

Howard Jacobson and His Jewish Narration

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Abstract

Howard Jacobson, a modern British Jewish novelist, drew international attention when *The Finkler Question* won the 2010 Man Booker Prize for fiction. He writes 13 novels, including five novels related to Jewish themes. The thesis puts the emphasis on the analysis of the theme of the Jewish novel *The Finkler Question* to see the modern Jewish problems in the modern British society and Howard Jacobson's skills of Narration.

Key words: *The Finkler Question*; Jews; Jewishness; Zionism; Identity

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INTRODUCTION

The Finkler Question is written by British Jewish novelist, Howard Jacobson, who won the 2010 Man Booker Prize. The thesis tries to make research into Zionism and boycott, the question of Jewishness and Jewish identity and analyzes the modern British society and human spiritual state so as to offer an insight into the theme of novel. However, *The Finkler Question* is the one that makes him famous in the world which is at once outrageously funny novel and a sobering account of Jewish life in contemporary Britain, set against the backdrop of rising anti-Zionist sentiment. The Jewishness is deeply kept in his heart, which is

dependent on his national complex. Jewishness is to use Jewish cultural elements by literature and thus reflects the comprehensive national quality. The core meaning of Jewish cultural elements is customer identity, voters' views, values and national customs, and so on. Different writers focus on different contents of Jewish themes. The novel puts emphasis on the Jewish identity. The characters are humanoids and exemplify various problems faced modern Jews. Jacobson has managed to portray in a short, funny but poignant way dilemma that a great many Jews and many Christians struggle with today. At the bottom of all the humor in the book is a deep moral urgency. It also manifests that flawed human beings, as all of us are, are just looking for their own place in the world. We are introduced into the novel through Julian Treslove, a professionally unnoticeable former BBC radio producer, and Sam Finkler, a popular Jewish philosopher, writer, and television celebrity. They were at school together. More rivals than friends, but rivalry too can last a lifetime. Finkler was the cleverer. Despite they had different lives, they were never separated from each other, or with their former teacher, Libor Sevcik. They dined at Libor's apartment at night together—the two Jewish widowers and the unmarried Gentile, Treslove—the men spent a sweetly painful evening, reminiscing their past and sorrow. But when Treslove went back home, a robbery happened to him outside a violin dealer's window. Treslove believed that it was an act of anti-Semitism and after that his whole sense of self would change. *The Finkler Question* is a story of exulsion and belonging, justice and love, ageing, wisdom and humanity. And the novel is always focusing on the questions. What makes a Jew a Jew? What creates the separation between Jews and Gentiles? Is it the fault of the Jews or because of anti-Semitism? Therefore, *The Finkler Question* is actually the Jewish question. Mr. Jacobson mainly puts emphasis on it.

1. JEWISHNESS AND JEWISH PROBLEMS

Identity is a very important concept in the western cultural research. It refers to the identity of people and the specific society. Therefore, people like to ask who they are and, where we are from and where to go (Tao, 2004). Everyone in the novel is flawed, but Jacobson has such sympathy for humans—while brilliantly skewering the vast chasm between how they see themselves and how they really are. He is bitterly brilliant in his literary descriptions of the wide range of Jewish opinions about Zionism and the distresses of the Israeli-Palestinian question. These are not his opinions. They are the opinions of his characters. Some are self-hatred Jews, some thoughtful and empathetic Jews, some wannabe-Jews, some not-wannabe-Jews, some just anti-Semites. He says so much about the human condition, and, as Darryl points out, about men, their friendships, their dreams and disappointments.

Howard Jacobson, as a Jewish British writer, talks about Jewishness and Jewish Identity in his works. *The Finkler Question* gives us a picture of the life of Jews in London. Samuel Finkler, is born and raised the son of a proud Jewish family. Going on to study Philosophy at Oxford University, he is smarter than average Englishman and the publication of several philosophical text books reinforce the point to his friends, family, associates and readers of the fine tome. Treslove wanted to be a Jew and he tried to learn Yiddish language in order to make himself integrate into the world of Jews. The Yiddish language is called the hated secret language of Jews by Finkler. “The Yiddishing drove German Jews mad in the days when they thought the Germans would love them the more for playing down their Jewishness. The lost provincial over-expressiveness of his father.” (Jacobson, 2010) To some of the Jews they always struggle for integrating into the society. On the other hand, they can’t get rid of the influence of the tradition.

All Jews. Endlessly falling out in public about how Jewish to be, whether they are or they aren’t, whether they’re practicing or they’re not, whether to wear fringes or eat bacon, whether they feel safe here or precarious, whether the world hates them or it doesn’t, the fucking Holocaust, fucking Palestine. (Jacobson, 2010)

You say you want to be a Jew – well, the first thing you need to know is that Jewish men don’t go out without their wives or girlfriends. Unless they’re having an affair. Other than another woman’s flat there’s nowhere for Jewish men to go. They don’t do pubs, they hate being seen unaccompanied at the theatre, and they can’t eat on their own. Jewish men must have someone to talk to while they eat. They can’t do only one thing at a time with their mouths.

