

# ORLY CASTEL-BLOOM'S PERCEPTION OF COUPLEDOM AND WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN LIGHT OF IMPRESSIONIST FEATURES AND INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS IN THE NOVEL *WHERE AM I*\*

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This study suggests a radical feminist reading of Orly Castel-Bloom's first novel, *Where Am I*. The research shows Castel-Bloom's adaptation of impressionist motifs and the intertextual connections to classic works—*Anna Karenina*, *The Visit of the Old Lady*, and *Prometheus Bound*—in order to express and characterize her version of women's oppression. In this novel, Castel-Bloom chooses to undermine the most central institute of patriarchy—coupledom, and by describing the heroine's two flawed marriages, she leads her readers to an apocalyptic conclusion that the collapse of the couple model leads the individual to remain alone in the world, not as a solution or as salvation, but as an inevitable course in view of the inability to establish ties that realize even slightly the romantic perceptions.

Castel-Bloom's impressionist poetics in this work (unlike her other post-modern stories) tries to reflect the tension generated in the course of the active processes of constant change of reality, which make women weak, fragile, and in danger of victimization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rich poetics of Orly Castel-Bloom is a controversial matter among literature critics. Every researcher seems to offer a different stylistic identification of Castel-Bloom's prose. Naaman believes her writing ranges from realism to fantasy.<sup>1</sup> Shamir associates her with the "thin literature" and believes that her stories have a naturalistic level.<sup>2</sup> Bartana maintains that Castel-Bloom is a post-modern author.<sup>3</sup> Gluzman describes the mix of genres in Castel-Bloom's prose—surrealist, post-modern and Kafkaesque—

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\* This article is based on my Ph.D. dissertation, supervised by Professor Nitza Ben-Dov.

<sup>1</sup> N. Naaman, "Remote Description of the Banal and the Wonderful," *Maariv*, Literature, (Nov 27, 1987): 2 (in Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Z. Shamir, "Stories from the Movies," *Maariv*, Literature (March 3, 1989): E3 (in Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup> O. Bartana, "Where are We? Post-Modernism in Israeli Literature from the 1980s to the 1990s" (in Hebrew), in *Eighty: Israeli Literature in the Last Decade* (Tel Aviv: Hebrew Writers Association in Israel, 1993), pp. 187–200, see especially p. 191.

that makes her writing style, in his opinion, "magical realism."<sup>4</sup> According to Meltzer, Castel-Bloom's works combine satire and the tragicomic mode.<sup>5</sup>

Castel-Bloom's first novel, *Where Am I*,<sup>6</sup> won a mixed reception, like most of her works: Paz states that "the book leaves a bitter sense of lacking" and that "Castel-Bloom invested most of her strengths at the beginning of the novel, arriving breathless and exhausted at the end."<sup>7</sup> Dana-Fruchter maintains that "this is a graceful book, but not much more than that."<sup>8</sup> Navot, in a scathing article on Orly Castel-Bloom and Yehudit Katzir, wrote with the publication of *Where Am I*, "These two [authors] are like rag dolls stuffed with cotton or the marionettes of a poor puppet theater of a rural fair, trapped in the centrifugal movement of our literature accelerating its loss."<sup>9</sup> Mishmar describes the novel as complex, in contrast to "the artificial reflections" that characterized, in her opinion, Castel-Bloom's first book, *Not Far from the Center of Town* (1987).<sup>10</sup>

The critical ambivalence towards Castel-Bloom's work raises an analogy to Amalia Kahana-Crmon's ambivalent acceptance, as described by Fuchs and this criticism has the same chauvinist function.<sup>11</sup>

False categorization—or noncategorization, for that matter—have traditionally been frequent rationalization for excluding women's work from the canon.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the criticism it received, the novel has been taken seriously enough to be the subject of some academic studies.<sup>13</sup> Previous researchers

<sup>4</sup> M. Gluzman, "The Infinite Strangeness of the World," *Maariv*, Literary and Art Supplement (January 7, 1994): 29 (in Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Y. Meltzer, "The Reality is a Fact on the Ground," *Maariv*, Shavuot issue, Literature and books (May 16, 2002): 22 (in Hebrew).

<sup>6</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I* (Tel-Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> M. Paz, "The Falling Feathers of Hatred," *Davar* (March 12, 1990): 9 (in Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> R. Dana-Fruchter, "Tel Aviv's Servants," *Davar* (May 11, 1990): 20 (in Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> A. Navot, "Cinderella: Between the Cinderella Syndrome and the Dulcinea Syndrome," *Maariv Literary Supplement* (May 18, 1990): 5 (in Hebrew). On critics' textual violence against Orly Castel-Bloom's prose see Sh. Rudin, "Textual Violence against Women Writers: The Reception of Female Writing in Israeli Criticism," *New Directions* 20 (July 2009): 223–254 (in Hebrew).

<sup>10</sup> T. Mishmar, "Female Presence in Neutral Speech," *Al Hamishmar* (August 24, 1990): 18 (in Hebrew).

<sup>11</sup> E. Fuchs, *Israeli Mythogynies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp. 87–94.

