grace Paley, and the Argentine Julio Cortazar, "master of fragmenting narrative." Many have compared Castel-Bloom to Kafka as well as James Joyce.¹⁴

Although motherhood triggered her writing career, she did not start writing her book about motherhood, Dolly City, until her daughter was eight years old. Dolly City is

¹⁴ Samuel G. Freedman. "For an Israeli, Flights of Fancy Are Grounded; Wide Praise for a Novelist Stirred to Social Realism by Bombings." New York Times. June 17, 2002.

a novel about a female protagonist named Dolly who finds an infant boy in a trash bag in a car. Dolly rescues him and raises him as her own. The reason she wrote Dolly City is due to the "existential anxiety" she was feeling after her wedding and her father's death. Writing this book helped her rid herself of this anxiety. Like *Dolly*, whose father worked for B. OFF airlines for thirty-two years before he died, *Orly's* father worked for El Al airlines until he died of lung cancer. Castel-Bloom used Dolly City to "try to make sense of [her father's] life and death."¹⁵ Also, Castel-Bloom was experiencing some maternal anxiety as well. Like Dolly, she was always worried that her child might contract all kinds of illnesses. Letting *Dolly* be the one to act on these concerns, no matter how normal or irrational, helped *Orly* to calm down and not overreact to her child's slightest cough or snifle. As a result, three years later, in the early 1990's, she was able to conceive again and give birth to a son, Hanoch.

Shortly after Hanoch was born, Castel-Bloom began to realize that her marriage was falling apart. However, it wasn't until a number of years later that she and her husband divorced.¹⁶ She said, regarding her divorce,

"I am at my best when I'm on my own, and that institutions are not for me. I had a duty to immunize my children and convey to them that life is not a picnic, but also to protect them from the ugly side of my marriage. The divorce enabled me to be myself and a better mother to them."¹⁷

At her lecture at Makor, she described her divorce as unpleasant: "But aren't all divorces ugly?" she asked rhetorically.

¹⁵ Negev, p. 164.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Orly Castel-Bloom's Post-Modernist Writing Style

As an author, Orly Castel-Bloom has been both praised and criticized for her unique writing style. She has been described by many as a post-modernist. Her post-modernism can be sub-divided into three categories: post-Zionist, feminist, and language style. I will take each category in turn.

Post-Modernism

Post-modernism is "any number of trends or movements in the arts and literature... in reaction to or rejection of the dogma, principles, or practices of established modernisms."¹⁸ It challenges modernity by questioning in a skeptical manner the legitimacy of modern institutions. During modernity, people believed that reason and rationality would lead to the perfection of humanity. Post-modernism points out that there is no one path towards this perfection. As a post-modernist, Castel-Bloom critiques and sometimes even rejects modernity's established principles and institutions. Three of the established principles or institutions that she most often criticizes and/or rejects are Zionism's objectives, the notion that Israel is a feminist society, and the writing styles of her predecessors.

Post-Zionism

Orly Castel-Bloom has often been described, both positively and negatively, as a post-Zionist.

"Broadly defined, post-Zionism can be described as disruptions of the cultural hegemony of the Zionist master narrative, or more specifically, the various social

¹⁸ Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary

and academic trends that undermine, fragment, or reinvestigate some or all of the tenets of Zionist ideology on which the state and its society were founded.”¹⁹

While post-Zionism recognizes “the legitimacy of Zionism as a national movement of Jews,” it points out that somewhere along the way, it lost its legitimacy because of the injustice it has done to Arabs as well as others.²⁰ In other words, post-Zionism is a post-modernist approach to Zionism because it challenges and even rejects some of its principles and objectives.

Although Castel-Bloom is an Israeli woman, she often points out the inherent flaws of Zionism. For example, post-Zionists question the dual assertion that Israel is a state for Jewish people and also democratic. They ask: How can Israel claim to be a democratic society when it excludes Arabs? Castel-Bloom responds: It cannot. She champions an Israeli society that is secular, democratic, and pluralistic.²¹ As she once claimed in an article,

“This worldview that there is only one country, one people, one religion, one way is ugly and suffocating. It could kill the whole idea of Israel as a free place.”

Consequently, she encourages all immigrants, whether legal or not, to contribute aspects of their cultures to Israeli society. She argues that Israel should not only be “a heaven and a haven” for Jewish people but for all peoples.²² Castel-Bloom views modern Zionists as maintaining a prejudice against those who are not Jewish. While Zionism’s original intent was to give the Jewish people a place to escape persecution, post-Zionists like Castel-Bloom feel that Israel needs to open its doors to all who are escaping

¹⁹ Deborah A. Starr. “Reterritorializing the Dream: Orly Castel-Bloom’s Remapping of Israeli Identity.” *Mapping Jewish Identities*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 221.

²⁰ Neri Livneh. “Post-Zionism Only Rings Once” *Ha’aretz*: 2001.

²¹ Starr, p. 220.

²² Castel-Bloom. “Reflections on Literature and Identity.”

persecution. In doing so, Israel would be upholding Hillel's tenet of, "Do not do unto others that which you would not want done unto you."²³

It should be noted that some believe that there is no difference between post-Zionism and anti-Zionism. As Castel-Bloom describes the criticism of her detractors,

"There is a great deal of slippage between the notions of 'post-Zionism' and 'anti-Zionism.' Poet, novelist, and critic Yitzhak La'or, for example, claims that there is no such thing as post-Zionism: 'It is just a bluff that permits [critics of Israel] to live with the critique they have of Zionism without letting slip from their mouths the word anti-Zionist' (cited in Sheleg 1995, 59)."²⁴

Others must argue that La'or fails to recognize that one can be critical of something without outright rejecting it.

Castel-Bloom seems to agree with La'or that post-Zionism is really anti-Zionism. When asked about being a post-Zionist during her lecture at Makor, she made it clear that she did not think of herself as post-Zionist. Although she does challenge ideas inherent to Zionism, she does not reject it as a whole. In her lecture at Makor, Castel-Bloom said that she used to think that Diaspora Jews were cowards because they preferred convenience and luxury to fighting for Israel. She felt that all Jews should make *aliyah* and live in Israel.²⁵ Today, she no longer feels this way because of the state of affairs in Israel today. She knows that there is a constant threat that one day Israel will no longer exist, and so understands a new function for Jews living in the Diaspora. She believes that if Israel should be destroyed or annexed, the Diaspora Jewish community would come together to reconstruct the state of Israel.

²³ Tractate Shabbat 31a.

²⁴ Starr, p. 242.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 229. For example, "various branches of Zionism had long advocated for 'dissolving the diaspora' to do away with the passive mentality that had no place in their vision of the new, empowered Jew who would build the state."

