Love and Politics in Orly Castel-Bloom's *Textile*

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**Abstract**

This article examines the effect of living in a constant state of war on Israeli citizens, as depicted in Orly Castel-Bloom's novel, *Textile*. The "human textile" that Castel-Bloom weaves is a tapestry of separation, non-communication and the lack of deep mutual relationships in which the individual gives up his or her ego for the "other." In this reality, where "words are merely spoken into space," it is no surprise that not only does coupledom fail but so do any other social interactions, whether they exist between one Israeli to another, or between Jews and Arabs.

**Introduction**

The rich poetics of Orly Castel-Bloom is a controversial matter among literature critics. Each scholar seems to offer a different stylistic identification of Castel-Bloom's prose. Neta Naaman (1987) believes her writing ranges from realism to fantasy. Ziva Shamir (1989) associates her with the "thin literature" and believes that her stories have a naturalistic level. Ortzion Bartana (1993: 191) maintains that Castel-Bloom is a post-modern author. Michael Gluzman (1994) describes the mix of genres in Castel-Bloom's prose – surrealist, post-modern and Kafkaesque—that makes her writing style, in his opinion, "magical realism." According to Yoram Meltzer (2002), Castel-Bloom's works combine satire and the tragicomic mode. Smadar Shiffman (2009) 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. However, most critics seem to concentrate on Castel-Bloom's poetics, while ignoring Castel-Bloom's thematic structure. One of Castel-Bloom’s recurrent themes, which appears in most of her works, is distorted coupledom. This theme is present in Castel-Bloom's first short-story collection *Not Far from the Center of Town* (1987). In the story of the same title the author describes the first days of marriage of a young

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couple. The fetid air of death gradually replaces the sense of freshness, falling in love, and hope. The direct mention of Camus' novel *La peste* (1947), which Avishai, the story's protagonist, is trying to read, emphasizes the malaise of his and Dalia's coupledom. The death of the couple's neighbor at the end of the story parallels the demise of their relationship, and the apartment, painted white, signifies the combination of marriage and death, sickness and purity, blooming and withering.

Castel-Bloom's first novel, *Where Am I* (1990) presents a nameless woman after her second divorce. After her first divorce, the protagonist tries to create harmonic marriage life with her second husband, Omri, but she fails again. Shortly after their marriage, Omri removed his wife from her home, and relied on her to be the "stable partner" of their relationship:

My second husband was a high flyer, and it immediately brought me down to earth. A high-flying husband – so you can be a high flyer yourself. You've no choice, you have to pull yourself together. Coming to my senses hurt, because I'm like a balloon.8

The second marriage is characterized by homophily: the partners are alike. They are “high flyers” so they fall in love at first sight, although he does not allow his wife to be herself and insists that she start post-secondary studies. For the protagonist, such activity represents involvement with the establishment, an encounter she wants to avoid. Omri states his purpose: "You're going to be an undergraduate student in history, and then we'll see what to do with you. You'll teach high school!"9 Omri is determined to set her in stereotypical female role: obedient wife, teacher of history—a profession concerned mainly in men's wars, or as she says, "the chronicle of one war"10.

At their first meeting, Omri tells her that his first wife left him for an abusive drunk. He does not understand how she could cheat on him and replace him with such an aggressive fellow. The picture emerging from the narrator's marriage to Omri explains this mystery. His violence against her can be traced to his wish to handle her like a puppet, to make her his cheerleader as he travels around the world, forcing her to adopt a conventional profession. His sexual behavior too is no "less" violent than his physical violence:

Their relationship is reminiscent of that between a master and slave, and applies to their sexual intercourse too. It is forced upon her. While flying in a hot-air balloon, Omri orders her to undress, and the act of "lovemaking" is in fact rape. On a later occasion, when she gets home exhausted from the university and falls asleep, he wakes her up and demands sex: "Let's do it', he said, and sent a shudder through

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9 Ibid., p. 58.
10 Ibid., p. 59.

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me". To avoid intercourse, she tries various excuses, and then she clearly says: "Leave me alone". But her husband answers, "It doesn't bother me in the dark" and dismisses her refusal. She realizes that she has to decide whether to accept this marriage, or return to her previous life, living alone.

Of the two worlds—academia and obedience on the one hand, and freedom of consciousness and space on the other, the hero chooses the latter. Her second marriage is an endless confrontation that prevents her from answering the question "Where am I?" which is the central part of the novel. Her conscious choice to leave the cycle of violence and coercion is a feminist one, even though society (her brother, her friend Ofra) had urged her to find a husband after her first divorce. Similarly to the inability to fulfill the myth of romantic love, the novel is set at the time of the first Intifada, and the apocalyptic feeling arises not only from the divorce, but also from the reality of violence that Castel-Bloom describes.