<sup>12</sup> E. Fuchs, *Israeli Mythogynies*, p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, T. Hess, "She Has No Delays: A Feminist Reading of *Calling the Bats* by Hannah Bat-Shachar and *Where Am I* by Orly Castel-Bloom" (in Hebrew), in *A Window onto the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies* (ed. Y. Atzmon; Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center of Jewish History, 1995), pp. 375–394; T. Keydar, "The Function of the Phonetic Structure in the Poetics of the Novel *Where Am I*," *Pages for Literature Research* 10 (1995/1996): 105–129 (in Hebrew); H. Hertzog, *The Voice that Says I: Trends in Israeli Fiction of the 1980s* (in Hebrew; Raanana: The Open University, 1998). H. , "Feminine Identity and

discussed Castel-Bloom's post-modern poetics, and the use of parody to deconstruct Zionism.<sup>14</sup> A feminist reading of the novel was suggested by Hess and Sakra. Sakra comments that the heroine of the novel leaves a bad married life and wins sexual freedom.<sup>15</sup> According to Hess, "all possible types of female existence in the fictional world of the novel are humiliating. The alternative exists only in distant provinces."<sup>16</sup> This critic mentions the anger arising from the novel; yet it is not intended to suppress men, nor is it about women's submission: it aims at the system in which they function. Hess's statement associates the novel with the radical feminist wave, concerned with the oppression of women as a result of the social system that promotes the rule of men and works to perpetuate female inferiority.<sup>17</sup>

This article analyses the novel *Where Am I* from a radical feminist view, identifying two central-themes: women's oppression and distorted coupledom. These themes are presented by means of impressionist poetics and intertextual connections. Juxtaposing these two methods leads to tracing the oppressive foci that perpetuate women's marginality and reification: traditional heterosexual coupledom that imposes on women a life of wives inferior to their husbands and bound to family care and different social arrangements, such as the legal system, founded on laws made by and for men and not referring to the female perspective; likewise the economic system, which ensures the retention of economic resources in the male niche and dictates in this light female requirements and a range of women's acts of survival to gain access to economic resources.

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Its Reflection in Thematic Aspects and in Poetics Aspects of Spatial Obstruction: The Works of Ruth Almog, Dorit Abush and Orly Castel-Bloom" (in Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> See Z. Ben-Yosef Ginur, "The Zionist Dystopia according to Orly Castel-Bloom" (in Hebrew), in *Literature and Society in the New Hebrew Culture: Articles Presented to Gershon Shaked* (ed. Y. Bar-El, Y. Schwartz, and T. S. Hess; Jerusalem: Keter, 2000), pp. 350–362.

<sup>15</sup> H. Sakra, "Feminine Identity," p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> T. Hess, "She has No Delays," p. 386.

<sup>17</sup> According Rowland and Klein, Radical feminism delves into the roots of female suppression. Unlike liberal feminism, radical feminism does not aspire to equality, but to present, and preserve, the female difference, and to depict the means of subjection that stop women constituting a real force. Radical feminism deals with the functioning of these means: abuse of women, violence against women, rape of women, pornography, prostitution, control of decisions about the female body (prohibition of abortion, forced heterosexuality), and the spatial exclusion of women. A radical feminist reading, then, refers to the way the particular female experience is characterized, as distinct from the male and not judged according to it. Examples of unique female experiences are pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage/abortion, and also sexual violence at the hands of men, whereby institutional male dominance is carried into the private chambers within, between men and women. See R. Rowland and R. Klein, "Radical Feminism: History, Politics, Action," in *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed* (ed. D. Bell and R. Klein; London: Zed Books, 1996), pp. 9–36.

Castel-Bloom's unique poetics in *Where Am I* emphasizes the impossibility of establishing romantic coupledness, or as the heroine declares, every marriage ceremony "separates couples forever."<sup>18</sup> The use of impressionism corresponds with the aspiration to describe the fracture attributed to romantic relationships and also shows that the violence in the sphere of public authority influences the woman's private realm. The above process emphasizes the impossibility of a fulfilling coupledness and the reality of violence against women, in the public and the private sphere alike.

## 2. THEMATIC: CHAUVINIST GENDER ARRANGEMENTS AND CASTEL-BLOOM'S SOLUTION

In the opening of *Where Am I*, Castel-Bloom describes the unfulfilled desire of the protagonist to murder her husband.<sup>19</sup> The heroine, who refuses to reveal her real name, does not commit the murder.<sup>20</sup> In a conversation held between the novel's narrator and the so-called "Star of Neot Afeka," the latter tells her that "at this moment...three other women from Neot Afeka are standing with knife drawn and two are dropping poison into their husbands' cup of morning coffee. At this hour five men from Neot Afeka are about to kiss their mistress for the first time."<sup>21</sup> The opening conversation with the "Star" informs the heroine that not only has her relationship collapsed—so have all the relationships in her neighborhood, symbolizing her world. The dialogue with the "Star" represents the character's "inner-conversation" with her super-ego, which forbids her to take violent action against her husband. After the "conversation," her first husband (nameless throughout the novel) leaves her, and through expositional asides, she examines the reason why the marriage is over.

The dialogue between the heroine and her first husband is one of mutual violence and contempt. Her husband tries to silence her, but in defiance, she goes on talking and shouting. After the divorce from her first husband, the heroine changes her lifestyle. She finds a job as a typist with a newspaper. Finding work means wanting to stop being marginal (as an unfulfilled author

<sup>18</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> This desire makes her, in Mishmar's opinion, the "psyche of the twentieth century." T. Mishmar, "Female Presence in Neutral Speech," p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> The omission of the heroine's name makes her the representative of a social phenomenon ("mother-type"), not an individual woman contending with personal problems.

Thus she differs from the heroine of Castel-Bloom's early story "Diary." See O. Castel-Bloom, *Not Far from the Center of Town* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 9.

and as a woman who thinks she is an animal), and is supposed to make her a productive person. Along with the need to support herself, the heroine tries to fashion an identity as an employee, and she breaks out of her inner sphere—her apartment in Neot Afeka and her rich inner world.