There is one more reason proving that Castel-Bloom is not anti-Zionist, but post-Zionist. During her lecture at Makor, she said that she, along with all Israelis, thought that the task of building the State of Israel was complete. However, with the start of this most recent intifada, she now knows that it is far from complete. Israel needs to remind itself of Zionism's original intent and re-evaluate how this intention fits into modern society. Because Zionism was supposed to be an egalitarian way of life, men and women should be treated equally today. Also, Zionism created a safe place for Jews to escape persecution. Israel needs to remember what it was like to be persecuted, for in doing so, they will recognize the injustices they have caused others and will try to stop. Because Zionism has caused injustices to happen to others, Israel cannot move forward until these injustices are corrected.

Feminism

Only Castel-Bloom's post-Zionist stance can be seen clearly in her views on feminism in Israel and in her unique writing style. She contends that Zionism not only preserves a prejudice against other cultures but it helps to perpetuate prejudice against women. Zionism emerged as a socialist organization that promoted sexual equality. However, when the dream became a reality, and Israel came into existence, women were pushed back into a second-class status. Even more recently, once women were permitted to join the army (and, even become Prime Minister of Israel) women still remained in an inferior position. It is only now, with writers like Orly Castel-Bloom, that the issue of feminism is being pushed to the fore. In an article about the emergence of women and gender studies in Israeli universities, Daniel Belasco wrote,

"Writers like Orly Castel-Bloom and Nava Semel and artists like Nurit David have put women in the center and helped shape post-Zionist culture. As vigorously as Israelis once held to the myth of sexual equality, they are equally enthusiastic to refute it."²⁶

For example, in her novel The Mina Lisa, Castel-Bloom "satirizes the ideal of sacrificing the individual for the collective," an ideology that is characteristic of Israelis, especially women.²⁷ Women often had to sacrifice their desires to be treated as equals by men in order to aid in the creation of a Jewish homeland.²⁸ For example, the *halutsot* wanted the men to treat them as equals, and when the men did not, they took the demeaning jobs of working in the kitchen and laundry, instead of quitting and returning to their families in Eastern Europe because they still wanted to be a part of the creation of a Jewish homeland; it was something they knew to be necessary and important.

Although few women participated in the literary world of the Yishuv, Rachel, Dvora Baron, and Elisheva did manage to play a significant role. It is interesting to note that their voices as authors have been described as "feminine" because they were "quieter, smaller, more questioning and less confident than most of their more famous male counterparts."²⁹ They dealt more with personal issues, as opposed to writing epics about "the great national movement that was developing around them and in which they nonetheless played a part."³⁰ Rachel once wrote, "I only know how to tell of myself."³¹ These words were unintentionally echoed by Castel-Bloom during her lecture at Makor when she told the audience that normally she can only write about herself.

²⁶ Belasco, "Shattering Myths."

²⁷ Rochelle Furstenberg. "A Postmodernist Oracle." Modern Hebrew Literature 16 New Series. (Spring/Summer 1996).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Gender Roles: The Changing Role of Women" (www.jaff.org.il/education/culture/onisraeli/13-gender.html)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Today, this characteristic of self-revelation is regarded as post-modernist. Until the advent of post-Zionism, all mainstream Israeli literature was Zionist in content. It concentrated almost exclusively on the significance of the state, thereby ignoring the significance of the individual. In contrast, authors like Orly Castel-Bloom, Etgar Keret, Uzi Weil, and Gafi Amir

"had a sense that the subordination of the private individual to the public cause was suffocating one's ability to live, to love ... And they felt that the writer knew no more than the rest of us. The writer could say, 'I don't know.'"³²

Post-modernist writers realize that they are no more the experts or authorities on politics than the next person. It is not their responsibility to explain what is happening, but to express their personal reactions to what is happening.

As Starr suggests, Castel-Bloom is also very interested in the female perspective.

"Through her fiction writing as well, Castel-Bloom attempts to subvert the cultural hegemony of male ... voices in Israeli culture and recover the repressed voices of women ..."³³

Castel-Bloom's first novel, Dolly City, is an excellent example of recovering the repressed voice of an Israeli woman. The main character, Dolly, becomes the epitome of the stereotypical neurotic Jewish mother, who finds a baby and takes him as her own. However, in addition to being a Jewish mother, she is an *Israeli* Jewish mother. Being an Israeli Jewish mother means being the person who nurtures, cares for, and adores her children, while ensuring that they will be able to endure the difficulties of serving in the army, as regarded of all Israelis. So, in addition to being kind and nurturing, the Israeli Jewish mother must also be tough on her children.³⁴ Dolly recognizes that she is the

³² Freedman, "For an Israeli, Flights of Fancy Are Grounded; Wide Praise For a Novelist Stirred To Social Realism By Bombings."

³³ Starr, p. 221.

³⁴ Smadar Shiffman. "Motherhood Under Zionism." Hebrew Studies 44 (2003), pp. 139 and 141.

stereotypical Israeli Jewish mother. After telling the reader that she sometimes wants to "bash" her son's head and "serve it over a net," she then goes on to tell the reader that she is like this only because she wants to protect him. She says,

"I would like to stress something: I don't want to give the impression here that I took a child and destroyed him. I only wanted to protect him from harm. I wanted him to live to a hundred and twenty, and what's wrong with that? I wanted to be in command on all fronts, and what's wrong with that?"³⁵

Here, Castel-Bloom challenges the patriarchal concept of motherhood. After all, patriarchy has deemed the ideal mother to be a loving, nurturing woman, who is the primary caretaker of the child. She incessantly worries about the child and will go to any lengths to protect him or her from the world.³⁶ The fact that Dolly is a physician, ironically, contributes to her being the ideal mother. However, she worries so much about her child that she seems insane; she over-immunizes him and performs unnecessary surgeries on him. She even gives him chemotherapy treatments, knowing that he does not have cancer. She gives him the treatments as a preventative measure, though she knows better. (Through Dolly, Castel-Bloom is telling us that the "ideal mother" is absurd.)

In 1990, most Israeli women regarded "motherhood as the primary component of their identity, even though most of these women have a profession and expertise."³⁷ The same is apparently true of Castel-Bloom herself. After all, she wrote Dolly City as a way to express her anxieties triggered by motherhood. Upon first bringing her daughter home from the hospital, she claimed,

³⁵ Orly Castel-Bloom. Dolly City. (translated into English by Dalya Bilu) (London: LOKI BOOKS/UNESCO Publishing, 1997), p. 60.

³⁶ Rachel Giora. "Irony in Women's Protest Writing: The Politics of Indirectness." (www.tau.ac.il/~giorar/as2.html).

³⁷ Starr, p. 221.

