

**POSTMODERNISM AND HOWARD JACKOBSONS’  
*THE FINKLER QUESTION***

**Puja Thakur**  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Himachal Pradesh University  
Summerhill Shimal-171005

**Dr. Santosh Thakur**  
Assistant Professor  
Govt. College Rajgarh,  
Sirmour (H.P.)

**Abstract**

*The Finkler Question* which is Jacobson’s eleventh novel, was awarded the highly prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2010. The mingling of the comedy and tragedy becomes the nucleus of the novel. In the story, Jacobson comments with bitter humour on topics such as friendship, rivalry, loss and mourning and also belonging and identity. Novel portray the post holocaust period, where the Jews and the non- Jews have a revised thought of what it is to be a Jew or not. In a way, it could be considered as the revisiting of their identity of their past and what they conceive of the same in the present. In *The Finkler Question* humour indeed fulfils this redeeming function and allows Jacobson to tackle the dark forces of anti-Semitism. *The Finkler Question* also cleverly explores various expressions of Jewish identity and the struggle of many modern Jews to find the contemporary relevance in their heritage.

In the galaxy of contemporary British writers, Howard Jacobson is a shining star. Born in a working-class Jewish area of Manchester in 1942, was the son of market trader. A native of Manchester’s Ghetto, crumpsall park, he was brought up in Prestwich and attended grammar school in Whitefield. His doting mother, very reserved and quiet, read him poetry as he was growing up. His family was completely secular, yet they were upset when he married out of the faith. Jacobson was educated at Cambridge at the feet of the critic F.R. Leavis. Leavis played a critical role in Jacobson’s writing. He was married Barbara, second time married to Rosalin, a non-Jewish Australian and now married for third time to Jenny De Yong, a Jewish television producer. Before finding a new life as a novelist, critic and columnist, he started his career as a

literature professor at Cambridge and Sydney University in Australia. Howard Jacobson is one of the most high-profile Jewish authors in Britain, having written numerous critically-acclaimed and successful comic novels. Howard Jacobson is a multi-award winning writer of thirteen novels and five works of non-fiction as well as a regular contributor to major newspapers and journals.

Jacobson's novel *The Finkler Question* has earned a good deal of popularity as well as the coveted Man Booker Prize for it. *The Finkler Question* is an intercession into a long running debate about whether global civil society has learnt lasting ethical and political lessons from the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the unconquered Everest of our time. There are both comic and tragic moments all through the novel, two sides that continually balance each other. *The Finkler Question* is full of satire and Jewish humour, which is characterised by postmodernism. Martin Esslin aptly described transition from the humorous to horrifying. "The point about tragedy is that it is no longer funny. It is funny, and then it becomes no longer funny" (p.242).

Story begins with Julian Treslove, who is not a much accomplished former BBC radio producer and Sam Finkler who is found to be a popular Jewish philosopher, writer and television personality. Both them have been friends since school. They are good friends in spite of the dissimilarities in their lives and they have kept constant touch with their Czech history teacher back at school- Libor Sevcik who is a Jewish Czech nearing ninety and who once used to be a part time Hollywood gossip columnist. At present in the novel, Libor and Finkler have recently been widowed and Treslove's failures with women qualify him as an honorary third widower. Treslove who used to work hopelessly in BBC, has now been making a living as a celebrity lookalike. The story is narrated rather in a hilarious manner. It is all about what it meant to be a Jew, what it means to be a Jew and what it means to become a Jew, the latter being more prominent throughout the novel.

