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Renouncement Of Identity and Jewish Life in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*

Pankaj Kapoor

Assistant Professor, Govt. College for Girls, Patiala

Abstract: Identity crisis becomes the question of life when gentiles refuse the Jews not only their rights, their land but also their existence. Jews have gone through many existential plights and experiences full of agony. They are suppressed by the social system. The anti-Semitic activities have always alienated the Jews from the mainstream. Jews are exiled and boycotted from their host nations. They have to face anguish for mere survival. Simple peaceful life has eluded them. Identity is dynamic process. A single connotation cannot define this term. It takes different definitions from different perspectives. The question "Who am I?" often becomes an untold mystery for Jews. Howard Jacobson has projected the concept of identity in terms of Jews in his novel The Finkler Question. He has illustrated the quest of a Jew to adopt a non-Jewish identity and similarly a non-Jew wants to adopt a Jewish identity. Anti-Semitic view never forgives anyone whether the person belongs to Jewish identity or not. Therefore, in an anti-Semitic world everyone needs to struggle for his own existence. The present paper makes an attempt to show how anti-Semitic hostility has influenced the Jews and at the same time some of the gentile also in their quest for identities.

Key Words: Identity, Anti-Semitism, Jewishness, Existence, Plight.

It is a fundamental need of human beings to establish their identity in relation to others. It strives to project one's inner self in relation to the outer. It seeks to find extraction and to establish connections to the past as well as to the future. To establish a personal identity an individual has to break the typical stereotypical walls and confront with the external world. This might destroy the previous identity can also create confusion and question the existence of individual.

Desire to get an own national and social identity often strike the psyche of Jews. As, they have suffered a lot for survival. Due to anti-Semitic prejudice Jews have to face enormous brutality. They are often boycotted socially and even attacked. They have more experiences of hatred and animosity than love. They are mocked at for their religious rituals, laws and occupation. In earlier times a number of Jews have to live their life in exile and consequently they were compelled to choose an occupation as per the demand of the situation. The expertise of the Jews in money lending business has always become a source of trouble for them. They have to opt for this occupation as it was a question of their survival. Hence, non-Jews hardly understand the side of Jews and criticize them. Thus, they faced banished, hatred and also suffered from Diaspora consciousness. "People hate Jews because they hate Jews, Libor. They don't need an excuse. The trigger isn't the violence in Gaza. The trigger, in so far as they need a trigger – and many don't – is the violent, partial, inflammatory reporting of it. The trigger is the inciting word (Jacobson, The Finkler Question 156)".

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. He is well-known for writing comic novels. He is a Man Booker Prize winner for the book Finkler Question. His novel The Finkler Question deals with the concept of Jewishness and also discusses love, loss and male friendship. The Finkler Question (2010) is a candid work by Jacobson. It depicts the life journey of three friends. The novel talks about the survival of Jews in an anti-Semitic world. Julian Treslove is the protagonist of the novel. He is a former BBC radio producer. Another important character is Sam Finkler, a writer and television personality. These two characters have different lifestyles but even then they are good friends. It is shown in the novel that once they go

for a dinner Libor's residence in central London. That evening, Treslove was attacked by some persons when he was going back to his home. He said that he heard a lady's voice "You Ju" when he was attacked. Treslove considers that attacker was calling "You, Jew". Treslove was in a relationship with Hephzibah. She was the great-grandniece of Libor. It was depicted in the book that he was preoccupied with his traitorous affair with Tyler. She was the wife of Finkler. Finkler was not happy with his Jewish status. So, he joined an organization which favored the Palestinians over the Israelis. The Novel discusses the concept of Jewishness and anti-Semitic prejudices against Jews. In an interview titled "Howard Jacobson: Finding Humor In Jewish Nerves" in NPR Jacobson explains- "I never really knew very much about it," he adds. "I'm still a bit of a Treslove, actually. This may be where Treslove comes from. I'm still a bit of a gentile, looking with my nose pressed in against the window of Jewishness, and thinking, 'How fantastic! What great jokes they make! Look how wild they are, look how warm they are, look how deeply they love, and so on!' "I am a touch like that still" (Jacobson, The Finkler Question 105)."

Modern-day Jews have developed the sense of identity with the emergence of Zionist movement. Tragic history of the Holocaust is testimony of pain, sufferings and barren lives of Jews. It depicts nomadic culture of Jews. Post Holocaust novelists like Howard Jacobson explores the life journey of Jews in relation to most heinous act of anti-Semitism i.e. the Holocaust and the after effects of it. Jacobson has depicted the impact anti-Semitic prejudice in the life of an individual in his novel The Finkler Question. He further shows that one biased violence act changes the thinking process of Treslove. Treslove is basically a non-Jew. Before meeting his Jewish friend Finkler he never had any idea about Jews and its society. For Treslove, Finkler is the microcosmic representation of macrocosm. He imagines a picture of Jewish society from his impression of Finkler. Jacobson presents Finkler as a hero in front of Treslove. Treslove has a desire to be like Finkler "If this was what all the Jews look like, Treslove thought, then Finkler was a better name for them than Jew. So that was what he called them privately- Finklers. 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 (Jacobson, The Finkler Question 70)". He was in fact ready to leave his own identity, own existence and want to live the life of a Jew, a cursed, discarded life of a Jew. "After everything that had happened, wasn't it a word for private consumption only? Out there in the raging public world it was as a goad to every sort of violence and extremism. 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)".

