



Identity and Jewish Consciousness in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*

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Abstract

Howard Jacobson's novel, *The Finkler Question*, presents a thought-provoking exploration of Jewish identity and consciousness in contemporary society. This paper delves into the complex and multifaceted layers of identity within the narrative, highlighting how Jacobson skilfully examines the experiences and perspectives of Jewish characters in a modern, multicultural world. Through the lives and interactions of his characters, the author navigates themes of Jewishness, belonging, and the evolving nature of cultural identity. By closely analysing the characters' struggles, self-discoveries, and interactions with their Jewish heritage, this study provides insights into how Jacobson portrays the nuanced dimensions of Jewish consciousness. Further, the paper explores the novel's critique of stereotypes, the tension between assimilation and tradition, and the ways in which individuals grapple with their Jewish heritage in a society marked by diversity and change. *The Finkler Question* invites readers to engage with the complexities of Jewish identity in the contemporary world and raises questions about the role of heritage and cultural consciousness in shaping individual lives. This paper aims to shed light on Jacobson's intricate portrayal of Jewish identity and encourages a deeper understanding of the intricate connections between culture, heritage, and personal sense of self.

Keywords: Consciousness, identity, holocaust, anti-Semitism and the human psyche.

Introduction

Consciousness is a sense or feeling of being aware. The human consciousness is afflicted with ambiguity and suspicions; with reasonable attempts, one can resolve such clashes. The deliberate struggle of human consciousness in various circumstances brings freedom to one. The situation can be altered, but the struggle of consciousness to capture the root of understanding remains the same. Howard Jacobson, a Jewish-British writer, gives a deep insight into Jewishness and their role through various connotations. The quests for identity, the holocaust, Anti-Semitism are the primary significance of his novels. In *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson uses a different style to portray the human psyche. He also portrays Jewish life's religion, rituals and dogmas through his characters.

Discussion

Consciousness is a condition of being psychologically aware of something. It is also the condition of being attentive to an external entity in the self. Such awareness includes a person's outlook and thinking process for objects and persons. Often it includes a person's sentiments or frame of mind for positive and negative attributes. Such knowledge helps a person get rid of any illusions thus, to get actual knowledge of survival by understanding self and the other. In that state, a person becomes receptive to one's ambience. Consciousness denotes to person's realisation of unique opinions, commemorations, approaches and atmosphere. One's sensible understanding repetitively changes. People may be focused on reading some book at one point. At the same time, one's awareness may change to the recollection of a discussion the person had previously.

A human being possesses the capacity of rational thinking, which enables one to make a conscious attempt to choose things for ultimate bliss. Even ultimate consciousness enlightens people to feel God's omnipotence and omnipresence and man's duty in the world. Thinking procedures in the dream states exhibit a high level of absurdity. Both dream and non-dream conditions are associated with severe disorders of memory. It usually vanishes in seconds during the non-dream state and in minutes after waking up from a dream unless vigorously refreshed. Study indicates that patients who undergo partial seizures that are hallucinations and loss of mental control will experience altered states of consciousness. In such conditions, consciousness is harmed or lost, whereas some portions of consciousness, such as automated behaviours, stay unharmed.

Through his novel *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson tries to bring the anguish and dread of Jewish life, which significantly impacts present Jewish consciousness. The holocaust originates from the Nazi anti-Semitism. However, the abhorrence and discernment of the Jews led Nazi Germany for more than 2000 years. In Western philosophy, Jews partake a distinct place for several decades. Jewish people are deeply hated for centuries. This disturbing event appears all over the centuries and uncovers its diverse sides. The extensive presence of innate anti-Jewish conducts in modern Europe assisted as an obligatory situation for the mass extermination. Such haunted memory is further transmitted to forthcoming generations through the preserved documentation in the Holocaust museum or several other modes. Often, such a tragic past and the contemporary situation create a dilemma for a Jew. It forces them to explore the root of his self-identity as well as of the group's.

Jews are recurrently contrived, distressed and deprived of partaking a prestigious place in the society. After years of struggle Jews have occupied a considerable space in academia or other occupations yet still face subtle implicit discrimination in the host nations. Jews carry a terrified history of sufferings. The memory of Jews arc is occupied with the instances of the holocaust. It has left a profound impact in the minds of Jews. The holocaust occurred on the soil of Europe and the Jewish people's body. However, only a part of memory involves the past. The past image is projected on a screen of the present with which it interacts, and this new image sheds light on the future.

Jewish history is groundwork for understanding how the gentiles and other persecutors tormented them. Nowadays, numerous literary studies and writings have demarcated embracing and incorporating the all aspects of Jewish society, culture and tragedy. Jews were deprived of having equal rights in housing, education and employment. They were not allowed equal political, economic, scientific and academic positions. People were prevented from entering Jewish owned stores and business. Jewish-owned shops and businesses were destroyed, and their wealth was legally taken by force. Economically Jews were paralysed. Jewish companies experienced financial loses. Jews were forced to sell out to the companies to Nazi-German government.