"For every cough I would give her a thorough check-up, imagining all sorts of illnesses and deformities. Psychologists say that this manifests some kind of repressed aggressiveness, a fear of my own violence. Some mothers beat their child with murderous blows, and others abuse with over-protectiveness."³⁸

Of course, Castel-Bloom knows that she cannot perform surgery on her children every time she thinks something might possibly be wrong, so she used fiction as a means to express her anxieties.

As a feminist, Castel-Bloom is also critical of Israel's culture of violence. She views this culture of violence as masculine. Because of Israel's nearly constant battles over territory, a culture of violence has emerged. Her female protagonists respond to violence in two ways. The first is to "embrace a romanticized notion of their role as victim." In other words, they not only accept the fact that they are the victims, but they make that their whole identity. Take for instance, the female protagonist of "Mekupellet."³⁹ She is four months pregnant, a drug addict, and has been traded by a friend for sex. She does not fight back against her friend or against the person whom she has been traded to for sex. Instead, she just lets it happen. By having the character be so passive, Castel-Bloom is causing the reader to get mad at her for not standing up for herself. Castel-Bloom wants us to get so angry that we get up and do something to prevent other women from being in situations like this (i.e. teaching these women to fight back and get help). The second is to use violence as a way to control territory and the body.⁴⁰ Dolly is the perfect example of this. Because her environment is so violent, she chooses not to be a victim. Instead, she chooses to take control of this violence by being violent. She takes control of her son and her son's body by performing unnecessary

³⁸ Negev, pp. 162-3.

³⁹ Orly Castel-Bloom. "Mekupellet." Hostile Surroundings. (Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan, 1989).

⁴⁰ Starr, p. 230.

surgeries on him and carving a map of Israel into his back. I find this response to her violent surroundings to be unacceptable, as this response does not help to stop the violence, but instead encourages it to continue on. This is why Dolly's son tries to hijack an airplane at the end of the novel. Another example can be seen in Castel-Bloom's story, "The Woman Who Wants To Kill Someone."⁴¹ In this story, the main character is a woman who wants to shoot a fat man with a pistol. However, she does not want to kill anyone because she does not want to be responsible for someone else's death. She tries to find a victim, but cannot, so instead she tries to kill herself. However, there is no bullet in the chamber, and she therefore does not die. In trying to kill a fat man, she is trying to maintain control over someone else. Because she cannot do so, she tries to kill herself as a way of maintaining control over herself. In trying to kill herself, she is trying to prevent herself from killing others. Also, by killing herself, she would, in effect, be ending a chain of violence. Unfortunately, in her effort to try to stop the violence, she nearly caused herself to become a victim. It seems to me that Castel-Bloom is saying that "two wrongs don't make a right," violence plus violence does not equal peace.

Writing Style and Language

National Identity

In his 1950 address to the first Writers Association Conference after the State of Israel had been established, Israeli author Avraham Kariv⁴² pointed out that while "we receive identity cards from our state," we are actually the ones who create national identity. In other words, Hebrew literature is a means for establishing and maintaining

⁴¹ Orly Castel-Bloom. "The Woman Who Wanted To Kill Someone." Unbidden Stories. (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1993).

⁴² Kariv is most known for his book Lithuania, Land of My Birth.

national identity.⁴³ Indeed, faced with challenges by post-modernism, Hebrew literature is beginning to change. While Israeli writers were once considered "the watchman for the House of Israel,"⁴⁴ post-modernist Israeli writers feel that they do not know more than anyone else regarding Israel's state of affairs.⁴⁵ Orly Castel-Bloom once wrote,

"I am not a historian, although I know exactly where I am. I prefer to look at my surroundings not with a severe political social perspective, but as a temporary, uncertain situation about which you can only guess, wonder, or jazz."⁴⁶

However, while Castel-Bloom may not write about "the collective national 'I' of the State of Israel,"⁴⁷ I think she would agree with Kariv that the role of Hebrew literature is significant to Israel's national identity. After all, she does write about how the individual is affected by this national identity. For example, she wrote,

"we should accept and welcome the foreigner... One day he will surely write good Hebrew literature. Let him in and let us play more with our DNA."⁴⁸

Castel-Bloom feels that the national identity of Israel should be enlarged to include the foreigner who comes to live in Israel, and in doing this, the foreigner will be able to write about how their cultural background has been incorporated into the rest of Israeli society.

Words

The most basic characteristic of Hebrew literature is, of course, the Hebrew language. While it was once considered a dead language, it was brought back to life as

⁴³ Hannan Hever, "Mapping Literary Spaces: Territory and Violence in Israeli Literature." Mapping Jewish Identities. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 201.

⁴⁴ David Gurevitch, "Postmodernism in Israeli Literature in the 80s and 90s." Modern Hebrew Literature New Series 15. (Fall/Winter 1995).

⁴⁵ Freedman, "For an Israeli, Flights of Fancy Are Grounded; Wide Praise For a Novelist Stirred To Social Realism By Bombings."

⁴⁶ Castel-Bloom, "Reflections on Literature and Identity."

⁴⁷ Hever, "Mapping Literary Spaces: Territory and Violence in Israeli Literature," p. 201.

⁴⁸ Castel-Bloom, "Reflections on Literature and Identity."

the Zionist movement began to grow.⁴⁹ Now that Israel is faced with the challenges of post-modernism and post-Zionism, the Hebrew language is also faced with new challenges.

One of the new challenges that Castel-Bloom has posed for the Hebrew language is the incorporation of elements of Israel's multilingual heritage. Just as Castel-Bloom regards women as a persecuted minority, so too does she view other cultures, especially the Mizrahim, who speak Arabic (among other languages). She attempts to bring out the repressed voice of the Mizrahim in her story "Umami Fi Shur," by using both Hebrew and Arabic to make note of her own repressed Mizrahi background.

In her article "Writing for the Jewish Future: Reflections on Literature and Identity," Castel-Bloom encourages all foreign workers who enter Israel, whether legally or illegally, to "mingle" in Israeli society.⁵⁰ She hopes that non-native Israelis will influence the Hebrew language by blending their own language with it. While this is a nice, pluralistic idea, it does have one potential flaw. The fact that Castel-Bloom wants to incorporate different languages into the Hebrew language prevents all the different types of Jews from integrating into one Israeli Hebrew culture.⁵¹ On the other hand, modern Hebrew was originally an amalgam of ancient Hebrew, words created by Eliezer ben Yehudah, and words from other languages. By encouraging foreigners to contribute some of their native language into modern Hebrew, Castel-Bloom may be helping to perpetuate modern Hebrew and even create a new Israeli Hebrew culture.

⁴⁹ "On Israeli Culture: 6. The Hebrew Language." (www.jafi.org.il/education/culture/onisraeli/06-hebrew.html).

⁵⁰ Castel-Bloom, "Writing for the Jewish Future: Reflections on Literature and Identity."

⁵¹ Starr, p. 228.

