

Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question* as a Post-Holocaust Fiction

- K.R. Ragi

Abstract: Howard Jacobson is a British author and journalist, best known for his comic novels that often revolve around the dilemmas of British Jewish characters. The paper proposes to explore his novel *The Finkler Question*, which is Jacobson's 11th novel follows the lives of three friends, Julian Treslove, Sam Finkler and Libor Sevcik, and tackles not just what it is to be a British Jew, but also the nature of friendship itself.

Keywords: Post- Holocaust fiction, Finkler, Jewishness

Post- Holocaust fiction is a contemporary genre of fiction writing. These novels 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. The novel taken for analysis- *The Finkler Question* has every essence. of this genre. Howard Jacobson is an award-winning novelist and critic. He was born in Manchester and read English at Cambridge under F. R. Leavis. He taught at the University of Sydney, Selwyn College, Cambridge and finally Wolverhampton Polytechnic- the inspiration for his first novel- *Coming from Behind*. Other novels include *The Mighty Walzer* (winner of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize), *Kalooki Nights* (longlisted for the Man Booker Prize) and most recently, the highly acclaimed *The Act of Love*. He writes a weekly column for the *Independent* and has written and presented several documentaries for television. He lives in London. *The Finkler Question*, written in 2010 by the British author Howard Jacobson, won the Man Booker Prize in the year 2010. It falls into the genre of 'Comic Novels' and has won the prize since Kingsley Amis' *The Old Devils* in 1986. It is the eleventh book by Jacobson and narrates the life of three friends- Julian Treslove, Sam Finkler and Libor Sevcik. The story tries to unravel what is it to be a British Jew and the nature of friendship itself. A brief summary of the plot is necessary. 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 thick 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, but it delves deep into emotions, but also into relationships, identity and so forth. 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. It is

the story of Julian Treslove, who is not a Jew, but he is relentlessly in search of what it means to be Jewish- politically, socially, economically, romantically, intellectually, emotionally, culturally, musically, sexually and so on. He has only a “timid” awareness of his place in the universe “ringed by a barbed wire fence of rights and limits”. The whole crux of the story is that he wants to be a Jew- in order to explore the ancient, vast, intensity of being one. The story is also about Treslove's long time best friend as well as worst enemy- Sam Finkler, a spurious but popular and successful philosopher who is always on television and all other sorts of media. Finkler is Jewish and has always intimidated Treslove on his being a Jew and the greatness of the race. Treslove since childhood has cherished to be one like him, which he never achieves, specifically because of the fact that, he is not meant to be one, rather he is incapable of becoming anything in particular. Treslove uses the word 'Finkler' to mean 'Jew' and thus, the title of the book comes to mean “The Jewish Question”. The striking paradox in all these is that Finkler, albeit being a Jew, is an Israel- hater and joins a group called 'ASHamed Jews' while Treslove – a Gentile, craves to be one among the Jewish community. Libor Sevcik, their former teacher who is an ex-Hollywood journalist is mourning over his wife Malkie's death, with whom he had a lovely, fidel and long married life. His Jewishness is a long-marinated one and is described as intellectually “ritzzy”. He is pro-Israel.

One more important character in the novel is Tyler- the wife of Finkler. She is a non- Jewish but has been highly devoted into be one. Treslove thinks her for a Jew and sleeps with her so that through her he could know better of Finkler and thus Jewishness. But to his utter dismay, he discovers the truth that she is not a Jew. Tyler passes away in the novel. In a nutshell, the book is all about Jewishness and non- Jewishness. The whole novel traces the account of Palestine- Israel conflict. The author uses this aspect of “Post Holocaust” situation as a 'way in' to have a better perception of family, society, belief, culture, relationships, that is, the underlying essence of humanity. Julian Treslove has a fragile identity and his job of being a lookalike serves him right. He hasn't much opinion of working in BBC, in fact all who work in BBC, precisely because of the reason that he felt it made people limited- only to work and work to attain higher posts. He had had many women in his life and has two sons by two of them. He has been always been fancying that something is to befall him, leading him into deep mourning over death of his closer ones. He had all these not-so irrational side in him that made him desperate in front of his own and others' eyes. Once, in his student days, a gypsy astrologer tells him that someone called 'Juno' will change his life. The turn of events take place when after attending a party at Libor's home, he gets mugged by a woman who calls him “You Ju”, something that sounds like “You Jew”. This evokes in him the thought that knowingly or unknowingly, he has got something to do with Jewishness, even if he didn't want to be thus. But the fact is that he ardently wished to become one among them. The attack leaves him strangely cheerful and newly purposeful. Without losing much time, he searches in the internet for accounts of violence. Like that of anti- Semitic attacks against the Jews around the globe. He joins for a “Seder” dinner along with Libor and enters into an almost serious affair with Hephzibah, the great- great niece

