

# Anti-Semitic Representation in the *Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson: An Analysis

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**Abstract:** Every individual wants to live a contented and peaceful life. The constitution in fact allows individuals to have all the prerequisites. However, Jews were often deprived of such free space. The world history depicts Jews as swindler. They are considered as the Dhimi members of the society. They are always sidelined and ignored in gentile society. Julian Treslove one of the central characters of *The Finkler Question* tried to assimilate in the Jewish society but faced anti-Semitic hostility. The study is an attempt to understand the problems of British Jews. This study will try to explore hostility against Jews. It will try to explore issues related to anti-semitic prejudice and its consequences.

**Key Words:** Anti-Semitism, Other, Hostility.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

God is the creator of the world. He made all his creations as unique and one. All the creations are fulfilled with positive qualities. As every action has opposite reactions similarly, the creations of God reflect the hidden negative attributes. Forgetting the fact, that we all are the children of one creator individuals created their own groups, religions, society, customs etc. Moreover, they are in a race to prove one is superior and the others are inferior ones. Such competition brings the sense of hatred, hostility and extermination. Antisemitism is an example of such heinous attitudes of human beings towards Jews. Jews are considered as community aliens. They face indifference. They are eliminated from Christian and Islamic countries. They are forced to live the life of exotic others.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Tablet Magazine in a review on "*The Jewish Jane Austen, or England's Jeremiah?*" mentioned that Jacobson is strong enough to face and grow with anti-Zionist feeling. That is because he is capable to sort the anti-Semitic wheat from the anti-Israel chaff. He prefers to wage the combat against 'anti-Zionism'. Therefore, he has turned into England's anti-Zionism code-reader-in-chief.

In a special series of NPR books Jacobson considered as 'An Unexpected Jewish Writer'. It is described that he was not raised in a particularly observant Jewish home. He barely stepped into a synagogue as a child, and as a writer his intention was to never write about the Anglo-Jewish experience. When he started writing about Jews, he says, 'it astonished his family and friends — and he certainly surprised himself'.

In the article "*The Relationship Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism*" Henri Stellamn depicts that there is no difference between 'Zionists' and 'Jews'. It asserts "An attack on the Zionists is an attack on the Jews". To quote "It is our firm belief that there is no difference at all between the Jews and the Zionists. All the Jews are Zionists and all the Zionists are Jews and whoever thinks differently does not think logically. We consider World Judaism as our adversary and our enemy, as well as imperial ism and all the pro-Jewish powers that are advocating the recognition of this State that weighs heavily in the hearts of Arabs in Palestine"

Robert Wistrich<sup>1</sup> in the article "*Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism*" states that 'antizionism' is the historic heir of earlier forms of 'anti-Semitism'. 'Antizionism' uses a type of discourse and stereotypes concerning the "Jewish/Zionist lobby," Israeli/Jewish "criminality," "warmongering" that is fundamentally manipulative and anti-Semitic.

Aída Díaz Bild in the article "*The Finkler Question: Very Funny is Very Serious*" discusses that 'Humour' has become a source of 'salvation' for the Jews, allowing them to survive in a hostile world. Author depicts that Howard Jacobson celebrated the important role that 'comedy' plays in literature. He regrets the false division between 'comedy and seriousness' that critics have created and believes that 'comedy reaffirms the value of life by offering us a way to transcend our sadness and misfortunes'. Writer says "In *The Finkler Question* humour indeed fulfils this redeeming function and allows Jacobson to tackle the dark forces of anti-Semitism".

Ilan Zvi Baron in the article "*The Jewish Question in The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Unanswered Question? Exploring The Jewish Question in Literature and Politics*" explains that Jewish political thought is no longer concerned with what used to be called the 'Jewish Question'. This Question addressed what political space exists for the Jews in modernity. Michael Walzer explains that there were only two (humane) answers: "Assimilation and Zionism".

However, there were more than these two. According to Walzer, in a sense all answers spoke to two spatial options. As he writes, "The question itself might be phrased as follows: What political space is there for Jews in the modern world? The first answer points toward citizenship in inclusive democratic states; the second answer toward sovereignty in the land of Israel."