The cause of the dislocation in relationships in Castel-Bloom's prose varies. Tracing how the writer portrays coupledom leads to the conclusion that she wants to shatter the myth of a relationship based on love, passion, friendship, and admiration. Castel-Bloom usually depicts relationships by pushing a central motif to its extreme. In the novel *The Mina Lisa* (1995), a violent relationship between Mina and her husband Oved is outlined. The evident hierarchy of the spouses illustrates that their relationship is oppressive, as well as twisted. Love is absent from the marriage, and the overarching motif is violence, which has become Mina's daily reality. Her indifference on hearing of Oved's presumed death attests to Mina's position in the marriage, and the absence of love. Her reaction shows lack of connection and a subconscious wish to be alone.

Violence between spouses is described as a plague in the novel *Following the Trend* (1998), where family violence occurs every Shabbat—Saturday, when the family members are at home and share the same space:

[...] And on Shabbat, at about half past eight or quarter to nine in the morning, the shouting starts. Now this trend has a lot of poetry but you have to pay it a lot of attention. Something about the commitment to rest does it. People fight about everything. There are exchanges of bad words between the sexes, but also a lot of fights between the generations. Heard from the houses: shut up, get out of my sight, take your things and go back to your mother, parasite, leech, free rider.

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11 Ibid., p. 59.
12 Ibid., p. 59.
13 Ibid., p. 59.
Also shouts asking for quiet. Quite a lot of people shout on Saturday. And rightly so. It's their Shabbat. Very likely, during the shouting some slapping flies about. [...] Sometimes the first fight starts at seven in the morning on the fourth floor, goes up to the fifth, then down to the third and finishes off on the ground floor. This shifting has no rhyme or reason.\textsuperscript{16}

To illustrate the collapse of the family, Castel-Bloom creates a fragmented style, and illustrates a reality of personal relationships infected with violence and alienation. As seen in the passage quoted above, the author's sentences are short; she frequently uses punctuation to sustain the impersonal tone when she describes this particular example of family life. The broken syntax indicates the shattered relationships that appear throughout the novel.

A motif other than violence that defines coupledom is excessive closeness, as demonstrated in the surreal story "Mystical Events" (\textit{You Don't Argue with Rice, 2004}).\textsuperscript{17} The couple suffers from a "mystical sickness", being glued to each other body and mind. This story destroys clichés of "harmonious relationships," and ends with the hope that in the next incarnation the couple will not meet each other and will have an independent life physically and spiritually.

Another motif in Castel-Bloom's prose is the couple's lack of communication. Examples are the stories "Shifra," "A Bar-Mitzvah for Christopher", and "A Question of Water" (from \textit{Not Far from the Center of Town, 1987}); and the novel \textit{Human Parts} (2002).\textsuperscript{18} Adi Ofir (2000: 115) states:

\begin{quote}
In Castel-Bloom's texts there is no resignation. True, nowhere do they tell you what you can or should do, and they don't suggest that you should identify with any one character; but almost all the time they tell you that this present situation cannot continue.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

This assertion is apt for the range of relationships emerging from the writings of Castel-Bloom. She describes post-modern relationships (between lovers or among people in general) that have become hollow, devoid of intimacy and depth; therefore, they require a new definition, devoid of existing stereotypes.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 63.


\textsuperscript{18}Castel-Bloom, Orly (2002). \textit{Human Parts}. Kinneret.

If literature created by women is all about the conscious description of romantic relationships between a man and a woman, then Castel-Bloom in some way accepts it20; indeed, many of her works deal with various forms of coupledom. However, "Romance," as a catchword for both a literary genre and a popular myth of happy coupledom, becomes, under the scrutiny of Castel-Bloom's prose, and as presented in her work, an empty concept in which flaw and distortion replace the romantic notion of love, with no "happy ending."

Zvia Ben-Yosef Ginur (2000) discusses the controversy over the feminist viewpoint 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 live in a "maze with no way out."21 This article examines the feminist idea that the personal is also political and explores these social and political aspects in Castel-Bloom’s Textile.

