SITUATING HUMOUR IN SELECT WORKS BY HOWARD JACOBSON

Ramdinmawii

Department of English

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Master of Philosophy in English of Mizoram University, Aizawl.

DECLARATION

Mizoram University

December, 2011.

I, Ramdinmawii, hereby declare that the subject manner of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

This is being submitted to the Mizoram University for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English.

(Candidate)

(Head) **(Supervisor)**

MIZORAM UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that "Situating Humour in Select Works by Howard Jacobson" written by Ramdinmawii has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the M.Phil. regulations of Mizoram University. The dissertation is the result of her own investigation. Neither the dissertation as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted to any other University for any research degree.

(Dr. MARGARET L. PACHUAU)

Supervisor/Assistant Professor,

Department of English

Mizoram University.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I thank the Almighty God for granting upon me sound health and all the required resources.

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Margaret. L. Pachuau, who has been my source of inspiration throughout my research. I can only thank her for her sincere guidance, constant encouragement and moral support which she has rendered while she supervised my work.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the esteemed Mizoram University as well as the Department of English, Mizoram University.

I feel blessed for the incessant prayers that my parents have offered for me throughout my research and the unconditional love and affection that I received from them.

Lastly, I also express my sincere gratitude to all my near and dear friends for their contributions.

RAMDINMAWII

CONTENTS **PAGE**

CHAPTER I

SITUATING JACOBSON IN LITERATURE

Born on 25th August 1942 in Manchester, London, Howard Jacobson received his education from Cambridge University. He lectured at the University of Sydney for three years before returning to England where he taught English at Selwyn College, Cambridge. His famous works include *Coming From Behind* (1983), *Peeping Tom* (1984), *The Very Model of a Man* (1992), *No More Mister Nice Guy* (1998), and *The Mighty Walzer* (1999). The last novel was set in the Jewish community in Manchester during the 1950s, and it won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for humour writing and the *Jewish Quarterly* Literary Prize for Fiction in 2000. Finally, *The Finkler Question* won him the Man Booker Prize in the year 2010. It was the first humouric fiction to win the said prize since Kingsley Amis' *The Old Devils* in 1986. For all this while, humouric fiction had not gained literary interest and wide acceptance and thus the award was all the more significant in terms of an enhanced literary perspective. Two of his non-fiction works – *Roots Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews* (1993) and *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997) – were turned into television series.

This study will particularly dwell upon the various humouric modes and conventions that have been successfully employed by Howard Jacobson in three of his novels, *The Finkler Question* (2010), *Kalooki Nights* (2006), and *The Making of Henry* (2004). It shall attempt to portray an in-depth study of the various techniques and styles that fall within the aspect of humour, as denoted in his works. Jacobson's handling of humour certainly depends upon the amount of humour that he is able to work out of any situation in life, whether dark or tragic, failures or successes and make it "seriously funny". Subsequently, this chapter will focus upon aspects related to the theory of

humour that can be applied to the proposed dissertation. It will also include a brief biographical sketch of Howard Jacobson, and situate him in the realm of humour and literature.

As a broadcaster, newspaper columnist and author, Jacobson has placed himself firmly at the acerbic end of the humour scale. He is best known for writing humouric novels that often revolve around the dilemmas of Jewish characters. Being a Jew himself, most of his works dwell upon the lives and experiences of the Jews. In one of his interviews with Elizabeth Manus, Jacobson also admits that,

> I'm not by any means conventionally Jewish… 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 humour, that's what shaped Jewish pugnacity or tenaciousness.[1]

The chapter shall first dwell upon aspects related to humour and the theoretical nuances regarding the same. As a theory, the theory of humour is an inherently diverse subject and it perhaps may not have a single, unified field of theory. As a genre, it may also be considered to be rather sensitive because of the fact that there is a fine balance between pleasure and pain. Some of the greatest humour, sometimes, may often comes close to tears and sorrows, and of bitterness as well as anger. Borrowing Ben Jonson's words, "… Nor, is the moving laughter always the end of Comedy, that is

rather a fowling for the people's delight, or their fooling"[2], thus, laughter is not the only defining outcome of humour.

The history of the theory of humour could be regarded as a series of variations on the ground that humour involves a kind of triumph over whatever is hostile to human or social good. Even though there may be innumerable modifications and changes about this conception, by and large, the theory of humour has been categorized into two major strands in *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, edited by Maurice Charney. The first classification is the notion of laughter as the ridicule of some deficiency or error which can be regarded or shown as foolish. The resulting scornful laughter of this kind is mainly aggressive and therefore its painfulness or its derogatory effect upon a person is usually lessened in theory by an appeal to its instructive or corrective function. The other main theoretical category relates humour to festive rejoicing, in which the resulting laughter is cheerfully sociable and fooling is in order. Here the subversive spirit of carnival is licensed as a celebration of the life-force triumphing over its enemies.

In Plato's dialogue *Philebus*, Socrates (Plato's teacher, who frequently appears as a character in Plato's works) takes a negative view of humour and amusement where he explains that the object of laughter in comedy is the "ridiculous". The ridiculous, more specifically, is the self-ignorance of others when they falsely believe that they possess wisdom. In other words, laughter results from a feeling of pleasure at seeing others suffering the misfortune of being deluded about their own wisdom. Socrates argues, however, that the soul experiences both "pleasure and pain"[3] when amused by the

ridiculous portrayed in comedy: one can feel pleasure and laugh when presented by such fools in comedy, but to feel pleasure at other's misfortunes is to feel malice, which he considers a "pain of the soul."[4] The laughter and pleasure, then, that is experienced when enjoying comedy is mixed with malice and pain.

Another important negative thesis about humour is expressed by Plato in his most famous dialogue, the *Republic.* In this dialogue Plato (through Socrates again) describes the educational system that must be followed by an ideal caretaker- the "guardians"-for the ideal society. The most important characteristic trait for being a guardian is that a person is ruled by a reason, and in that manner he can be in control of base desires and emotions. When those who hold power in society are ruled by base desire and emotion, they tend to make undesirable decisions and be tempted to abuse power. Socrates describes amusement leading to laughter as an emotion that leads to other violent emotions and loss of control over oneself. Therefore he maintains that the "guardians" should not be "lovers of laughter".[5] In the ideal society, then, any story or theatrical portrayal of persons or gods as "overcome by laughter"[6] should be suppressed. According to him, this would prevent the young from thinking that losing control of one's emotions is a good thing.

Plato's student Aristotle maintains a similar line about amusement and laughter. In his work on drama, the *Poetics*, he describes comedy as "an imitation of people who are worse than the average."[7] The ridiculous portrayed in comedy, he continues, is a kind of ugliness at which laughter is evoked derisively. Like Plato, Aristotle thinks of amusement and laughter as essentially derisive. Aristotle also agrees with Plato about the possible

drawbacks of excessive indulgence in humour. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he explains that the best life is lived when ruled by reason. He does consider "relaxation and amusement as a necessary element in life,"[8] but carrying humour to excess is vulgar and improper. "A joke is a kind of abuse,"[9] and only jokes that abuse what is itself improper gain Aristotle's acceptance. Humour which is not in service to reason is of negative value: and those who enjoys humour excessively are "slave" to it.

The seventeenth-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes also observes in *Human Nature* that those who laugh often are the same as those who are "greedy of applause from everything they do well"[10]. He sees laughter as arising from joy, primarily from the feelings of an achievement or the realization of one's own ability. The realization of their superiority can be sparked by the presentation of the failings of others; in that others are seen to be incapable, the self-image is enhanced by comparison. For this reason, laughter is evoked at the infirmities and absurdities of others. Hobbes concludes that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves"[11]. Like Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes too has the notion that amusement is most commonly found in that which is considered inferior to a person; he adds that the joy found in such evidence of other's weaknesses derives from the assurance which is received regarding their own relative superiority. Hobbes' view of humour, like Plato and Aristotle, is negative: he characterizes the experience of humour and amusement as base and, further, unlikely to be of great help to social unity.

In like manner, Howard Jacobson utilizes the superiority theory in most of his works in order to bring out the humouric aspects of life by inculcating the workings of Jewish humour at its best. Jacobson explains how Jewish humour works, " We make more fun of ourselves than anybody else could. In the act of doing that, we appear to be on the back foot but we're winning…"[12]. For instance, a novel like *The Making of Henry*, with all its concerns about love, death and human relationships, contains an expansive and compassionate vision about humanity. Henry asks his mother "Isn't it a Jewish speciality to enjoy making jokes at our own expense ? Hasn't that been the saving of us, our comic self-awareness?" "I call it rubbing at an itch," his mother replies, "If you leave it, the itch will eventually go away of its own accord. But of course it feels like relief while you're rubbing." [13]

On the other hand, theorists such as Francis Hutcheson have noted that there are instances of humour that have nothing to do with the follies of others. Hutcheson, an Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher and minister observed, in *Reflections upon Laughter*, that witnessing someone in pain puts us in "greater danger of weeping than laughing."[14] Likewise, in response to the theory of humour proposed by Plato and Aristotle, Hutcheson, Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer offers some other perception towards the theory of humour with a strong notion that the presence of some perceived inferiority does not seem too much of a necessary nor sufficient for humour. According to Hutcheson, amusement derives from the intellectual recognition of an incongruity: "the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea."[15] What amuses is the incongruity, rather than any incidental degradation of the object of

amusement. This is evident in examples in which there is humour based upon wordplay or creative imagery, with no evidence of human inferiority. The humour that is occasionally found in human error is derived not from the sense of others' inferiority, but rather from a high opinion of humans as possessing wisdom that separates them from the animals. Immanuel Kant, the great eighteenth-century Prussian philosopher agrees with Hutcheson in that humour is derived from an intellectual recognition of incongruity. He denoted a certain reason as to why there is a resulting pleasant reaction to that intellectual recognition. According to Kant, laughter occurs at absurdities not because the intellect itself pleasure in that which frustrates it, but the intellect's attempt to reconcile an absurd conjunction of ideas causes a physical response which is found to be pleasant.