Nevertheless, the unfulfilled author is unable to fit in with her new role. She is unwilling to type the words of others but remains faithful to her own, which gets her fired. When she is dismissed from the newspaper, she is told, "Something's wrong with you.... You change the senior reporters' articles. You don't have the authority to do it. You see a word, type it as it is, even without understanding."<sup>22</sup>

But the heroine of *Where Am I* wonders about her place in the public sphere as a divorced woman, and also tries to find herself a place in the domain of literature as a unique author who uses controversial words and has a new style of writing that undermines the words of venerable canonic authors. At the novel's end, the heroine scorns *Anna Karenina* (1877), likening reading Tolstoy's masterpiece to working at prostitution. Of the two options, she chooses to read *Anna Karenina*, but not out of recognition of the novel's worth. In their thematic infrastructure, *Where Am I* and *Anna Karenina* both concern oppressive relationships. Each of the two women experiences relationships with two men, and tries to find happiness with the second, after the collapse of her first marriage. Despite the desire to find love and happiness, both fail in their second attempt. Neither woman can start a new life because the two relationships are intertwined. For example, the narrator's first husband in *Where Am I* does not know that she has remarried. In *Anna Karenina*, Alexei is not willing to divorce Anna and holds their son hostage in his house. Both of the relationships come to an end in each novel: Anna leaves Alexei Alexandrovich and her son Seriozhe and engages in a long affair with Vronsky until her suicide. Likewise, the heroine of *Where Am I* divorces her first husband, and her marriage to her second husband, Omri, is brief.

The two novels are alike in showing how hard it is for a woman to sustain a relationship, and to choose a new man who is different from the first; however, in the collapse of the second marriage, the novels differ in a significant way. At the end of Tolstoy's narrative, the heroine commits a horrible suicide on the railway tracks; Castel-Bloom, however, writes a feminist novel that frees the protagonist from the two men. The title *Where Am I* is taken from *Anna Karenina*. When Anna enters the railway station she asks

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<sup>22</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 27.

herself, "Where am I?" and then she kills herself. Castel-Bloom's heroine survives the ending of her two marriages.

In her work, Castel-Bloom as a feminist writer refuses to adopt misogynist perceptions; like her character, dismissed for refusing to type the words of other men at the newspaper, she uses her own words. She also refuses to adopt the linear Realism that characterizes Israeli literature and turns to a different writing style characterized by fragmented plot and coalesce times descriptions.

Ben-Yosef Ginur discusses the controversy over the feminist outlook in Castel-Bloom's early novels: *Where Am I* (1990), *Dolly City* (1992), and *The Mina Lisa* (1995). In her opinion, these novels do not promote feminist positions since all Castel-Bloom's protagonists exist in a "maze with no way out."<sup>23</sup> However, I believe that *Where Am I* makes a distinctly feminist statement. The novel ends with a conscious anti-establishment choice by the heroine to live alone rather than in the oppressive patriarchal system.

MacKinnon claims that heterosexual relations reproduce the gender asymmetry in the division of power. She sees an immediate connection between sexuality expressed in male erotic domination and female submission and the dynamics of gender inequality; leniency on sexual practices that oppress women approves, expands, and reinforces male domination.<sup>24</sup> In *Where Am I*, the woman's oppression is presented through a description of married life as something that turns wives into people devoid of desire and sex dolls. The protagonist's second husband is determined to set her in stereotypic femininity niches, and one of his "methods" is using sexual violence. The novel bluntly equates two patriarchal institutions that seem contradictory: marriage and prostitution.

Indeed, after her second divorce, the protagonist becomes a prostitute. Among those who avail themselves of her services, we find the prime minister himself. We are thus invited to identify the political system with sexual distortion; moreover, it is like the marriage institution in that both turn women into objects. Political (prime ministerial) control of the public domain is no different from patriarchal control of the private domain in partnerships. In public as in private, women exist as objects, forced blindly to obey the demands of maleness. This is also illustrated in the heroine's encounter with the minister of police at the newspaper offices. He erases his interview, which she has typed out without getting her permission. For him,

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<sup>23</sup> Z. Ben-Yosef Ginur, "The Zionist Dystopia," pp. 350–362.

<sup>24</sup> C. MacKinnon, "Sexuality, Pornography and Method: Pleasure under the Patriarchy," *Ethics* 99.2 (1989): 314–346.

the woman is a tool to record men's words; he is the speaker, she is the hand that types.

The sexual system that defines a woman as a prostitute is parallel to the gender arrangements portrayed in the novel in a world that has become a brothel. In Frederick Durrenmatt's play *The Visit of the Old Lady* (1956), Claire Zachanassian declares, "The world has made me a whore and I would turn it into a brothel"; likewise, Castel-Bloom presents a world that has become a brothel long since. It is an assembly line of women forced to work in prostitution—as wives/sex slaves, or as prostitutes working for a pimp, like the heroine.<sup>25</sup>

Looking for work after her divorce, the heroine thumbs through the want ads in the newspaper:

Needed: escort girls, senior secretaries, junior secretaries, tea servers, little trays, Saucers.<sup>26</sup>

The economic system, as exemplified in this episode, similarly uses women to fulfill male needs. This latter part indicates women's marginal economic position in taking up these occupations.<sup>27</sup>

While Wollach-Scott suggests that gender is perceived as the antithesis of engaging in politics,<sup>28</sup> Castel-Bloom confronts both together. When the heroine is brought to the prime minister, his assistant commands her to cooperate, even though she cannot bear to have intercourse with him. Like her second husband, who ordered her to strip and have sex with him, govern-

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<sup>25</sup>Beyond the thematic connection to Durrenmatt's play *The Visit of the Old Lady*, Castel-Bloom adopts the motif of the "world turns yellow" that accords with the play. The heroine in *Where Am I* speaks of a world which has turned to yellow, like the yellow shoes worn by the inhabitants of Gilen in Durrenmatt's play: "yellow sky. Yellow smoke lower yellow rain. Yellow sand that came from-near the sea rose after strong wind and paint the air, like a mustard-eye, yellow" (O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 46). Both writings portray a world suffering a crisis of values, and both demonstrate the price paid by the individual because of the capitalism that dominates society. The yellow color that shades the people of Gilen and the people of Tel Aviv indicates the loss of individualism. The heroine rebels against this because she does not want to belong to the hostile society surrounding her and feels disgusted with where she is and with the predominant values.

