



Impact Factor : 5.7



UGC Approved Journal



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

**Volume 6, Issue 8
August 2018**

www.ijellh.com

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Jewishness and Anti-Semitism: Scrutinizing of What It means to be a Jew in Howard
Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*

Abstract

The novel portrays the Jewish struggle in a comprehensive and clear way and deals with the sad fact that most of the Jews today don't know what the meaning of actually being Jewish is. *The Finkler Question*'s answer to a certain extent conveys the Jewish message of positivity, hope and belief in a better future. The vision in which Jews are God-like and non-Jews must inevitably become either God-lovers or God-haters has the functional utility of interpreting anti-Semitism as a twisted form of love. In *The Finkler Question*, Howard Jacobson has dealt with many significant themes like the Jewish identity, self-hatred of Jews, insecurity of old age, death, friendship, infidelity and the relationship among men as well as between man and woman in a very effective manner, and they give the readers food for thought.

Key words:

Anti-Semitism, Jewishness, Holocaust, The Finkler Question, Yiddish, self-hatred, insecurity, Jewish identity

Howard Jacobson is a British author and journalist. He is best known for writing comic novels that often revolve around the dilemmas of British Jewish characters. Jacobson has described himself as "a Jewish Jane Austen". His protagonists tend to be Jewish

Northerners or Jewish North Londoners of various kinds, all deeply preoccupied with their own Jewishness, interested in literature and obsessed with sex, though the order of these priorities may vary from book to book.

His fiction, particularly in the six novels he has published since 1998, is characterised chiefly by a discursive and humorous style. Jacobson is a writer very conscious of his Jewish background and heritage. Recurring subjects in his work include male-female relations and the Jewish experience in Britain in the mid-to-late 20th century. He is compared to prominent Jewish American novelists such as Philip Roth in particular for his habit of creating doppelgangers of himself in his fiction.

In October 2010 Jacobson wins the Man Booker Prize for his novel, *The Finkler Question*, which is the first comic novel to win the prize since Kingsley Amis's *The Old Devils* in 1986. The book, published by Bloomsbury, explores what it means to be Jewish today and is also about "love, loss and male friendship". Jacobson at the age of 68 is the oldest winner since William Golding in 1980.

In *The Finkler Question* Howard Jacobson has portrayed the life of three friends Julian Treslove, Samuel Finkler and Libor Sevcik. In the novel the life of each of the character is portrayed and how they suffer is shown vividly. The very title of the novel *The Finkler Question* deals with the Jewish question – What It means to be a Jew in the 21st century? As recorded in *Amazon.com*, "Jacobson's prose is effortless-witty when it needs to be, heartbreaking where it counts-and the Jewish question becomes a metaphor without ever being overdone".

The plot of the novel centres around Julian Treslove who is a former BBC producer turned celebrity, a textbook Romantic who longs for an Ophelia, a lover who will die young and beautiful, so that he can mourn her. His fantasy of happiness is kissing the cold dead lips a last goodbye that would leave him inconsolable forever. Julian Treslove is a childhood friend of Sam Finkler. Finkler is the first Jew Treslove ever met, and he has called all Jews Finklers. Finkler grows up to become a successful pop philosopher.

Finkler is an inconstant, distracted husband, is still a poor father, and spends his nights with Jewish mistress or playing online poker. Treslove and Finkler are also linked by a mutual teacher from their childhood, now recently widowed and bereift, named Libor Sevcik, a Czech who has become, of all things, a celebrity journalist. With this trio of lost mourning men at the centre of the story, the plot of *The Finkler Question* takes shape.

Whenever the three get together, Sevcik and Finkler debate the state of Israel.

Sevcik always pronounces it “Isrrrael”. Treslove analyses his pronunciation. Finkler, on the other hand, refuses to pronounce the word at all calling the country Palestine. As Treslove is mugged, he decides to convert to Judaism. He learns Yiddish, a language Finkler considers “the lost provincial over expressiveness” of his orthodox father.

Jewish identity is another subject discussed in this novel. Treslove becomes obsessed with the mugger’s obscure curse “You Jules”, “You Jewel”, “You Jew?”. His “muggerette” could have been an anti-Semite lashing out at Treslove’s “essential Jewishness” (33). Jewishness is a quality that resists definition. It is neither truly racial nor uniformly religious. There is no physiology, psychology, sensibility or spirituality that any Jew can authoritatively be said to share with his or her fellow Jews. Some Jews are uncomfortable with the idea that their Jewishness somehow binds them to all other Jews irrespective of colour, creed or character.

Treslove refers to Jews as Finklers after his friend and frequently wonders how they think, why they are smarter and more successful than him, and how he can understand and be more like them. The three men engage in frequent discussion about Israel, Palestine and Jewish life in London. Tyler tells that Finkler is born Jewish so they cannot reject him. Treslove is considered as the least Jewish looking person. Treslove tells Finkler that he has never wanted to become a Jew. Finkler tells him that Treslove wishes Finkler’s father is his father. Treslove immediately replies that he is not interested in becoming a Jew. “Sam – Samuel – read my lips. I Do Not Want To Be A Jew OK? Nothing against them but I like being what I am” (67).

Tyler admits to Finkler that he hates being a Jew in the past. He always complains about the Jews. “Have you forgotten that you don’t like Jews? You stun the company of Jews. You have publicly proclaimed yourself disgusted by Jews” (115). Finkler considers that talking fervently about Jewish is being Jewish.