Whether Castel-Bloom is helping to create a uniform Hebrew language or not, she does use language as a tool to help us understanding what is happening. The language a post-modernist writer uses does not inform the reader of a deeper meaning of the text. Instead, its job is to be an instrument that only describes *what* is happening, not *why* it is happening. Some characteristics of post-modernist writing are "paranoia and mockery, indifference and neglect, apocalypse and kitsch."⁵² These characteristics describe Castel-Bloom's writing style. In her book, Human Parts, there is no deeper meaning of the text. She merely describes for us what is going on; she gives us a description of what life is like for people in Israel during the intifada through the lenses of different fictional characters. There is no underlying meaning – no hidden agenda. She does not neglect the realities that everyday people in Israel face, whether during an intifada such as this or not. For example, while the intifada continued on, Kati Beit-Halahmi and her family continued to live in poverty. She washed stairwells to make ends meet. Due to some exposure on television, the president of Israel, Reuven Tekoa, was going to pay them a visit in between shiva calls to the families of fallen soldiers. Kati was so excited about this visit that

"She didn't know what was the right impression to make...poor and pleasant, poor and embittered, or poor and cheerful, relaxed and full of hope for the future."⁵³

The narrator flat out tells the reader what Kati is thinking and why she is thinking it. There is no underlying meaning, no hidden agenda. We know the context. Nothing is hidden from the reader. By writing in this straightforward manner, Castel-Bloom is forcing her readers to become a part of the reality of the story. We can now not only

⁵² Gurevitch, "Postmodernism in Israeli Literature in the 80s and 90s."

⁵³ Orly Castel-Bloom. Human Parts. (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2003). (Translated by Dalya Bilu). p. 73.

sympathize with the characters, but we can empathize as well. Their problems become our problems, and we need to react, which is exactly what Castel-Bloom wants us to do.

In her novel, Dolly City, we can see the characteristics of paranoia, mockery, indifference, neglect, apocalypse, and kitsch. Dolly is a mockery of the stereotypical Jewish mother. She is constantly paranoid that her son may be sick, yet she is so worried about his physical health that she neglects his emotional needs. She is so fed up with him at one point that she has him glued to her back so that she can always have him around, but not have to look at him. There is even an apocalyptic feel to the story because of the amount of violence in it and because of the cancerous cells that she sees everywhere, even on the wheels of a bus. The reason these characteristics are considered to be part of the post-modernist style of writing is because in modernist writing, the language of the literature is meant to help the reader uncover a hidden meaning and come to a catharsis, whereas post-modernist writing does not. Instead, when the literature comes to the point where a modernist writer would have put a resolution of some kind, the post-modernist writer does not do that; there is no catharsis. All that the reader is left with is this weird absurdity.⁵⁴ This weird absurdity is meant to encourage the reader to act, as people (readers) need a resolution. By having the reader do something, a catharsis to the story will occur in reality.

One particular post-modernist characteristic of Castel-Bloom's writing is that she creates reality out of clichés.⁵⁵ She uses literal interpretations of idioms. In other words, rather than using clichés and idioms to encourage the reader to find a deeper meaning, she makes the clichés and idioms flat out say what she wants to say. In a sense, she

⁵⁴ Gurevitch, "Postmodernism in Israeli Literature in the 80s and 90s."

⁵⁵ Furstenberg, "A Postmodernist Oracle."

destroys the meanings of the words "cliché" and "idiom," because she makes them literal. Take for example, the story "Story" from her book Unbidden Stories, in which a homeless man is sitting in a diner eating sugar packets because he cannot afford to buy any food. Across the room, there is a man reading the newspaper. Each time he tried to speak to this man, the man ignored him and kept on reading. Finally, he went over to the man, and instead of finding the man behind the newspaper, he found nothing. "The man read himself into the paper" literally.⁵⁶ This man behind the newspaper was desperate not to talk to the homeless man. While a modernist writer would have made the reader understand this idiom to mean that the man was hiding behind the newspaper so as to avoid contact with the homeless man, Castel-Bloom made it so that even when the homeless man went behind the newspaper to talk to get this man's attention, he would not be able to do so, as he actually was able to avoid complete contact with him. While this man could read about the harsh reality of day-to-day life in Israel, such as homelessness and poverty, he could not actually face it, so he escaped into the newspaper.

Conclusion

Needless to say, Orly Castel-Bloom is a unique writer. Whether her stories are set in fantastic worlds or reality, her agenda is clear. She wants everyone to understand the reality of life in Israel. She draws on her own reality to enhance this understanding. Her stories break the myth of feminism in Israel and expose the flaws of Zionism. The reason she points out these flaws is to help Israel become a better place, as she recognizes that

⁵⁶ Dan Miron. "A Handbook to a New Prose Language." Modern Hebrew Literature 13 New Series. (Fall/Winter 1994).

these flaws actually conflict not only with the original intent of Zionism, but also with Jewish values.

Chapter 2: A Shout of Resistance⁵⁷

An Analysis of Orly Castel-Bloom's *Mekupellet*

Introduction:

"There is in her work a shout of resistance, a scorn of social norms and public taste."⁵⁸ Thus wrote the literary critic Dan Miron about Orly Castel-Bloom's novel, The Mina Lisa.⁵⁹ though he could have written the same critique for nearly all of her works. Castel-Bloom uses her writing as a vehicle for pointing out the flaws of modern society. She does not hesitate to expose the reader to the harsh realities that many Israelis (particularly women and Mizrahim) face every day. She does not "soften the blow" by hiding behind metaphors. Instead, her writing is confrontational and provocative.

Take for example the story "Folded," which appears in Castel-Bloom's short story collection Hostile Surroundings.⁶⁰ This is a story set in the real world, and it is meant to draw our attention to real problems. In this story, Castel-Bloom is trying to portray what life is like for women in Israeli society. While not every woman in Israel is like the female protagonist in "Folded," there are plenty who are like her. And even those who differ from her find that they can identify with her on some level (whether it's being a woman, pregnant, poor, or the way men treat her). By describing this harsh, biting reality, Castel-Bloom is trying to show society's failings, including the mistreatment of women and the poor. In writing this story, Castel-Bloom pushes her readers to react – to get angry enough to do something about this problem plaguing humanity.

⁵⁷ www.ithl.org.il/books_info.asp?id=50

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Orly Castel-Bloom. Mina Lisa [in Hebrew]. (Jerusalem: Keter. 1995).

⁶⁰ Orly Castel-Bloom. Hostile Surroundings. [in Hebrew]. (Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1989).

Translation of Mekupellet:

I am ready for them. When they will come, I will wait for them with the forms. The question is only who of them will arrive first. I will wait for him. My boyfriend and I came up with a plan. When they will come, I will say that he is not at home. I will say that he went to save time. That is to say, the opposite. That will be my purpose, my friend said to me, to buy time. I needed to say that my friend went to get cash.