<sup>26</sup>O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 76.

<sup>27</sup>As Fuchs maintains, Kahana-Carmon deals with mail-dominated economy, victimization of women by patriarchal arrangements, and she also shuns both the euphoric and the catastrophic vision of romantic love. These themes were adopted by Castel-Bloom, in addition to Kahana-Carmon's poetics of avoiding the linear, causal plot progression with its focus on a beginning, a climax, and a denouement and by focusing instead on the drama of consciousness and by that challenging the poetic principals of realistic drama and redefining the meaning of narrative action. Accordingly, both authors are presented as "Others" in their generation. E. Fuchs, *Israeli Mythologies*, pp. 90–95.

<sup>28</sup>J. Wallach-Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analyzing," *American Historical Review* 91.5 (1986): 1053–1075.

ment representatives also demand sexual obedience from her. The two circles of her existence—her partnership as a wife and the political system as a citizen, are analogues of woman's place as the satisfier of man's sexual whims. The two unequal relationships (wife/husband, citizen/ruler) end in separation: her second husband leaves her, and the prime minister's assistant throws her out of the limousine.

Similarly, after her second divorce, when a friend introduces her to a man who is an "antique dealer, or secret agent," he regales her with his political doctrine:

If only one Israeli woman would agree to give this cactus one good blowjob, all the Arab–Israeli conflict would be resolved. No one is willing to go down on him.<sup>29</sup>

The narrative-present is the time of the first Intifada. The appellation "cactus" is apparently an allusion to the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. The solution to the conflict, so the secret agent maintains, lies in a female sex act, representing surrender. This deed would compensate the Palestinians and lead, in his opinion, to the end of the conflict. In a social and political reality in which women are presented as sex slaves, gender roles permeate the political horizon too and conjure up solutions like this one. This episode corresponds with the biblical tale of the "hill mistress" (Judges 19–22), in which a woman is handed over for sexual abuse to satisfy enemies. Although women are excluded from the public sphere and from positions of control and policy making, they are not entirely absent. Women are the first to be sent to the front line as sacrifices. The concept of woman as a present, given by one man to another, as shown by Rich,<sup>30</sup> appears in the novel on two levels: the tangible, as shown above, and the symbolic, seen in the cigarette lighter in the form of a woman: the flame flares up from the woman's genitals.

The narrator is fascinated by the lighter. It is "a statuette of a woman made of gold, and the flame comes out from between her legs."<sup>31</sup> The lighter, owned by the pimp, "finds" its way to her. She considers selling it, but decides to keep it. In the closing of the novel, her house is on fire, sparked by a cigarette lit with that lighter. It is hard not to feel that the repeated descriptions of the cigarette lighter (which parallels the objectifica-

<sup>29</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 107.

<sup>30</sup> A. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5.4 (1980): 631–660.

<sup>31</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 78.



tion of women that characterizes the novel) and the act of stealing it create a textual dialogue between the novel and the Prometheus myth as told in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.

Similar to Prometheus' war with the gods because he stole fire and gave it to humans to conceal from them the day of their death, and to arouse in them "blind hopes,"<sup>32</sup> the narrator in the novel steals fire from the pimp—but unlike Prometheus, she keeps it for herself. Prometheus' uprising is a declaration of war against the brutal power of Zeus, whose heart was "not familiar with compassion,"<sup>33</sup> and his servants in the play are "power" and "violence." The narrator chooses a metaphorical way equivalent to Prometheus' action. She does not respond to the dictates of government, by not having sex with the prime minister; and she steals fire—a cigarette lighter. This illustrates the stereotype of the "little woman," like Aayo who refused to give her virginity to Zeus and embarked a journey into exile replete with torture. The fire that breaks out at the end of the novel is the burning of the patriarchy myth, embodied in the wedding ceremony: "half transparent white curtains, swaying like wedding dresses."<sup>34</sup>

Fire, ignited by the lighter, is given to human beings—the residents of Neot Afeka. At first, the fire consumes the white curtains, representing, in the character's consciousness, a wedding dress. The heroine imagines rabbis, the wedding hall, and the canopy. In her imagination, these replace her burning apartment, in such a way, as she sees it, that the fire guts the marriage institution. Stylistically, the theft of the fire parallels to the theft of language, as Ostriker remarks.<sup>35</sup> This scholar enumerates the various ways in which women poets "steal" male language. One method is by taking the mythical language created by men to describe mainly male heroes and minor goddesses, and feminizing it into female language. A woman writer who wants to declare her identity through language seeks access to the sphere of the mythical language that until recently served the patriarchy and defined the categories "man" and "woman" for the first time.<sup>36</sup> The appeal to the myth and its "theft" does not mark the writer's access to the male canon alone, but also her willingness to challenge the gender image which was first

<sup>32</sup> The quotes are from A. Shabtai's translation of Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1994), p. 50; English edition: Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (trans. J. Scully and C. J. Herington; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> A. Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

<sup>36</sup> A. Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, p. 211.

designed in the myths that define women as “angels” or as “monsters.”<sup>37</sup> In *Where Am I*, the fire (and the language) was stolen by a woman, who decided to assume the role of heroine, and subvert male power and the existing norms. In another dimension, the theft of the lighter which emits its fire from the female statuette's genitalia, symbolizes the theft of female sexuality: after her second divorce, the heroine is on her own; she “steals” sexuality, and accordingly experiences a chain of sexual encounters with men.