The Jewish identity is the reason behind the attack on Tresolve. One night after having a party at Libor's house he was going back to his own residence. At that very moment Treslove was attacked by one lady calling you Jew. Initially Tresolve was unable to identify what the lady has actually called him? But after the hours of pondering he got the conclusion that it is actually phrase "You Jew" the lady had called him. This incident forced Treslove to think or to rethink about the life of Jews. However, Finkler himself stands as an inspiring figure to him. Above all author Jacobson himself yearns to live the Jewish life of Finkler. Jacobson wants to show the beauty of Jewish life through the character of Treslove.

Through, the character of Finkler Jacobson raises the "The Jewish Question" of identity and space. Tresolve considers the word Finkler as identical to Jewish. Therefore, Finkler's question is actually the "Jewish Question". Finkler often feels ashamed of his own identity of being a Jew therefore; he renounces that identity and considers himself as an English man. The history of Jews past too horrified to remember. Even, the trauma of the Holocaust haunts the psyche of Jews in the present time too. Moreover, recurrence of anti-Semitic incidents brings more hatred, horror and distress for their own people. Person like Finkler believes that the equality of the Jews living in other nations can be brought by discarding the notion of creating the State of Israel. That is why; he has joined the organization named ashamed Jews which is in reality an anti-Zionist organization. However, looking at development of his son as a perpetrator indulging in violent anti-Zionist activity he leaves that ideology. Thus, Jacobson reveals that question and journey of Jews through the character

of Finkler. Baron in the article "The Jewish Question In The 21st Century: An Unanswered Question? Exploring The Jewish Question in Literature and Politics" explicates- "The Jewish Question which asks what political space exists for the Jews in the modern world… Assimilation became integration. Consequently, it would appear that the Jewish Question has been answered and is no longer of significance in contemporary Jewish thought…The Question has served as a key plot element in the novels of two award winning Jewish novelists, Howard Jacobson and Michael Chabon. Their work helps to reveal not only that the Jewish Question remains relevant, but that its answers could challenge the underlying premises upon which the Question was based (Baron, 06)."

Both Tresolve and Finkler have different disappointments from their individual life, culture and group. Therefore, they want to leave their own group and identity and adopt the culture and identity of the other ones. However, when they step into the society of the other groups they realize the uniqueness of their own groups. Even, Libor's suicide also brings deep impact in their own decision to adopt the culture and identity of other group.

"He felt the same about the taxi driver. Who takes a lonely old man to a noted suicide spot in the late afternoon and leaves him?.. It was his fault in more ways than he could number. He had neglected Libor in recent months, thinking only about himself. And when he had spent time with him it was only to talk sexual jealousy. You don't talk sexual jealousy – you don't, if you have a grain of tact or discretion in your body, talk sexual anything to an old man who has recently lost the woman he had been in love with all his life. That was gross. And it was grosser still – worse than gross: it was brutal – to burden Libor with the knowledge of his affair with Tyler… It wasn't out of the question that this uncalled-for confession was among the reasons Libor had ended his life – so that he didn't have to bear his friend's turpitude any longer". (Jacobson, The Finkler Question 266)

Libor is often worried about his own group people and their future. Such fear ultimately leads him to commit suicide. Therefore, realizing the actuality of life and understanding the pain of Jewish people Tresolve leaves the idea of living as a Jew. Similarly, Finkler also adopts his own culture and identity and mourns for his deaths of his people. As, there is no end to Jewish mourning, he says:

"Hephzibah visits but he is sleeping. 'Don't wake him,' she says. She believes he knows she's there but doesn't want to acknowledge her. She has become part of all that disgusts him. Like Libor, he wants out. She's wrong. But it doesn't matter. What she might be wrong about today she will be right about tomorrow… Libor has no children, we will say Kaddish for him, Hephzibah and Finkler had agreed. As a non-Jew, Treslove was not permitted to recite the Jewish prayer for the dead and so had been excluded from their deliberations… It's so all-embracing he might as well be mourning the Jewish people. Not that he draws the line at Jews. Even Treslove gets a look in, a sideways glance of grief, though he is alive and well – as well as he ever can be – and presumably back working as a lookalike. It's from Hephzibah, with whom he is in frequent contact, that Samuel Finkler takes his cue. Her sense of incompletion, 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. There are no limits to Finkler's mourning". (Jacobson, The Finkler Question 368-70)

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