I know that they need to arrive because already for a few months all my mail has been red, in contrast to that of my neighbors whose is yellow and orange. They receive letters from their bank. I don't receive any letters from the bank, because the director said to me, "We will meet in court."

The day before yesterday was crazy (slang definition of טטק). My boyfriend, his name is Uri, arrived at five in the morning with a big truck, after I didn't know where he was all night. He knows that because I have contractions from the second month (on), I am not able to stand up straight, but only bent over, or to lie down completely, and he left me alone all night, he said that he is going to get money. I crossed my fingers that it will work for him (slang definition of לוי לך), and when I woke up in the morning, my whole hand was red because I crossed my fingers for him so much.

At the beginning I thought that the truck was full of good things that he earned, but the truck was empty. "Good," I said to myself, "He earned a truck. This is not bad." But the truck was not Uri's but a new friend of his, one character (with) a sick bad tooth decay illness that went up together with him to the apartment and said to Uri:

"I'm leaving the key here for you. Don't forget what you promised." And he went.

"How was the night?" Uri asked me.

"Okay. The truck is empty, heh?"

"Empty. It (the truck) is for (me), so that I will transfer everything from here.

That (way), when they come, we will say to them that there isn't what to take, that if they want, that they will come to peel off the wall paper from the wall." He loaded all our furniture and left. He didn't return the whole afternoon. At four Gingivitis (the sick man with tooth decay) appeared and he said to me to undress, that this was his deal with Uri, that I will give him (sex) and he will lend the truck to Uri and he will buy the furniture from us at any price. This is terrible to lie down with Gingivitis, especially when you are pregnant and still in the fourth month and you want to hold him (the baby) inside. I do not want to describe it, I will only say that in the middle I stopped him because I couldn't anymore and I requested that he give me air, he was killing me (גומר לי את הבטן) is slang).

"So turn over," Gingivitis said to me.

"Not especially come to me," I said. "Listen, next time, let me speak with Uri before he orders to me rotten teeth."

Gingivitis said:

"Deal! This is a deal! Anyway, you are not such a big deal. Turn around and that's it."

I couldn't without shooting drugs, even though I knew that this might finish the baby for me. I said to Gingivitis:

"Don't look at me. You turn around now, if you want that I will turn around afterwards."

I put (a needle) to (my) the artery with tears. Gingivitis paced in the empty apartment. The drug trip was worthwhile the whole moment, but afterwards the crash came. The pains that I had in my stomach were something completely crazy. I crawled to the street. In the street I requested from the owner of the mini-market that he call me a cab.

I am known as the neighborhood drug addict, a name that he maybe correct but that does not give the owner of the mini-market the right to ignore me when I request of him to call a cab. He said to me:

"Where do you have money to pay for a cab? Where do you have money to pay for this conversation, this half shekel?"

I said to the owner of the mini-market:

"Human being, you and I are Jews. Good? (Right?) For this you will call and lend me ten shekels (גולדה is the first name of Golda Meir, the female Israeli Prime Minister, גולדה is also a term meaning 10 shekels)."

"I will lend you ten shekels? You have chutzpah/guts. And there are also dirty Jews. You remember this!"

"Listen Pastrami," that's what we call him, "Listen to me already. I am telling you that I am pregnant. In the fourth month. I have pain. I am afraid that I am going to have a miscarriage."

"You are pregnant, you?" he said in disgust as if I connected things that have no connection between them, "You were sent a baby? A baby will come out of you, from there? What do you have there besides filth? You are pregnant like I am pregnant."

"I am pregnant, don't you understand me, Pastrami? I am pregnant." How my stomach hurt me, I thought that my soul was going to leave my body. I saw black in my eyes. Pastrami drove me away from the store. I doubled over in pain outside, in the center of commerce. I seized the tree trunk. I shouted from pain, people passed by me and didn't stop because they thought that I was on a drug trip in the garbage. But I wasn't on a drug trip, mother, I wasn't on a drug trip at all. I hope that all the white reaches the baby's head and that he does not feel anything. Because if he felt what that I felt, how will I ever laugh?

Sarah Malchin, a leader of the early women settlers in Palestine, once wrote,

*"On reaching Palestine, however, 'our beautiful dreams were destroyed by our hostile surroundings... We girls were met with indifference and scorn everywhere.'"*⁶¹

Castel-Bloom might have drawn on this quote to provide a title for her first collection of short stories published in 1989. In writing Hostile Surroundings Castel-Bloom was demonstrating that time had not changed Israel. Indeed, the protagonist of "Folded" represents just how little it has progressed. In sum, all men treat this character poorly, and yet her self-perception is dependent upon how they view her.

⁶¹ Hazelton, Lesley. Israeli Woman: The Reality Behind The Myths. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), p. 17.

Identification of Characters:

The main character in this story has no name. While this is a common characteristic of many of Castel-Bloom's stories, there is a reason why she has no name. She is only identified by her gender, as she is the only female in the story. This identification is made all the more prominent due to the fact that she is pregnant. In the story, her gender limits her identity. Her boyfriend does not see her as his friend and lover, but instead as his possession, which is why he is able to trade her. Gingivitis barely sees her as a human being at all; he sees her only as someone with whom he can have sex. (And as far as the sex goes, only his pleasure matters, not her pleasure, or even her pain for that matter). The mini-market owner does not see the female protagonist as a human being at all. In fact, he barely sees her as a female, as he cannot believe that she, the neighborhood drug addict, is pregnant. By viewing her this way, he has stripped her of what little identity she might have had not just as a woman but as the mother of an unborn child as well.

Castel-Bloom provides no name because she wants her to represent any woman. That is, by not giving her an individual identity, she gives her a collective identity – the identity of women in Israel. Whether rich or poor, young or old, fat or thin, at some point in their lives, every woman in Israel has been treated this way by at least one man. She universalizes that experience.

The names of the male characters in "Folded" suggest interesting commentary as well. Uri, her boyfriend, is the only character who has a real name. The name Uri comes from the Hebrew root word meaning "light."⁶² It also comes from Uriel, who was one of

⁶² Anita Diamant. The New Jewish Baby Book. (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing. 1994).

the four angels who resided around God's throne.⁶³ So why would Castel-Bloom give this man a name with positive associations? He is not a good person, yet his name has such positive origins.

Uri is a common name for an Israeli man, which is one of the reasons why Castel-Bloom gave him this name. In a way, just as the female protagonist represents any/all Israeli women, so too does Uri represent all men, or at least the stereotypical Israeli man.

Another reason why Castel-Bloom named him Uri is because of the angel Uriel. While Uriel was one of the four angels around God's throne, this Uri may be like the angel who fell from grace -- the "Uri" who lost his godliness ("el"). And while the root of the name Uri means "light," he, ironically, is a very dark character in the story. Moreover, Castel-Bloom may have named him Uri in order to further illustrate that she is shedding light on a subject that has been left in the dark.

