

Orly Castel-Bloom's "Ummi Fi Shurl"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/orly-castel-blooms-ummi-fi-shurl>.

Introduction

Orly Castel-Bloom was born in Tel Aviv to parents who had immigrated to Israel from Egypt in 1949. She has been an important voice in contemporary Israeli letters and her innovative work has influenced the direction of postmodern Hebrew literature. In 2015 her latest book, *An Egyptian Novel*, won the Sapir Prize, Israel's highest literary honor. The story "Ummi Fi Shurl" was included in her 1993 collection, *Involuntary Stories (Sipurim bilti retsoniyim)*.

"Ummi Fi Shurl" is characteristic of Castel-Bloom's style. A short-short story defined as much by what it does not say as by what it says, it explores large themes with an economy of language and tackles serious issue with absurdism. It sketches a scene in the life of a mentally ill woman who steps outside to get some air and encounters a homeless woman under a bench who claims to be her mother.

In a short space, the story does many things: It raises questions about language and identity, through a brief, circular conversation between the narrator and the old woman in Arabic. It explores the issue of motherhood in the narrator's encounter with the mother-figure, whom she denies. It raises the specter of mental illness by the character's own description of her emotional state. And it touches on social issues, gender, and class, topics often marginalized in Israeli literature. This kit offers resources related to some of the major themes of the story—including language, Mizrahi identity, and motherhood—as well as comparative resources for reading it in the context of world literatures.

Cover image: Photograph of Castel-Bloom by Ulf Andersen. Courtesy of Ulf Andersen/Getty Images Entertainment via Getty Images.

Subjects

Fiction, Gender, Hebrew, Israel-Palestine, Mizrahi, Social Commentary, Women Writers

Reading and Background

- An English translation of the story "Ummi Fi Shurl" can be found in the anthology *Ribcage: Israeli Women's Fiction*, published by Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America.
- More information about Orly Castel-Bloom's work in English translation, as well as a brief biography, can be found [here](#). A longer interview with her was published in the collection *Literature and War: Conversations with Israeli and Palestinian Writers*.
- Many analyses of Castel-Bloom's work have been published in academic journals. For a discussion of "Ummi Fi Shurl," see Zvia Ben-Yoseph Ginor's "Involuntary Myths: Mania, Mother, and Zion in Orly Castel-Bloom's 'Ummi fi shurl.'"
- For context on the place of Castel-Bloom's work within Israeli literature, particularly with regard to Mizrahi culture and the use of Arabic, see Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine*, and Gil Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination*.

Resources

1: Short story excerpt, Orly Castel-Bloom's "Ummi Fi Shurl," 1993.

This conversation occurs between the unnamed narrator of the story, who has been suffering from some unspecified anxiety or



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emotional distress, and an apparently homeless woman she encounters underneath a bench in a park. Stung by something under the bench she is sitting on, the protagonist thinks she may have been the victim of a black widow spider. It turns out, in a dark comedic moment typical of Castel-Bloom, that a human widow dressed in black has pinched or bitten her. The black widow claims to be the protagonist's mother, and proceeds to ask her questions about herself, in particular about her heritage. The Arabic conversation that follows is a kind of grammar-book exercise that repeats itself in a closed loop.

This conversation, from which the title is drawn, is the center around which the story hinges. It brings together the themes of family, identity, language, and motherhood, but its formulaic format functions to alienate the speakers from one another rather than bring them together.

Suggested Activity: Have students read the entire story, or read it out loud to them. Then have them focus in on this excerpt and identify some of the main themes of the story that are expressed within it. For each theme that they identify, ask them to trace the moments when it is expressed in this conversation. Have them draw a web or map of the themes they have identified and how they are connected through the conversation between the two women. What are the links between each theme? Are there multiple connections? Can you create a coherent narrative or a backstory for these characters out of the relationship between the themes?

For more sophisticated students, have them re-write the story from the perspective of the black widow, the woman under the bench. How would she describe the protagonist? How does she recount their conversation? Why was she under the bench?

Source: Orly Castel-Bloom, "Ummi Fi Shurl," trans. Dalya Bilu, in *Ribcage: Israeli Women's Fiction*, eds. Carol Diament and Lily Rattok (Hadassah, 1994), 259-262.

Editor's note: We have not been able to make contact with the rights holder for Dalya Bilu's translation. Any information about the current copyright holder for this material would be welcome and appreciated.

2: Short story excerpts, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," 1892, and Orly Castel-Bloom's "Ummi Fi Shurl," 1993.

Separated by one hundred years and several continents, as well as language and culture, these stories would seem to have little to do with each other. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's classic feminist tale tells the story of a young mother confined by her husband to an estate for the "rest cure," a Victorian treatment for a variety of what we now know to be serious mental illnesses, including the post-partum depression from which the narrator appears to suffer. Forced to suspend her own creative work and not venture outside the confines of home and garden, the unnamed narrator envisions a woman trapped inside the hideous yellow wallpaper in her bedroom. By the end of the story, her confinement has driven her mad.