"Words that are just spoken into space": Disconnect Coupledom as Political Metaphor in the Novel Textile

Textile tells the alienated relationship of a wealthy couple, Mandy and Irad Gruber. The spouses enjoy successful careers: Irad is an inventor and an Israel Prize laureate; Mandy runs a textile factory that manufactures pajamas. But since their relationship is comparable to that between a mother and her son, he cannot fulfill the

20See for example the definition of Dvora Baron's prose as one that deals with only feminine issues. By this definition scholars ignored Baron's descriptions of the capitalization of the world, and also the violence of gentiles against the Jewish community – both politic themes which represent the public sphere. Ratok argues that Baron's descriptions of "the world of the individual", and her avoidance of portraying the social problems of her time, led critics to identify women's literature as minor one. Further example is the critic reaction to Amalia Kahana-Carmon's fiction, as described by Fuchs. Amalia Kahana-Carmon, in her essay "To Be A Woman Writer", notes, that the woman writer is in double blind. If she remains loyal to her own experience as a medusa, she risks being criticized as too limited. If on the other hand she decides to become a dolphin and "write like a man" she risks being charged with inauthenticity. In her essay "To Be Wasted on the Peripheral" Kahana-Carmon discusses the reader's misconception of women writers as dealing with the marginal or the esoteric.

Seidman, Naomi and Kronfeld, Chana (2001). "Introduction". In The First Day and Other Stories, Dvora Baron, Seidman Naomi and Kronfeld Chana (Eds.), University of California Press, pp. XV-XXV.

role of a father and a husband. Mandy takes care of him, finances him, listens to his monologues—he emerges as a burden, not a partner. She did not share with him the information that she needed plastic surgery on her shoulder blades; so Irad was the last to know that his wife died after the operation. The couple had two children – Lyrit and Dael, and the complications that emerge from their coupledom are reflected in the behavior of their children: both cannot establish a romantic relationship and eventually accept the inability of being part of a couple.

Undergoing cosmetic surgery for the eighth time, Mandy Gruber chooses the surgeon Dr. Carmi Yagoda. The third-person narrator, who traces the history of the Gruber family, lingers over Yagoda’s character despite his marginality in the main plot. The reader is first given an inkling of Yagoda's conversational style when he speaks to the operating nurse:

Yagoda was a graduate of Harvard, where he also learned to maintain a pleasant relationship with the staff of the operating room, and of the possibility of using the consonant M to hum and appear to be listening and taking an interest. On the other hand he had also learned to defend himself against plunging fully into small talk, which could distract him from the operation. From time to time he had to throw into the operating room a whole sentence, leaving nothing to be added [...]. This time, he took the trouble to say: 'The average person can speak two hundred words a minute, and the average person can listen to a hundred and sixty words a minute. This means there will be always people who just talk to the air, with no one listening to them because of the limits of the average person's listening ability. There will be always words that are just spoken into space'.

Next, the reader learns that while Yagoda’s career soars, his romantic life is described as "one-night stands with married nurses, and it was enough for him."23 The above conversation between Yagoda and the nurse amounts to nothing more than small talk. Yet, with the novel’s emphasis on romantic ties, this seemingly insignificant conversation proves to be a key to understanding the characters' opinion about coupledom. The relationships that Castel-Bloom describes between Irad and Mandy Gruber, and between their children and their partners, as well as the extramarital affair between Irad and his colleague Bahat McPhee, replicate the essence of the conversation between the doctor and the nurse. The doctor explains the implausibility of a real connection between any two people who engaged in a dialogue; similarly, the novel re-affirms this "scientific" statement.

The relationship between Irad and Mandy can be summarized as the absence of communication. They move to the Tel Baruch neighborhood of north Tel Aviv, on the corner of Yocheved Bat-Miriam Street and Alexander Penn Street, named after

23 Ibid., p. 56.

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two Israeli poets. The new neighborhood lies near the two cemeteries of Kiryat Shaul. Mandy and Irad move into their new lavish house, but this in no way changes their relationship which, like the nearby cemeteries, has an aura of death. And it certainly does not resemble Penn's famous love poetry. Lyrit, their daughter, tries to live an idyllic life in the Negev with Shlomi. Confusing lyrics and capitalism, she thinks her parents' house is "pretty much like a hotel"—and indeed, as in a luxury hotel the Grubers’ house is devoid of any feeling of home. Mandy dies, and Irad refuses to return to Israel; so, the house turns into Lyrit's private hotel, where she settles after she and her partner end their relationship.