Like Prometheus, the heroine of the novel rebels against acceptance of female oppression, alone fights the social institution, which she finds guilty of female suppression, and burns it metaphorically. Her statement

I will always have to be my own audience, my own light man. I will always have to run for myself, to build homes alone.<sup>38</sup>

illustrates how her personal bonds have been loosened, suggesting to other women how they may get their freedom. After stealing language, she faces no more obstacles, and unlike her previous writing experiences, which came to nothing, she completes her story. She follows the words of Prometheus: “not force, not violent repression, but the advantage of cunning will bring the rule to the victors.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike Prometheus, who at the end of the play is swallowed up by the earth, the heroine of *Where Am I* is back in her neighborhood, leaving the fire behind, feeling strong and liberated despite the attempts to suppress her.

### 3. POETICS: THE MEANING OF THE IMPRESSIONISTIC STYLE OF *WHERE AM I*

In *Where Am I*, Castel-Bloom uses the impressionist mode in her descriptions and in her way of building the plot. The use of impressionism corresponds to the aspiration to describe the fracture attributed to romantic relationships, or as Amalia-Kahana-Camon wrote in the impressionistic novel *And Moon in the Valley of Ajalon*, “Every married woman, something is broken in her.”<sup>40</sup>

Lipsker notes that the impressionistic artist repetitively observes small and allegedly “unimportant” details of the theme he wishes to explore. In his

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<sup>37</sup> A. Ostriker, *Stealing the Language*, p. 212.

<sup>38</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 43.

<sup>39</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> A. Kahana-Carmon, *And Moon in the Valley of Ajalon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1971), p. 40.

opinion, the impressionistic artist tries to reflect the tension generated in the course of the active processes of constant change of reality, which make people weak, fragile, and, as in reality, in danger of collapse. Lipsker comments that impressionistic work expresses a deep crisis of values. He determines the elements of impressionist style as cutting off, restlessness, a tendency to highlight the episodes of the story, adoption of a leitmotif, aspiration to represent the immediacy of reality, and adoption of a syntax in which the lexical level replaces the syntactic level.<sup>41</sup>

According to Hauser, impressionism is an urban art, because it sees the world through the urban person's eyes. It presents the rapid changes, the nervous pace, and the sudden sharp and brief impressions of city life.<sup>42</sup> The formula that summarizes impressionism in Hauser's opinion is "the superiority of the moment on permanence and continuity, the feeling that every phenomenon is a passing situation that will never come back."<sup>43</sup> For Hauser, the impressionist vision makes nature a process of growth and decay, breaks stable things into series of metamorphoses, of a choppy and unfinished character. The description of the subjective action, instead of the objective perspective of seeing, reaches its peak in this style. The impressionism is also characterized by improvisation techniques, associated with a quick, rough sketch. Hauser notes that instead of describing the whole picture, impressionism reflects the bricks which build the experience, and instead of characterizing the object by signs, it presents the elements that build the material.<sup>44</sup> The perception of art according to impressionist artists is opposite to the bourgeois viewpoint because of their desire to live the moment, their rebellion against routine and discipline, and their discontent with culture.<sup>45</sup>

Shait believes that impressionism opposes the objectivity of realism, offering a sensory-intuitive experience instead of a cognitive experience. Through this artistic form, we learn about escapism: escape from reality, escape from the busy city to nature, avoiding communication with people, and mental escape. The impressionist text requires the reader to make an additional effort to construct its meaning since the plot is not linear but episodic.

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<sup>41</sup> A. Lipsker, "Tops of Delirium: The Impressionist Style in the Language of Gnessin, Baron, Kimchi, and Yzhar," *Criticism and Interpretation* 29 (1993): 121–142 (in Hebrew).

<sup>42</sup> A. Hauser, *Social History of Literature and Art* (trans. A. Yavin; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1979) (English edition published in 1973).

<sup>43</sup> A. Hauser, *Social History of Literature*, p. 242.

<sup>44</sup> A. Hauser, *Social History of Literature*, p. 243.

<sup>45</sup> A. Hauser, *Social History of Literature*, p. 254.

The language does not cling to familiar syntactic patterns, and can become deliberately incomprehensible and inaccurate.<sup>46</sup>

It is important to illustrate how Castel-Bloom applies impressionist elements in *Where Am I*, especially since earlier studies have presented her style as post-modern.<sup>47</sup> A new approach can be seen in Shiffman's research. According to Shiffman,

Post-modernism is characterized by absence or deconstruction: the absence of a coherent plot, the deconstruction of character and psychology, the deconstruction of narrative and of the representational function of language. The basic absence, upon which all these deconstructions seem to be founded, is the active deconstruction of search for, or belief in meaning.<sup>48</sup>

In light of the abovementioned definition, Shiffman classifies Castel-Bloom's writing style as "Israeli postmodernism" and states that even when Castel-Bloom deconstructs the collective narrative or the meta-narrative, she does not actually give up the attempt to cling onto the narrative, and her texts seem to embody a kind of a modernist search for meaning. I would like to suggest, that Castel-Bloom adopts impressionist features in the novel *Where Am I* as part of her searching for a meaning in a broken (patriarchal) meaningless world.

The novel places a female character at the center (similar to the recurrent concentration of impressionist painters on female experiences), and examines her life between her two collapsed relationships, presenting small allegedly "unimportant" details of her marriage life, like the heroine's false attempt to bake cookies in order to be a "good" wife. In relating the narrative, the narrator does not construct a linear plot. For example, the heroine's exclusion from theater studies, which occurred before her first marriage, is related before her second marriage.

Regarding the dissolution of times, the syntax in the novel often seems to be without a causal or developmental sequence. As Hess explains, this accords with the heroine's disorder in her thinking process: incoherence and loose associations. Hess also describes the novel as "fragmented, floating,

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<sup>46</sup> H. Shait, "Rodulf Gordweil: Talush (Rootless) in an Impressionistic-Expressionistic Space: The Figure of the Talush in 'Married Life' by David Fogel" (M.A. thesis, University of Haifa, 2000), pp. 80–90.

