

EXISTENTIALISM INSTINCT IN JACOBSON'S BOOKER PRIZE WINNING NOVEL *THE FINKLER QUESTION*

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Abstract

The Finkler Question by Howard Jacobson is an interesting novel about three friends, two of whom are Jewish and one who decides to be a Jew. The novel won the Man Booker Prize in 2010 and remains as the first comic novel to win the prize. *The Finkler Question* is a very interesting and entertaining novel that questions what it means to be Jewish in an inherently anti-Semitic world. The story of the novel moves around the Julian Treslove, the protagonist and his two friends Finkler and Labor. Finkler is his old school friend and at the same time his envy also while Labor is their school teacher and now days a friend just double to their age. Labor and Finkler are Jews while Treslove finds himself aloof whenever they discuss over the anti-Semitism and Jewishness. Treslove struggles with his new found identity as a Jewish Gentile while Labor Sevcik mourns his wife's death and Sam Finkler learns to cope with his intricate feelings about being Jewish. The central character of the novel Julian Treslove is having an identity crisis and he is not sure where he stands on Israel and Palestine or on Holocaust memorial (the Jewish culture in contemporary London). Julian's self awareness and doubt on being a Jewish starts when he has been attacked by a woman. Julian, who isn't Jewish, takes the attack as a license to explore all aspects of Jewishness, which has fascinated him since childhood. It was then, thinking of his friend Sam Finkler, that he adopted Finkler's name for his own silent euphemism. Treslove has only a "timid" awareness of his place in the universe. He wants to be part of something vast and ancient, something abounding and intense.

Keywords: *The Finkler Question*, Jewishness, Treslove....

EXISTENTIALISM INSTINCT IN JACOBSON'S BOOKER PRIZE WINNING NOVEL *THE FINKLER QUESTION*

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The *Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson is an interesting novel about three friends, two of whom are Jewish and one who decides to be a Jew. The novel won the Man Booker Prize in 2010 and remains as the first comic novel to win the prize. *The Finkler Question* is a very interesting and entertaining novel that questions what it means to be Jewish in an inherently anti-Semitic world. The story of the novel moves around the Julian Treslove, the protagonist and his two friends Finkler and Labor. Finkler is his old school friend and at the same time his envy also while Labor is their school teacher and now days a friend just double to their age. Labor and Finkler are Jews while Treslove finds himself aloof whenever they discuss over the anti-Semitism and Jewishness. Treslove struggles with his new found identity as a Jewish Gentile while Labor Sevcik mourns his wife's death and Sam Finkler learns to cope with his intricate feelings about being Jewish. The central character of the novel Julian Treslove is having an identity crisis and he is not sure where he stands on Israel and Palestine or on Holocaust memorial (the Jewish culture in contemporary London). Julian's self awareness and doubt on being a Jewish starts when he has been attacked by a woman. Julian, who isn't Jewish, takes the attack as a license to explore all aspects of Jewishness, which has fascinated him since childhood. It was then, thinking of his friend Sam Finkler, that he adopted Finkler's name for his own silent euphemism. Treslove has only a "timid" awareness of his place in the universe. He wants to be part of something vast and ancient, something abounding and intense. But the real problem with Julian's identity is that he's not at all Jewish. Treslove's sense of self is a quest of one's small place in a universe. *The Finkler Question* is an accomplishment of the sense of Jewishness. It is a novel which rounds up the theme of identity crisis and Jewishness, runs throughout exhaustively and sometimes exhaustingly. It is one of those themes which will not

surprise any admirers of Jacobson. Mr. Jacobson's power of cultural observation is so keen that it has become the marvel piece on Jewish identity.

Jacobson's novel *The Finkler Question* won the Man Booker Prize in 2010. The first comic novel to win the prize, since Kingsley Amis's *The Old Devils* in 1986 after 3 decades. Truly deserve the Booker Prize, this novel left lasting impression to reader's mind through its witty, humoristic, intelligent and satiric comment on Jewishness. The story of the novel moves around Julian Treslove, The protagonist and his two friends Finkler and Labor. Finkler and Treslove are two old friends and at the same time his envy also while Labor is their school teacher and now days a friend very senior to both of them. Labor and Finkler are Jews while Treslove finds himself aloof whenever they discuss over the anti-Semitism and Jewishness. Julian Treslove with the history of unsuccessful carrier, jealousies with Sam Finkler, who is a popular Jewish philosopher, writer and television personality. Despite a contrast lives and prickly relationship both of them remain friends, keeping contact with their former Teacher Labor.

One fine night, after the dinner at Labor's grand apartment in central London Treslove is attacked while walking to home. He is mugged by a woman who hit the words "you Jew" at him. This attack completely changed his life. After much rumination, Treslove believe what the attacker means "you Jew". The curiosity to know Jewishness brings him closed to grandniece of Labor and Treslove also had adulterous affair with Finkler's deceased wife Tyler.

The Finkler Question is an accomplishment of the sense of Jewish Identity. The theme runs throughout in the novel dominantly. This is the popular theme of Jacobson's work which will not surprise any admirer of Jacobson. He describes the novel as "the most Jewish novel that has ever been written about anyone anywhere". The finest American writer of the last century Bellow, Malam and Roth restlessly interrogated their own Jewishness and Jacobson couldn't leave himself with this challenge. The novel has been the marvel piece on Jewish identity. Mr Jacobson's power of cultural observation make the book more authentic

The central character of the novel Julian Treslove is having an identity crisis. He is not sure whether he stands on Israel and Palestine or on Holocaust memorial even as per of Jewish culture in contemporary London. The real problem with Julian identity is that he is not at all Jewish ' Treslove's sense of self is a quest of one's small place in a universe.