While Gingivitis does not have a name in this story, he certainly has an identity. He is the epitome of disgusting -- both physically and mentally. He is not given a name because the female protagonist does not know him, and she is the narrator of the story. The reader only knows as much as she does. We only know him by the identity that she gives him. She gives him the identity of Gingivitis both because of his physical ailment and because of the inhumane way in which he treats her. He feels that her only purpose is to give men physical pleasure. The fact that he is physically hurting her while they are having sex does not bother him at all, let alone the fact that he is emotionally bruising her as well. All that bothers him is the fact that she interrupted their sex because she felt pain. The fact that she continues to have sex with him shows that she cannot stand up to him because she has been so emotionally abused.

⁶³ Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 4

And finally there is Pastrami, the owner of the mini-market. Pastrami is not his real name. It is a nickname that was probably given to him by some people in the neighborhood. To me, both his name and personality reflect that of a butcher. Just as a butcher slaughters an animal, so too did Pastrami butcher what little identity this woman had to begin with.

Motherhood:

Despite the fact that the female protagonist has not yet given birth, motherhood plays a significant role in this story, especially as she attempts to take care of her unborn child. Although she is concerned for her unborn child's health and safety, she is not considered to be a good mother, especially according to the patriarchal concept of motherhood. The patriarchal concept of the "ideal" mother is one who is loving by nature, and the child's primary caretaker. She incessantly worries about her child and does everything possible to protect her from the outside world. The reason why this is a *patriarchal* concept is because it is a myth that women have maternal instincts like these. Because men don't have "instincts" like these, children must be the mother's responsibility.⁶⁴ While it is clear that our female protagonist loves her unborn child, she can barely take care of herself, let alone a baby. And even though she worries about her baby, she exposes it to the outside world (i.e. by doing drugs and having sex with Gingivitis) instead of protecting him from it.

Not only does our female protagonist not fit the mold of the patriarchal concept of motherhood, but she also does not fit the stereotype of the Israeli Jewish Mother. Israeli Jewish Mother is an extreme version of the patriarchal concept of motherhood: overly

⁶⁴ www.tau.ac.il/~giorar/as2.html (Tel Aviv University's web site)

nurturing and adoring. But, at the same time, she must prepare her children (specifically her sons) to join the army when they grow up in order to "harness to the national effort."⁶⁵ In other words, she must be sweet but tough. Our protagonist, while caring, is not self-effacing. She does not put her baby's needs before her own, as she gets high in order to endure the pain of having sex with Gingivitis, knowing fully well that the drugs would probably harm the baby.

To further demonstrate the importance of motherhood in Castel-Bloom's writings, let's compare our female protagonist to Castel-Bloom's other fictional mothers, namely Dolly, from the novel Dolly City and the mother from the story "The Woman Who Gave Birth To Twins And Embarrassed Someone." We will begin with Dolly.

At first, it may not seem as though there is a significant parallel between these two mothers. For example, while our female protagonist is four months pregnant, Dolly was never pregnant; instead, she adopted her son. Another difference between these two women is that Dolly is a physician, and our protagonist does not have a job or any kind of training that we know of. However, while they both want what is best for their children, they both end up hurting them instead so as to make themselves feel better. Dolly over-immunizes and performs unnecessary surgeries on her son to ease her own neuroses.

Despite the fact that Dolly was never pregnant and the narrator of "Folded" is a drug addict who can't seem to make ends meet, they both become mothers. The reason for this is to illustrate Castel-Bloom's belief that it is the destiny of all women to become mothers, no matter what.⁶⁶ Before finding the baby boy in the garbage bag, it is obvious that Dolly did everything she could to avoid forming meaningful relationships with other

⁶⁵ Smadar Shiffman. "Motherhood Under Zionism." Hebrew Studies #44. National Association of Professors of Hebrew, Madison. 2003. p. 139.

⁶⁶ Rochelle Mass. "Dolly Freaks Out." Jerusalem Post [Books Magazine. Edition]. May 15, 1997.

people. Yet, after finding this infant, she commits to creating a relationship with him.⁶⁷ As for our female protagonist in "Folded," her circumstances also make it difficult for her to be a mother. She is an unmarried drug addict who lives in poverty. In both cases, neither mother fits the common mold of being a wife to the father of her child either. In centering her stories on women least likely to become a mother, Castel-Bloom is depicting a reality in Israel. As a 1990 survey showed, Israeli women see motherhood as a central part of their identity. This still holds true today.⁶⁸

Let's now take a look at the story, "The Woman Who Gave Birth To Twins And Embarrassed Someone."⁶⁹ This is a story about a woman who gives birth to twin boys and wants to name them Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar. These are indeed very strange names to give her sons, as both Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar were kings of Babylonia (Hammurabi ruled from 1792 to 1750 BCE and Nebuchadnezzar ruled from 605 to 562 BCE). While Hammurabi is best known for the Code of Hammurabi (one of the earliest written collections of laws), Nebuchadnezzar is infamous for his role in exiling many Jews from Jerusalem to Babylonia. In contrast to the mother in the story, the father wants them to have normal Israeli names, such as Etai and Daniel. Everyone thinks that the woman is crazy for wanting to name her children Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar. Apparently everyone agrees with her husband. At the *bris*, the *mohel* names them Etai and Daniel, completely against the woman's wishes. However, she still continues to call them Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar. In the end, the woman eventually gives in to her husband and calls her children Etai and Daniel.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ www.tau.ac.il/~giorar/as2.html

⁶⁹ Orly Castel-Bloom. *Involuntary Stories* [in Hebrew]. (Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1993). pp. 57-62.

While on the surface it may seem as though the woman who gave birth to twins is similar to the female protagonist in "Folded," they are, in fact, very different. For example, at first glance it seems as though the woman who gave birth to twins is weak because her husband forced her into naming their sons Etai and Daniel. This is similar to the narrator of "Folded" who also allows men to take control of her. However, a closer examination of "The Woman Who Gave Birth To Twins And Embarrassed Someone" shows that the woman who gave birth to twins is not weak at all; she is very strong. At the beginning, when the woman is in labor, she does not cry out and curse like the other women in the maternity ward. In contrast, the woman in "Folded" is so weak that she has to get high to endure pain. Also, after the twins are born, the woman and her husband argue over what to name their children. She does not give in to him right away; instead, she firmly holds her ground. The woman in "Folded" is too weak to stand up to any of the men. In the end, the woman may have let her husband "win" by calling her sons Etai and Daniel, but she still comes out strong because ultimately, she showed more maturity than her husband. She knowingly gave in for the sake of their marriage and their family.