Howard Jacobson is one such writer whose works deal with Jewishness and role of prejudices and antagonistic behaviour which navigates their lives between loss of identities and survival struggle. In *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson describes the problems faced by the central characters due to multifaceted values in life. Jacobson presents two main characters, Tresolve, he is non Jewish and another character is Finkler, he is Jewish. Before meeting his Jewish friend Finkler he never had any idea about Jews and its society. For Tresolve, Finkler is the macrocosmic representation of macrocosm. He imagines everything about Jewish society while looking at Finkler.

Tresolve reproaches Jews of holding the sign of "God's covenant". Finkler's charisma brings self-resentment within Tresolve. Finkler's confidence and charm appeals him too much that he specifies it as the characteristic of all Jews. Therefore, he terms all Jews as Finklers. "He would have liked to tell his friend this. It took away the stigma, he thought. The minute you talked about the Finkler Question, say, or the Finklerish Conspiracy, you sucked out the toxins. But he was never quite able to get around to explaining this to Finkler himself" (89). Even Jews capacity to speak a fluent language and their mastery over numerical symbolism in language enchants Tresolve. "Jews, Tresolve thought, admiringly. Jews and music. Jews and family. Jews and their loyalties" (93). All such mastery of Finkler and his inability to complete with him develops and sense of inferiority within Tresolve.

Tresolve's journey towards Jewishness takes place at point he is attacked by a woman in the road for a mistaken identity of Jew. In rebelliousness of the enigmatic assaulter thus, to custom an identity for him he chooses to become a Jew. He tries to construct his Jewish personality from ambiguously recalled Jewish features of his parents. His obsessive imagination of actually being Jewish forces him to discover the true meaning of Jewishness. While exploring the mysteries of Jewish life Treslove finds out that Jews are frequently misapprehended for their identity of being Jew. A Jew is often connected to someone insignificant, obscure and scuttling, a person with a secretive instinct. Person's secretive attempt to their identity cannot deny the datum of their persona. However, Tresolve's generalisation of Jews as Finkler's offers a new connotation.

Treslove uses Finkler's family name as an inscription for Jewishness. "Finkler opened wide his arms Finklerishly. Infinite patience beginning to run out, the gesture denoted. Finkler reminded Treslove of God when he did that. God despairing of His people from a mountain top. Treslove was envious. It was what God gave the Finklers as the mark of His covenant with them-the ability to shrug like Him" (65). Jewish identity cannot be restricted in a narrow channel or can be elucidated in paradigmatic way; it is a palpable quality. Jews are aware of Jewishness without having an explicit knowledge about it. It spread among Jews like contagious ailment. The effect of Jewishness is so high that Treslove wants to explore the mystery of it. His idea is not to convert into Judaism rather his inner quest for recognition and to reconnoitre the veracity of Jewish life he strives to be a Jew.

Treslove does not have groundless hatred for Jews instead he has crazy fascination towards Jews. He is overwhelmed by the charisma of Jewishness. He strives to get recognised as Jewish person whom Finkler assumes hazardous imagination "though he detested his fellow Jews for their clannishness about Israel, Finkler couldn't hide his disdain for Treslove for so much as daring, as an outsider, to have a view" (26). Treslove starts labelling what he contemplates are Finkler personalities, Finkler aptitudes, Finkler cultures the things Treslove lacks. Thus, shifting from inquisitiveness through approbation, to responsiveness, he excavates his affection to Finkler as:

What am I? Treslove stared at the ceiling. It felt like a trick question. Exactly. You don't know what you are so you want to be a Jew. Next, you'll be wearing fringes and telling me you've volunteered to fly Israeli jets against Hamas. This, Jewish, I repeat, is not healthy. Take a break. You should be on the town. "Out" as you call it. Get yourself a bird. And whoever it was still more certainly didn't confuse you with me or call you a Jew. (81-82)

Finkler also suffers from similar psychological trouble that brings hatred towards his individuality. Therefore, he becomes the part of ASHamed group. Unlike Treslove, Finkler carry different opinions about Jews and Israel. Treslove's desire to be the part of Jewish world and get Jewish identity is unacceptable for Finkler. Finkler's denial is the reflection of Jewish inner fear of being expatriate. "You can't be us. You shouldn't want to be us. I don't want to be you, somewhere you do. I don't mean to be cruel but there has always been some part of us you have wanted. Now you want another part of us" (109).

Like Treslove, Taylor too has a fascination towards Jewish life. Comparing to Finkler, she is more devoted to Judaism and Jewish ethics. Her attraction towards Jewishness leads to adapt dogmas of Jewish culture. "I, the Jew of the tow of us even if I was born a Catholic. I'm the Jewish princess you read about in the fairy stories, only I'm not Jewish" (78). Hence, Finkler's ignorance towards their relationship builds a bond between Taylor and Treslove. That bond can be considered an act of revenge against Finkler, similarly to Jews who makes them realise their inferiorities. Finkler subdues the misery he feels for the death of his wife Taylor due to cancer.