The parallel between the house and the public realm persists. Lyrit lies in her parents' bed, switches on the television, and feels that "she is sitting in the front row at the cinema". Her parents' bedroom, like the rest of the house, lacks intimacy and privacy. Feelings of family and coupledom are replaced by a sense of the outdoors, devoid of love or emotional depth. At the end of the novel, when Irad Gruber is deeply depressed, the psychiatrist Bill Stanton claims that Irad’s condition was caused by the move to the new house in north Tel Baruch. Stanton comments, "He prefers their old house," because Irad saw the move as a punishment; and everything would be better if only they returned to the old house. But that “paradise lost” is an imaginary paradise. Mandy and Irad's contorted relationship is presented from the start as flawed; the couple has no real communication. Therefore, the desire to return to their old house becomes an escape mechanism.

When Mandy and Irad move from Ramat Aviv to Tel Baruch, Irad passively resists by choosing to stay at a friend's house while Mandy unpacks their belongings by herself. When he eventually shows up, the house is tidy and well organized, and the reader is told that Mandy, in addition to the unpacking, plans to renovate the new home. Unable to "renovate" her marriage, she feels the need to “rebuild” her body and her house repeatedly. Divorcing her husband was against the wishes of her mother. Furthermore, Mandy chooses to move on Rosh Hashana, the New Year festival, and unpack the boxes when she is off work. This decision illustrates the loneliness she feels, trying to occupy herself by arranging the house on the festive days. The narrator says that Mandy raised two children by herself, because her husband was preoccupied with his public speeches, and a career as a patent inventor.

When Irad left to the United States to advance his research, he forgot his cell phone in his bedroom in Israel. This provided Irad with an excuse not to call his wife and children. In addition, when Mandy dies his children could not reach him to inform him of her death. Although his son served as a sniper in the army, Irad has never felt the need to check upon his safety. Nowhere in the novel is there a single conversation between the soldier son and his father. Three days after Irad arrived to the United States, he called his daughter:

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24 Ibid., p. 38.
25 Ibid., p. 120.
26 Ibid., p. 203.

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He sounded far away and foreign. It's incredible that he is the only parent they have left, she and Dael. Would he think about asking her how she is? How their mother, his wife is? Usually, he calls to hear himself talking with his family. Lyrit let him finish to the last detail, including that he was then in the lab with his American colleague; only then, a moment before he hung up, did she land him the bitter news.

Mandy's death, which should have been the main topic of the conversation, is marginalized due to Irad's inability to listen to his daughter and his lack of interest in his family. Irad copes with Mandy's sudden death by turning to Bahat McPhee, the scientist at whose home he is staying. She functions as a "replacement mother," who treats him as Mandy did. Bahat feeds him, clothes him, and provides him with sex. To please him, she changes the linen often, mainly because he wets the bed, cooks for him or takes him out to restaurants, listens to his monologues, drives him around, and attends to his medical and mental wellbeing. While Mandy financed his "genius" until he became well known and made money from his inventions, Bahat supports his research by sharing her own findings with him and giving him the copyright to her discoveries.

The connection between Irad’s character and sin are present throughout the novel but not explicitly stated. It is evident in Mandy’s desire to erase all signs of their shared past (in her physical body and her house) and in the biblical origin of the name Irad. In the Hebrew Bible, Irad is the grandson of Cain, the first murderer (Genesis 4:18).

Mandy's addiction to cosmetic surgery seems to have two main causes: First, her desire to forget everything and sink deeply into anesthesia. Second, as the mother of a combat soldier, in danger of being killed every day, she becomes an addict of unconsciousness. She has undergone seven operations and does not need any more; however, this is her only way of escaping into oblivion:

If they put my son as a sniper in the front line without asking my opinion, I can't stand this suspense. I want to sleep and sleep, and wake up younger and younger, a day after he is discharged. At his celebratory party I'll look thirty-five [...].

27 Ibid., p. 166.

28 Ibid., p. 15. The horror of bereavement is highlighted through the two women close to Mandy: her personal assistant, Carmela Levy, whose son died in Sidon in the war in Lebanon, and the poet Yocheved Bat-Miriam, for whom Mandy's street is named, who also lost her son in Israel's War of Independence, as noted by Oren (2007: 65). Oren, Yosef (2007). Crisis of Values in Israeli Fiction: A Critical Dialogue with New Novels. Yahad (Hebrew).