In the thesis "*Transcending Techniques in Counselling for Grief and Loss with Philosophy*" author Dianne inquires into the historicity of 'self and others' and opines that requires 'an ethics of *époché*'— ethical, right restraint. It again adds Story, history and historical consciousness enclose each person's fore-structures of understanding that shape and determine the ways one sees and interprets in the world. It concludes "Grief and loss" are ultimate situations in life. "Grief and loss" often injures human beings mercilessly. Author mentioned that people rejoice at their strength being confident. Similarly, in pain and weakness they despair. But one needs to have the power of acceptance. "Grief and loss" plays an important role in transforming people therefore; being counselor one should be humble.

### 3. ANALYSIS:

Howard Eric Jacobson is one of the most eminent English novelists. Jacobson was born on 25 August 1942 in Manchester in Lancashire. He was brought up in Prestwich. Jacobson is a British writer and a journalist. He is well-known for writing comic novels. In *Telegraph* it is mentioned "Spot him across a room and you would not guess that he is our funniest living writer". The works of Jacobson's revolve around the plight of British Jewish characters. He is a Man Booker Prize winner for the book *Finkler Question*. He was educated at Stand Grammar School in Whitefield before going on to study English at Downing College. Howard Jacobson studied at Cambridge University. Jacobson married three times. He got engaged when he was a student at Cambridge. After graduation, he married his first wife Barbara in 1964. They have a son named Conrad Jacobson. In late 1964 Jacobson and Barbara shifted to Australia. Barbara and Jacobson were separated when he was in Australia. He married his second wife, Rosalin Sadler, in 1978 and got separated in 1995. In 2005, Jacobson was married to a radio and TV documentary maker Jenny De Yong.

Jacobson taught English at Wolverhampton Polytechnic in the West Midlands during 1970s. Jacobson got the material for his first novel *Coming From Behind* from this experience. *Coming From Behind* (1983) is a campus comedy. He wrote a travel book in 1987, titled *In the Land of Oz*, which was researched during his time as a visiting academic in Sydney. His novel *Peeping Tom* (1984) is a comedy of sexual jealousy. *The Very Model of a Man* (1992) is a re-working of the Cain and Abel myth. *No More Mister Nice Guy* (1998) is the story of television critic Frank Ritz's mid-life crisis. The novel *Mighty Walzer* (1999) is set in the Jewish community in Manchester during the 1950s. His novel *The Mighty Walzer* is about a teenage table tennis champion. Jacobson admits that there is more than an element of autobiography in it. The book received the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic writing and the Jewish Quarterly Literary Prize for Fiction in 2000. His two non-fiction books are *Roots Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews* (1993) and *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997). *Roots Schmoots: Journeys among Jews* is an exploration of his own Jewish roots whereas, *Seriously Funny* is an analysis of comedy and its functions. In *Who's Sorry Now* (2002) Jacobson effortlessly lists the comedies and tragedies of the sexual battlefield through protagonist Marvin Kreitman. *The Making of Henry* (2004) is a comic story of love, hope and disappointment. Howard Jacobson's most recent books are *The Finkler Question* (2010), winner of the 2010 Man Booker Prize for Fiction; *Zoo Time* (2012); *J a novel* (2014) and *Shylock Is My Name* (2016). A collection of his journalism work is titled as *Whatever It Is, I Don't Like It*, was published in 2011. *The Finkler Question* deals with the concept of Jewishness and also discusses love, loss and male friendship. Jacobson won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for *Zoo Time* in 2013. In September 2014, Jacobson's novel *J a novel* was shortlisted for the 2014 Man Booker Prize. His novel *Kalooki Nights* (2006) was also short-listed for the Man Booker Prize. In an article on *Tablet Magazine* Jacobson described *Kalooki Nights* as "the most Jewish novel that has ever been written by anybody, anywhere"(01). It won the 2007 JQ Wingate Prize. Apart from writing fiction Jacobson also contributes a weekly column for *The Independent* newspaper.