<sup>47</sup> See O. Bartana, "Where are We?"; H. Hertzog, *The Voice That Says I*, pp. 80–93; S. Shiffman, *Things You See from Here: David Grossman, Orly Castel-Bloom and Meir Shalev: Beyond Modernism?* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Carmel, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> S. Shiffman, "Orly Castel-Bloom and Yoel Hoffmann: On Israeli Postmodern Prose Fiction," *HS* 50 (2009): 215–227.

associative."<sup>49</sup> The following two sentences (about the visit of the four cousins in Israel) illustrate the impressionistic syntax which is not post-modern syntax, since the fragmented sentences still managed to build a coherent meaning:

Fortunately fought the four in the airplane, and they are not talking to each other. Because the French that in my mouth is slurred, we sat in the eastern restaurant in Jaffa—and we were silent.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the novel, successive sentences are unconnected, and apparently unimportant details are lingered over in a seeming retreat from the main plot. Hertzig states that “the transfers in the text are made through linguistic associations.... The opposite literary features provide to Castel-Bloom’s works organization and logic that are being made in the way of ‘pseudo.’”<sup>51</sup> In Herzig’s opinion, Castel-Bloom shows the futility and the foolishness of the human usage in language.<sup>52</sup>

The novel’s final chapter contains a conversation between the heroine and a beggar who knocks at her door. He asks for a handout, but gets the heroine’s life story. This episode explores the key to understanding the place of the language in the heroine’s world: she uses fragmented sentences in order to present her unique meaning of life and to undermine hegemonic arrangements (and expectations).

The motif of light characteristic of impressionist art is found in the novel: “the lawyer has a heart of gold” (p. 37), the clouds have a “gray whiteness” (p. 36), the landlord in Normandy has “yellow hair” (p. 37), the director of the theater studies has “shining hair” (p. 42), the sky is colored “yellow” (p. 46), as are the smoke, the rain, and the sand (p. 46). At the end of the novel “white curtains half transparent” waft about (p. 110). Tel-Aviv city, set at the center of the novel, is described as having “an orgy of lights” (p. 85).

In contrast to the whiteness of the geographic and social space, the heroine portrays herself in black colors so as to be different from other people, and this makes her wonder “Am I even here?”<sup>53</sup> The newspaper editor asks her if her name is Zehavit (Goldie), and she immediately denies it. She does not want to belong to a particular group, and she perceives herself as a

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<sup>49</sup> T. Hess, “She has No Delays,” pp. 386–387.

<sup>50</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 30.

<sup>51</sup> H. Hertzig, *The Voice That Says I*, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> H. Hertzig, *The Voice That Says I*, p. 92.

<sup>53</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 77.

combination of animal and human being, a person with no identity,<sup>54</sup> since the common identities are stranger to her.

The heroine's choice of describing herself as an animal accords with the duality in her description of her physical appearance combining male and female elements. The animal motifs refer to physical power (masculine), but animals are also hunted and tamed by humans.

Accordingly, we witness a mixed gender presentation, which combines strength and weakness, masculinity and femininity, a dominant position against marginality and violation. The entire novel moves on the axis of initiative/withdrawal, movement in space/resignation. The character is clearly determined to find her place in space—as a subjected woman struggling with various factors for freedom of self-determination, which is the opposite to dictated self-determination.<sup>55</sup> The narrator is unwilling to be defined by female categories that serve patriarchy such as “wife,” “whore,” “host,” “typist”; she refuses to concede her unique language. Her journey, which seems to be only to escape from her husbands, also serves as a deliberate journey of non-hegemonic initiation, of a woman seeking access to an independent life.

The light leitmotif in the novel reinforces the heroine's difference from the rest of the “lightening” people, physically and normatively, as presented in the way she experiences and writes about life. Of herself she says: “No one today deals with the gazes I deal with,”<sup>56</sup> and this statement soaring to an *Ars-Poetic* statement illustrates her innovative choices of the author. The implied author juxtaposes false light and black reality. Various hegemony cultural concepts and approaches generally presented as “the light” become dark elements following the new way of observing. Impressionism, as illus-

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<sup>54</sup> The editor throws her out of his office “like a bitch” (p. 10), and she declares: “I have soft fuzz covering me, especially at night” (p. 16). Describing her appearance, she uses mixed gender motifs: “I know that I'm weird. A black one. Brown. With a thin mustache. People do not recognize me when they see me” (p. 40). When this subjective determination confronts reality, things seem different: the various people whom she meets recognize her, including Ofra, a friend whom she has not met for a long time.

<sup>55</sup> Pinkola-Estes explains the concept of “animal-woman” from a Jungian perspective, noting that this is “a woman who was once in a natural state of mind, namely, with all her senses, and then caught under any circumstances, domesticated too much, until her instincts dulled. When she has a chance to return to her original wild nature, she falls too easily to traps. Her cycles and her defense systems disrupted, and therefore she is in danger when she is in what were once her wild natural surroundings.” Through a Jungian analysis of *Where Am I*, we learn the above parallels the process experienced by the heroine. C. Pinkola-Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (trans. A. Ginzburg-Hirsch; ed. N. Telpaz; Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing, 1997), pp. 20–25; (English edition published in 1992).

However, Gluzman shows Castel-Bloom's tendency to parody psychology terms, and we can see how in this novel she corresponds with psychological concepts in order to show their Islet. M. Gluzman, “The Infinite Strangeness of the World.”