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This is the stated reason for her operations.\(^{29}\) However, her mother's aging presages her own battle against the ravages of time:

Mandy had recently buried her mother Audrey, eighty-two years old. With her own eyes, she watched the decay [...]. She had seen how Audrey became shorter and shorter, her humped back increasingly curved [...]. She noticed the thinning of the hair on her head, which no hairdresser could shape [...]. Her neck too [...] became scrawny, and what had once been her beautifully shaped face sank ever deeper into her double chin. All this was accompanied by a diminishing of her mind [...].\(^{30}\)

The meticulous description of the natural process of her mother’s aging accentuates Mandy's own fear of aging. A year after her mother's death Mandy transforms her lifestyle: she becomes a vegan, buys numerous creams, and spends "two hundred and fifty-four thousand shekels"\(^{31}\) on cosmetic surgeries. Her fear of growing old like her mother impels her to try to halt the process. This repressed psychological condition accompanies the stated wish to escape the constant worry about her soldier son.\(^{32}\)

After her mother's death, she "planned to run to the Rabbinate and file for divorce."\(^{33}\) But before her mother dies, she warns her against the divorce, so that they "will not have a third generation of women's loneliness."\(^{34}\) Mandy's grandmother raised her mother alone. Her own widowed mother also raised her by herself. Yet, despite being married Mandy raised her children alone, following in the steps of her mother and grandmother, and the prediction that loneliness would be the fate of the three generations of females in the family.

Mandy becomes deeply depressed because of her mother's insistence on preserving her marriage. She then starts her journey back to youth; however, associating the operations (and her addiction to anesthesia) with an unconscious death wish seems unavoidable, despite her claiming the opposite:

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\(^{29}\) The anxieties of motherhood connect Mandy and Dolly, the heroine of *Dolly City*. See: Castel-Bloom, Orly (1992). *Dolly City*. Zmora-Bitan.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 56-57.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 60.

\(^{32}\) In the beginning of the novel, the appeal of these operations is aptly described: “Joked Amanda, who was raised-breast, erased belly, emptying cellulite thighs, eyebrows lifted, cheekbones implanted, and third lower face and neck lifted.” These, and her eighth operation to replace her shoulder blades, have apparently continued for a long time, well before Dael was recruited to the military. Even as a teenager, Mandy had a nose operation.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 32.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 32.
Life with the genius-Gruber became over the years increasingly difficult, and the task of absorption this human being, was entirely on Mandy's responsibility. He did not listen to anyone and only spoke without stopping [...] Over the years, he stopped needing any sort of intimacy, and Mandy did not see the end of all this ego trip. The children ignored his long speeches, which could take hours, (since he liked to think out loud), even when they were little. So, Mandy remained his only listener.35

After Irad's success with his invention of the spiral staircase Mandy's condition worsens:

Those days Gruber experienced emptiness and boredom, and had nothing to do except bear down on Mandy. She found herself staying at the factory for long hours unnecessarly [...]. Sometimes she locked herself in the toilet, but he would stand at the door and continue talking.36

She tries to escape in various ways, by acquiring breathing space: moving from Ramat Aviv to north Tel Baruch, fleeing to her workplace in Netanya, hiding in toilets, staying home in order to avoid leaving at the same time Irad left, the cosmetic clinic—a quiet place where she could get some respite from her childish husband.

Even when it was not necessary, Mandy was determined to have general anesthesia in each operation. This preference could demonstrate her latent death wish. Chaim Kaplan and Tally Rosin state that under general anesthesia the patient "is not aware of what is happening around him."37 For the same purpose, she also uses a variety of pills. She advises Lyrit that

In situations you cannot stand, when it is just impossible, because the nightmare is bigger than reality—there is no choice: anesthetize the mind.38

When Shlomi leaves Lyrit, the daughter chooses to deal with the situation by taking relaxants, like her mother, who turned to prescription drugs not just because she fears for her son's safety but also because of the absence of a real relationship with her husband and her constant desire to escape the stressors in her life. Her death, then, constitute the final escape.

Though implicit in the narrative, Irad feels guilt for his wife’s death. As Yosef Oren notes, Irad's family name, Gruber, is Yiddish for gravedigger.39 Irad repeatedly says that Mandy understood him, and that she allowed him to be selfish. But above

35 Ibid., p. 32.
36 Ibid., p. 33.
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all, the escape motif shows that Mandy is not reconciled with their flawed relationship. As for Irad's feelings for his wife, the reader learns the truth from Irad’s remarks on hearing of her death:

My wife is just dumb. All her plastic surgeries—it all boomeranged on her. It's hard to believe I'm a widower. That title doesn't suit me. I'm the most vital man in the world.\textsuperscript{40}