Although Orly Castel-Bloom's story takes place in contemporary urban Israel, the maladies suffered by the narrators seem nearly identical. Apparently cut off from human contact, largely confined to the claustrophobic space of her small apartment, the unnamed narrator here appears to hallucinate a woman as well, this time a mother figure. Like Gilman's, Castel-Bloom's narrator both identifies strongly with the woman and is alienated from her. She, too, suffers from paranoia and anxiety, and possibly depression. They are both writers who are unable to write. The parallel is so close that Castel-Bloom's story may even consciously allude to Gilman's.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to make a list of similarities between these two passages and the characters who narrate them, both in terms of their situations and in terms of the language they use. At the same time, ask them to make a list of differences in their situations and the things they describe. While keeping in mind the very different contexts in which these stories were written, ask students to think about why so many similarities exist between them. Do they both suggest something permanent or universal about the human condition? What do they say about gender and gender norms, and how they have changed or remained the same? Similarly, think about the differences in their situations, and what they might indicate about the different contexts of the stories. What is it that each woman finds depressing or anxiety-producing? What is the treatment, if there is one, for their conditions, and who controls the treatment? How great are the differences between them?

Sources: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), 12, 14.

Orly Castel-Bloom, "Ummi Fi Shurl," trans. Dalya Bilu, in *Ribcage: Israeli Women's Fiction*, eds. Carol Diament and Lily Rattok (Hadassah, 1994), 259-262.

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3: Medieval midrash, "The Alphabet of Ben Sira," c. 700-1000 CE.

The *Alphabet of Ben Sira* is a medieval Hebrew text comprised of epigrams, aphorisms, and a narrative recounting of Ben Sira's life in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar, of which this excerpt is a part. This excerpt from the text recounts one story about the legendary demon Lilith, mentioned in several commentaries. This text aggregates many of the demonic and supernatural attributes assigned to the mythological Lilith, Adam's first wife. Lilith is characterized as a woman who cannot be controlled by men, or even by God. She represents a threat to patriarchal order, refusing marriage and childbearing, and disrupting family structure and continuity by killing children.

Lilith is one possible source for the mysterious mother figure in "*Umami Fi Shurl*." Just as Lilith is placed outside of the family structure and deemed harmful to children, so too is the mother figure in the story only tenuously linked to family, if at all, living under a bench in the park and denied by her own daughter. She also introduces herself to the daughter by stinging her, a sting that the protagonist at first assumes to be fatal, the bite of a black widow. There are other specific parallels to this legend, such as the above/below physical configuration that Lilith rejects, which is actualized in the positions of the characters in the story, where the mother/Lilith figure begins under the bench, below the protagonist, but eventually ends up on the bench with her. Lilith's presence at the site of the Exodus from Egypt also recalls the protagonist's Egyptian heritage, as well as the modern immigration of Egyptian Jews to Israel.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to identify the elements of the midrash that are present in the story, whether those elements are words, ideas, themes, locations, or personality attributes. Then, for each of these elements, have them identify how reading the midrash adds meaning or tells them something new about the story itself. Does the midrash fill in missing information in the story? Does it suggest something about the characters or the plot? Does it reflect on the reliability of the narrator? Does it suggest any deeper or hidden meanings of the story itself?

Source: Judah David Eisenstein, "*Otzar Midrashim, The Aleph Bet of Ben Sira, The Alphabet of Ben Sira, (Alternative Version)*," Sefaria, accessed September 2019.

4: Music video and lyrics, Dudu Tassa and the Kuwaitis' "Bint El-Moshav," 2018.

Dudu Tassa is a popular Israeli musician of Iraqi and Yemeni descent. He is the grandson of Kuwaiti musician Daoud Al-Kuwaiti who, with his brother Saleh Al-Kuwaiti, was a popular and influential musician in the Arab world from the 1930s to the 1950s. The Al-Kuwaiti Brothers are considered some of the creators of modern Iraqi music, and they helped to establish Baghdad's first broadcasting authority. They were favorites of the king, although their music was banned under Saddam Hussein. Like many Iraqi Jews, they immigrated to Israel in the 1950s when the government made life in Iraq difficult for its Jewish citizens. After their immigration, the Al-Kuwaitis gave up music professionally.