The incongruity theory is also carefully employed by Howard Jacobson in his works by juxtaposing certain events and ideas through his writings which actually evolves laughter and amusement when coming to terms with them. In *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson frequently talks about the ASHamed Jews, a movement inspired by one of his characters by the name of Sam Finkler:

> …Sam's on the phone to them every minute God sends.
>
> And then there are the meetings.
>
> …Not public ones, as far as I know. Not yet, anyway.
>
> But they meet at another's houses. Sounds disgusting to me.
>
> Like group confessionals. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

> …Sam's their father confessor. "I forgive you my child.
> Say three *I Am Ashameds* and don't go to Eliat for your holidays."[16]

From these lines, the amusing juxtaposition between the Christian rituals of a confession with that of the meetings that is held by a fictional Jewish movement created by Jacobson, the ASHamed jews, can easily be deciphered. Jacobson also fuses some events of the Jewish sufferings in *Kalooki Nights* where there is a certain point that mentions:

> "you don't say "gassed" to Jews if u can help it.
> One of those words…gassed, camp, extermination, concentration,
> experiment, march, train, rally, German.
> Words made unholy just as ground is made unholy".[17]

This is inherently how Jacobson handles instances that are related to the incongruity theory in his works.

Various twentieth-century and contemporary philosophers have offered other approaches towards the major historical theories of humour. Among the most compelling and influential are those of Henri Bergson, John Morreall, as well as Ted Cohen. Bergson presents the superiority theory in a rather different angle from that of his predecessors in his influential essay *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* Bergson focuses on the social function of laughter and comedy. He thinks that there is one characteristic that all comic situations have in common: people are found to be comic, or in a comic situation, when they experience a sudden downfall, caused by their own "mechanical inelasticity." By this term Bergson refers to a certain rigidity of

thought or habit, which exposes one to errors of behavior or mishaps. He also argues that laughter is a kind of corrective to ways of thinking and acting that are detrimental to the greater good: we laugh at "a certain rigidity of body, mind, and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability."[18] One fine example that he has denoted is regarding a person running along a street who suddenly trips and falls. The fall, according to Bergson, is the result of "absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy."[19] Bergson's theory is often regarded to be falling into the superiority theory category, in that he agrees that amusement and laughter are primarily derisive and usually are directed at people demonstrating a certain kind of inferiority. However, his view is rather more drawn towards appreciating the comic. For him laughter and derision actually serve a positive societal purpose. For this reason he does not devalue or reject humour and laughter as Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes do.

Another interesting aspect of his theory is the representation of laughter and amusement as a cognitive state, rather than as an emotional state: he states specifically that "the comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence."[20] This imposes another significant deviation from other proponents of the superiority theory, who represent the response to the comic as an emotional state. By representing amusement as a cognitive state, Bergson's theory has a certain connection with most versions of the incongruity theory. John Morreall, however, favors with the theory that states that the cause of "humourous amusement" is incongruity. He claims that instances of humour tend to involve some "cognitive shift,"

or psychological reorientation. Just as several proponents of the incongruity theory describe, such shifts take place when some intellectual expectation is frustrated by reality, or upon some unexpected or absurd juxtaposition of ideas and experiences. To be amusing, the shift itself needs to take place in a context that is not somehow threatening or painful to the amused person. Morreall's theory is that humourous amusement is the enjoyment of a pleasant cognitive shift, though this amusement is often boosted by a simultaneous affective pleasure, (which is, pleasure that is derived from a positive emotion). He also suggests that one advantage of his theory is that it would explain as to why children are so prone to laughter, because for children, almost everything is new and unexpected.

Jacobson's handling of humour certainly depends upon the amount of humour that he is able to work out of any situation in life, whether dark or tragic, failures or successes and make it "seriously funny". Howard Jacobson's employment of humour in his writings is always at the heart of Jewish humour and in his words,

> It's partly to do with the seriousness of the Jewish imagination, which can turn a joke against itself. Jewish writers are sadistic toward their readers, not only Jewish readers… You tell a joke against yourself, you've achieved an intellectual moral superiority. We make more fun of ourselves than anybody else could. In the act of doing that, we appear to be on the back foot but we're winning…[21]

This statement is more or less in connection with the superiority theory that is proposed by Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Hobbes in that "the humour we find in comedy and in

life is based on ridicule, wherein we regard the object of amusement as inferior and/or ourselves as superior".[22] For them, humour is of a negative value because it lacks wisdom and reason and according to Hobbes "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves."[23] Howard Jacobson, in turn, carefully utilizes this superiority theory to reveal the Jewish experiences and what it actually feels to be Jewish, to be human and to suffer.

In tracing the history of Jewish humour, Jews have located humour in their lives for a very long time. The Talmud, particularly in the *aggadic* (narrative) sections, is repleted with witty asides and repartees, and in one famous account, the Talmud speaks of even God laughing. During the medieval period, the valuation of humour was institutionalized in Jewish communal customs, perhaps most famously in Purim *shpiel*s, the comic plays based on the book of Esther, continue today in Jewish communities across the globe.

Jewish humour, is regarded to be a distinctive cultural phenomenon and it first sets foot in nineteenth century Eastern Europe. In the marketplace, the synagogue, and in the home, the Jewish joke established itself into its own recognizable discourse. The *shtetl* (village) became home for the new Jewish-humour folk tradition--stories of the fools inhabiting the town of Chelm is but one example. Sustaining and enriching this street humour were new Jewish texts. Jewish writers, including Mendele Mokher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz, along with playwrights such as Abraham Goldfaden, have elucidated upon the bittersweet grumbling of the Jewish ethos and produced lasting classics of Jewish humour, which in turn fed the comic banter of Jewish daily

exchange. Jewish humour, have been regarded to be all about coping: Jews were miserable, and laughter kept them going. Jewish psychologists further deconstructed Jewish humour as introjections of this external hostility which is regarded as self-mockery. Freud writes, in signification of Jews, "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character."[24] It is also suggested that the Jewish jest is a survival tactic: By altering one's perspective, the Jew can accept the unsympathetic world for what it was. "Want to alleviate your big-time worries? Put on a tighter shoe,"[25] advises the Yiddish proverb.

The destruction of Eastern European Jewry in the Holocaust did not bring an end to the comic Jewish spirit, but it did change both its content and style. In pre-war European Jewry, humour was predominantly an internal affair-- the Jewish joke was an inside joke. The comic lines were in Yiddish, the religious allusions were familiar to all, the fears and frustrations shared across classes, and the context of the storyline shared histories. With the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish humour has developed itself into a significant cultural force. At the beginning of the twentieth century, an assimilated Jew, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, defined humour and articulated a now prevalent theory of comedy. Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* opens with a friction between funniness and feeling: "The comic demands something like a momentary anesthetic of the heart"[26] and "appeals to intelligence pure and simple"[27] Later on, a more overtly Jewish perspective on humour was brought into the forefront by the narrator of a 1966 Cynthia Ozick story, "The Pagan Rabbi." The narrator of this story, named for the biblical patriarch Isaac (which means "laughter" in Hebrew), defines laughter as a form of "assault".

Nearly a century after Bergson framed the theory of comedy, the Jewish comic actress Madeline Kahn highlighted pain as intrinsic to all laughter: "Laughter is a strange response. I mean, what is it? It's a spasm of some kind! Is that always joy? It's very often discomfort. It's some sort of explosive reaction".[28] The American comic actor and master of juvenile mania, Jerry Lewis, can also stand as a representative figure among the handful of Jews who became famous in the middle of the twentieth century for being funny. Like Lewis' career, much of this Jewish comic sensibility developed in the Jewish summer resorts in the Catskill Mountains northwest of Manhattan, an area that came to be known as the "Borscht Belt", between the world wars. In this area, performers such as Henny Youngman and Milton Berle served their apprenticeships before becoming household names and staples of network television. In the year 2000, novelist Philip Roth characterized Jewish humour as "a moment when Jewish self-infatuation was at a postwar pinnacle…when the aggrandizing appetite driving their Jewish mental audacity was beginning to look to be uncontrollable and an aura of cultural significance emanating as much from their jokes and…from their laughter and their clowning and their wisecracks and their arguments…"[29] Theater critic John Lahr also explains how, by importing aspects such as Jewish angst, Freud, literacy, irony into the discourse of mainstream comedy, performers such as Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Elaine May, Mike Nichols, amongst others "led comedy away from the ersatz to the authentic"[30]. This pervasive influence led the monthly *Esquire* to pronounce in 1965 that "for good or ill, the Jewish style, with its heavy reliance upon Yiddish and Yiddishisms, has emerged not only as *a* comic style, but as *the* prevailing comic style."[31] As a result of this triumph, this influence on American culture, Jewish humour began transforming

Americans' attitudes toward their own Americanness; toward all cultural and ethnic boundaries; toward prevailing explanatory paradigms in the media and academe; even toward such touchy subjects such as sex and violence.