The relationship of Irad and Mandy's "replacement", Bahat, helps the reader comprehend the difficulty of living with a man who is insensitive and inconsiderate. Bahat is waiting for Irad at the airport. She tells him a little about herself, but Irad "did not listen to what she was saying, and told himself to remain passive and to hope for the best."\textsuperscript{41} Irad's passivity in his relationship with Mandy recurs with Bahat, but Bahat does not feel empowerment since she understands that "in his essence he is disturbing her entity from spread to the proportions that she used to."\textsuperscript{42} Bahat takes care of Irad's gourmet meal at a restaurant, and also his massage and tries to please him during his stay at her house. Although she does not trust men, due to the betrayals by her husband and her father, she manages to deflect her suspicions. On their first night together Irad's selfishness is revealed. He wakes her up as he watches television in the middle of the night. Later, after being told of the death of his wife, he decides to stay at her house, and tries to make it his own. He offers Bahat "five hundred dollars a week, including food and laundry."\textsuperscript{43} He treats her as a maid/wife, now that his therapist-wife has died.

Assertively, he urges Bahat to treat him as if he were "a pilot"\textsuperscript{44} and she "a little princess who stays by him in difficult moments."\textsuperscript{45} Although Bahat considers herself as a strong, independent woman, and identifies with the Biblical Deborah,\textsuperscript{46} she loses the battle with Irad. He takes over her room because he does not like the guest room, and the reader can identify this action as a parody of Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929). Bahat is a woman whose room has been taken from her, as well as her original work. And contrary to his promise, he continues to be a financial burden on Bahat. His behavior, "as if seven chambermaids follow him everywhere,"\textsuperscript{47} transforms Bahat from a scientist to a housekeeper, forced to cook and clean for a man whose declarations of love are lost in his patronizing attitude:

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 169.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 83.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 83.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 183.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 196.

This comparison underscores the analogy between Audrey Grinholtz, Mandy's mother, nicknamed "Eshet Lapidot (the woman from Lapidot) and "Eshet Mezimot," an epithet associated with the prophet Dvora, and Bahat. See ibid., p. 29.

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Sometimes he says to her 'I love you', in English. And also 'I love you very much'. You can't tell anything from these statements, which are diametrically to the opposite of his behavior. It was clear to her that he was quite mad, and she only hoped that his expectancy of love would be short-lived [...].48

Despite the fact that Shlomi is "haggard and dull,"49 Lyrit continues to stay by his side until they separate. During their time together, she leaves north Tel Aviv for the Negev, throws away her fashionable clothes (at Shlomi's request) and adopts the practices and beliefs of Shlomi. Her fear of separation, resulting from her being abandoned by her previous partner, was the "glue" that united the two. After Shlomi breaks up with her on the phone, she sets out on a journey to restore her self-esteem; her shopping spree is a ritual whereby she regains self-control and battles depression. Moreover, after her mother's death, she resorts to take over the management of the textile factory, and tries to improve and promote its operation.

At the end of the novel, with Lyrit and Shlomi's separation, the worst fears of Lyrit's grandmother are realized, and magnified: three generations of single women become four. The grandmother, Audrey, wanted to protect her daughter from her own fate, being forced to survive by herself as a parent and provider, but Mandy's life with Irad ends with her death, and Lyrit finds "salvation" only when she is left alone, like the hero in Where Am I. After Shlomi, the forty-two-year-old man, exits the life of Lyrit, the twenty-two-year-old woman, her youth, strength and love of life return. At the start of the novel, Mandy worries that "her daughter will repeat the mistake she made when she married Irad Gruber."50 But in the end, with the celebration of Lyrit's freedom, the successful conclusion is achieved not with a union of lovers but with their parting, similar to the plot of Where Am I.

The sense of liberation arises because of the violence she experienced in her partnerships: first, she has been a victim of "spatial violence". According to previous research of this author, men use spatial violence to oppress women;51 namely, preventing their movement in space or moving them from one space to another, thereby weakening them and placing them under the patriarchal control. Secondly, Lyrit is a victim of silent violence. Shlomi hardly talks to her. The narrator describes Shlomi's behavior as consisting of "long speeches," or total silence, which could be explained as the breakdown of communication between the couple.52 When Lyrit is

\[48\text{Ibid., p. 197.}
\[49\text{Ibid., p. 124.}
\[50\text{Ibid., p. 20.}
\[52\text{Tannen (1991: 138-150) notes that one of the causes of disconnection between men and women is men's appropriation of the speaker's position, leaving the woman in the passive position of the listener. Tannen, Deborah (1991). You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. Ballantine Books.}
by herself, people tell her that she is gifted. But when she tries to grow crops with Shlomi, the hierarchical, disconnected relationship does not allow them (or her) to flourish.