of Libor. She is shortly to open a museum of Anglo- Jewish culture. She is not completely an orthodox Jew but tries to train Treslove, who in short, is trying to become a Jew. He is convinced to get circumcised but Hephzibah has been not at all particular about it. Back in college, Finkler had challenged Treslove that no woman is going to like him because he is not circumcised. "Circumcision", again for Treslove, becomes a boon that Jews have inherited. Later when he reads Moses Maimonides, he comes to know that it is done in order to retrain them from excessive sexual pleasure. This knowledge elates Treslove as he thinks that women have been dissatisfied with Finkler and it is because of the same reason that Tyler, his wife, slept with him. But again, to the dismay of Treslove, Finkler claims that being circumcised has not restrained him from having absolute sexual pleasure.

Jacobson has characterized the post- Holocaust condition of contemporary British Jews. The anti-Semitic attacks go on from time to time in the novel, as if a reverberation of what is happening in Gaza or West Bank back in Israel. Libor preserves his idea Israel, "Isrrrae" as he pronounces it, as a place in which history might one day force him to seek refuge. He is highly sympathetic to the cause of Jews. But Finkler, contrary to that, thinks that all these bragging about the suffering of Jews and Holocaust have in turn, done them all more damage. He is of the opinion that Israelites who believe that they should have their own land are in turn oppressing the right of people who want a land of their own, which is Palestine. He is of the opinion that this violence from the part of Jews has made them wrong in front of the world, and all these facts leads him to self hatred. It has resulted in the picturisation of them being victims and led to self hatred inside the community itself. Finkler won't even bother to utter Israel but referring to it as Palestine. For Finkler, the conduct of Israel is nothing but a moral aberration on which justice is to be brought to bear. But for Libor, it is more like a regrettable behavior of an errant family member. The fun lies in that Libor peppers his conversation with Jewishness to irritate Finkler and the latter retaliates with cod philosophical analysis. When Finkler comments their lengthy arguments, prefacing- "Here we go, Holocaust, Holocaust", Libor retorts with an equal amount of resignation- "Here we go, here we go, more of the self- hating Jew stuff". All these conversation, but, is incomprehensible for Treslove. He always feels left-out in the company of a group of Jews and this creates in him the want of becoming a Jew. If Finkler doesn't approve of admitting to self- hatred, he will certainly admit to shame. And thus, he joins an organization named "ASHamed Jews" in order to protest against Israeli actions. His wife Tyler doesn't support it. She thinks that it is over the board to get involved in such an organization. She understands without doubt that Finkler has got involved in it solely for the purpose to become more famous for having fathered and christened the organization. She says that it is littered with celebrities. Finkler even changes his first name from 'Samuel' to 'Sam' to expose his hatred. The position of Libor is also hardening as that of Finkler. He has been approached by an old friend of his- Emmy Oppenstein, actually his ex-girlfriend, with a request. She requests him to help her bring her some attention to the fate of her grandson who has been blinded by anti-Semitic attack. He brushes off the request because he clearly knows that

he can't do anything and it has been the way of the world. He says that it is not a matter of deterioration of compassion or "compassion fatigue". He says:

Except that it never was compassion that I felt. Compassion comes from another place. You can't feel compassionate towards yourself or towards your own. It's more fiercely protective than that. When a Jew was attacked, I was attacked. But it's too long ago now. Too long ago for us, and too long ago for those who aren't us. There has to be a statute of limitation. That's enough now with the Jew business. Let's not hear from any of you on the subject again, especially from you Jews yourselves. Have a bit of decency. Accept that when your time is up, your time is up. (p. 213-214)

By this, what Libor wants to say is that for a man who is reaching his end, he is helpless in case of dispute of morals, spirituality, etc. it is difficult for him to do anything further in this matter. He hasn't been able for long, to enter this dispute of territory. Likewise, Hephzibah finds that her museum door handles have been smeared with pork fat. Soon, Finkler's son gets hurt by a group of Zionists of "settler types" when he protested at a political debate on Israel's right to exist. Alex Clark is of the opinion that "What affronts Finkler most is his inability to accept debate, to allow the continuance of tradition of dispute and discussion that has characterized his relationship with Libor and, it is suggested, Jewish life throughout history". We discover soon that the three main male characters of the novel get disrupted from their own stands, solely because of certain relations. In case of Libor, it is Emmy, for Finkler it is his son and for Treslove, it is Hephzibah, his 'Juno'. It certainly points towards the post Holocaust condition of these people's conviction of their respective Jewishness- the way in which it sways in front of personal relations and decisions, giving an important message that there is something beyond community or any other human classifications. And that is, 'Humanity'.

On the part of Non-Jews, there is of course Treslove, who actually fantasises and glorifies being a Jew. He takes them for being intelligent, artistic, and aesthetic and people who have had a great history and a long saga of perseverance and sufferings. It would be quite interesting to note that, as said before, Treslove is a person who, from his childhood itself been engaged in himself expecting a catastrophe to befall on him. He always thought that he would meet with an end in some expected or unexpected circumstances. Later, these fears get extended to all women he happens to have affair with. He fears that his partner would be infected with some deadly disease and die in his arms, leaving him to bereave. It is a matter of luck for him that when he thinks of leaving a woman, the woman would have left him already, taking note of his strange nature. This apocalyptic urge in him is again rendered through the way he long to be a Jew in all sense, although he knew that he couldn't be one. He has been envisioning the glorified apocalypse in Judaist scriptures along with his own perceptions of what his life could be. Non- Jews find it reluctant to say what they think about Jewish concerns and Tyler refers to this as "self-preoccupation". "Finklers" are described as notoriously "touchy". Sometimes, the reader might find that 'Jewishness' is an ill- defined concept, it implicates neither 'Judaism' nor 'Jews'. Some might even think that Jacobson himself contradicted these ideas in the novel. But this is

what is all about the concept of confused Jewish identity in the Post-Holocaust era. One such instance can elucidate this. Hephzibah calls Finkler, the Jew “arrogant, heartless, self- centered, ambitious and convinced his intelligence makes him irresistible” (Jacobson, 2010, p. 241) as if attributing this combination is meant only for a Semite. But this same character cooks a meal with eight types of herring as a part of 'shtetl' cuisine, by getting herself stereotyped with the Jewish culture. It seems that there are more people who are of the same opinion like that of Finkler. Tamara Krausz- a member of 'ASHamed Jews' reacts over the talk on anti- Semitism:

Don't we have to show that to be a Jew is a wonderful and various things, and that it carries no more of a compulsion to defend Israel against all criticism than it does to live in constant fear. We are not, are we, a victim of people? As that brave Israeli philosopher Avital Avi said recently in a heartwarming speech in Tel Aviv which I had the honour to hear from the platform, it is we who are keeping the Holocaust alive today, we who continue where the Kapos left off. Yes, of course it demeans the dead to forget them, but to disinter them in order to justify carnage demeans them more”. (p. 169)

At this point it would be interesting to note what Jacobson himself has said about the whole thing. An excerpt from what he spoke at B'nai B'rith World Center in Jerusalem goes like this:

We are told to learn from the boy who cried wolf. Cry it too often and at last no one will come out to assist. But what if we aren't crying wolf?” he asked. “Anyway, who came to our assistance the last time?” Nevertheless, he continued, if reminding the world about the events simply causes the public to resent Jews more, should they then remain quiet? “It is vain to suppose we can thereby undo the twisted logic of being 'unforgiven' for the Holocaust,” he said, observing that the root of Holocaust denial is more psychological than political. (Rome, 2013).