Throughout the ages Jewish humour has characterized itself with wisdom and prophecy by colliding between two mutual values. They are inherently in terms of acknowledging the appeal of the prevailing wisdom while discrediting it and also by recognizing the comforts of home and inherited identity while insisting that intellectual integrity, moral system, and even artistic distinction more often than not require renouncing these comforts. Funny Jews, as Irving Kristol observed, inhabit "a knife edge between faith and nihilism".[32] The former obliges them to shape and subscribe to myths, narratives of unfulfilled chosenness such as that of the Lost Tribes while the latter deprives them of such reassurance. Such deprivation, however, eventually opens a crack, a difference, or a chasm, which, nature detests.

Theodor Reik has prophesied the coming of 'funny Jews' to bridge this chasm: with "the truly democratic spirit that breathes in Jewish jokes";[33] with "social justice…a better distribution of the goods of the world…equality for all";[34] with a dawning "realization of those predictions of the Jewish prophets, the transformations of swords into ploughshares".[35] Reik also maintains that these transformations will occur only when "Judaism as a religion will slowly disappear"[36]. Reik further prophesies that "Jewish jokes," which "started with heresies and allusions of timid aggression against the exaggerated demands made in the name of religion,"[37] will spur "the abolishment of religion."[38] Reik envisions this eradication not as a violent overthrow, not as a separation

of the elect from the unredeemable, but in terms of embracing all who desire to join the community of 'funny Jews': "the telling of Jewish jokes has the unconscious aim of cementing the bond that was originally founded on certain common values and on the awareness of Jewish isolation in the nations within which they live. Telling these jokes has…the significance of reaching one's arms out to the other fellow."[39]

Conforming to what Henri Bergson has proclaimed, "To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its functions, which is a social one…Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* signification."[40] Jacobson, in *Kalooki Nights*, skillfully blends the bittersweet Yiddish-inspired humour at which he excels. Being an acute observer of the bottomless embarrassment of Jewish adolescents, the novel takes the readers back to the boyhood years of Max Glickman and his two friends, Manny and Errol, who offer two extreme ways of coping with their discomfiture. Max's mixture of shame and transgression is extremely funny and also reveals a convincing character beneath the caricatures. At the heart of Max's story is the explanation as to why he has made so many disastrous choices, and why such a "lucky man" continually creates situations where he is the most willing of victims. This is an aspect where Jacobson is most admired. He always has the ability to bring out the humourous aspects even in the most tragic situation. The flashback to his "shikseh"41 wives and their mothers is denoted at the other end of the Jewish extended family which characterizes the novel. This is the hard-boiled humouric of over-statement, with wives and girlfriends denoted as suitably interchangeable: "Zoë, Chloë, Björk, Märike, Alÿs, and Kätchen."[41] As Max asks, "what does it say about me that the only people

with whom I am able to enjoy intimacy must have diaereses or umlauts in their names?"[42]

Kalooki is a card game, that Max Glickman's mother plays obsessively with a small circle of friends and admirers, except —reluctantly—on High Holy Days, although neither she nor Max's father has any time for religion. Max is the standard Jacobsonian male protagonist. He is a cartoonist whose masterwork, a comic history of the Jews, is entitled *Five Thousand Years of Bitterness*. Unsurprisingly, the title itself is inherently ironic and does not evoke laughter nor the comic side of life. Jacobson has created versions of himself as his subject, while gnawing on his own entrails. His books can be regarded to be a kind of anger management, not diminishing the fury but transmuting it into laughter. *Kalooki Nights* also is too angry to be entirely comic, yet is somehow hilarious, but this is how the Jewish humour works. It fuses both elements—the comedy and the anger—into a kind of verbal slapstick, as in this exchange between Max and his second (Gentile) wife, Zoe:

> Now Zoe was wondering why I had to look quite so Jewish quite much of the time.
>
> 'Because I am fucking Jewish,' I reminded her.
>
> 'All the time?''Every fucking minute.' 'Stop swearing,' she said.
>
> 'I'll stop fucking swearing when you stop asking me why I look so fucking Jewish.'
>
> 'Why is everything a negotiation with you? Why can't you stop swearing and stop looking Jewish?'
>
> 'What do you want me to do, have a fucking nose job?'[43]

Max becomes enmeshed not only with the religion which he thought meant nothing to him, but also with an Orthodox Jewish boy he grew up with but never especially liked, namely Manny Washinsky. Manny's sole act of distinction is to murder his domineering parents Channa and Selick by turning on the gas while they sleep. The scene in which Max's mother tells him resonates with madness and absurdity.

> 'Ma, just tell me what happened.'
>
> 'Channa and Selick have been found dead.'
>
> 'Christ!'
>
> 'In their beds, Max. They think gassed.'
>
> 'Gassed!'
>
> 'I know.'
>
> You don't say 'gassed' to Jews if you can help it. One of those words.
>
> They should be struck out of the human vocabulary for a while.[44]

Years later Manny is released from prison, where he served a token sentence, a television documentary firm, Lipsync Productions, convinces Max to look up Manny and help him examine his past and find out why he murdered his parents. Like a pair of rabbis, Max and Manny argue and discuss faith and community in half a dozen salt-beef restaurants and pizza parlors across London, but there is no satisfactory answer to any of it. Manny gassed his parents because they forbade his brother to marry the Gentile that he loved. Everything leads back to the Holocaust, and it succeeds in dragging Max into its spiritual vortex, the religion, or at least the community, that he tried to leave behind. Thus, the suffering of the Jews is always predominant in the works of Jacobson.

Jacobson's accomplishment in writing has been to discover the varied sources of interest in the lives of English Jews. *The Finkler Question* is characterized by his structuring skill and intelligence, and it denotes aspects in terms of the connections and differences, between vicariousness and parasitism, and between Jewishness, Judaism and Zionism. *The Finkler Question* is a novel about love, loss and male friendship. It once again explores what it means to be Jewish. Anti-Semitism is the language of loathing that looms large in *The Finkler Question*. Aspects related to the language of love, and that of laughter are predominant too, because this is a Jacobson novel, and is a comedy about 'tragedy'. Julian is never married, but he is the father of two sons, Julian feels bested in the matter of emotional depth and seriousness when his Jewish friends— Libor Sevcik and Sam Finkler, a TV celebrity and pop philosopher, are both widowed. Julian is later thoroughly humiliated at the hands of a female mugger whose parting words, as she makes off with his wallet and credit cards, are, or so Julian believes: "*You Jew*."[45] Thus he decides, in defiance of the mysterious mugger, as well as to fashion an identity for himself, that he is indeed a Jew, and he goes about constructing his Jewish persona from vaguely remembered, plausibly Jewish characteristics of his parents, namely by using Yiddish expressions.

Libor in the novel had been lucky in love but in politics he was from a part of the world that expected nothing good of anybody. Sam Finkler, whose family name Julian uses as a kind of private shorthand for Jewishness takes pains to denote how 'little' being Jewish means to him by joining a group of anti-Zionist Jews who call themselves ASHamed Jews. Born a Jew on Monday, he had signed up to be an ASHamed Jew by Wednesday and was seen chanting 'We are all Hezbollah' outside the

Israeli Embassy on the following Saturday. The three friends continue to have amiable differences over women and politics and life itself. Julian, being a decent soul, is concerned about his friends, and is sympathetically disgusted with Sam's ASHamed Jews, and worried about Libor, whose widowerhood has made him suicidal. This and much else – notably the minor motif of the gulf that both Treslove and Finkler experience between themselves and their adult children – has a painful as well as a funny side in the context of the novel.

Shame has always been an impetus behind the writings of Jacobson and this shame is brought out at length in the portrayal of Henry Nagel, who is a neurotic Jewish academic. In *The Making of Henry*, Henry, whose life is nothing but a continuous contemplation of failed relationships, friendships and hopes. However, to no surprise, the humouric elements finely balance the story and prevents it from getting too weighed down in melancholy. Henry's taste in women is quite amusing, and he is portrayed as a solipsistic old man who prefers older women, but at one point of his life he realizes that "The thing about older women once you've reached Henry's age is that there aren't any."[46] Sooner or later he finds himself attracted to Moira Aultback, who is a little younger than him. "Nothing in his life has interested Henry more than this. Woman. Never mind the phenomenology or metaphysics of woman, just woman. Just the aesthetic of her. Just the prospect."[47] Thus, Henry revels in the sheer, exciting difference of male and female, and this becomes a familiar theme in his work.