The above is seen as parts of symbols of being Jews from different aspects, such as living habits or the political thoughts or some typical festivals. They follow the rules of Jewish life. The festival of Passover and Circumcision

are mentioned in the novel. Jewish people also celebrate Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succot, Simchat Torah, Shavuot, Purim, Pesach, Hanukkah. The phenomenon of Circumcision is considered as the tag of racial identification. And Treslove also regards it as the one of the ways of being a real Jew. In the statutes of God, it says whoever is not circumcised cannot be Israelites. And Howard tries to find the Jewishness and what are the Jewish identity and the state of gentiles under the British culture.

2. MOVEMENTS HAPPENED IN THE JEWISH WORLD

Boycott was a shorthand term for the comprehensive Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israeli Universities and Institutions. Proposals for academic boycotts of Israel have been made by academics and organizations in Palestine, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries to boycott Israeli universities and academics. The goal of proposed academic boycotts is to isolate Israel in order to force a change in Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians which proponents state to be discriminatory and oppressive, including oppressive to the academic freedom of Palestinians (Wikipedia, 2001).

Merton Kugle was the group’s prime boycotter. Already he was boycotting Israel in a private capacity, going through every item on his supermarket shelves to ascertain its origin and complaining to the manager when he found a tin or packet that was suspect. In pursuit of “racist merchandise” usually, in his experience, concealed on the lowest shelves in the darkest recesses of the shop—Merton Kugle had ruined his spine and all but worn out his eyes. (Jacobson, 2010)

In Finkler’s view, Kugle was one of the walking dead. But more than that, his putrefaction was infectious. We can see that he disapprove this movement.

Another movement is Zionism. It is a kind of political movement that lets the Jews around the world return to Palestinian. As for Jews, Zionism is deep in their heart. Zion is the synonym of, the holy city, Jerusalem in their eyes and also refers to the whole Israel (Geoffrey, 1994). Zionism emerged in the late 19th century in central and eastern Europe as a national revival movement, and soon after this most leaders of the movement associated the main goal with creating the desired state in Palestine, then an area controlled by the Ottoman Empire. A religious variety of Zionism supports Jews upholding their Jewish identity, opposes the assimilation of Jews into other societies and has advocated the “return” of Jews to Israel as a means for Jews to be a majority in their own nation, and to be liberated from anti-semitic discrimination, exclusion, and persecution that had historically occurred in the diaspora. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the Zionist movement continues primarily to advocate on behalf of Israel and address threats to its continued existence and security.

In case of such Ashamed Jews as these it wasn't the J word but the Z word of which they were ashamed. For which reason there was always a degree of fretting at edge of the movement in the matter of what they called themselves. Wouldn't it more accurately describe the origin and nature of their shame if they changed their name to Ashamed Zionists? (Jacobson, 2010)

That is to say, who were ashamed as Jews of Zionism, but not Jews of being Jewish. As a matter of fact, Finkler is a Jew who is ashamed of his own Jewish identity. He once was in favor of Zionist. It was Merton Kugle whose commitment to ASHamed Jews was what had originally attracted him to the group. He is a great talker and maintains an ambivalent attitude towards his own standpoint.

It included Jews like Finkler, whose shame comprehended the whole Jew caboodle and who didn't give a hoot about a High Holy Day, and Jews who knew nothing of any of it, who had been brought up as Marxists and atheists, or whose parents had changed their names and gone to live in rural Berkshire where they kept horses, and who only assumed the mantle of Jewishness so they could throw it off. (Jacobson, 2010)

Finkler is also a person who always doubts what he did.

There were moments when he wondered what he'd let himself in for here. If I don't particularly want to be with Jews, where's the sense, he asked himself, in being with these Jews, solely because they don't particularly want to be with Jews either? (Jacobson, 2010)

The logic that made it impossible for those who had never been Zionists to call themselves ASHamed Zionists did not extend to Jews who had never been Jews. To be an ASHamed Jew did not require that you had been knowingly Jewish all your life. Indeed, one among them only found out he was Jewish at all in the course of making a television program in which he was confronted on camera with who he really was.