The style of Jacobson's fictions is mainly discursive and humorous. His works are based on male/female relationship and the Jewish experience in Britain. Jacobson is compared with prominent Jewish-American novelist Philip Roth. To quote from *Telegraph*—"Like Roth, Jacobson has made versions of himself his subject, gnawing on his own entrails. Like Roth, he is enraged. Like Roth, his books can be seen as a kind of anger management, not diminishing the fury but transmuting it into laughter. Both are in the taboo-breaking business. Both are obsessed by men and women and the harm they do each other. Supreme exponents of bitter mirth, both are capable of explosive loveliness on the page" (01). Jacobson has described himself as "a Jewish Jane Austen". He also states, "I'm not by any means conventionally Jewish. I don't go to shul. What I feel is that I have a Jewish mind, I have a Jewish intelligence. I feel linked to previous Jewish minds of the past. I don't know what kind of trouble this gets somebody into, a disputatious mind. What a Jew is has been made by the experience of 5,000 years, that's what shapes the Jewish sense of humor, that's what shaped Jewish pugnacity or tenaciousness" (Jacobson 1). In an article in *Telegraph* Jacobson asserts, "I don't think Roth would understand the feeling that being Jewish might be about being apologetic and finding the space in the cracks" Jacobson states, "comedy is a very important part of what I do." (01)

*The Finkler Question* (2010) is a very interesting novel by Jacobson. It is an interesting novel about three friends. The book questions what it means to be Jewish in an anti-semitic world. Julian Treslove is a former BBC radio producer and Sam Finkler is a popular Jewish philosopher, writer and television personality are old school friends. They had very different lives, still they remained good friends. Libor and Finkler have lost their wives and. Once they had dinner together at Libor's grand apartment in central London. That evening Treslove was attacked while walking home. He felt that he was attacked by a woman who whispered the phrase "You Ju" at him. After much rumination, Treslove believes what the attacker meant was "You, Jew". Treslove got into a relationship with Hephzibah, the great-grandniece of Libor. He was haunted by his adulterous affair with Tyler, Finkler's deceased wife. Finkler joined an ashamed organization which favoured the Palestinians over the Israelis over their land disputes. Novel discusses about concept of Jewishness and anti-semitic prejudices against Jews.

Judaism refers to the religion, philosophy or the way of life of the Jewish people. It is one of the oldest monotheistic religions. It was founded over 3500 years ago in the Middle East. There are about 15 million followers of Judaism who are called Jews. Judaism was founded by Moses. Judaism traces its heritage to the promise of God made with Abraham and his roots that God would make them a sacred people and give them a holy land. Judaism is also a convention grounded in the religious, ethical and social laws which are expressed in the Torah (the first five books of the *Hebrew Bible*). Jews refer to the Bible as the *Tanakh*, (an acronym for the texts the Torah, prophets, and writings). Other important texts are *Talmud* (is a central text of Rabbinic Judaism consists of two parts *Mishnah* and *Gemara*). It is also the first major work of rabbinic literature. There are four major movements in Judaism till present time notably orthodox, conservative, reform, and reconstructionist. These tell that God revealed his laws and commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai in the form of both the written and oral Torah. Although different in views, Jews keep on to be united on the basis of their common connection to a set of sacred narratives expressing their connection with God as a holy people. (*Jewish Virtual library*)

Anti-semitism is a prejudice against Jews or hatred of Jews. It encompasses the hostile actions or discrimination against Jews as a religious or ethnic group. People who possess such feelings are called 'Anti-Semites'. Anti-Semitism can be considered a form of racism. It tries to project the Jews as inferior to other people. In 1879, German journalist William Marr coined the term 'Anti-Semitism'. It denotes the hostility to or hatred of Jews. It also talks about the hatred of various liberal, multinational and international political inclinations of the 18th and 19th centuries often associated with Jews. Jerome Chanes in his book *Anti-Semitism: A Reference Handbook* identifies six stages in the historical development of anti-semitism.

