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Surviving the Darkness of Life with Humour: A study of Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*

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Abstract:

The Jewish community is hailed for its unique comic sensibility. Their sense of humour is defined by its ability to laugh despite tragedy and misery. In a hostile world, humour has given them courage to survive and face the biggest hardships of life. For Booker Prize winning British novelist Howard Jacobson, humour is an important medium of expressing his inner thoughts and pouring his heart out. His writings have always celebrated comedy. Breaking the barriers between serious writing and humour, he has time and again reiterated that literature should rise above sadness and celebrate life. This research paper will focus on his novel *The Finkler Question* and analyse it as an intellectual comedy that deals with the issue of identity crisis among Jews and the threat of anti-Semitism in the contemporary world through humour.

Key Words:

Booker Prize, Humour, Jew, anti-Semitism, Finkler Question, Identity.

History of Jewish people is riddled with torture, pogroms and slaughter. Surviving against all odds, their humour has persevered through centuries. It is like a defence mechanism, based on self-mockery. It helps them intellectually to escape from the political and social powers that have suppressed them for ages. Elliott Oring describes the Jews as “the People of the Joke” and explained that their humour originates from deep-rooted sense of exile, persecution, and suffering. Once hailed as ‘the Chosen People’, they never reached their anticipated glorious destiny. Throughout history, they have suffered due to hostile perception of people against them. Ridiculed, tormented and isolated from the world; they learnt to cope with the prejudices by laughing at their own expense. To them tears and laughter go hand in hand.

Yiddish humour is famous for its self-deprecating tone. Psychologist Sigmund Freud identified this unique tendency in Jews as far back as 1905 when he wrote that so many jokes “have grown up on the soil of Jewish popular life.... Incidentally, I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character.” (156) It acted as a source of redemption and escape from the bleak existence in this world. It became a source of profound and life-affirming thought process.

The typical Jewish jests are characterised by astute observations, exposing frailties and idiocies of human nature. The punchline of the jokes is either a pun or double entendre. They also incorporate physical humour in terms of exaggerated body language and animated gestures. An old Yiddish proverb goes like, ‘burdens are from God, shoulders too’, which means that shoulders can be used to bear the burden as well as to shrug it off. Moshe Waldoks, a scholar of Jewish humour believes that it is “a device for self-criticism within the community... It serves as a social catharsis.”

In the 19th century Europe, Jewish humour began evolving as a unique cultural phenomenon. It gradually became part of regular discourse. If the villages became centre for the emerging folk tradition of jesting; the city marketplace became the hub of street humour. Writers, novelists and playwrights mined the bittersweet grumbling of the Jewish character and produced lasting classics of humour. Every new wisecrack and ensuing laughter brought it into the limelight it deserved. After

the tragedy of holocaust, the Jewish infatuation with self-mockery reached a new pinnacle. Saul Bellow, Lenny Bruce, Philip Roth, Woody Allen took the comedy of the bumbling Jew from ordinary to the realm of extraordinary. Their angst and tragic irony were now part of mainstream comic genre. By the 1960s, breaking all ethnic and cultural boundaries; Yiddish-isms had emerged as the prevailing comic style in mainstream literature and cinematic world.

In the contemporary world of humourous fiction, British novelist Howard Jacobson is a name to reckon with. His prolific oeuvre includes works like *Peeping Tom* (1984), *No More Mister Nice Guy* (1998), *The Mighty Walzer* (1999), *Kalooki Nights* (2006), *The Finkler Question* (2010), *Zoo Time* (2012), and *Live a Little* (2019). Jacobson is known for his intense, intellectual comedies, which draw inspiration from his British-Jewish identity. His novels explore the themes of fickle male mind, neurotic Jewish behaviour and the love-hate relationship between the sexes. As a writer, he received recognition late in his career but once he reached the centre-stage, the praise has kept coming all these years. His writings are a generous combination of tragic and funny; heart-warming and laugh-out-loud at the same time. For his writing style, he has been compared to Philip Roth but Jacobson likens himself to a 'Jewish Jane Austen'. In an interview with the *Tablet*, he admits, "I'm an English novelist working absolutely square in the English tradition.... The voices in my head are Shakespeare, Dr. Johnson, Dickens, George Eliot".