The relationship between men and their fathers is another of Jacobson's characteristic concerns. This is depicted in his non-fictional work, *Roots Schmoots*, and it

was sharpened in that instance by his own father's recent death. Izzi, in *The Making of Henry*, was a part-time children's entertainer, employing magic and illusion. The fictional father specialised in fire-eating, which was a marvelously symbolic activity that was made much of by Henry who, childless and unfulfilled, is given to conducting imaginary conversations with his dead but still dominating parent. This comic, Jewish echo of Hamlet's father constantly reinforces his son's sense of dislocation. For, although the action takes place in Henry's London-based late-middle-age, it flows from his Manchester childhood.

Another interesting and funny side of Henry's character is that Henry hates dogs, mainly because their compulsion to sniff other dog's urine reminds him of his own compulsion to hound other men's women. Thus, *The Making of Henry* revolves around the psyche of a solipsistic old man whose life is consumed by his own mortality and he picks endlessly over his own failures, which are entertaining and hilariously funny. Jacobson fearlessly delves into the aspect of male-female relationships, the dark spaces of the male psyche, and the dilemmas of Judaism. He does this by incorporating the essence of humour, and indeed humour plays an important tool in understanding human nature as well as the psychological workings of the human mind.

In *The Making of Henry*, Jacobson has created a protagonist for whom the central male characters in his earlier novels now seem like prototypes. This is a beautifully rounded portrait of a man, gazing into the prism of the past in order to facilitate the future. Coloured by humour that is both penetrating and playful, it also conveys varying shades of humiliation and resignation. However, Henry is able to face up to the

mortifying images of his personal and family history. And love, no less, is the key, which is exquisitely articulated and celebrated as the narrative progresses. The novel finishes with a flourish of joy and happiness. It denotes that those stimulating elements of his writing, those that are - to cite the title of another of his non-fiction books - "seriously funny", have been blended together in the most satisfying manner.

The compulsion to travel is at the heart of historical Jewishness. In *Roots Schmoots: Journeys Among Jews*, Jacobson is a globe-trotter, journeying among Jewish communities searching for the source of his identity. He meets Jews of every type: aggressive yet lachrymose Jews in upstate New York's Borscht Belt; medieval yet warm ultra-Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn; Jewish yet Christian Jews, who recognize Jesus, in Los Angeles. He also finds fanatically right-wing Jews in West Jerusalem, committed left-wing Jews in East Jerusalem, and Israeli Jews who do not know that they are Jews in the Red Sea resort of Eilat. Finally, there are the shrunken, haunted, despised Jews of the Old Country, Lithuania. Jacobson meets them, hears their stories and describes them artfully. When he meets a Nazi-hunter in California, he notes what he says as faithfully as a reporter, but observes him like a novelist: 'He has dark eyebrows which contradict each other. One is shaped comically into an interrogation mark. The other is an underscoring, heavy and final . . . His lips make a wet sound whenever they meet, so that his sentences are punctuated by a sort of moist percussion'.[48]

Jacobson lambasts the Torah-thumpers of the Israeli right, who advocate the death-penalty for Jews who do not observe the sabbath and who see the churches of the Holy Land as blasphemous blemishes that are fit only to be razed to the ground. Yet

his heart sides with them when, that same evening, he meets a Gentile do-gooder from Tunbridge Wells, whose anti-Zionism has become anti-Semitism, making him one of the author's 'enemies of the soul'. In other words, Jacobson has discovered that when it comes to 'gut instincts', his Jewishness is more important to him than either his Britishness or his politics, and perhaps even his principles. He also makes another, related discovery. As he travels he becomes less apologetic, (not about his Jewishness in the company of non-Jews - an angst he worked over thoroughly in his first novel, *Coming from Behind*) - but about the much less discussed emotion of shame among one's own. Jacobson shrugs off the ethnic cringe that he had once felt at seeing his people engage in the crass, the gauche, and the plain grob. And he banishes the old feeling of inadequacy prompted by his ignorance of Hebrew and religious custom, and his lack of faith. Having seen as many Judaic forms as Jews, he concludes that his atheistic brand of Judaism – defined by the pursuit of free thought, a constant desire to debate and dispute, a willing immersion in art made by Jews, if not in 'Jewish art', and the consumption of Jewish food - is legitimate. No longer out-jewed by the black-hatted and side-curled ultras of Stamford Hill, he declares himself *kosher*.

He goes further, explaining to a woman at a dance for LA Jewish singles that the still-religious Jews are a kind of proletariat, stoking the fires of Judaism's engine room, while 'the real aristocracy of the Jewish faith are its intellectuals and non-observant philosophers'.[49] These two realisations (which, in truth seem more like confirmed prejudices) are linked. The elements that make up his secular Jewish identity - the warmth, the almost obsessive sense of past, the humour soaked in tragedy - also make up the tribal glue that bond him to his fellow Jew. Even the Jew for Jesus has some of

it when, incredibly, he asks the author for a donation, because, 'In the end, we're still Jews and we have to help one another'[50]. The characteristics that he identifies in himself and celebrates in others have different meanings for 'him' and 'them'. The author places these characteristics traits at the very root of his Jewish identity. For the people he encounters, however, those traits - of disputatiousness, of hospitality, of rudeness - are merely by-products. They are the fruits of something more fundamental: a sense of faith, culture and community.

Jacobson, thus, occupies an important place in the realm of literature and he is widely admired for his creative handling of humouric modes and conventions in his literary works, it is beyond doubt that humour always remain central to Jacobson's themes, however dark, tragic or profound. Howard Jacobson's employment of the humouric technique is characterized chiefly by a discursive and humourous style. Most of the common recurring features in his work include the portrayal of male-female relationships and the Jewish experience in Britain in the mid 20th to late 20th century. Jacobson has his own way of producing what is 'seriously funny' even from the serious things in life, be it failures or any undesirable obstacles rather than trying to convey serious messages through his writings. As to whether he has regarded himself as a humouric writer or not, he replied, "As long as it means I'm a serious writer. Comedy is a very important part of what I do…"[51] (Jacobson). Indeed, it would not be wrong to consider him as a humouric writer who is able to recognize and make use of humour in almost any situation or condition in life.

NOTES:

[1]Jacobson, Howard. "Interview by Elizabeth Manus". *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004.web 16 Jan. 2011.<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

[2]Palmer, D. J., ed. *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1984.Print. 37.

[3] Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print. 463.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid. 464

[11]Ibid.

[12] Jacobson, Howard. "Interview by Elizabeth Manus". *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept. 2004.web. 16 Jan. 2011.<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

[13] Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print. 293

[14]Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print. 465.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Jacobson, Howard. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010. Print.120

[17] Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 49

[18]Bergson, Henry. *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Maryland: ArcManor. 2008 Print.17

[19]Ibid.12

[20]Ibid.

[21] Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

[22] Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print. 463

[23]Ibid. 464

[24] Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. New York: Penguin Books. 1976. Print. 157

[25]http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Humor/History.shtml.web.18 June 2011.

[26] Bergson, Henry. *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Maryland: ArcManor. 2008. Print. 11

[27]Ibid.

[28] Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print. 93

[29]Ibid. 94

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid. 103

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

[40] Bergson, Henry. *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Maryland: ArcManor. 2008. Print. 12

[41] Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 23

[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid. 25

[44]Ibid. 49

[45] Jacobson, Howard. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010. Print. 66

[46]---. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print. 102

[47]---. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print. 126

[48] Jacobson, Howard. *Roots Schmoots Journey Among Jews*. New York: The Overlook Press. 1993. Print. 98

[49] Ibid. 76

[50]Ibid. 352

[51] Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

CHAPTER II

LOCATING JEWISH HUMOUR

The Jewish people lay claim to the oldest of written histories, as well as an endless list of grievances toward the mostly hostile world in which they have lived. They have endured over four thousand years of persecution, slaughter, torture, inquisition, pogroms and death camps. They were enslaved by the Egyptians, slaughtered by the Philistines, exiled by the Babylonians, dispersed by the Romans, and butchered and chased from land to land in Europe. A history of pain and suffering, of tragedies, of great losses, and of surviving against all odds. Jewish humor, too, has persevered over many a generation. Wit and laughter helped sustain the Jews in their misery. It also provides us with a unique and insightful tool for the examination of the Jew's chronicles, his attitudes, and his way of coping with reality.[1]

Jewish humor derives from the immense disparity between what was expected to be the glorious destiny of the "Chosen People" who were to be "light unto the nations" and their long tormented and often bleak existence. The people perceived as the "Nation of the Book," the people who view themselves as an intellectual powerhouse and have pride in their ability in interpreting vast complexities of sacred texts, found themselves powerless in their dealings with hostile rulers, malicious brainless peasants, and anti-Semites throughout their history. Though cohesive in their private world, they felt isolated and apart from the world at large and in order to help cope with this disparity Jews created a humor where laughter and tears, happiness and fear were inextricable.[2]