Holocaust is actually the genocide of approximately six million European Jews during World War II, a programme of systematic state-sponsored extermination by Nazi Germany throughout Nazi-occupied territory. Nearly two thirds of the population of nine million Jews who resided in Europe before the Holocaust perished. The Jews seldom mention about the Holocaust. Jewish museums are present everywhere. A question arises in the novel whether a Holocaust museum is needed or not. “Jewish museums. Everywhere you go now, every town, every shtetl you find a Holocaust museum. Do we need a Holocaust Museum in Stevenage or Letchworth” (179)?

Finkler hates the idea of Jewishness. Sevcik irritates him by adding a fourth r to the word Isrrrae which irritates Finkler. He dislikes to talk about Israel. “Sevcik knew that Finkler hated Jewishms. Mauscheln, he called it, the hated secret language of the Jews, the Yiddishing that drove German Jews mad in the days when they thought the Germans would love them the more for playing down their Jewishness” (45).

Treslove searches the Internet and gets the shock of his life when he sees hundreds of pages for the Anti Semitic incidents in the various parts of the world. He never wants to ask Finkler about this because he considers Finkler not the best person to ask to. Similarly, he never wants to frighten Sevcik by asking him how many Jews got beaten up outside his door most evenings. “In Creteil, two sixteen-year-old Jews were beaten in front of a Kosher restaurant by a gang that shouted – Palestine will win, dirty Jews!” (81).

Anti-Semitism is prejudice against or hostility towards Jews often rooted in hatred of their ethnic background, culture and religion. Self hating Jew is a term used to allege that a Jewish person holds anti-Semitic beliefs or engages in anti-Semitic actions. The self hating Jews is often used rhetorically to discount Jews who differ in their lifestyle. Tyler insists that she is the real Jew, in their marriage because she knows the difference between culture and biology, religion and stupid ethnic vanity. She sees Finkler and his anti-Zionist comrades as profoundly self important.

Jacobson has hit upon many truths in this book about Jews who often have uncomfortable connection with their spiritual identity, as well as the fact that non-Jews often find more right with Judaism and Israel than do Jews. Finkler addresses a group of anti-Israel audience and is suddenly filled with rage when a non-Jew stoops up to accuse the Jewish state of being inherently racist. He shocks himself as well as the audience when he questions, “How dare you a non-Jew how dare you even think you can tell Jews what sort of country they may live in, when it is you, an European Gentile who made a separate country for Jews a necessity” (236).

When Tyler gets a sudden insight into her husband Finkler, she puts her thoughts on paper and leaves a short type-written manuscript in a box for her husband to see after her death. She writes that Finkler is too Jewish and unlike many Jews, he has too much of Jewish thoughts. She uses the word “shande” for the ashamed Jews and thinks that they bring shame upon others. In the letter, she writes, “... he thinks he has jumped the Jewish fence his father put around him, but he still sees everything from a WHOLLY Jewish point of view, including the Jews who disappoint him. Wherever he looks, in Jerusalem or Stamford Hill or Elstree, he sees Jews living no better than anybody else”(271).

As the Jews are not exceptionally good, Finkler with his extremist Jewish logic thinks that they are exceptionally bad! Tyler writes, "...my husband adheres with the arrogance to the principle that Jews either exist to be 'a light unto the nations'(Isiah 42:6) or don't deserve to exist at all".(271). Jacobson himself has said, before receiving the award that one of the great things about the Jews is that they tell the best jokes. Part of the reason is they tell jokes against themselves before anyone else gets to do it.

The novel mixes comic elements with bits of irony. Comedy is found in Finkler organizing a group called ASHamed Jews. ASHamed Jews is a group that conducts meetings frequently to hammer out the precise dimensions of its members' shame. Jacobson's accomplishment has been to discover the varied sources of interest in the lives of English Jews. He frequently uses one sentence paragraphs. A clear idea is portrayed in through the single sentence. "No ... Well, yes. I was a musical boy. I listened to operas and wanted to play the piano" (95). Jacobson talks about many truths in this book about Jews who often have an uncomfortable connection with their spiritual identity and that non-Jews often find more right with Judaism and Israel than Jews.

National Public Radio *Daily Beast* comments about *The Finkler Question*, "as it tackles an uncomfortable issue with satire that is so biting, so pointed, that it pulls you along for 300 pages and leaves a battlefield of sacred cows in its wake Like all great Jewish art ... it is Jacobson's use of the Jewish experience to explain the greater human one that sets the story part."

The Finkler Question, a clever, canny, textured, subtle and humane novel exploring the friendship of three aging male friends ... is a work of greatness. Although *The Finkler Question* is by no means a straightforward comic novel, it once again demonstrates Jacobson's mastery of the form ... Jacobson's capacity to explore the minutiae of the human condition while attending to the metaphysics of human existence is without contemporary peer.

As the Chairman of the judges of the Booker prize, and former Poet Laureate Andrew Motion said, "*The Finkler Question* should not be seen as something that was 'relentlessly middle-brow, or easy-peasy' because it was comic. It is much cleverer and more complicated and about much more difficult things than it immediately lets you know. Several people have used the word wise, and that's a good word". Many other writers have also written about Jewish identity. But Jacobson has established himself as the literary voice of the Jewish community in Britain; a country where Jews are a much smaller and less assimilated minority compared with America.

The Finkler Question explores various expressions of Jewish identity and the battle of many modern Jews to find the contemporary relevance in their heritage, providing a vivid description of the struggles they face. The author makes a self analysis of the concept of being Jewish and the idea of linking with the place Israel. A struggle is found in the novel whether a non Jew has the need to be recognised as a Jew.

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