3. DIFFERENT FATES OF THE HEROES IN THE MODERN BRITISH SOCIETY

Finkler is ignorant about his Jewish identity and even wants to get rid of it. Finkler is actually an ambitious person and is fond of limelight. As for Treslove, he wants to get rid of him. Sometimes Treslove admires him and even envies him. A robbery happened unexpectedly to Treslove when he went back home from Libor's house. Although Treslove wasn't a Jew, he believed that the robbery happened because of being seen as a Jew. And it also shows the suffering of Jews in the modern British society. Some of them are confronted with robbery, poverty, discrimination and so on. They are always regarded as the guests in the whole society and it is hard for them to be the members in other cultural background. The most tragic character is Libor. He always struggled within the death of his wife, Malkie Hofmannsthal. Finally he committed suicide. Although his story is sad, it is wholly believable. The bond among three men is

very real, but many tensions exist, religious and sexual. Treslove had sexual relationship with Finkler's wife, Tyler. Although he and Tyler were very intimate, he was always unconfident when he faced Tyler, even Finkler. Of course we wonder about the state of mind of Treslove as he jumped at and chases imaginary shadows. His two friends, at any rate, have no idea what he's growing through. But they learn of it eventually and like all good friends indeed, they "run" to assist their friend in need. He admires the social panache and ease of his rich friend Finkler and his rival Jew, Libor, both of whom have opposed views on Zionism. Julian took revenge on Finkler by making love to his wife while Finkler was out seducing other women. This is the most unconvincing of several attempts that describe Julian's determination to become accepted by a woman. Treslove is a pretty ugly character, child-hating, woman hating and self-hating, impotent socially and sexually, though managing to 'make love' to unlikely women who scorn him. Lastly, another strand in the novel is political. This novel will annoy a lot of people of the liberal. Probably that explains most of the negative reviews. The novel tackles the modern Western mass media's fashionable and generic stance on Palestinian and Israeli issue. It is nothing but a politically correct and prejudicial genre of news reporting to demonize Israeli Jews and present the Palestinians and Muslims as their victims. Finkler, Treslove and Libor are small in the society, especially as Jews. They have different fates and attitudes towards their lives and the future of the Jewish people in the modern world.

4. THE TECHNIQUE OF PUTTING SADNESS IN JOY

In the novel, Mr. Jacobson uses the humorous words to illustrate the lives of the three heroes. Although the heroes have different fates, sad or joyful, Jacobson puts the sad elements behind the humorous words. David Lodge says: "The effect of comedy comes from two aspects: One is the situation and the other is styled." (Lodge, 2010) At the beginning of the novel, Jacobson designs the situation of a robbery happening to Treslove by a woman. To Treslove's surprise, he himself was robbed by a woman and even didn't fight back. The situational event not only displays the personality of the hero, Treslove, but also gives the picture of the Jewish problem in the modern society. Therefore, the situational design is important and necessary. And the humorous effect is embodied from the situational events. "He was a man who saw things coming. Not shadowy premonitions before and after sleep, but real and present dangers in the daylight world. Lamp posts and trees reared up at him, splintering his shins. Speeding cars lost control and rode on to the footpath leaving him lying in a pile of torn tissue and mangled bones. Sharp objects dropped from scaffolding and pierced his skull."

Humorous words convey the information that Treslove is an ill-fated person and he always encounters different misfortunes and sadness, while the author uses the relaxed words to narrate it. There are mainly dialogues in the novel to narrate, which is real and vivid.

Libor was smiling at him. "Now you're a Jew, come to dinner," he said. "Come to dinner next week- not with Sam—and I'll introduce you to some people who would be pleased to meet you."

"You make it sound sinister. Some people. Which people? Watchmen of the Jewish faith who will scrutinise my credentials? I have no credentials. And why wouldn't they have been pleased to meet me before I was Jewish?"

"That's good, Julian. Getting touchy is a good sign. You can't be Jewish if you can't do touchy."

"I'll tell you what. I'll come if I can bring the woman who attacked me. She's my credentials."

Libor shrugged. "Bring her. Find her and bring her." (Jacobson, 2010)

Playful discourse implies the irony and it is not the thing deserving pleased. Therefore, situation and style are indeed crucial to analyze the real theme or meanings which the author wants to convey.

CONCLUSION

Jacobson does write well you feel involved in the arising issues. He has managed to portray in a short, funny but poignant way dilemma that a great many Jews and many Christians struggle with today. At the bottom of all the humor in the book is a deep moral urgency. We can find the genuine humor here. There are also sharp observations of current behavior in some of the peripheral events. However, these characters give us different types of personalities—they verge on being stock characters that rarely, if ever, come fully to life. Therefore, The Finkler Question is really the Jewish question. There are still many questions existing and need to be solved about Jews. Mr. Jacobson demonstrates that it is not ethical behavior, religious feeling or sensibility, wisdom, or even tradition. Instead, he appears to be saying that it is a sort

of tribalism, that is, a sense of belonging to a group, but a group that is based on interconnected families, i.e. a group one must be born into. Past and present insults and persecutions are shown to be important in maintaining tribal identity. This novel is very slow-moving and there is very little in the way of plot and while some of the dialogue is clever, amusing or even thought-provoking, many of the characters are difficult to relate to. It is mostly dialogue between the 3 men involved and each of them talking to themselves. It is interesting particularly the aspects of grief. It is very current just now with the situation between Israel and Palestine. And his writing technique really deserves researching and paying much attention to analyzing the Jewish theme in this novel.

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