Certain aftermaths of Holocaust in the contemporary era are various realizations regarding their Jewish identity. Realization in the characters takes place in different level. As Treslove saw a route to becoming Jewish via Hephzibah, so did Tyler through Finkler. And Finkler realizes it only after her death that although she had questioned Finkler's stance, she has a realization that nothing is exceptional and that all are contemptuous- be it a Zionist or an Anti- Semitist. She says commonly about the Jews in one of her messages to Finkler: “They are now just like ordinary bastards, half right, half wrong, like the rest of us” (Jacobson, 2010, p. 274). She even goes to the extend saying, “Because even you, my false, beloved husband, are not ALL wrong” (Jacobson, 2010, p. 274). In the case of Finkler, he comes to many realizations. In a meeting of the 'ASHamed Jews' a Gentile woman accuses that Israelites have been a bunch of racists. Although he has been an Israel-hater, he retaliates to this allegation, thus showing before us the dilemma of a British Jew of the Post Holocaust situation. He says to the woman:

How dare you, a non- Jew- and I have to say it impresses me not at all that you grew up in a awe of Jewish ethics, if any your telling me so chills me- how dare you even think you can tell Jews what sort of country they may live in, when it is you, a European Gentile, who made a separate country for Jews a necessity?... I can understand why

a Palestinian might say it feels racist to him, though he too inherits a history of disdain for people of other persuasions to himself, but not you, madam, since you present yourself as a bleeding heart, conscience- pricked representative of the very Gentile world from which Jews, through no fault of their own, have been fleeing for centuries... (p.236).

He understands that be a Zionist or an anti- Semitist, the position of a British Jew is the same. As for Treslove, he comes into an important realization, after he comes across an incident where a Jewish boy gets beaten up by English children who spew out on him anti-Semitic words. The boy bore it without uttering a single word, as if it is what the world has been doing and will do to him. Treslove sees, at the same time, Zionists go against Hephzibah's museum. A news breaks every Jew's heart- a Jew named Meyer Abramsky killed an Arab family, that enraged people all the more against Jew. He understands that there is violence without the discrimination of communities- violence by non- Jews upon Jews, Jews upon Jews and Jews upon non-Jews. And it is this violence that builds or distorts one's identity. He thinks a way out:

It would have been good, Treslove thought, had humans learned to apportion their lives similarly. Never mind fighting over land, simply parcel out the days. Muslims in the morning, Gentiles in the afternoon, Jews at night. Or some other ordering. It didn't matter who got when, only that they all got a part. (p. 294)

To sum it up, Treslove leaves Hephzibah, abandoning his idea to be Jew, because he knew that nothing is to achieved if he converted or not. Finkler leaves the organization of 'ASHamed Jews'. The whole novel becomes Post- Holocaust in the sense of what the characters who are British Jews/ non- Jews perceive of Jewishness. Libor, may be heartbroken for what he 'didn't do' for Emmy (well against his Jewish principles), suicides and rests in peace next to his wife's grave. The whole mindset of the Post Holocaust 'dilemma' and the sense of incompleteness could be extracted from the situation of Finkler- "It's from Hephzibah, with whom he is in frequent contact, that Samuel Finkler takes his cue. Her sense of incompleteness, of a thing not finished that might never have begun, becomes his sense. He never really knew Treslove either. And that too strikes him as a reason for lamentation" (Jacobson, 2010, p. 307). Although there are some who are of the opinion that Howard Jacobson shouldn't have won the Man Booker Prize for this novel, most of the reviewers agreed upon Jacobson's flawless prose and incisive examination of Jewishness. And, thus it becomes a towering example of Post-Holocaust fiction of the 21st century.

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