Dining together one night at Sevcik's apartment, Treslove share a sweetly painful evening. After leaving dinner, Julian is mugged by a woman, causing him to become obsessed with his belief that she may have called him Jewish. Both recently widowed, Libor mourns for Malkie, but Sam is unable to mourn for Tyler. When Julian tells Sam about the mugging, Sam believes Julian invented it because he wants to be Jewish. After recalling his affair with Tyler, Julian runs into Libor while searching for the mugger, and Libor invites Julian to dinner with a group of fellow Jews, so Julian attends his first Seder where he meets Hephzibah. Meanwhile, Sam has a falling out with the ASHamed Jews, an academic group he joined despite Tyler's objections. Emmy, an old friend, contacts Libor to ask for help in contacting the media after her grandson is blinded in an anti-Semitic incident. After a vacation in Italy, Julian moves in with Hephzibah and finds that he enjoys being Jewish. He agrees to help her set up the new Anglo-Jewish museum of which she will be curator. Libor continues to grieve for Malkie.

After Libor commits suicide by jumping from the cliffs at Beachy Head, Julian, Sam and Hephzibah mourn for their lost friend. Because he feels life is disgraceful, Julian often walks through Regent's Park, and one day, he breaks up a group taunting a young Sephardic Jew. He returns home to realize he is late for the museum opening, so he rushes to the museum where security refuses him entrance because he forgot his invitation. After a brawl, Julian spends the night in the hospital, and though Hephzibah visits while he is sleeping, she is convinced he simply does not want to see her because she has become part of what disgusts him in life. Sam and Hephzibah say the Kaddish for Libor. Hephzibah also laments the loss of Julian because she is unsure if he was ever really there, and Sam mourns for Libor, Tyler and all Jews, in addition to Julian who, he realizes, he never really knew either.

Julian Treslove calls every Jew a 'Finkler' from the moment he had met his friend Sam Finkler. Because Sam isn't the stereotype Jew, Treslove begins to wonder what qualities make a Jew. He's actually a bit envious of Finkler because he is a Jew. So the real meaning of the book's title is actually "The Jewish Question". Now in reality there is something called The Jewish Question. This Jewish question is about the problems of the unequal status between minority Ashkenazi Jews and non-Jews. Ashkenazi Jews are Jews who descended from the medieval Jewish communities along the Rhine in Germany from Alsace in the south to the Rhineland in the north. Politicians and writers of western and central Europe discussed these issues during the Age of Enlightenment and the French revolution. The problems were about legal and economic Jewish disabilities, equality, Jewish emancipation and Jewish Enlightenment.

*The Finkler Question* can be classed as a postmodern novel because it mixes the genres of comedy and tragedy, which is prominent feature of postmodernism. Postmodernism undermines this distinction. Postmodernism has striven to close the gap between art and popular entertainment, between high art and low, between elite culture and popular culture by absorbing into its corpus elements of contemporary popular culture. The distinction made between high culture and low culture, in postmodern era, is vanished and it is now recognised as a culture of mass society. As a result, in the contemporary period, the boundaries between high culture and popular culture have melted and now the term popular culture is applied to everything from the common culture which includes Postmodernist blur the boundaries between high and low culture, as Jacobson in *The Finkler Question*.

Jacobson's fear that anti-Zionism may slide into anti-Semitism is present in *The Finkler Question* and echoed most accurately by two female Jewish characters: Hephzibah, who is setting up a museum of Anglo-Jewish culture, and Emmy, whose twenty-two-year old grandson has been stabbed in the face and blinded by an Algerian.

When Hephzibah first hears about an anti-Semitic act of vandalism against her unopened museum – rashers of bacon smeared on the handles of the museum doors -Treslove finds her at home sobbing but, at a closer look, he sees that she is actually laughing and crying at the same time.