Anti-semitism is easily classified historically as pointing to at least half a-dozen varieties. (1) The pre-Christian anti-Jewish activity in the ancient Greco-Roman world, most of which was not what we would call "anti-semitism," was primarily ethnic in nature. (2) There is the classic Christian antisemitism of antiquity and the middle ages, which was religious in nature and which extended into modern times. (3) Traditional Muslim antisemitism is—at least in its classical form—highly nuanced in that Jews are *Dhimmi*, members of a protected class. (4) There is the political, social, and economic anti-semitism of Enlightenment and post Enlightenment Europe, which laid the groundwork for racialist anti-semitism. (5) There is the racial anti-semitism that arose in the nineteenth century out of Enlightenment thinking and that culminated in Nazism. (6) Finally, the contemporary anti-semitism of Israelophobia and "Zionism Equals Racism," a relatively new phenomenon, is what many characterize as the new anti-semitism. (Chanes 06)

These six stages could be merged into three categories i.e. "ancient anti-semitism, which was primarily ethnic in nature; Christian anti-semitism, which was religious; and the racial anti-semitism of the 19th and 20th centuries." (Chanes 06)

Early Christians considered Jews to be responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Such dogma has brought the horrible consequences for the Jews. The Holocaust is the most distinguished act of anti-semitism. It is also known as the final solution, a mass devastation which happened between 1933 and 1945. Jews faced countless harassments and brutalities. They were forcefully segregated from their land. The Jewish minority achieved some rights after the Enlightenment in Europe. Gradually, Europe turned to become more secular, and Jews were assimilated into mainstream society, this led to the birth of political forms of anti-semitism. People targeted Jews for their ideas and their roles in the society. The Nazis and their associates exploited Jews during World War II, resulted in the Holocaust. It is the systematic murder of Jews in Europe. Adolf Hitler wanted to create a pure 'Aryan Race' in Germany. Therefore, he tried to banish the Jews from Germany. In a report of *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* it is mentioned that-

In many Middle Eastern countries, anti-semitism is promoted in state-controlled media and educational systems, and militant groups with political power, such as *Hamas*, use genocidal language regarding Jews and the State of Israel. The former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, repeatedly declared the Holocaust a "myth" and that Israel should be "wiped off the map." In Europe, anti-semitism is increasingly evident among both far-right and far-left political parties. And in the United States, some Jewish students on some college campuses are confronted by anti-semitic hostility. (01)

Holocaust is an example of anti-Semitic prejudice against Jews. It took place because of the moral and societal failures of Germans. Jews around countries nations felt unsafe for such hostilities. Christians denounce Jews from their society for the death of Jesus. Christian anti-semitism deals with the hostility of Christian churches and Christian groups towards Judaism and the Jewish people. Anti-Semitism is the criticism of Israel. People often project the bigoted stories about Jews but there is always the other side of the coin. In the words of Jerome Chanes, “Anti-Semitism presupposes that the Jews are radically ‘Other’, fundamentally different from the mainstream population—different, therefore deviant.”(03)

From the time of Alexandria till present era Jews are always considered as exotic other. People of worldwide have stereotypical notions about Jews. Jews are considered as heretics, Christ killer, swindlers. They are even seen as hostile, cunning, vindictive and cowardice. Stereotypical notions associate with Jews are trickery and deceitful. Eminent figures like Martin Luther said that people are at fault for not slaying Jews. Various authors make an attempt to project the conditions of Jews in the world. Howard Jacobson in his award winning novel *The Finkler Question* depicts the condition of Jews from the point of view of a gentile. Jacobson confess that he feels like Treslove in *The Finkler Question*, “I am still a bit of gentile looking with my nose pressed against the window of Jewishness, thinking, How fantastic! What great jokes they make! Look how warm they are! Look how deeply they love, and so on!” (NPR 2010:3)

The book deals with the concept of Jewishness and its meaning. The question it hoists is the question of identity. Who or What was/is one in reality? It talks about the importance of history and background of an individual. The story moves around Julian Treslove. One night he was assaulted by a lady who called him ‘You Jew’. Treslove believed that it was an act of anti-semitism. After this incident he was obsessed with the question of Jewishness. Treslove was attracted to cultural standpoint of Jews instead of religious. He tried to understand the mannerisms of Jews life, their sarcasm and body language. Treslove seems to be more clear-sighted about the Jews' problems.