Explaining the Jewish tendency to make fun of themselves, in the *Jewish Chronicle*, Howard Jacobson said that "when we make fun of ourselves than anybody else could. In the act of doing that, we appear to be on the back foot but we're winning." He further explained that comic self-awareness is like "rubbing at an itch...If you leave it, the itch will eventually go away of its own accord. But of course, it feels like relief while you're rubbing." He has perfected the art of satisfying the itch with his wry humour and giving a witty twist to commonplace situations.

The Mighty Walzer earned him worldwide recognition as a writer with distinctive voice when it won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for humour writing. It is the coming-of-age story of a shy, adolescent boy Oliver Walzer who has two great passions: women and the sports of ping-pong (Table tennis). His life is plagued with goofy mistakes, failures and imperfections. As a master storyteller, Jacobson narrates the bildungsroman story with such ease that laugh-out-loud anecdotes and incidents just roll off page after page. Called the British version of Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), it received a lot of acclaim for its confessional humour. Full of witty wordplay and abundant energy, the novel gave an engaging story that cemented his reputation as successful comic novelist.

Kalooki Nights, published in 2006, was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize. It skilfully blended the tragi-comic Yiddish humour that is Jacobson's strength. He has the ability to bring out the comical aspects even in the most touching situations. Continuing his observations about anxious Jews, he narrates the story of three men: the protagonist Max Glickman, and his friends Manny and Errol and their misadventures in life. The novel transports us to the world of endless embarrassments that life brings. Max is the typical Jacobson-ian protagonist. He is a cartoonist who is currently writing a comic history of the Jews titled 'Five Thousand Years of Bitterness'. Kalooki is a card game that Max's mother plays obsessively every night. The novel has several scenes of verbal slapstick and is written like an anger management assignment that transforms the anger into laughter. The story is a complex narrative of religion, tragedy and redemption. Jacobson seamlessly weaves together several strands of the story with his trademark humour.

Zoo Time is another novel that received a lot of accolades for its comic timing and an irreverent Jewish protagonist. Jacobson won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse prize for comic writing for a second time for this novel. Reviewing the novel, critic James Walton said that few British novelists could touch Jacobson "for such stirring, belligerent comedy, and almost every page contains at least

three sentences that could go straight into any Dictionary of Humorous Quotations". The story is about Guy Ableman who is a novelist going through mid-life crisis. No one is buying books, bookstores are shutting down and his publisher just committed suicide. Currently he is caught in a literary limbo and is deeply distressed due to two reasons: firstly, he is worried about the terminal state of literature and secondly, he cannot control his adulterous mind and fantasises about sleeping with his mother-in-law. To top this, his wife is writing an autobiographical novel and he dreads the consequences of her finishing and publishing it. This conundrum in his life leads to razor-sharp wit and some very awkward situations. The novel is a sort of sex-comedy containing all the staples that we have come to associate with Jacobson's fiction.

However, the jewel in Howard Jacobson's literary crown is his Man Booker Prize winning novel *The Finkler Question*. It was the first humorous novel since Kingsley Amis' *The Old Devils* in 1986 to win the reputed Prize. It is a fact that comedy is rarely put on the same pedestal as literary writings. So, this victory was very significant in terms of an enhanced literary perspective. It sealed his name as one of the most powerful voices in the literary world. Sir Andrew Motion, the chairman of Booker Prize committee, while discussing the novel, shared that Jacobson's work has been overlooked in the past nominations because of his audacious humour. His novels were considered entertaining and that disqualified him from being taken seriously by the jury. He further added that *The Finkler Question* won because it was the best novel among the shortlisted books. Readers associate Jacobson's name with clever, funny and dark stories. Sir Andrew Motion agreed it was everything that people expected but at the same time it was much more. It was "absolutely a book for grownups, for people who understand that comedy and tragedy are linked. But it is also... a very sad, melancholic book. It is comic, it is laughter, but it is laughter in the dark." This recognition by Booker Prize committee finally helped him gain recognition in the eyes of serious readers.

Jacobson brings back the middle-aged protagonist going through mid-life crisis in the novel. Only in this novel there are two middle-aged friends and both are going through crises. The storyline is simple with an unusual twist—Julian Treslove, is a non-Jew who fantasises about being recognised as a Jew and surrounds himself with all things Jewish; whereas Sam Finkler is a Jew who at heart is an anti-semitic and has joined a group called 'ASHamed Jews' to distance himself from his Jewish legacy. There are two other characters in the story- their elderly history teacher Libor Sevcik, a widowed Jew who is grieving the loss of his beloved wife and Tyler, Finkler's non-Jewish wife who has passed away recently. Treslove refers to Jews as Finkler as a sign of affection. So, the title 'The Finkler Question' translates as 'the Jewish question' and becomes a metaphor of quest for identity in the modern world.