Treslove couldn't keep up with the fluctuations of her feelings. She wasn't, he realised, going from fear to amusement and back again, she was experiencing both emotions simultaneously. It wasn't even a matter of reconciling opposites because they were not opposites for her. Each partook of the other. (F.Q 208)

On another occasion, it is Finkler who, at the end of the agitprop *Sons of Abraham*, responds with a loud laughter, "turning round so that people could observe him," only to describe it in the end not as a laughter, but as "the contortions of grief" (250). The simultaneity of comedy and tragedy mirrors the structure upon which the whole novel is built and connects it with the tradition of Jewish humour. As it appears now evident, the novel deals with matters which are not easy to laugh at. Death, loss, widowhood are among them. Besides, a haunting fear envelops the lives of the characters, the fear for a returning surge of anti-Semitic violence, the memory of the Holocaust and the anxiety at the possibility of it happening again. Thus, laughter seems to be a means through which fear and pain can be exorcised. "You have to see the funny side" (207), Hephzibah says, as a way to cope with terror and anxiety.

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It had started again, anyway. Her emails streamed reported menace and invective. A brick was thrown through a window of the museum. An Orthodox man in his sixties was beaten up at a bus stop in Temple Fortune. Graffiti began to appear again on synagogue walls, the Star of David crossed with the swastika. The internet bubbled and boiled with madness. She couldn't bear to open a newspaper. Was it something or was it nothing? (Jacobson *Finkler Question* 282. All subsequent references are to edition have been mentioned all through the text as F.Q. with page numbers).

She is aware of the fact that her fear is shared by other British Jews:

An anxiety had settled like a fine dust on everything she did, and on everyone she knew -on all the Jews at least. They too were looking askance - not over their shoulders exactly, but into a brittly uncertain future which bore fearful resemblances to an only too certain past. Paranoia, was it? She asked herself. The question itself had become monotonous to her. (F.Q. 257)

Ironically Julian Treslove, a former BBC producer who is so obsessed with Jews that he wants to become one of them, seems to be more clear-sighted about the Jews' real problems than the Jews themselves:

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. *End of*. As his sons said. Anything else would not be tolerated. A brave rearguard action in the face of insuperable odds was one thing. Anything resembling victory and peace was another. (F.Q. 266-67)

Jacobson has confessed that Finkler is something of an archetype. Both Tyler, Finkler's wife, who although a Gentile seems to be more Jewish than her husband, and Libor Sevcik, a Jewish retired history teacher and Hollywood reporter who supports the state of Israel, are very critical of Finkler's actions and ideas and reprimand him for his public display of shame and vanity: “ ‘Look at him,’ Libor said ‘parading his shame to a Gentile world that has far better things to think about, does it not, Julian?’ ”(F.Q. 26). Of course, Jacobson does not miss this opportunity to make fun of Finkler and what he represents: “A thinking Jew attacking Jews was a prize. People paid to hear that” (F.Q. 230). Jacobson also introduces the comic element by highlighting the contradictions in Finkler, for instance that it does not make much sense to join a group of Jews in order to turn on Judaism:

He was a thinker who didn't know what he thought, except that he had loved and failed and now missed his wife, and that he hadn't escaped what was oppressive about Judaism by joining a Jewish group that gathered to talk feverishly about the oppressiveness of being Jewish. Talking feverishly about being Jewish *was* being Jewish” (F.Q. 275).

The novel is humorous in tone, however the topics it covers are serious and sometimes almost depressive therefore the overall impression is more bitter than comic. Alongside Jewishness it comments on topics such as friendship, loyalty or belonging. Even though there is no happy ending, the novel cannot be seen as tragic. Even though Treslove, who had been trying to become a member of Jewish community, does not succeed, his friend finally recognises the importance of his heritage and community and manages to overcome the shame of being Jewish that he had to cope with since his youth. As a consequence of my analyses, it will be shown that

what is apparently a comic novel, with the constant use of the so-called black humour, is in fact a very serious protest against the humour, is in fact a very serious protest against the Jewish, which deprive individuals of their own identity. Thus although readers might find themselves smiling or laughing while reading the novel, they must take into account that the message is quite serious. However, the ending of novel is not overtly pessimistic, even optimistic. These and other traits of novel lead to consider *The Finkler Question* as a postmodernist novel. Black humour appeared to explore the absurdity of contemporary society.

**Works cited:**

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