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. (166-67)

Treslove wanted to live his life like a Jew whereas his friends Finkler and Lenin tried their best to hide their identity as Jews. They wanted to live the life of a gentile. Sometimes character in the book tries to reverse the circumcision. “It was a password to madness. Jew. One little word with no hiding place for reason in it. Say 'Jew' and it was like throwing a bomb.” (185-86)

It is pertinent to note that by using humour as a weapon Jacobson tried to get rid of the pains of anti-semitism by making fun of Finkler and ashamed Jews. Jacobson has confessed that Finkler is something of an archetype: “There are a lot of Sam Finklers . . . which is why I invented him - I invented him out of what I saw” (NPR 2010: 2) Finkler’s son also faced an anti-Semitic incident explained to his dad: ‘And then I knocked his 'You knocked a Jew s hat 'Is that so terrible?' 'Jesus Christ, of course it's 'Least of all a Jew! What? bulldoze Palestinian villages. Did you hurt him?' 'Not enough.' 'This is a racist assault, Immanuel.' 'Dad, how can it be a racist 'I'm not even going to answer 'Do I look like a racist? Look at me.' 'You look like a fucking little anti-Semite'. 'How can I be an anti-Semite? I'm a Jew.' (189-90) Anti-Semitic prejudice against Jews were shown through the characters of Hephzibah, is setting up a museum of Anglo -Jewish culture, and Emmy, whose twenty-grandson has been stabbed in the face and blinded by an Algerian. Hephzibah worried about the steady escalation of anti-semitism

It had started again, anyway. Her emails streamed reported menace and invective. Thrown through a window of the museum. An Orthodox man in his sixties was a bus stop in Temple Fortune. Graffiti began to appear again on synagogue walls, 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? (2010a: 282)

It was a collective unconscious fear shared by most of the British Jews: “An anxiety had settled has settled like a fine dust on everything she did and everyone she knew- They too were looking for askance... but too were bitterly uncertain future which bore fearful resemblances to an only certain past. Paranoia, was it? She asked herself. The question itself had become monotonous to her.” (257)

## CONCLUSION:

Howard Jacobson gives an imprecise conclusion in *The Finkler Question*. He shows that Treslove leaves Hephzibah and goes back to his life as a celebrity whereas Hephzibah cries for Libor who is dead and Treslove, who has left her, while Finkler seems to have gone back praying three times a day not only for those already dead – Libor and Tyler but also for Treslove. The threat of anti-Semitism has not disappeared but readers are not left with sense of failure and disappointment. In the book Jacobson tried to create a bond between gentile and Jew. Therefore, he projected Finkler and Treslove as friends. Time and again one can witness hostile acts against Jews. Treslove (gentile)

wanted to be the part of Jews but he too faced hostility. Finkler wanted to forget their origin as Jews and joined ashamed group. Unable to handle pain Libor committed suicide. Anti-semitic prejudice brings nothing but sense of alienation, isolation, antipathy and pain. Such heinous act of anti-Semitism resulted with tragedies like holocaust. Adolf Hitler in his reign buried the concept of universal brotherhood or oneness in culture. Rather Hitler became the demy God and offered Jews hell fire of concentration camp. Such feelings of discrimination create hurdle in the path of universal brotherhood. It not only confines the progress but also kills the feelings of oneness. It not only confines the progress but also kills the warmth feelings of oneness. Finkler, Libor and Hephzibah were forced to face hostile actions. They were never allowed to have feeling of equality. That is why Finkler never wanted to reveal his identity as a Jew. "Jew. One little word with no hiding place for reason in it. Say 'Jew' and it was like throwing a bomb." (185-86)

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