The novel is a journey towards discovery of self in a life surrounded by grief, loneliness and sometimes, friends. The story begins with Julian who is an unsuccessful BBC producer having dinner with his two friends. His schoolmate Sam Finkler is now a successful philosopher and television personality. The two share a prickly, love-hate relationship. Third wheel in this dinner party is their nonagenarian former teacher Libor. Both Finkler and Libor are recent widowers and deign Treslove an honorary widower owing to his chequered history with women. When walking back home Treslove is mugged and his watch, mobile phone and other things are taken. The interesting revelation is that his assailant was a woman. "Mugged by a woman! For a man whose life had been one absurd disgrace after another, this surely was the crowning ignominy. Yet it wasn't" (11). And if that is not enough, he is convinced that she called him 'You Jew' (The mugger had hissed 'Your Jewels'; but Treslove misheard). For some inexplicable reason, he is convinced that this incident is a call of the destiny and to change his fortune, he needs to re-invent himself as a Jew. This moment onwards the story takes a hilarious turn. Soon, we find Treslove learning Yiddish phrases and wondering if it is too late to get circumcised. He even starts dating a woman named Hephzibah Weizenbaum.

The rest of the novel is about how one would-be-finkler and two born finklers stumble from one crazy scenario to another. With the help of his friends, Treslove begins preparing a list of prominent Jewish habits, gestures and customs. In his mind he is sure that he needs to nurture these traits to pass as a true Jew. He quits his job to devote himself fully to this mission. In one boisterous incident, he tries to gate crash a party as a Brad Pitt lookalike but a woman guesses him to be Adam Sandler or Billy Crystal (both are Jews). This further adds to his identity crisis and spirals his anxieties out of control. To add more chaos in the story, Sam Finkler reveals himself as an Israel-hating Jew who has secretly joined an anti-Zionist group of similar minded Jews which goes by the name 'ASHamed Jews'.

The novel also takes up the issue of messy love relationships. Jacobson has a penchant for dealing with men-women issues in his individualistic style. Relationships bring stress in life but they also keep things grounded. The characters express fond memories for the women they married and loved or loved and lost. Libor was married happily to Malkie for a long time. She passed away and now, he misses her presence all the time. He feels completely lost at this stage of his life and struggles to find his footing. His only solace is the company of these two friends. Finkler was married to Tyler and she too passed away recently. Treslove feels envious of his friends—for finding love in their lives and now, for being able to mourn the loss without feeling guilty.

Above all, the novel raises the pertinent question of Jewish identity in the contemporary socio-political society. The two women characters- late Tyler and Hephzibah are the sane voices who try to break the cycle of Judeophobia. Tyler, a Gentile, had immersed herself in the Jewish culture after her marriage with Sam Finkler. When she learnt that he had joined an anti-Semite group, she tried to talk him out of his decision. After her death, Finkler discovers her notes which express her disappointment at her husband's abandonment of his own people. She felt he was not the same man she had married. His self-hating attitude had created a distance in his married life. Tyler confronted him for his hypocrisy many times and tried to awaken his conscience with her anger.

Using a reverse psychology principle, Jacobson conveys the message that this type of overtly irresponsible behaviour by Jews encourages Jew-haters to rationalise their hatred. Who will respect you if you do not respect yourself? In a desperate bid to assimilate, the Jews are losing their cultural identity. This kind of obnoxious attitude towards one's religion will have disastrous consequences for Jewish solidarity while facing an anti-Semitic world. If they have not learnt anything from history than the British Jews have a dystopian future awaiting them. Their divided attitude will only leave them defenceless and take them to the gas chambers of another holocaust.

Since the Israeli invasion of Gaza in 2009, the political climate was simmering with anti-Semite criticism. The Jews fed the hatred against themselves by starting groups like 'ASHamed Jews'. Jacobson dealt with this sensitive political issue in a light-handed manner through the character of Sam Finkler. After several hysterical incidents, Finkler confesses that it is dangerous to use the word Jew in public places, "Out there in the raging public world it was as a goad to every sort of violence and extremism. It was a password to madness. Jew. One little word with no hiding place for reason in it. Say 'Jew' and it was like throwing a bomb." (185-86). His political stand changes only after an eye-opening conversation with his son Immanuel who is following in his father's footsteps. His son was involved in an anti-Semitic fight and explains to his father what actually happened:

'And then I knocked his hat off.'