The typical Jewish joke revolves around those situations that are familiar to all Jews, geography notwithstanding. The point of a traditional joke was grasped as quickly by the ‘shtetl’ dweller as by his more sophisticated brother in the large metropolis. The

humor is full of acute social observations, exposing mental follies and the frailties of human nature. The gist of the jest is often a play on words, double entendres, animated facial expression, and conspicuous body language. An old Yiddish proverb expresses it poignantly, "burdens are from God, shoulders, too." Shoulders at times bear the load, and at time shrugs it off. The humorous element of a conventional Jewish anecdote is as amusing in contemporary times as it was in days past, forfeiting none of its biting relevance to time. Jewish humour is rooted in several traditions. The first is the intellectual and legal methods of the Talmud, which uses elaborate legal arguments and situations often seen as so absurd as to be humorous in order to tease out the meaning of religious law. Hillel Halkin in his essay about Jewish humour traces some roots of the Jewish self-deprecating humour to the medieval influence of Arabic traditions on the Hebrew literature by quoting a witticism from Yehuda Alharizi's *Tahkemoni*.[3]

A more recent one is an egalitarian tradition among the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe in which the powerful were often mocked subtly, rather than attacked overtly— as Saul Bellow once put it, "oppressed people tend to be witty."[4] Jesters who were known as ‘badchens’ would poke fun at prominent members of the community during weddings, and in the process, they created a good-natured tradition

of humour as a levelling device. Rabbi Moshe Waldoks, a scholar of Jewish humour, has argued:

> You have a lot of shtoch, or jab humor, which is usually meant to deflate pomposity or ego, and to deflate people who consider

> themselves high and mighty. But Jewish humor was also a device for self-criticism within the community, and I think that's where it really was the most powerful. The humorist, like the prophet, would
>
> basically take people to task for their failings. The humor of Eastern Europe especially was centered on defending the poor against the exploitation of the upper classes or other authority figures, so rabbis were made fun of, authority figures were made fun of and rich people were made fun of. It really served as a social catharsis.[5]

Throughout history, Jews have been seeing the humour in their lives for a very long time. The Bible itself recounts how Sarah laughed when told she'd have a child, and the forefather of the Christians, Isaac is named for that laughter. The Talmud, particularly in the *aggadic* (narrative) sections, is repleted with witty asides and repartees, and in one famous account, the Talmud speaks of even God laughing. During the medieval period, the valuation of humour was institutionalized in Jewish communal customs, perhaps most famously in Purim *shpiel*s, which were comic plays that were based on the book of Esther in the *Bible*, which continue today in Jewish communities across the globe.

Jewish humour, as a distinctive cultural phenomenon appeared in nineteenth century Eastern Europe. In the marketplace, the synagogue, and in the home, the Jewish joke established itself into its own recognizable discourse. The *shtetl* (village) became home for the emerging Jewish-humour folk tradition--stories of the fools inhabiting the town of Chelm but one example. Sustaining and enriching this street humour were new

Jewish texts. Jewish writers, including Mendele Mokher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz, along with playwrights such as Abraham Goldfaden, mined the bittersweet grumbling of the Jewish ethos and produced lasting classics of Jewish humour, which in turn fed the comic banter of Jewish daily exchange.

In the year 2000, novelist Philip Roth characterized Jewish humour as "a moment when Jewish self-infatuation was at a postwar pinnacle…when the aggrandizing appetite driving their Jewish mental audacity was beginning to look to be uncontrollable and an aura of cultural significance emanating as much from their jokes and…from their laughter and their clowning and their wisecracks and their arguments…" [6] Theater critic John Lahr also explains how, by importing Jewish angst, Freud, literacy, irony into the discourse of mainstream comedy, Woody Allen, Lenny Bruce, Elaine May, Mike Nichols, amongst others "led comedy away from the ersatz to the authentic"[7]. This pervasive influence led the monthly *Esquire*[8] to pronounce in 1965 that "for good or ill, the Jewish style, with its heavy reliance upon Yiddish and Yiddishisms, has emerged not only as *a* comic style, but as *the* prevailing comic style."[9] As a result of this triumph, and the inherent influence on American culture, Jewish humour began transforming Americans' attitudes toward their own Americanness; toward all cultural and ethnic boundaries; toward prevailing explanatory paradigms in the media and academe; even toward such touchy subjects as sex and violence.

Throughout the ages Jewish humour has characterized itself with wisdom and prophecy by colliding between two mutual values: acknowledging the appeal of the prevailing wisdom while discrediting it; recognizing the comforts of home and inherited

identity while insisting that intellectual integrity, moral system, and even artistic distinction more often than not require renouncing these comforts. Funny Jews, as Irving Kristol observed, inhabit "a knife edge between faith and nihilism".[10] The former obliges them to shape and subscribe to myths, narratives of unfulfilled chosenness such as that of the Lost Tribes; the latter deprives them of such reassurance. Such deprivation, however, eventually opens a crack, a difference, or a chasm, which, nature detests.

Theodor Reik has prophesied the coming of funny Jews to bridge this chasm: with "the truly democratic spirit that breathes in Jewish jokes";[11] with "social justice…a better distribution of the goods of the world…equality for all";[12] with a dawning "realization of those predictions of the Jewish prophets, the transformations of swords into ploughshares". Reik also maintains that these transformations will occur only when "Judaism as a religion will slowly disappear"[13]. Reik further prophesies that "Jewish jokes," which "started with heresies and allusions of timid aggression against the exaggerated demands made in the name of religion,"[14] will spur "the abolishment of religion."[15] Reik envisions this eradication not as a violent overthrow, not as a separation of the elect from the unredeemable, but as the embrace of all who desire to join the community of funny Jews: "the telling of Jewish jokes has the unconscious aim of cementing the bond that was originally founded on certain common values and on the awareness of Jewish isolation in the nations within which they live. Telling these jokes has…the significance of reaching one's arms out to the other fellow."[16]

Jacobson, in *Kalooki Nights*, skillfully blends the bittersweet Yiddish-inspired humour at which he excels. Being an acute observer of the bottomless embarrassment of

Jewish adolescents, the novel takes the readers back to the boyhood years of Max Glickman and his two friends, Manny and Errol, who offer two extreme ways of coping with their discomfiture. Max's mixture of shame and transgression is extremely funny and also reveals a convincing character beneath the caricatures. At the heart of Max's story is the explanation of why he has made so many disastrous choices, and why such a "lucky man" continually creates situations where he is the most willing of victims. This is an aspect where Jacobson is most admired. He always has the ability to bring out the humourous aspects even in the most tragic situation. The flashback to his "shikseh"[17] wives and their mothers is denoted at the other end of the Jewish extended family which characterizes the novel. Most of the works of Howard Jacobson can be seen as a kind of anger management, not diminishing the fury but transmuting it into laughter. *Kalooki Nights* also is too angry to be entirely comic, yet somehow is hilarious, but this is how the Jewish humour works. It fuses both elements—the comedy and the anger—into a kind of verbal slapstick. Max Glickman, the main protagonist in *Kalooki Nights*, exclaims:

> "Ask me, though, as the author of *Five Thousand Years of Bitterness*, who are the greatest enemies of the Jewish people today, as bad as the Nazis in their hearts, as indurated in their detestation of us, however short they fall in practice – ask me whom I fear the most and I will whisper to you, looking up and down the street, 'socialists, Fabians, Bundists and the rest of them'.[18]

This type of juxtaposing anger and humour also features in *The Finkler Question* when Sam Finkler argues

> "How dare you, a non Jew – and I have to say it impresses me not at all that you grew up in awe of Jewish ethics, if anything 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?"[19]

It also depicts that some Jews are uncomfortable with the idea that their Jewishness somehow binds them to all other Jews irrespective of colour, creed or character. For them, Israel is a noisy, hot, excitable, creative, Jewish country, and it remains the ideal target at which to direct a sense of discomfort. And, in recent years, various British Jews, critical of Israel's actions towards the Palestinians, have formed themselves into 'not-in-my-Jewish-name' splinter groups – in effect, groups that group together to assert their refusal to be grouped. Given the inherent absurdity of all this, it is no surprise that Howard Jacobson who by himself is a writer who is able to recognise the humour in almost any situation and a man as expansive as most on the nature of Jewishness, should make it the theme of his novel. In *The Finkler Question*, "this Israel business"[20] remains a hot topic of conversation for Sam Finkler who keeps on, with his fellow ASHamed Jews, being "Ashamed as Jews of a country of which they are not citizens…?"[21]

Jacobson's manner of handling Jewish humour is highly imaginative. Admittedly Jewishness cannot be contained in a test-tube or explained in a textbook, it is none the

less a tangible attribute. Even without knowing precisely what it is, every Jew is significantly conscious about it. Jacobson suggests that it may be contagious, as Julian Treslove and his wife Tyler in *The Finkler Question* have put it this way, as both of them continue to talk about their own perception of Jews in particular:

> 'The Jews I knew pretended they weren't Jewish. That was why they went to the BBC – to get a new identity. It was the next best thing to joining the Roman Catholic Church.'… 'Because Jews don't want to go around with nothing but their history on their faces.[22]

This is the manner by which Jacobson skillfully blends this "itch" in most of his writings with wit and irony without neglecting to bring out the humour elements it thus contains. This technique is also carefully brought out in *Kalooki Nights* where Chloe reminds Max of his constant obsession about him being a Jew:

> 'You see! We can't even go to a concert without your bleeding heart coming with us.'
> 'Then you should be more careful which concert you choose for us to go to.'
> 'Max, there isn't one that's safe. They all come back to the Nazis in the end.'
> 'Have I said anything about the Nazis?'
> 'You don't need to say anything. I know you. You've thought of nothing else all evening.'[23]

Shame has always been an impetus behind the writings of Jacobson and this shame is brought out at length in the portrayal of Henry Nagel, a neurotic Jewish

academic in *The Making of Henry*. Henry's life is nothing but a continuous contemplation of failed relationships, friendships and hopes. He is portrayed as a solipsistic old man who is consumed by his own mortality. He is a person who is depicted as endlessly picking over his own failures and is thus, not just entertaining but often gloriously funny and a sort of character, who, as Jacobson has portrayed him:

> "knows what's waiting. He will hobble homewards one ordinary madhouse afternoon, he will feel a stabbing in his heart, and he will beshit himself…He will beshit himself in a public place. He will come out of himself, his own entrails the waste matter of his life and being. See that mess? That's Henry."[24]

Sam Finkler in *The Finkler Question* is another protagonist of Howard Jacobson whose life is enmeshed with shame and thus, he continues to expose the reality of ethnic undertones: "He's ashamed because he's a Jew…All Jews. Endlessly falling out in public about how Jewish to be, whether they are or they aren't, whether they're practicing or they're not, whether to wear fringes or eat bacon, whether they feel safe here or precarious, whether the world hates them or it doesn't…"[25] This statement clearly reveals the inner 'shame' that the Jews continually bears within themselves. It can also be assumed that they are always inherently conscious of their identity and thus, wherever they may be, they always tend to struggle hard enough to cope with the world around them. In the same manner, it can be found in *Kalooki Nights*, that Max Glickman has questioned one of his friends Manny Washinsky upon the fact of Jewish secularity:

> Why, Manny? Why the food hysteria? Why all the salting that went on in his house, salting the flavour out of everything? Why, when they bought kosher meat from a kosher butcher did they have to kosher it again when they got it home?... Did Elohim have nothing else to do, was he so small-minded that he would notice and punish a transgression as negligible as that? And why the obssession with Saturday? How can a day be holy? [26]
>
> (*Kosher* here means "observing Jewish food law")

Howard Jacobson once explained in an interview by Elizabeth Manus how Jewish humour works, " We make more fun of ourselves than anybody else could. In the act of doing that, we appear to be on the back foot but we're winning…"[27], therefore, his works are colored with shades of abundance humour by making fun of his own identity. In *Kalooki Nights*, Howard Jacobson explains in a rather edifyingly funny manner about a few characteristic traits of Jewish men: "Jewish men wear loose, comfortable trousers with a double pleat. And maybe in chilly weather, a cardigan on top. It is considered inappropriate by Jews to show strangers of either sex the outline of your glans penis."[28] He also adds "No commandment against it that I know of. Just not what you do. And for this, as an uncle of mine used to say, apropos anything Jewish, the Nazis tried to exterminate us."[29] The same features can also be found in *The Finkler Question* as Tyler explains to Julian Treslove "You say you want to be a Jew – well, the first thing you need to know is that Jewish men don't go out without their wives or girlfriends. Unless they're having an affair. Other than another woman's flat there's nowhere for Jewish men to go"[30]. These statements can be read as amusing but is indeed true that while

thinking about their circumstances, their identities carry an aspect of shame that remains a burden for them.

In parallel to the aspect of shame that the Jews carry along with their identities, an aspect of ambiguity can always be found in the workings of Jewish humour. In *Roots Schmoots Journeys Among Jews*, Jacobson himself admits this sense of ambiguity which remains central in their identities:

> The worst we suffered were sensations of ambiguity. We were and we weren't. We were getting somewhere and we weren't. We were free of the ghetto and we weren't. We were philosophers now and not pedlars, and we weren't. If we had any identity at all, that was it: we countermanded ourselves, we faced in opposite directions, we were our own antithesis…[31]

Similarly, Max Glickman is among the protagonists of Howard Jacobson whose life is obsessed with the sense of ambiguity. His life is a mixture of shame and transgression. He often questions himself about "Jew, Jew, Jew. Why, why, why, as my father asked until the asking killed him, does everything always have to come back to Jew, Jew, Jew?"[32]. In observing the secular practices that is carried out by Manny Washinsky and his family, Max Glickman thinks to himself:

> Why this, Manny? Why that? When Manny or either of his parents went through their front door they put a finger to their lips and then to the mezuzah on the door frame…I knew what a mezuzah contained: words, words from the Torah, including the Shema, the holiest words of all -

> ‘Shema Yisrael, Hear, O Israel, the Lord is one…’ But precisely because the Lord *was* one we did not tolerate idols. In which case why did we kiss words? A word too could be an idol, couldn’t it? [33]

Likewise, throughout the narrative, Max Glickman continually ponders upon the subject of his identity and frequently asks himself questions about the sense of ambiguity that he feels when it comes to the laws and practices of the Jews in particular. In doing this, Max Glickman often “countermanded” himself and becomes his ‘own antithesis’ for most of the time.

Angst also plays an important part in Jewish humour and this aspect is skillfully brought out by Howard Jacobson through the character of Max Glickman in *Kalooki Nights*. At the very beginning of the novel, it can be learnt that Max Glickman is a Jewish character who believes that “We did a Jewish thing, we ate of the tree of knowledge, and didn’t know a day’s happiness thereafter”[34] keeps on repeating the words “Jew Jew Jew”[35]. Later on, at one point of time, while Max Glickman was having a conversation with her mother, he even cries out:

> I’ve never understood all this secrecy. Who we are, where we cme from, what we were really called. All this starting again, always starting again, for what - to hide a quarter of Gentile blood?...The secrets, the shame, the dread of anyone seeing the inside of our lapels.[36]

Sam Finkler in *The Finkler Question* is no exception. He laments the deeds of the state of Israel and stand on public platforms denouncing Israelis and supporting Palestinians:

> "Do you know of any country whose recent history is not blackened by prejudice and hate against somebody? So what empowers racists in their own right to sniff out racism in others? Only from a world from which Jews believe they have nothing to fear will they consent to learn lessons in humanity."[37]

The Finkler Question is a series of tragicomic meditations on one of humanity's most tenacious expressions of malice, to produce a more intellectual humour about the bizarre metastasis of anti-Semitism and the exhausting complications of Zionism. The subject of shame and ambiguity can also be traced through the character of Julian Treslove, the main protagonist. He is portrayed as a handsome, middle-aged gentile who attractively wears a benovolent disguise that an anti-Jewish sentiments can wear. He "didn't look like anybody famous in particular,"[38] Jacobson admits, but he "looked like many famous people in general, and so was in demand if not by virtue of verisimilitude, at least by virtue of versatility."[39]

The story opens with a tiny burst of action -- the only real action that the readers can get in this ruminative novel. Julian is walking home from a pleasant dinner with two old Jewish friends who have recently lost their wives. Their grief, Jacobson notes, allows him to luxuriate vicariously in widowed reveries. As usual, Julian is imagining the calamities that could befall him -- a crane dashing out his brains, a terrorist opening fire, a road sign bruising his shin -- when suddenly he is mugged by a woman. His injuries are minor, but while emptying his pockets, she mutters what sounds like "You Ju!"[40] of which Julian is exhilarated. This touch of absurdity adds some essential driving

force to what can be an excessively brooding tale. Julian becomes obsessed with the mugger's obscure curse -- "You Jules"? "You jewel"? "You Jew"? [41] Could his assailant, his "muggerette," have been an anti-Semite lashing out at Julian's "essential Jewishness"? “Wouldn’t it have made sense, if my father didn’t want me to know we were Jews, or for anyone else to know we were Jews for that matter, to have changed our name to the last Jewish one he could find? . . . No one knew my family. We kept ourselves to ourselves. I have no uncles. My father had no brothers or sisters, my mother neither. It's a difficult question that awakens his long-simmering envy of his two Jewish friends and makes him determined to be a Jew himself. "He wondered about training to be a rabbi. . . . What about a lay rabbi?" Should he get circumcised? Should he read Maimonides”?[42] This is the manner in which Howard Jacobson carefully blends the technique of Jewish humour in his writings. He never hesitate to poke fun at the expense of his own identity, instead he makes it the central theme of his writings.