<sup>56</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 16.

trated in Dvora Baron's short stories, hides cruel truth and alienated existential reality beneath the light.<sup>57</sup> This path is also taken by Castel-Bloom in *Where Am I*. Dana-Fruchter notes that in *Where Am I*, Castel-Bloom shows the cracks in bourgeois reality, namely "what society hides or makes pretty, she emphasizes and makes ugly."<sup>58</sup>

The disintegration of the urban person is highlighted by the "human/animal motif." The heroine characterizes her image as similar to that of an animal, but also the people surrounding her are "infected" by the animal motif and described as "rat people."<sup>59</sup> The sense that humankind is losing its humanity and becoming animal-like intensifies in her conversation with the watchman at the newspaper premises. Looking at the rain, the guard mentions that he feels "like being in Noah's ark;"<sup>60</sup> his description merges with the human/animal inclination of the novel. The apocalyptic feeling associated with the Flood is added to the human/animal theme that underscores the bestialization of mankind.<sup>61</sup> The biblical Noah's ark saved humankind and animals alike, and the sense of crisis and extinction that accompanies Noah's story seems to carry over into the novel. It is set at the time of the first Intifada, and its content alludes to the escalation of the violence between Jews and Palestinians. There are two personal fragments as well: two cases of divorce, which the heroine has experienced and tries to cope with, and she tries to understand the reasons for the collapse of the marriages.

The disintegration of society and the crisis of values are illustrated in the novel by the heroine's repeated examination of the most central bourgeois institution: marriage. Her conversation with the "Lover" accentuates this institution in modern times:

And don't answer any phones....My wife may call me from Los Angeles at any time. I do not need her to hear a girl answering the phone. Although she betrays me all the time we like to keep it that way, far away, and not bring it to meet our consciousness....I love you.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> On impressionism as outer clothing to present cruel processes which make life ugly, see D. Meyron, *Aiming Lights* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Schocken, 1979), p. 137.

<sup>58</sup> R. Dana-Fruchter, "Tel Aviv's Servants," p. 20.

<sup>59</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Levy characterizes Castel-Bloom's apocalyptic perceptions from her early fiction. He states that she uses apocalyptic images taken from two main dimensions: the city space and time. Sh. Levy, "Women Writers on the Edge Line: Four Cases of Comparative Apocalypse: Human, Society, Nature and Spirit," *Moznaim* 70.7 (1996): 21-28 (in Hebrew).

<sup>62</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 85.

Antagonistic to heterosexual coupledness, which has lost its seminal values such as "love," "loyalty," and "reciprocity," is the homosexual relationship. However, same-sex coupledness is not presented as an alternative since it reproduces heterosexual coupledness. The heroine's brother is a homosexual, who has temporary partners, calling each of them "my wife." He certainly internalizes the heterosexual perception of existence in the form of coupledness: he introduced his sister to her second husband and declares, after the success of the match, "You've hooked a very fat fish,"<sup>63</sup> a sign of their mutual success in finding a rich man.

After their divorce, the protagonist describes her apartment as a "rehabilitation center"<sup>64</sup> and tries to change the reality of her life again, by finding a job. The impressionistic wish to escape, combined with her material needs, force her out of the house. But her new "feminine" occupation does not further her entry into the outside because she chooses to nurse a handicapped woman, a deaf mute. Communication is impossible, and this allows her to continue with her escapism and become absorbed in her inner world.<sup>65</sup> It also symbolizes the way of communication in the city, since no one in the novel listens to each other.

The heroine's escape from communication is a dominant theme in the novel. Aside from her preference for meaningless communication, which always fails, the heroine tends to avoid giving answers: to the simple question asked by the prime minister—where did she get her lighter from, she replies in a kind of stream of consciousness and with mixed sentences, until he dozes off.<sup>66</sup> This pattern of external questions and her evasion through incomprehensible answers is typical of most of her communication in the novel. Accordingly, she asks her surroundings many questions about minor details. This pattern emphasizes her "impressionistic thought" about the little things in life that can build a whole meaning.

Ostensibly, asking questions forms a leitmotif underlining the heroine's alienation. However, Virginia Woolf's essay "Why?" illustrates that asking questions does not mean passivity but helps the asker to find a place in the

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<sup>63</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 48.

<sup>64</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 75.

<sup>65</sup> In an interview with Kupfer, Castel-Bloom said that she was into "escapism. Trying to live in oblivion as much as I can." R. Kopfer, "She Needs to be Alone," *Ha'aretz Gallery* (December 7, 2007): 1, 20 (in Hebrew).

<sup>66</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 99.



outside.<sup>67</sup> Like Woolf, Castel-Bloom's wandering heroine does not cease to ask her surroundings and herself questions, in the first place, "Do I exist?"<sup>68</sup>

The ensconcing of the heroine in her inner world, then, is spatial, but also perceptual. To escape reality, she adopts a unique language, hides her identity and her essence, uses words as a shield to protect her from the outside world, and remains loyal to herself.<sup>69</sup> Raising questions forces people around her to expose themselves, makes her the center of the conversation, and assures her position in the urban space as the viewer, not the viewed.

In *The Mina Lisa*, Castel-Bloom defines her unique style by using Flora's diagnosis of Mina's writing. Flora characterizes Mina's writing style as "soda realism."<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in *Where Am I*, Castel-Bloom, who consistently rejects being labeled a post-modern writer, defines her style.<sup>71</sup> During her holiday, the heroine tells us, "I took a book on impressionism and leafed through it."<sup>72</sup> As we have seen, Castel-Bloom adopts several impressionist elements in this novel, primarily the fragmentation of the plot and the sentences. The author seems also to be under the influence of the impressionist feminist writer Dvora Baron, both thematically and stylistically. From a style aspect, Castel-Bloom, like Baron, breaks the "hegemonic syntax" and creates a unique syntax, impairing the "accepted" sentence components. According to Lipsker, Baron makes use of singular-sentences or of subordinate clauses, which place nominal objects or situation descriptors at the beginning of the sentence, and the subject and verbal core to the continuation.<sup>73</sup> To shatter the rules of established syntax, Castel-Bloom, in Ben-Shachar's opinion, inverts the roles of the language and the designed world:

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<sup>67</sup> V. Woolf, *The Death of the Moth: Essays, Notes and Articles* (trans. C. Guy; Jerusalem: Keter, 2008), p. 196.