'You knocked a Jew's hat off?'

'Is that so terrible?'

'Jesus Christ, of course it's so terrible. You don't do that to anyone, least of all a Jew.'

‘Least of all a Jew! What? Are we a protected species now or something? These are people who bulldoze Palestinian villages. What’s a hat?’

‘Did you hurt him?’

‘Not enough.’

‘This is a racist assault, Immanuel.’

‘Dad, how can it be a racist assault when they’re the racists?’

‘I’m not even going to answer that.’

‘Do I look like a racist? Look at me.’

‘You look like a fucking little anti-Semite.’

‘How can I be an anti-Semite? I’m a Jew.’ (189-90)

Finkler had set a bad example for his son and he blames himself for what happened. In the absence of his wife, there is no balancing factor in the family. Realising the folly of his decisions, he decides to mend his errant and disrespectful ways. He resolves to return to his Jewish roots to teach his son respect for their religion.

Another sign of Jewish moral decline comes into picture when Treslove meets Hephzibah’s ex-husband Abe. Abe is a lawyer who is defending a client who has lost his job for “saying that Auschwitz was more a holiday camp than a hell for most of the Jews in there” (253). This whole incident indicates Jewish Denial of their terrible past. When Treslove learns about the details of the case, he feels frustrated at their passivity. He concludes that “These people don’t know how to stand up for themselves ... They’ve ceded their sense of outrage” (254).

As an outsider, Treslove saw the weaknesses and failings of the religion that he so desperately wanted to embrace. He realises that his dream of initiation into Jewish culture will remain only a dream. His imagined idealistic life with Hephzibah cannot reach fruition due to their inherent divisive tendencies and their failure to identify the enemy within. The novelist implies that a similar self-destructive scenario prevailed in Germany before the rise of the Hitler when the Jews eagerly sought the acceptance of Nazis who despised them.

Howard Jacobson has fused the comic and the serious in the novel without trivializing the issue. Even in its darkest moments, the novel does not abandon the comic thread. Comedy allows him to tackle the darkness surrounding him in the modern society. Both Treslove and Finkler add comic elements to the story with their peculiarities. Especially Treslove’s obsession allows Jacobson to make fun of the Jewish traits. In an interview with *NPR* (National Public Radio), the novelist acknowledged that the “whole point of Treslove was to make some comedy out of how Jewishness looks to somebody who isn’t a Jew”.

The novel ends without a clear resolution. There are disappointments. Libor succumbs to loneliness and commits suicide. Finkler who had always thought he was an anti-Zionist, changes his political stand. He goes back to his religious roots, praying three times a day for those already dead—Libor and Tyler—and seeking forgiveness those who misguided—Treslove, himself and his son. Treslove thought that he had found his identity in Judaism and security in a Jewish lady. But he is weighed down by the idea of living like a Jew. Unable to continue with his philo-Semitic ways, he goes back to his old life.

The threat of hatred that the world faces has not disappeared. But that does not mean life can not be cherished. Living itself is a celebration of positivity and happiness. Through this journey of life, darkness only dispels when smiles and laughter shine brightly. In this novel, Jacobson has ensured that comedy permeates each page and the reader does not end it with a sense of despair or unfulfillment. The humour in the novel seems to be inspired by Austen's touch of comedy of manners and Roth's self-delusional worries about Jewish identity. At times it also hints at Woody Allen's neuroses as well as comic sensibility. The scenes at the bar in Groucho Club in London or dinner at Libor's, when all three friends are together, are like the riotous tea party from Alice in Wonderland.

"When I do comedy, it bleeds", said Howard Jacobson eloquently while talking to Eric Herschthal. This statement rings true for *The Finkler Question*. The novel that begins as a cerebral satire about identity, runs whole gamut of emotions and concludes as a treatise on existing peacefully and dealing with the darkness of anti-Semitism with humour and patience. Without missing his trademark comic beat, Jacobson conveys the seriousness of the issue of existential anxiety to his readers. His wry Jewish humour is unmistakable on every page but it is not used to ridicule the problem rather to uphold his faith in human beings to take the right decision at the right time. After all what is comedy, if not an affirmation that we are alive and willing to change.

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BIO-NOTE

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