Jacobson has stirred this theme even in his other works, but the novel's real depth develops slowly beneath the satire, as anti-Semitic attacks begin to filter into the story from around London and the world -- a boy blinded, a grave covered in swastikas, a man beaten: little echoes of the horror of the mid-20th century. "It's not Kristallnacht,"[43] Libor says with a shrug. Soon enough, the witty one-liners keep coming "She dressed like a native of no place one could quite put a name to – the People's Republic of Ethnigrad"[44], but the laughter starts to fade gradually as sorrow and fear accumulate on these pages, "After a period of exceptional quiet," one character thinks, "anti-Semitism was becoming again what it had always been -- an escalator that never stopped, and which anyone could hop on at will."[45] *The Finkler Question* is often funny,

even while it roars its witty rage at the relentless insanity of anti-Semitism, which threatens to drive its victims a little crazy, too. This is, after all, a humour that begins and ends in grief.

The workings of Jewish humour can also be denoted at length in *The Making of Henry*. Henry Nagel is the main protagonist, who is obsessed with death: most immediately his own, those of his parents, his contemporaries and various members of his extended family, but also with the constant fear and awareness of death that has settled over London. If Henry is not indoors asking futile questions of his father's ghost, he is mooching the streets of St. John's Wood trying to find a suitable place to be buried while contemplating a lifetime of failed loves, friendships and hopes. The character of Henry is being treated with seriousness by Jacobson without neglecting to bring out the funny side as well:

> Henry is just waiting for himself to die. There's a subtle political difference. Never mind poison gas in the Underground, never mind helicopters crop-dusting the city with anthrax, Henry sees what's coming as an entirely personal catastrophe, something between him and his Maker and no one else. That's always been the trouble with Henry- he has never been able to grasp the larger picture.[46]

From the above statement, it can be assumed that Henry is being portrayed as a solipsistic old man, a funny old man whose life has been trapped with fear and shame. To some extent, it may be true, but behind the portrayal of Henry's character lies the

sufferings, the shame and the fear that has been undergone by Jews for a long period of time.

How Henry came to be in St John's Wood is the riddle at the heart of his self-interrogation. Coinciding with his being fired from the University of the Pennine Way (for writing a student an honest but damning reference, 'denying [her] the words of enthusiastic commendation to which she'd been born entitled'), Henry learns that he has been bequeathed life tenancy of a luxury apartment in NW8. The only conclusion, he thinks, based on fragments of memory, is that his father must have had a wealthy mistress - a conclusion that leads him to unravel his past, in search of the truth about his parents' marriage and how such truth might transmute his own dismal sense of self. Along the way he falls in love with a waitress, "thus has Henry missed out on history, not noticed the twentieth century or its passing- war, famine, communism, capitalism, the birth and death of nations, genocide- so engrossed has he been in women".[47] He also reluctantly makes friends with his embittered neighbor and gradually learns to unshackle himself from the shame - personal, familial and cultural - that has hobbled him all his life. Unlike Max Glickman in *Kalooki Nights* whose life has been troubled with history, especially with "Five Thousand Years of Bitterness", Henry is obsessed with death, "Death being the hardest part"[48], he sometimes thought that "if he could only reconcile himself to death, as a fact of his life, then he would be better able to accept it as a fact of someone else's life."[49]

The Making of Henry cannot be read for its suspenseful plot because very little happens and even the central mystery of the flat's provenance generates only an

occasional mild curiosity. However this anatomy of one small life, with all its concerns about love, death and what binds one person with another, contains an expansive and compassionate vision of humanity. It ought to persuade anyone tempted to argue otherwise that humour is not merely the best but the only conceivable means of contemplating mortality and what it means to be human and to suffer.

Howard Jacobson, in all the three novels, has creatively blended the technique of Jewish humour at which he excels. He illustrates the sufferings and the shame that the Jews have been suffering for a long time, but he has the ability to turn these sufferings and shame into a more humourous side. The experiences of the Jews have been

brought to life in his works as he hardly deviates himself from his own roots. Jacobson has indeed presented the workings of Jewish humour at length without hesitating to make fun of 'themselves', thus, he himself admits:

> 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 humour, that's what shaped Jewish pugnacity or tenaciousness.[49]

NOTES

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_humour.Web.19.August.2011

[2] Ibid

[3]Ibid

[4]Ibid

[5]Ibid

[6] Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print. 93

[7] Ibid. 94

[8] Ibid

[9]Ibid

[10]Ibid. 103

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print. 103

[16]Ibid.

[17] Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 23

[18]Ibid. 73

[19] ---*The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010. Print.23

[20]Ibid. 118

[21]Ibid. 119

[22]Ibid. 162

[23]--- *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print.10

[24]---*The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print.12

[25]---*The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010. Print.121

[26]--- *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print.20

[27] Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle*. 14 Sept. 2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.

<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

[28] Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print.4

[29] Ibid.

[30] ---*The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010.Print.121

[31] --- *Roots Schmoots Journey Among Jews*. New York: The Overlook Press. 1993. Print. 98

[32] --- *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 7

[33] Ibid. 20

[34]Ibid. 33

[35]Ibid. 7

[36] Ibid. 304

[37]---*The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010. Print. 236

[38] Ibid. 14

[39] Ibid.

[40]Ibid. 33

[41] Ibid

[42] Ibid. 56

[43]Ibid. 233

[44] Ibid.

[45]Ibid.

[46] ---*The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print. 1

[47] Ibid. 102

[48] Ibid. 100

[49]Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewis Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.

<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

CHAPTER III

JACOBSON AND THE "SERIOUSLY FUNNY"

Jacobson is often associated with the phrase “seriously funny” because he treats humour as a serious subject. For him, humour is an important tool of expressing his inner thoughts and is an useful medium of pouring his heart out upon the readers. He earns his fame through his creative handling of the humouric aspects, but the seriousness that lies within his humour cannot be ignored. It is not an easy task to identify when Jacobson is joking and when he is not because his unpredictable wit is more likely to shock the readers than his pathos. Jacobson wants his fellow Jews to be portrayed as serious. Funny, but “seriously funny”, as in the title of his book published in 1997 and television series. Jacobson's own humour is always central to his themes, however tragic, dark or profound.

In *Seriously Funny: An Argument for Humour* the reader is faced with an arduous, unrewarding journey through the realm of humour, from Aristophanes to Dame Edna. The problem isn’t the tour, which is as diverse a travelogue of human experience as one could hope for. It is the conclusions drawn by the tour guide in the course of his ostensibly critical discussion that render the book both academically bland and of negligible intellectual rigor.

In essence, Jacobson’s theory of humour revolves around animals, genitals, bodily wastes and abuse. Jacobson’s starting point is a rejection of the position that laughter is a function exclusive to humans; that humour proceeds from the human ability to perceive the difference between things as they are and things as they ought to be. So kookaburras, parrots and monkeys are brought into the picture to demonstrate a primal laughter that is alien to the readers, yet in some sense necessary to the idea of the

comic. His point is not that humour "reconciles us to the animal in ourselves"[1] but that "we resemble beasts more closely than we resemble gods, and we make great fools of ourselves the moment we forget it"[2]. However, in the chapter, entitled "Where There's A Fool There's A Phallus", it gives the statement that: "In its unpredictability, in its capacity for abrupt movement and sudden change, in its miraculous powers of recovery (or not), the phallus gives the comic its dynamic pattern."[3]

If Jacobson didn't take the whole thing so seriously, if the above statement were the product of some elaborate academic farce, it might actually be funny. But he believes what he is saying is true, and proffers a huge amount of anthropological evidence to, as it were, hold it up. He starts with Aristophanes, proceeds to Scandinavian fairy stories and continues, with a fair amount of sexual delight, to the Hopi, Zuni and Winnebago peoples of North America. The Winnebago trickster-hero Wakdjunkaga deserves special mention for his phallic antics are surely unparalleled. Wakdjunkaga is able to detach his penis and put it in a box. One day he encounters the chieftain's daughter swimming in a lake, gets the box out and releases his penis, which charges torpedo-like towards its destination and lodges there so firmly that the men of the village are unable to pull it out.[4] It is an amusing story, but to draw from it the unqualified conclusion that the comic derives its dynamic force from the phallus may as well be hardly convincing, especially for the female comedians.

Next, naturally enough, come bodily wastes. Jacobson equates the urine-throwing clowns of Native American tribes with those of other nations: "It is difficult to see those buckets of water that conventional circus clowns employ so liberally … as anything

but tame substitutes for the overflowing bowls of urine … with which the Newekwe and the Chuku enliven the plazas of New Mexico".[5] Surely, in cases like this, clowns are taking the piss out of an audience rather than hurling some into it.