In sum, both the woman who gave birth to twins and Dolly fit the stereotype of the Israeli Jewish mother, and the woman in "Folded" does not. The mother of twins sought to name her sons Nebuchadnezzar and Hammurabi to arm them with the strength to fight those who might mock their strange names. Dolly, too, toughens up her son by subjecting his body to unnecessary surgeries and immunizations. Whereas, the woman in "Folded" is weak, which might impinge on her ability to raise a child prepared for battle (i.e. the army). Although she risks harming her unborn child by getting high, it is not meant to tough the child up. She is very different from the two stronger mothers.

Victimhood:

As the literary critic Deborah Starr suggests, "Victimhood," like motherhood, is a significant and recurring theme in Castel-Bloom's stories.

"While her female protagonists do not succeed in escaping their confines, they are granted two limited responses: embracing a romanticized notion of their role as victim, and appropriating violence as a tool to control territory and the body, thereby perpetuating rather than subverting the system."⁷⁰

In other words, Castel-Bloom either makes her female protagonists the epitome of the pathetic victim by not allowing them to stand up for themselves, or she makes them fight fire with fire. This second role is contradictory, as it in turn helps to perpetuate the same violence Castel-Bloom wishes to cease. Castel-Bloom's protagonists fit neatly into one of these categories.

The female protagonist of "Folded" fits into the first. She is the ultimate victim because not only is she female but she is a pregnant drug addict who has been forced into prostitution by her boyfriend. Dolly from Dolly City fits best into the second. While living in Dolly City, a city infested with violence, Dolly's way of taking control of this violence is by using more violence. For example, by carving a map of Israel into her son's back, she is perpetuating the very violence she abhors. Her violence causes her son to seek a similar response. At story's end, Dolly reads in the newspaper that her son attempted to hijack an airplane. The woman who gave birth to twins is also one who fits into the second category, even though she allowed her husband to win their disagreement in the end. She tried to fight fire with fire by naming her sons Nebuchadnezzar and Hammurabi, so that they will learn to fight back, thereby perpetuating violence.

⁷⁰ Starr, p. 230.

Although she was never physically violent to her sons, she did try to control her own body by not allowing herself to cry out in pain during labor.

Whether the female protagonist becomes the epitome of the victim, or decides to fight back, all are portrayed as victims. In this way, Castel-Bloom expresses her post-Zionism. Like many other post-Zionists, she feels that while Zionism was once a legitimate national movement of Jews, it eventually lost its legitimacy due to injustices it has caused others, including women.⁷¹

Notice, for instance, the exchange between the narrator and Pastrami in "Folded." When pleading with Pastrami to call her a cab to take her to the hospital, the female protagonist says to him,

"בן אדם, אתה ואני יהודים. טוב? בשביל זה תצלצל ותלווה לי גולדה." "Human being, you and I are Jews. Right? For this you will call and lend me a Golda."⁷²

Here she is trying to make him realize that she is not just a drug addict. She is, like him, a human being. Not only that, but she is, like him, a Jew. Although she is trying to appeal to him on these two basic levels, he fails to see the common ground they share. He tells her that she has some nerve saying this to him. He says, "יש גם יהודים מלוכלכים," "And there are also dirty Jews."⁷³ In saying this to her, Pastrami places her in a lesser category.

Pastrami's insult, "And there are also dirty Jews," is representative of Castel-Bloom's viewpoint because Zionism's original intent was to create a safe place for all Jews – a place where they wouldn't be persecuted. Yet here, Pastrami has taken away even this safeguard, and he is victimizing her.

⁷¹ Livneh. "Post-Zionism Only Rings Once."

⁷² Orly Castel-Bloom. "Bent." *Hostile Surroundings*. (Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1989). p. 25.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 25.

Castel-Bloom uses the story as an example of the kind of injustice women face as a result of Zionism. Pastrami represents Zionism -- the stereotypical Israeli male who is strong and belligerent. Zionism does not tolerate the female protagonist's weakness.⁷⁴ Post-Zionism points out that this prejudice is unjust.

One woman able to escape the Zionists' scorn is Golda Meir. And Castel-Bloom picks up on this in an indirect reference in the story. While trying to persuade Pastrami to help her, the narrator says to him, "Human being, you and I are Jews. Right? For this you will call and lend me a Golda."⁷⁵ A "Golda" is a slang term for a ten shekel bill. It is referred to as a Golda because there is a photograph of former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir on both the front and back of the bill.⁷⁶ While this little tidbit may not seem significant to our analysis of "Folded," a closer inspection of the ten shekel bill proves otherwise.

On September 4, 1985, the new shekel was introduced as the currency of Israel. "The new shekel series continues the trend of perpetuating the memory of prominent personages in Jewish history."⁷⁷ The new ten shekel bill "perpetuates the memory of the prominent personage" Golda Meir. On the front of the bill is a portrait of her, "a stylized tree with intertwining branches against a background of a seven-branched candelabra and the words 'Let my people go,' in microprint."⁷⁸ On the back of the bill is a "picture of

⁷⁴ Indeed, because of this intolerance, some Zionists had contempt for people like Holocaust survivors, whom they regarded as weaklings before the Nazis.

⁷⁵ Castel-Bloom. "Bent."

⁷⁶ www.bankisrael.gov.il/catal/eng/p041.htm

⁷⁷ www.bankisrael.gov.il/catal/eng/newsheqel.htm

⁷⁸ www.bankisrael.gov.il/catal/eng/p041.htm

Golda Meir among a gathering of Russian Jews in front of the Moscow synagogue." In the background, in both large and small letters, are the words, "Let my people go."⁷⁹

Thus, we begin to understand Castel-Bloom's intent in including the request to "lend me a Golda." The symbolism of the bill itself contributes to the story's themes. When the new shekel was released in the mid-1980's, Russian Jews were facing persecution on a daily basis. They wanted to escape to Israel, but the Communist Russian government refused. In some ways, the female protagonist of "Folded" is like these Russian Jews because she too faces persecution on a daily basis with seemingly no way out. "Let my people go,"⁸⁰ free the Israelites from slavery, the Russian Jews from Communist oppression, and this woman from a male-dominant society.

While Meir was also born in Kiev, Russia, in 1898, she escaped to the United States with her family in 1906. In 1921 she moved to Israel with her husband, Morris Meyerson.⁸¹ In Israel, she was also able to escape the persecution many women face as a result of Zionism. She was a rare exception to the norm. The fact that Israel had a female prime minister is a source of hope, perhaps, for our female protagonist.

Writing Style:

Castel-Bloom employs an unconventional writing style.