Finkler is detached towards religious beliefs. He never considers that it is a prominent part of Jewish life. Hence, occurrence of his child as a Jewish anti-Semite alters his psyche. Finkler considers himself responsible for such impairment of attitude of his kids who ridicule the Jews having significant religious faith. The incident leaves a significant impact on Finkler's mind therefore, he starts attending synagogue. Moreover, Libor's death also takes him to the nearest synagogue for Kaddish prayer, the prayer of dead.

Like Finkler, Tamara Krausz is also an ASHamed Jew who ardently criticise Israel. However, her ideologies burn his tolerance. Her mystic works ruins his conscience. Therefore, he thinks, if he "had gone into adult education, these were the sorts of people with whom he would have spent his evenings" (144). Tamara becomes an intimidation to the welfare of Jews as "Zionism was her demon lover, not Finkler. She could not, in her fascinated, never quite sufficiently reciprocated hatred of Zionism, think about anything else. Which is how things re when you're in love" (231). Whenever, she speaks about anti-Zionism Finkler deliberates to cut off her tongue. "Which might have been the very thing she was referring to when she spoke of the breakdown of the Jewish mind, the Final Solution causing Jews to go demented and seek final solutions of their own, the violence begot of violence. Indeed, Finkler would have done no more than illustrate her thesis. Was this not the very things she sought? Kill, you demented Jew bastard, and prove me right" (231).

Jacobson tries to draw a parallel between the anti-Semites and the anti-zionists. While uncovering the mysteries of Jewishness he flips the both sides of the coin and presents it to his readers. Showing the cause and consequences of anti-Semitic hostility in modern day life Jacobson creates a parody. The parody of Jewish existence, their denial, shame and escapism are the primary role of a part. He even mocks at the people like Treslove, who can only fantasise to be Jew. Treslove is an actual examiner of Jewish hardship who can only fantasise to be Jew. Treslove is an actual examiner of Jewish hardship who, looking at the progressive Jews like Finkler, can dream of being a part of their world. Hence, the crudeness world will ultimately create confusion and frustration inside them, leading to discard their desired identity and to survive with their inherited one.

In order to project the beauty of Jewishness, Jacobson created Tresolve, an obsessed person with acquiring Jewish identity. While describing his journey among Jews, Tresolve experiences numerous tragic experiences. “He could see because he was outside it. He could afford to see what they—his friends, the woman he loved—dared not. The Jews would not be allowed to prosper except as they had always prospered, at the margins, in the concert halls and at the banks.... Anything else would not be tolerated. A brave rearguard action in the face of insuperable odds was one thing” (266-67). Hence, other Jews like Finkler and Libor also possess tragic memories. Jacobson blends both comedy and tragedy to depict the life-circle of Jews. Tresolve comes out to be a pure character with both tragic and comic instances.

It has been observed that their journeys teach them the exact shade of life and both return to their own communities. Even, the humour is used by creating "ASHamed Jews” and making parody of “Jewish question”. “Before he met Finkler, Tresolve had never met a Jew. Not knowingly at least. He supposed a Jew would be like the word Jew—small and dark and beetling. A secret person, but Finkler was almost orange in colour and spilled out of his clothes” (19). It has been perceived and examined that Jews across the globe face the same pain of discrimination from one generation to the other. It has been observed that the trauma of the holocaust and apathy of hurt connects Jews as they experience the exact nature of antipathy, agony, isolation and fear.

The people in modern life procure such notions, yet Jews in the world are still discriminated against. Therefore, the concept of egalitarianism needs to be followed realistically. It has been observed that the issue of Jewish identity is a global problem which has forced them to balance the characters in the select works with their self-quest for identity. Such a quest often leads the characters to revolt against social norms and the nature of hate. In order to equate the love and hate concept, a parallel study has been drawn between good and evil by bringing a humanist perspective to Jacobson’s works. The character tries to battle the present-day situation, yet their inner conflicts often lead them to surrender. The study also points out that human sentiments, associations, and society have an affirmative influence on the person’s mind which often helps them to grow as a strong individual.

Conclusion

Jacobson through *The Finkler Queen* depicts that Jews need to be careful enough to display their present status along with their conscious mental state. They need not display themselves as sufferers and should restrain themselves from projecting any fear of the reoccurrence of the holocaust. However, the author ponders the duties and obligations of anti-Semites. He presents the mental condition of the Jews through his work. The works reflect Jewish consciousness, the holocaust and other anti-Semitic prejudice. Jews often tend to de-link themselves from such tragic roots to get a new identity to create a new memory, yet the collective memory of the past never leaves the Jews as such memories survive in the minds of the sufferers, often documented in the form of memoirs and books. However, current heinous and prejudiced mannerisms towards Jews often force them to reconsider their tragic history. Therefore, considering the history and testimony, Jews need to act consciously.

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