<sup>68</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 77.

<sup>69</sup> Keydar notes that the narrator presents the language as a battlefield where two equal forces (vectors) fight: on the one hand we hear the "hegemonic" language, on the other hand "low," "everyday" speech. By adopting characteristics of these languages, the narrator's speech merges and conforms with them. But a phonetic reading shows that the narrator has designed for herself "secret language," and she undermines both the "established" and the "low" languages. T. Keydar, "The Function of the Phonetic Structure," pp. 105–129.

<sup>70</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *The Mina Lisa* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1995), p. 88.

<sup>71</sup> For example, in an interview with Lee, Castel-Bloom terms the post-modern style a "blame" that was forced on her. V. Lee, "I Came to Them from the Opposite Side," *Ha'aretz Book Reviews* (August 15, 2007) (in Hebrew). Online: <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/892896.html>.

<sup>72</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> A. Lipsker, "Tops of Delirium," pp. 121–142.

The language leads the narrative, and the signs are made more important than the signifiers.... The deviations from the semantic rules of joining, the linguistic paradoxes, and the mingling of things that do not go well, arouse in the reader suspicion and unease regarding a realistic deciphering of the text.<sup>74</sup>

The thematic orientation to Baron is evident throughout Castel-Bloom's writing on oppressive coupledness. In Baron's story "Like a Driven Leaf," a young simple woman works as a maid in a widow's house. She falls in love with the widow's son, who takes advantage of her sexually and later becomes engaged to another woman. Following this betrayal, the girl commits suicide. In her story "Fradel," Baron portrays warped communication between two partners, which results in the woman's withering and brings the relationship to an end. In this story, divorce is portrayed as liberation action, causing the female character happiness and also giving her the ability to marry again, now to a suitable man. Becoming a widow in Baron's story "Snatches" ends a relationship in which the woman is treated like an object, her presence unnoticed by her husband. Her widow's status, usually considered lowly, becomes uplifting, and the heroine, Haya-Fruma, flourishes and constructs a sound economic basis through her persistence.

Even though divorce was unacceptable in the early twentieth century, when Baron was writing, it is characterized as a liberating experience and as an opportunity for women to turn slavery into freedom. Such is the case in her story "Ziva," which is the name of a puppy belonging to a woman who lived with a violent abusive husband who drove her out of their house. The story of the violent marriage is presented through Ziva's eyes. It highlights female oppression by comparing the life of a wife to a life of a helpless dog.<sup>75</sup> In *Where Am I*, the heroine's second divorce carries the spirit of liberation found in Baron's stories. The protagonist remarks, "Though I had just got back from the Rabbinate [in charge of granting divorce] and I was supposed to feel sorrow for the failure of my second marriage, actually I felt pretty good."<sup>76</sup> Finally, there is a light in her life, but opposite to the bourgeois concept—the cause of it is the breaking of her coupledness.

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<sup>74</sup> R. Ben-Shachar, "Pity about the Trend: The Poetics of Orly Castel-Bloom" (in Hebrew), in *Lamed Leish: A Collection of Studies to Mark Thirty Years of the Israeli Society of Applied Linguistics* (ed. I. Schlesinger and M. Mochnik; Jerusalem: Tulips, 2003), pp. 78–93.

<sup>75</sup> Baron's stories are taken from the collection *Parashiyot*, the Bialik Institute, 1951. English edition: D. Baron, *The First Day and Other Stories* (trans. N. Seidman with Ch. Kronfeld; Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> O. Castel-Bloom, *Where Am I*, p. 77.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Ofir states that "In Castel-Bloom's texts there is no resignation.... Almost all the time they tell you that this present situation cannot continue."<sup>77</sup> This assertion is apt for the range of relationships emerging from the writings of Castel-Bloom. Her writings on relationships between the sexes undermine patriarchal norms that demand institutionalized relationships dominated by men. They likewise abandon the myth of the "harmonious relationship" for a realistic look at heterosexual ties. According to Castel-Bloom, in the post-modern age relationships (between lovers or among people in general) have become hollow, devoid of intimacy and depth; therefore they require a renewed definition, withstanding conflict with existing stereotypes.

The novel *Where Am I* explores the collapse of the couple model, and the outcome is the individual remaining alone in the world, not as a solution or as salvation, but as an inevitable course in view of the inability to establish ties that realize even slightly the romantic perceptions. Castel-Bloom's impressionist poetics tries to reflect the tension generated in the course of the active processes of constant change of reality, which make women weak, fragile, and in danger of victimization. The heroine's journey is not a story of hegemonic initiation: If we expected a feeling of closure or learning, we were misled. Her life experience levels Castel-Bloom's criticism of women's reality of oppression and undermines the patriarchal notion of marriage as a gateway to a better life ("the Cinderella myth").

This poetics emphasizes the fractures in both coupledness and women's position in the public sphere. The novel's rich intertextual level affirms that what happened in the past (represented by allusion to Anna Karenina, Prometheus, Claire Zuchanassian, and Baron's protagonists) is here to stay, and the various waves of feminism have not yet achieved the vision of the free woman—neither abroad nor at home. In this reality, the question "Where am I?" implying that women do not have a place of their own in an androcentric world, is no longer a question. It is a fact.

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<sup>77</sup> A. Ofir, "On Postmodern Writing and the Possibility of Its Moral Justification: Readings in *Unbidden Stories* by Orly Castel-Bloom," *Mikan* 1 (2000): 115–133, quote from p. 115 (in Hebrew).