Another difficult relationship in the novel is that of Dael, Lyrit's brother, with Aya-- a relationship, which could be classified as a "connection of convenience." Unlike his previous girlfriend, Moran Elliot, whom he loved, with Aya, who lives nearby, he establishes a stable and useful partnership. On weekends he customarily surfs pornographic websites, and reads several masterpieces at once from world and Hebrew literature. No romantic activity between the two is mentioned in the novel, and when Dael needs to talk to her about his mother's death, she cannot be reached on her cell phone.

In sum, mutual support, caring and friendship are absent from the four relationships presented in the novel, and the impossibility to establish positive coupledom is emphasized throughout.

Dysfunctional relationships, in which each partner feels that he/she is lonely, form the first tier of the narrative. Yehudit Oryan (2006: 6) comments that Textile opens as a detective story and progresses into "endless grotesque parody and satire." In her opinion, Castel-Bloom's issues are "social, local and human, psychological and humorous, realistic, absurd and, thank God, not political. No Jewish-Arab relations and no dragging in the moral problems of occupation." Oryan's assertions reinforce the foregoing analysis about the distorted communication that defines the relationships in the narrative. However, according to Yosef Oren (2007), Textile is "a satire on the impact of security issues in Israel in the twenty-first century." Oren claims that the novel begins as a social satire but becomes a political satire: the tale of the Gruber family is an allegory illustrating the detrimental effect of Israel's policies in the territories on its citizens' mental health. 

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54 Ibid., p. 7.


56 Ibid., p. 74.

Oren describes the novel in this article (p. 77) as "tedious, banal and exhausting".

Another patronizing critique is by Levitan: "this novel is tantamount to a bad essay written by a typical Israeli student studying three units for the Hebrew literature matriculation exams [...]." Levitan, Amos (2006). "Three units in literature and language". Iton 77, 312-313, p. 49-50.

Kakun wrote: "I didn't like Textile [...] without even reading it [...]. Her novel, without reading it, is a housewives' romance. I haven't read a single line and I promise not to read the book because I heard rumors about it before even a word was written, during the preparations, when the advance was paid
The political dimension of the novel emphasizes the dysfunctional relationship motif. A society whose members are unable to communicate, in which text messages have become the main channel of communication, will be unable to communicate with the enemy; hence the solution invented by Irad Gruber: the anti-terror suit. The suit will decrease war casualties. In addition to the Defense Ministry's wish to produce protective suits, the Israeli army continues a policy of targeted assassinations, carried out by Dael and his unit. While the Israeli government uses targeted killings as a way to eliminate Palestinian terrorists, Castel-Bloom looks inward, and shows how the executioner, namely the sniper, is the person most damaged.

Dael's life, like his mother's, becomes an endless search for escape from his dreaded military occupation. Like Mandy, who uses cosmetic operations to escape her unhappiness, he avoids reality by concurrently reading as many books as he can.

Castel-Bloom's political statement is evident from her decision to illustrate the social and psychological damage caused to the individual by the militant policy adopted by Israel. In the novel, *Human Parts*, the author concentrates on the character of Angelica Gome, a bereaved mother, while ignoring the helicopter disaster in which Angelica’s son lost his life. Likewise, in *Textile*, she portrays the life of a mother whose son serves in a frontline combatant unit. Mandy's anxiety for her son's safety intensifies by her affinity to Carmela, her assistant, who lost her son. After the tragic event, "Carmela lost the need to live," and Mandy sends her to a psychiatrist who "puts her back on her feet." The sons who serve in the army, and their anxious mothers pay a heavy price for Israel's security situation.

The sense of Israel's challenging security situation arises when the reader observes not only Dael but also the supporting characters: Bahat McPhee, Rafi Profeta, the designer Oz Bonefil and Dr. Carmi Yagoda. They have one thing in common, i.e., they all chose to emigrate from Israel. Bahat sees no difference between


Contrary to these three reviews, written by male critics, are the critiques by Shiffman and Oryan. According to Shiffman (2007: 153), "*Textile* is a complex book, has several levels of meanings, is touching, and yet, in Castel-Bloom's way, amusing and occasionally hilarious." Shiffman, Smadar (2007). *Things You See from Here: David Grossman, Orly Castel-Bloom and Meir Shalev. Beyond Modernism?* Jerusalem: Carmel (Hebrew). Oryan (2006) says: "Castel-Bloom is in my opinion an excellent, unique writer and it irritates me that people have never mentioned her in the same breath with the four great canonic writers, some of whom are not as good she is in every aspect". These reviews were written before the Leah Goldberg Prize for Hebrew Fiction was awarded to Castel-Bloom in 2007 for the novel *Textile*.

Oryan, Yehudit (2006). "It's not us, it's our friends".


