

## Depiction of the Fragile Nature of Human Relationships in Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the fragile nature of human relationships in *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson, exploring how different factors such as Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict influence the emotional interactions and bonding among the major characters of the novel; Julian Treslove, Sam Finkler and Libor Sevcik. The paper analyses how these external factors affect the personal lives of the characters while highlighting the challenges for Gentiles and the Jewish people to maintain relationships in the post-war British society.

**Keywords:** Jewish Identity, Anti-Semitism, Israel-Palestine conflict, Zionism

Howard Jacobson is a British-Jewish novelist. He was born in England in 1942. He is popular for his wittiness, sarcasm, and in-depth examination of themes like Jewish identity, love, and human relationships. He graduated from Cambridge University. He has taught English at Selwyn College, England. For three years, he has been a lecturer at the University of Sydney.

In the past few years, his literary contributions include the novels *The Finkler Question* (2010), *Zoo Time* (2012), the dystopian novel *J* (2014), *Shylock Is My Name* (2016), and *Pussy* (2017), a witty mockery on Donald Trump. His recent novel is, *Live a Little* (2019). He has written fifteen novels and seven works of non-fiction.

Jacobson won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Award in 2000 for *The Mighty Walzer* and then again in 2013 for *Zoo Time* ("Penguin Random House"). He was also honored with the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize, regarded as British Jewry's most prestigious literary award, for *The Mighty Walzer* in 2000. *Who's Sorry Now* (2002) was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2002, while *Kalooki Nights* (2006) earned a longlisting for the Man Booker Prize in 2006. Notably, *The Finkler Question*, "a scorching story of friendship and loss, exclusion and belonging, and of the wisdom and humanity of maturity", won the Man Booker Prize in 2010. ("The Man Booker Prize 2010")

*The Finkler Question* revolves around three main characters: Julian Treslove, Samuel Finkler, and Libor Sevcik, all residing in north London. Libor Sevcik, a former teacher, is a Czech Jew, while Sam Finkler is a British Jew, and Julian Treslove is a Gentile. After fleeing Czechoslovakia in 1948, he moves to America and works as a showbiz commentator in Hollywood. He eventually settles in London with his wife, Malkie, and goes on to teach European history. He often describes his teaching as offering his students “a taste of the wider world” (*The Finkler Question* 23). At the start of the novel, Libor is approaching his ninetieth year and is grieving the recent loss of his wife, while Sam and Julian, both in their late forties, are dealing with their own personal struggles. Sam’s wife, Tyler, passes away unexpectedly in the same month that Libor loses his wife, which leads the two men to reconnect and spend more time together while Julian is a melancholic man, father of two sons by two different women whom he never marry.

The novel explores themes such as rivalry in male friendships, relationships with women, jealousy, and the challenges of aging and confronting death. The three main characters in the novel hailing from different backgrounds provide a foundation for exploring these themes. The fragile nature of their relationship is shaped by complex factors such as Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

Julian is unable to comprehend how Libor manages to survive the death of his wife, Malkie. Libor tells Julian that the only reason he continues to live is all because of his promise to Malkie that he would not die before her. Julian envies the bond Libor has with Malkie, specifically of their contemplation on a joint suicide they have planned if one of them falls ill. Here, the male bonding is characterised by more of competition than of compassion. In contrast to Libor, Sam reacts to his wife Tyler Finkler's premature death with anger rather than sadness which suggests unresolved conflicts in their relationship. Despite sitting by her deathbed, Tyler never opens up to him, remaining secretive as they lack communication. Consequently, Sam suppresses his grief until he can process his emotions.

Julian's attempt to control his fractured relationships by keeping his girlfriends and sons apart highlights the struggle for order in his life. As Russell Berman observes, “Treslove ...has fathered two sons with two different women, stylizing each failed relationship in the terms of Italian operas, one Puccini and one Verdi, with one son named Alfredo and the other Rodolfo” (Berman 63). His failure to compartmentalize, shown through his confusion with Rodolfo and Alfredo, reveals the fragility of human relationships. The accidental bonding of his sons contrasts with his intentions, emphasizing the unpredictability of his control over relationships. As Josephine and Janice compare their experiences with Julian, their initial outrage turns to a shared understanding which reveals the complex nature of human relationships.

Julian’s increasing suspicion of Sam’s relationship with Hephzibah is fueled by his obsession with the belief that Sam secretly desires what Julian has-both a connection with Hephzibah and a perceived link to Jewish identity. Julian’s thoughts about whether Sam has sought out a prostitute after being with Hephzibah, driven by guilt or a need for satisfaction, reveal the deepening of his emotional insecurities. His fixation on Sam’s possible guilt or satisfaction in sexual acts underscores Julian’s struggle to escape his anxieties surrounding intimacy and relationships.