Tassa, who never met his grandfather, came across an old box of tapes of the Al-Kuwaiti Brothers' recordings, began listening to them, and eventually decided to modernize some of the songs and re-record them in the original Iraqi Arabic, using modern arrangements and musical styles. This has led to three albums, featuring both Jewish and Arab performers from Israel and Iraq, as well as traditional Middle Eastern instruments and melodies. Tassa is part of a group of young Jewish Israeli artists and writers who are reclaiming their Arab heritage and reviving Jewish-Arab culture. This song, "*Bint El-Moshav*" ("Girl from the Moshav"), was written by the Al-Kuwaitis to celebrate the women working on Israeli moshavim, or agricultural settlements.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video and listen to the song while following along with the translation. The video combines images traditional in celebrations of Israeli pioneering and agricultural efforts, like harvesting, orchards, and fruit, with images and sounds that recall Arab culture, including the veil on the main female character and the language of the song. Have students come up with a list of images from the video and elements of the song that remind them of Jewish culture and, separately, a list of things that remind them of Arab culture. Do these elements seem to go together or are they competing or contrasting? Why? How do the song and the video attempt to reconcile these varied elements?

After discussing the song and video, ask students to connect Dudu Tassa's song to Castel-Bloom's story. How and for what purpose does each work use the Arabic language?

Sources: Dudu Tassa, “*Bint El Moshab* Lyrics,” DUDU TASSA & THE KUWAITIS, Dudu Tassa, accessed September 2019, <https://www.the-kuwaitis.com/>.

Dudu Tassa & The Kuwaitis, “*Bint El Moshab*,” Bird Music, Nov. 19 2018, music video, 4:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sYZ0eGEWdk>.

5: Essay excerpt, Jacqueline Kahanoff’s “Israel: Ambivalent Levantine,” 1959.

Jacqueline Kahanoff was an Israeli writer who theorized the social model of Levantinism. Born and raised in Cairo, she lived in the United States and France before settling in Israel in the 1950s, and she wrote only in English and French, although much of her work was translated into Hebrew and published in Israeli newspapers and journals. Levantinism, as described here, understands Israel and Israeli culture as part of the broader region of the Levant, and posits the pluralism of Levantine culture as a positive value rather than a denigrated quality. Here, she describes what she sees as the possible contributions of Levantinism to Israeli culture.

Orly Castel-Bloom, whose parents were born in Cairo and who grew up speaking French in her home, is an example of the cultural plurality of Levantinism. Her incorporation of Arabic and of characters whose origins are in the Middle East puts emphasis on the presence of Levantine culture within the homogenizing realm of a largely Ashkenazi, or European-dominated, Israeli culture. Like Kahanoff, Castel-Bloom foregrounds the plurality of Israeli culture and attempts to, in Kahanoff’s words, “reconcile its two main component groupings into one dynamic, creative unity.”

Suggested Activity: Ask students to identify elements in the excerpts from “*Ummi Fi Shurl*” that represent the East and those that represent the West. Make a list of these items. Are there any items on the lists that overlap? Which ones? How does the story integrate the “Eastern” and “Western” elements? Are there items that are not integrated or that are in conflict? Does the story correspond to Kahanoff’s understanding of Levantinism? If so, how?

Source: Jacqueline Kahanoff, “Israel: Ambivalent Levantine,” in *Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shoheit Kahanoff*, eds. Deborah A. Starr and Sasson Somekh (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 200.

6: Video, National Geographic’s “Deadly Mating.”

The description of the mother-figure in “*Ummi Fi Shurl*” hinges on her identification with a black widow spider. At first, the protagonist thinks she may have been bitten by a black widow spider, but in a darkly comic turn it appears that she’s been bitten by a human black widow, a bereaved woman wearing black. This joke runs much deeper than just linguistic confusion: black widow spiders are so named because they kill and eat their mates. In identifying the mother-figure with the black widow spider, the story creates a parallel between human familial relationships and the sometimes brutal, survival-of-the-fittest behaviors of the natural world.

Significantly, it is female black widow spiders who are dangerous: they not only are poisonous to humans and devour their male counterparts, but also, like all spiders, draw sustenance from cannibalizing insect prey. Female black widows are powerful and dominant, getting only what they need from their mates to perpetuate themselves. The black widow of “*Ummi Fi Shurl*” is also represented as dangerous, although she may represent a different type of danger, but a similar kind of power. There are no men present in the story, and other than the black widow’s dead husband, none are mentioned. It appears to be an entirely matrilineal world, where men are marginal and even unnecessary. It is women who go to work, reproduce, and raise children. At the same time, the relationship between these women seems precarious, even damaging, as with the initial sting.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video with students and read the part of the story in which the black widow character is described. Ask students: what does the description of the spider add to your understanding of the “black widow” character in “*Ummi Fi Shurl*”? Then ask them to think of other animals or natural phenomena that are often anthropomorphized or used to characterize human beings. For example, sometimes we call a tricky or slippery person a “snake.” Discuss: Why are nature metaphors so powerful? How do they enhance our understanding of people or fictional characters when used as descriptors?

Source: Nat Geo WILD, *Deadly Mating | World’s Weirdest*, National Geographic, Feb. 13 2013, video, 2:38, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=mRnCeg-EWio.