The quest started from a melancholy dinner with a couple of old friends. Both were recently made widowers, to mulling over the sadness of the night, he had decided to walk a little around a part of London he knew well. It was exactly 11.30 when the attack.....

When she departs, she spitefully calm him “you Jew” or at least that’s what he thinks she said.(Jacobson 15)

Julian, who is not Jewish, takes this attack as a license to explore all aspects of Jewishness which has fascinated him since childhood. It was then thinking his friend Sam Finkler . Before meeting Finkler , Treslove finds Jews as a secret person-small, dark and beetling. But Finkler was almost orange in color and had extravagant features. Prominat jaw, long arms and big feet. Treslove generalized that “if this was all Finkler looked alike, Treslove thought then Finkler which sounded like sprinkler was a better name for them. So that was he called them privately- finklers”(Jacobson 20)

Treslove’s rumination over his identity to proved him as a jew runts throughout in the book after mugged by a woman. The long discussion with Libor over Treslove made clear to Treslove that he wanted to be a Jew. Libor does not believe that he is attacked by a woman because woman do not make a practice of attacking men in the street and calling them Jew especially when they are not Jewish. When Treslove asked to Libor that obeying his father prove him as a Jew Libor said,

Julian you don’t look Jewish, forgive me ,I don’t mean it as an insult but you are the least Jewish looking person I have ever met ...I would stake my life on it that no Jewish gene has been near the gene of a member of your family for ten thousand years ago there were not any Jews. Be grateful. A man can live a good and happy life and not be a Jewish (Jacobson117).

Treslove’s life is full of accident. His own identity, his marriage, his affairs and his carrier everything and now this accident. Treslove began to be awake night after night resolving the attack in his mind. He felt left out that no one was there to whom he share the incident. He found his life with no meaning to live it. There was a tendency to sudden gloom in him and more than that a hunger for gloom. He was not satisfied with his own person and tries to suck out

others. A search for the identity, that came with more power than he could manufacture out of his own desires.

The two more Finkler Sam and Libor also share the story. Samuel Finkler who is now a philosopher and successful author is just contrast to Treslove . He does not pay much attention to the religion to which he was born into. Besides this, he also found a group named Ashamed having support of the people who have gone public with their unhappiness about Israiel's policies towards the Palestinies while Libor who survived World War II is completely Jewish.

Treslove had the affair with the Tyler, wife of Sam Finkler. Though they were not looking for an affair but somehow they found a way of showing kindness to each other over and above the convention of adultery filled by anger and envy. Tyler and Treslove both wore each other to work out their rivalry with Treslove. Tyler called herself a means to work out their rivalry"Was it true, what she had said? That sleeping with Sam's wife gave him temporary honorary entry to Sam's success?"(Jacobson)

The theme of the novel is unexceptionally finding the identity within the Jewish community to share their grief and approach universal fact of humanity. There is essentially no inconsistency in the plot of between characters. Plot of the novel concerns characters dissect ideas in their heads or they argue with themselves about the things occurring. It extends to the limit that readers start to feel like they are reading nonfiction book. No character left with the influence of theme of Jewishness. Their discussion round over the subject there only. In the first part Tyler and Treslove in their one of the meeting discusses Jewishness, Tyler's reply,

Two year I put in learning how to run a jewish home, how to be a jewish mother. Ask me anything you need to know about Judaism and I can tell you, how to kosher a chicken how to light three shabbes candles, what to do in a mikwa...(Jacobson 93)

Though the subject not appeals to everyone but the way Jacobson presents it is commendable. Jacobson's sense of humor to present a serious subject with intelligence is enough to push readers to read. The main character Treslove is pretty unpleasant. Jacobson creates this character in a false impression between sincerity and incompatibility. He presents a serious subject through a insincere character. Subject's emotional gravity is lost because the reader is

always suspicious that they should not take things too seriously. Treslove is unsuccessful to catch the sympathy of readers.

So all this Jewishness and non Jewishness is what the book asks the reader to signify. Apart from its formal spirit Jacobson also used Judaism as his approach to convey a message. The approach becomes personal to universal. The author is trying to explore the deeper question of family, society, belief culture and relationship which are fundamental to humanity. This is the way we understand our lives, our circumstances our random births and certain deaths. The book is really in all about presenting snobbishness of religion or in specific over whelming beauty of Jewishness. Jewishness is metaphor for human culture in general. AS National Public Radio declares The Finkler question tackles an uncomfortable issue Jewish identity with satire, is so biting, so pointed. The book is like an essay on Judaism to read as it gives a complete pictorial plethora on Jews and their culture. Following Extract from the book is zest of the paper,

This time they had painted death to Jewesses on the walls. Jewesses was Muslim hate talk. There were more and more reports of children being abused as Jewesses in mixed school. Hephzibah considered this is a far more seriously menacing development than the swastikas with which white thugs defaced Jewish were creeping things. They were made low and vicious by their faith. If you trod on them their Jewishness would ooze out of them. It was directed not at individual Jews but at Jewish essence. And of course it came from a part of world the conflict was already soaked in blood, where hatred were bitter and perhaps incredible”(Jacobson275)

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