Relationships between the characters are so fragile that Libor couldn’t connect himself easily with others even after Malkie’s death. His friends set him up with Emily, a woman almost

half his age. However, Libor feels a stronger connection to Hugh, Emily's late boyfriend, who took his own life two years ago. Libor confesses to Julian, "I could use the company but I can't go through the pain of getting it" (TFQ 44). Libor sends flowers to Emily and claims impotence as an apology for the awkward date. Impotence is not just physical but also emotional for Libor. It evokes his memories of jealousy over Malkie's admiration for Horowitz, whom she referred to as Maestro, have left him emotionally impotent. When Julian declines Libor's dinner invitation, choosing instead to be alone, Libor warns him "One day you will regret needing to be alone, Julian, when you have no choice" (TFQ 48). Although Julian already feels guilt for rejecting the lonely, elderly Libor, he is preoccupied with his own sense of emotional impotence which restricts him from fully confronting his friend's loneliness.

Libor feels an intense isolation throughout the novel leading up to his suicide since he feels very disconnected with the world. His death serves as the tragic consequence of his unspoken grief and loss of Malkie, and strained relationships he has had with his friends. Libor's death deeply affects Julian, who struggles with guilt and a sense of responsibility for his friend's suicide. Julian's belief that he has burdened Libor with the confession about his affair with Tyler illustrates his complex emotional entanglement with his friend's death. According to Ned Curthoys "Libor's demise can be read as succumbing to fatalistic despair and Jewish self-loathing in response to the recrudescence of antisemitism encouraged by Finkler's public repudiation of Judaism" (Curthoys 13).

In a conversation with Libor about their deceased wives, Sam expresses envy for Libor's deep grief, contrasting it with his own sense of worth as a husband and Libor's steadfast fidelity. After Malkie's death, Libor attempts to cope with his grief by hiring a piano teacher, a skill Malkie has once nurtured in him. Libor's reflects on his sorrow emotionally: "Just when you think you've overcome the grief, you realize you are left with the loneliness." This reflection makes Julian question if it is preferable to never know happiness at all, thus sparing oneself from the inevitable pain of loss.

While Libor remained faithful to Malkie, Sam feels guilty for his infidelities with Ronit Kravitz, his production assistant, but justifies them. Moreover, he claims indifferently and unemotionally, "It takes two to create fidelity, and while he wouldn't say Tyler didn't deserve his, she certainly hadn't made it easy" (TFQ 52). Julian seems to envy the grief Sam and Libor appear to feel, but it is actually Sam who is consumed by anger, particularly given the emotional distance he had experienced in his marriage with Tyler. This anger, partly, explains the gulf between his late wife and him, as well as his struggle to reconcile with his loss. These observations highlight the fragility of human relationships through Sam's guilt and rationalization of infidelity, contrasting his inability to mourn with Libor's deep grief. Sam's envy of Libor's emotional connection, and Julian's aversion towards happiness underscore the complexity and tension in human bonds, marked by unfulfilled hopes.

According to Petr Anténe, the author of the book "Howard Jacobson's Novels in the Context of Contemporary British Jewish Literature",

*The Finkler Question* suggests ... a more complex situation regarding not only anti-Semitic attitudes in Britain but also the Jewish community members' views of themselves. For the first time in Jacobson's novelistic oeuvre, their opinions of Israel stand at the centre of the characters' perception of themselves as Jews. (Anténe 98)

Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and Israel-Palestine conflict affect not only the relationships between the major characters of the novel- Julian Treslove, Sam Finkler, and Libor Sevcik- but also their interactions and bonds with other people in their lives.

After his first sexual encounter with Tyler, a Christian later converted to Judaism by Sam before their marriage, Julian is bewildered by his lack of guilt for betraying his friend, Sam, even though both believe Sam "had it coming" (*TFQ* 78). Julian reflects on his relationship with Tyler as a form of connection to Jewish identity, considering that Sam "koshed his wife from the inside, regardless of her origins" (*TFQ* 78), despite her not being Jewish by birth. According to Andrzej Gąsiorek, Julian "is drawn to Jewish women who (he believes) can provide him with the sense of identity he lacks" (Gąsiorek 889). He continues to wrestle with the complexities of Jewish life, even after Tyler's tragic death. Earlier in the novel, Tyler had reached out to Julian, asking if they could watch Sam's new television program together, which heightens the indifference and insincerity Julian feels towards Sam. This moment underscores the influence of Jewish identity, paving the way for the fragility in human relationships.

In the novel, political and ideological attitudes of the major characters towards anti-Semitism and Jewish identity play a vital role in shaping the personal relationships between them. Tyler is totally disappointed with Sam as he publically announces his shame in 'Desert Island Discs', a TV programme, on Israel for its inhumane attacks on Palestine. Moreover, she is frustrated that he expresses his further contempt for Israel's actions by his enrollment in 'ASHamed Jews', an anti-Zionist group of Jews proud to be ashamed of their Zionist Jews. Finkler tries to escape his Jewish identity. On the contrary, Julian is increasingly obsessed with Jews and Jewishness. "[H]e isn't Jewish but becomes increasingly philosemitic, learning some Hebrew" (Moseley 514). Julian's interaction with Tyler highlights his emotional vulnerability and longing for acceptance. When Julian expresses his love for Tyler, she identifies Julian's desire to be more like Sam.