58 Ibid., p. 17.
Iraq and Israel: both frighten her. She refuses to travel to Israel. Her friend, Rafi Profeta, a professor of Hebrew literature, becomes a pro-Arab. He condemns the policy of occupation (like the biblical prophets who criticized sinners; hence his name Profeta), and his speeches become the emigrants' manifesto:

Those who do not leave the country, as I have done by the way, share a moral responsibility. After seeing for several years how much the occupation scars Israelis, I took to my heels and went to France. And only there did I start to live. And when I say 'live' I don't mean just 'survive'.

Profeta, the teacher of Hebrew literature, often feels that "he himself wants to leave his class." It appears that Profeta expresses the author’s view on Modern Hebrew literature. In an interview, Castel-Bloom admits that she shuddered at the writing of Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua. Her decision to write was a counteraction against the canonical texts and language, which, in her opinion, did not represent real life:

The authors who belonged to the canon at that time were A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz, and when I read their books I said to myself, 'I don't want to write like this.' The words do not hold themselves on the page [...] Every description has seventeen synonyms, archaic language, forced, affected. This language disregards a large chunk of the population of Israel, which is a country of immigrants. How many people understand all these words? I began to write in the 1980s, searching for a language to reflect reality.

Relating Dael's reading habits, the narrator mentions his love for the prose of Mendele Mocher Sfarim (the pen-name of Shalom Jacob Abramovitz), fiction with satirical and grotesque motifs, like Castel-Bloom's own fiction, and nothing like the realistic fiction produced by Israeli writers such as Amos Oz, Abraham B. Yehoshua, and David Grossman.

Emigration from Israel, along with the price paid by Israelis because of the security situation, becomes a political statement. Yehoshua's novel The Mission of the Human Resource Man (2004) tells of a journey to determine the identity of Julia Raga'eb, who was killed in a terrorist attack. However, it also offers a solution, which supports the division of Jerusalem, as pointed out by Nitza Ben-Dov (2006: 234). She observes that the book is "a marvelous fantasy novel about Jerusalem which belongs

59 Ibid., p. 150.
60 Ibid., p. 147.
to everyone, to all her believers. Unlike Yehoshua, Castel-Bloom does not propose a resolution to the problem; fracture is at the center of the novel, while the position of the "crisis-solving author" isforgone. Castel-Bloom chooses the feminist claim for the "private position that evokes the public one" to emphasize that the two spheres cannot be separated. The conflicts between couples are related to the Israeli military position, and likewise, the communication problems with the Palestinians begin at home. If one cannot talk with his/her spouse/parents, they will not be able to talk with their enemies.

**Conclusion**

In her book *Textile*, Orly Castel-Bloom creates a society where war has become a way of life and casualties of war are prevalent—metaphorically (the fear of being bereaved) and geographically (living near cemeteries). The individual feels isolated and has difficulty forming social connections. Building relationships based on communication is mostly implausible. This lack of communication and miscommunication can be traced, for example, to Lyrit's Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) on the one hand, and by the lack of interaction of couples on the other. This is paralleled by the “price” Israelis pay since the beginning of the Israeli–Arab conflict. All the characters in the novel are presented as dysfunctional. They cannot connect with others: "Shlomi's ability to express himself orally is weak," Lyrit cannot listen, even when Dael tries to share with her his harrowing events in the army. Audrey Grinholtz, Mandy's mother, cannot carry a dialogue with her daughter but demands that she should stay married. Mandy stops listening to Irad's stories and fires her workers by text messages. She forces Lyrit, as her own mother forced her, to run the factory without making any changes. Dr. Carmi Yagoda knows how to practice "the illusion of listening and interest." Irad does not communicate with his family, listening only to himself, forgetting his cell phone at home; this suggests a lack of any desire to deal with family matters while he is away on business. Lyrit remarks that she likes to be with Mandy just after she recovers from surgery because then her mother is docile. The lonely Bahat associates mainly with animals. Her daughters send her text messages pronouncing their love, but she interprets this as a close relationship between them. Dael calls his girlfriend hoping for a sympathetic ear, but finds her mobile phone turned off. Furthermore, he often substitutes human dialogue with reading.

The “human textile” that Castel-Bloom weaves is a tapestry of separation, non-communication and the lack of deep mutual relationships in which the individual gives up his or her ego for the "other." In this reality, where "words are merely spoken

66 Ibid., p. 27.
into space," it is no surprise that not only does coupledom fail but so do any other social interactions, whether they exist between one Israeli to another, or between Jews and Arabs.

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