"New writers such as Orly Castel-Bloom and Etgar Keret use a very different prose whose everyday character and apparent 'flatness' of tone produce a strangely surrealistic effect that is at odds with the richer narrative prose of their predecessors. To a large extent, they come very close to writing in contemporary speech patterns."⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Exodus 5:1

⁸¹ www.wic.org/bio/gmeir.htm

⁸² "On Israeli Culture: 6. The Hebrew Language." (www.jafi.org.il/education/culture/onisraeli/06-hebrew.html).

In addition to "the Golda," Castel-Bloom uses other slang expressions in this story. To name a few, toward the beginning of the story, we are given the background information leading up to the narrator's present. It says, "שלשום היה קטע," "The day before yesterday was crazy." The word קטע is slang for "crazy." While Uri is gone during the night to try to get a good plan together to foil the bank, the woman "חזקתי אצבעות, שילך לו," "... crossed [her] fingers so that it will work for him." The words לו שילך are slang for "it will work for him." And finally, during sex with Gingivitis, it was so painful for the woman that "הוא גומר לי את הבטן," "He was killing me."

In keeping with her post-modernist writing style, Castel-Bloom describes for the reader *what* is happening in "Folded" but not *why* it is happening.⁸³ We know as much as the narrator does. She (and we) knows that Uri left for the night and has come back in the morning with an empty truck. She (and we) finds out that he made a deal with one of his friends, but she (and we) does not know what the deal is until the friend comes collecting.

Interestingly, Castel-Bloom uses color as an agent for describing what is happening. At the beginning of the story, the narrator informs us that she has been receiving red mail, while her neighbors have been receiving orange and yellow mail. While it may be obvious to some readers that red mail is final notices of unpaid bills, as all final notices are characteristically red, it was not obvious to everyone until the narrator informed us of what the bank director said to her. The reason why the narrator saw fit to

⁸³ Gurevitch, "Postmodernism in Israeli Literature in the 80s and 90s."

describe the neighbors' mail was to set herself apart from them. She is not part of the norm.

At the end of the story, Castel-Bloom uses the two most distinctly opposite colors: black and white. After receiving no help from Pastrami, the narrator was in so much pain that she thought she was going to die. She said, "I saw black in my eyes."⁸⁴ The pain had overtaken her body. She saw no light, no hope, no pathway to escape the pain. Darkness was all she could see. While she had no hope left for herself, she "hope(d) that all the white reaches the baby's head and that he doesn't feel anything."⁸⁵ In other words, black represents the pain and white represents comfort, protection, and safety.

In addition to using color as an agent for describing what is happening, Castel-Bloom uses idioms in an unconventional way to do the same. In a review of Castel-Bloom's book, Unbidden Stories, it says that the author uses literal interpretations of idioms, and in the same review of The Mina Lisa (as was previously mentioned), it says that Castel-Bloom creates reality out of clichés. There are at least two examples from "Folded" that support these statements. While Uri is out for the night, the narrator says, "I crossed my fingers that it will work for him, and when I woke up in the morning, my whole hand was red because I crossed my fingers for him so much." Castel-Bloom had this character take the act of crossing her fingers to the extreme. This reminds me of the part in Castel-Bloom's story, "Story,"⁸⁶ when the man actually reads himself into the newspaper. The other example is חולה העששת, Gingivitis. Although I know that the word חולה can mean both "an illness" and "one who is ill," I cannot help but feel that

⁸⁴ Castel-Bloom. "Bent." Hostile Surroundings.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Orly Castel-Bloom. Involuntary Stories [in Hebrew]. (Tel Aviv: Zemora-Bitan. 1993). pp. 101-108.

Gingivitis (the character) is more like the embodiment of Gingivitis than one who is sick with it.

Conclusion:

"Folded" encompasses all of the main points of Castel-Bloom's writing. Motherhood, "victimhood," post-Zionism, and her unique, post-modernist writing style are all evident in this story. And, while Castel-Bloom has painted a picture of this harsh reality, in doing so, she has caused us to get angry. She has now taken us from merely readers to actors. Without asking us, she has given us the task of helping to prevent situations like this from happening to other women.

Conclusion

Whether set in the world of fantasy or reality, Orly Castel-Bloom's stories are bizarre. She situates them in strange circumstances to highlight particular issues. These issues are made all the more glaring because they are never completely resolved. Instead, she goads the reader to solve these societal problems in their own reality. For example, Castel-Bloom's portrayal of women instills in the reader a desire to change the role of women in Israeli society – to help them gain equality among men. Although she often portrays her female protagonists as mothers, she *always* portrays them as victims. The reason for this is because modern Israeli women are victims of sexism. In fact, Castel-Bloom's stories show that the role of women in Israel has not changed much since the beginning of the Zionist movement. By pointing out sexism in Israel, Castel-Bloom is dispelling the myth of feminism in Israel.

At the same time, by dispelling this myth, Castel-Bloom points out Zionism's flaws. While Zionism originally intended for all men and women to be treated as equals, this did not materialize in actuality. It was a rare exception for a woman to work the land and take up a gun, as illustrated in stereotypical portrayals. And though women are required to join the Israeli army today, they are still not treated as equals.

Another flaw of Zionism that Castel-Bloom wants to correct is the injustice toward Arabs and Palestinians. In the minds of many, Israel was created as a safe haven for Jews around the world who were (and still are) being persecuted. Yet, in creating a safe place for Jews, an unsafe place was created for Arabs and Palestinians, as pointed out in her writing.

Castel-Bloom's approach to Zionism has led some to accuse her of being a post-Zionist. She personally does not like this identification, as she associates post-Zionism with anti-Zionism. However, this is not the case, as post-Zionism recognizes both the legitimacy of Zionism and its flaws. In so doing, post-Zionism allows for growth and change. Anti-Zionism, on the other hand, rejects the whole notion of Zionism as a legitimate movement.

Upon first reading her works, I wondered why Castel-Bloom chooses to continue to live in Israel if she critiques it so much. She chooses to remain there for two main reasons: (1) her belief in the original intent of Zionism, and (2) she wants to help improve her homeland. By escaping to another country, she would not be helping it at all.

While Castel-Bloom's writing clearly expresses her critique of Zionism, it also shows how much she loves Israel. Her writing reminds me of a parent chastising her child for its mistakes; she loves her child and she wants it to learn from her mistakes. Simultaneously, though, her writing style does not represent that of a parent at all. She is like a bully; she sugar-coats nothing. Her writing is abrasive. She tells it like it is. The reality is there for us to encounter and confront.

Writing this thesis has been an incredible journey. Reading and researching Orly Castel-Bloom has helped me to better understand my own experiences in Israel. I have been able to come to terms with the reality that Israel is not heaven, and I am still able to love Israel. And instead of harping on the negative experiences I endured there, I am now one of the readers who has been encouraged to act. Writing this thesis is my way of helping to prevent the injustices of prejudice and sexism from continuing in Israel. My

only hope is that the knowledge I have gained from this experience will influence others to act as well.

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