You have been lovely to me. I am under no illusions, Julian. I get men. I know the bizarre way masculine friendship works. ... And I thank you for having made me feel it was me you wanted.'

'It was you I wanted.'

'I believe it was. But not as much as you wanted Samuel.'

Treslove was horrified. 'I, want Sam?'

(*TFQ* 141)

This conversation traces Julian's obsession with Jewish identity while exposing his emotional fragility that is exposed through a romantic connection. This can be further explained by his experience at his first Seder where he finds the second part of the ritual, where Jews express gratitude to God, confusing. His discomfort, confusion, and a sensation of outsider at the Seder illuminate how human relationships can be impacted by cultural and religious identities.

Also, Julian's unease as he watches Sam and Hephzibah, the Jewess, speaking "the secret language of the Jews" during the Seder reflects his continued struggle with his Jewish identity. Despite his growing emotional bond with Hephzibah and his increasing connection to Jewish culture, he still feels like an outsider in this world. His infatuation with Hephzibah, the Jewess, adds another layer to his emotional vulnerability and inability to connect with people. His attraction to Hephzibah represents an idealized connection that may offer him a sense of emotional fulfillment. Julian's assertion that Hephzibah is "what he'd been promised" (*TFQ* 192)

reveals the extent to which he idealises her, connecting her to a larger sense of fulfillment that transcends the individual. This assertion suggests that Julian constructs an image of Hephzibah not just as a woman, but as a symbol of his own desires and aspirations, particularly his longing for a meaningful connection with both a woman and Jewish identity. However, Julian's discomfort when discussing his own family further complicates this idealization.

His refusal to paint a child's face at a family birthday party reveals his avoidance of family and his inability to reconcile his sense of self with familial or domestic expectations. This irony underscores his emotional inadequacy in personal relationships. On the other hand, Hephzibah possesses and cherishes her Jewishness that is not confined to a passive role of heritage. She takes on her Jewish identity to an intellectual level by being part of a cultural project that challenges the stereotypes Julian might have on Jews. Hephzibah is "not biased in reporting about the Middle East like other Jews are" (TFQ 195). Her understanding of Jewish identity is more pragmatic and dynamic that she wants to establish a Holocaust museum in London to preserve and continue the Holocaust memories inherent to the Jewish community.

Libor and Sam view anti-Semitism and Jewish identity differently which leads to occasional ideological conflicts between them. Libor's views on these two topics are so opposite to that of Sam's that he needs Libor's promise not to discuss these topics whenever they meet. For Libor, a Zionist, any Jew who hates another Jew is an anti-Semite. Finkler complains on Libor's remarks: "Oh, here we go, here we go. Any Jew who isn't your kind of Jew is an anti-Semite. It's a nonsense, Libor, to talk of Jewish anti-Semites. It's more than a nonsense, it's a wickedness" (TFQ 54). At the outset, Finkler seems to be a more liberal Jew, but while he detests "his fellow Jews for their clannishness about Israel, Finkler couldn't hide his disdain for Treslove for so much as daring, as an outsider, to have a view" (TFQ 30). During his conversation with Sam where Treslove tells Sam about the mugging incident, Sam remarks "That's an insensitive question. You know very well since when. Now that's not enough for you. Now you want another part of us. Now you want to be a Jew" (TFQ 81). Perplexed Treslove asks Sam 'Who said I want to be a Jew?'. (TFQ 81). Sam is irritated and tells Julian that he wants to be a Jew and adds that he is not the only one who wants to be a Jew. To this, Julian sharply responds 'Well, you don't' (TFQ 81). Julian's longing to be a Jew, and Sam's lack of Jewishness despite being a Jew are evident. On the other hand, Sam doesn't welcome Julian's hidden desires to follow Judaism, revealing his clannish behavior and his intention to snub Julian's motive like any other Jew. Sam, growing more detached from his Jewish heritage, develops a disapproving stance toward Treslove's entry into the Jewish community. These notions complicate the characters' differences in understanding the Jewish identity which widens their emotional bonding.

Julian helps a Sephardic Jew boy by breaking up a group who taunts the boy. But to Julian's shock, the boy shrugs indifferently and leaves the place without expressing gratitude to Julian. By the boys' indifference, he is reminded of Libor's words to Emmy about the inevitability of suffering for a Jew. This moment highlights Julian's sense of disconnection from the world and his inability to bridge the gap between himself and others.

## Conclusion

The novel *The Finkler Question* explores the fragility of human relationships influenced by external factors such as Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and the ongoing Israel-Palestine



conflict. Also, the novel emphasizes the struggles faced both by Gentiles and Jews in maintaining relationships within the post-war British society. The major characters in the novel undergo a sense of disconnection from the world due to their inability to bridge the gap between themselves and others which renders them emotionally vulnerable.

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