Invective is the final thread of Jacobson's argument for humour. "The ambition of invective is plenitude," he says. "Abuse is dialectic. Craves conversation."[6] He cites numerous examples of comic duos to support his argument: Punch and Judy, Prince Hal and Falstaff, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. Thus he argues that excess and profusion are at the heart of humour (in this case the language of humour) and this technique is employed by Jacobson at a certain amount in most of his writings. Jacobson has travelled the world with a camera crew in tow (a television serial has been produced out of this book) in search of the comic from Pompeii to New Mexico, and he doesn't laugh once. Indeed, he is a willful non-participant. At a Venice fair he forcibly prevents a female clown from tweaking his nose, refuses to participate in the Extempo War held annually at the Trinidad Carnival, doesn't laugh at the antics of Slava Polunin, the famous Russian clown. Thus, he understands that in order to be funny one must first let down one's defences, throw dignity to the wind and prepare to laugh at oneself.

Although there is a plot, *The Finkler Question* is a series of tragicomic meditations on one of humanity's most tenacious expressions of malice, to produce a more intellectual humour about the bizarre metastasis of anti-Semitism and the exhausting complications of Zionism. Here, Julian Treslove is portrayed as a handsome, middle-aged gentile who attractively wears a benovolent disguise that an anti-jewish sentiments can wear. He "didn't look like anybody famous in particular,"[7] Jacobson admits, but he

"looked like many famous people in general, and so was in demand if not by virtue of verisimilitude, at least by virtue of versatility."[8] That chameleon-like nature, along with his favorite fantasy of a lover dying poetically in his arms, gives some idea of the grasping quality of this pleasant, lonely man, "whose life had been one absurd disgrace after another."[9] In university he'd been:

> A modular, bits-and-pieces man . . . not studying anything recognizable as a subject, but fitting components of different arts-related disciplines, not to say indisciplines, together like Lego pieces. Archaeology, Concrete Poetry, Media and Communications, Festival and Theatre Administration, Comparative Religion, Stage Set and Design, the Russian Short Story, Politics and Gender.[10]

As the story opens with a tiny burst of action which remains the only real action that the readers can get in this ruminative novel. Julian is walking home from a pleasant dinner with two old Jewish friends who have recently lost their wives. Their grief, Jacobson notes, allows him to luxuriate vicariously in widowed reveries. As usual, Julian is imagining the calamities that could befall him -- a crane dashing out his brains, a terrorist opening fire, a road sign bruising his shin -- when suddenly he's mugged by a woman. His injuries are minor, but while emptying his pockets, she mutters what sounds like "You Ju!"[11] of which Julian is exhilarated. This touch of absurdity adds some essential driving force to what can be an excessively brooding tale. Julian becomes obsessed with the mugger's obscure curse -- "You Jules"? "You jewel"? "You Jew"?[12] Could his assailant, his "muggerette," have been an anti-Semite lashing out at Julian's

"essential Jewishness"? “Wouldn’t it have made sense, if my father didn’t want me to know we were Jews, or for anyone else to know we were Jews for that matter, to have changed our name to the last Jewish one he could find? . . . No one knew my family. We kept ourselves to ourselves. I have no uncles. My father had no brothers or sisters, my mother neither. It's a difficult question that awakens his long-simmering envy of his two Jewish friends and makes him determined to be a Jew himself.”[13]

One of his two Jewish friends is Libor, a retired celebrity reporter, still deeply shaken by the death of his wife and shocked by the predicament of surviving her. The other fresh widower is Sam Finkler, an old schoolmate, the first Jewish person Julian ever met, the prototype in his mind of all Jews. Finkler is confident and bold, a successful TV personality and the author of a series of pop philosophy books, such as "The Existentialist in the Kitchen" and "The Little Book of Household Stoicism." "What Sam had”, Jacobson writes, "was a sort of obliviousness to failure, a grandstanding cheek, which Treslove could only presume was part and parcel of the Finkler heritage. . . Such confidence, such certainty of right. . . They always had something you didn't, some verbal or theological reserve they could draw on, that would leave you stumped for a response."[14] Eventhough Julian is desperately afraid of stereotyping Jews, he nonetheless luxuriates in all the classic caricatures, envying their legendary success and their history-dominating grief. While trying to disentangle what's so disturbing about Julian's special regard for Jews, the novel pursues another line of humour and it is about self-loathing Jews. Finkler, always desperate for attention and a public platform, takes over a group called "ASHamed Jews,"[15] an anti-Zionist group that holds endless Talmudic meetings to remove the precise dimensions of its members' shame, the crucial distinctions that define

"*as*hamed of being Jewish,"[16] being "ashamed as Jews"[17] and being "*Jewishly* ashamed."[18] All this is woven through bitter and abusive language, sometimes hilarious, sometimes tedious arguments about Israeli exceptionalism. For instance, in one of their meetings, Sam Finkler buried himself in a deep thought:

> Finkler sighed as they went through routines that had been tired when he first heard them from his father thirty or more years before – how tiny Israel was, how long-standing were Jewish claims to the land…how Israel had offered the world but every effort at peacemaking had been rebuffed by the Arabs, how much more necessary than ever a secure Israel was in a world in which anti-Semitism was on the increase…[19]

The Finkler Question is less exhilarating as compared to the other works of Howard Jacobson. It can be regarded as more topical, and in some ways more disturbing. The narrative brings out at length what Jacobson is often associated with, the "seriously funny". In *The Finkler Question*, the resurgent anti-Semitism in the wider world hinted at in *Kalooki Nights* remains the central theme of the novel. At the heart of the novel is Jacobson's reaction to *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*, a controversial ten-minute stage piece written by the English dramatist Caryl Churchill in response to the Israeli military action in Gaza in 2008–2009. Caryl Churchill, author of the hits *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*, is a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, and many of her colleagues in London theatrical circles belong to similar groups, such as Jews for Justice for Palestinians and Labour Friends of Palestine. Soon after Churchill's play hit the stage of the Royal Court Theatre in February 2009, with its strained and

insulting parallels between the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto and the Israelis in Gaza, Jacobson wrote a blistering column in *The Independent*, which concluded:

> And so it happens. Without one's being aware of it, it happens. A gradual habituation to the language of loathing. Passed from the culpable to the unwary and back again. And soon, before you know it . . .[20]

From the above statement, it can be assumed that anti-Semitism is the language of loathing and it looms large in *The Finkler Question*. But, the language of love, and that of laughter can also be found at large as it is the novel of Jacobson.

Meanwhile, in the larger world, as is given in the novel, anti-Semitism is on the rise, again, disguised as anti-Zionism. This comes as no surprise to Libor, the only 'gentile' among the three friends. The manner in which Jacobson portrays Libor is "seriously funny" and thus, greatly reveals the technique at which he excels:

> Libor had been lucky in love but in politics he was from a part of the world that expected nothing good of anybody. Jew-hating was back—of course Jew-hating was back. Soon it would be full-blown Fascism, Nazism, Stalinism. These things didn't go away. There was nowhere for them to go to. They were indestructible, non-biodegradable. They waited in the great rubbish tip that was the human heart. [21]

On the other hand, Sam Finkler, whose family name Julian uses as a kind of private shorthand for Jewishness (hence the book's title, parodying "The Jewish Question" of unlamented memory), takes pains to show how little being Jewish means to him by joining a group of anti-Zionist Jews who call themselves ASHamed Jews. He was

flattered to receive a letter from a number of well-known theatrical and academic Jews inviting him to join the group, but when he reads out the letter to his wife Tyler, her reaction was:

> Samuel, there is not a person whose name you have just read out for whom you have the slightest regard. You abominate academics. You don't like actors – you particularly don't like *those* actors – you have no time for celebrity chefs and you can't abide stand-up comedians…Not funny, you say about them. Seriously *not funny*. Why would I – no why would *you* care what any of them think?[22]

As the narrative proceeds, the process of Sam's own disillusionment with the ASHamed Jews and their ilk is beautifully played out against the backdrop of an angry piece that sweeps fashionable London: *Sons of Abraham*, Jacobson's fictionalized version of the Caryl Churchill number.

> *Sons of Abraham* . . . charted the agonies of the Chosen People from ancient times up until the present when they decided to visit their agonies on someone else. The final scene was a well-staged tableau of destruction, all smoke and rattling metal sheets and Wagnerian music, to which the
>
> Chosen People danced like slow-motion devils, baying and hallooing, bathing their hands and feet in the blood that oozed like ketchup from the corpses of their victims, a fair number of whom were children.[23]

As the title of the novel suggests, "The Finkler "Question"— what does it mean to be Jewish in 21st-century England?— is never answered. However, Jacobson's outrages, delights, and surprises, without neglecting the seriousness in dealing with humour can be denoted time and again in *The Finkler Question.* Jacobson's power of prose also continues to fill up the pages with his courage to make the readers laugh with amusement, in spite of life's miseries:

> The great London dawn bled slowly into sight, a thin line of red blood leaking out between the rooftops, appearing at the windows of the buildings it had infiltrated, one at a time, as though in a soundless military coup. On some mornings it was as though a sea of blood rose from the city floor. Higher up, the sky would be mauled with rough blooms of deep blues and burgundies like bruising. Pummeled into light, the hostage day began.[25]

In dealing with humour, Jacobson always tends to treat the subject-matter of his works with seriousness and careful brevity. It can be easily identified that his intention is not only to evoke laughter, but to leave a serious message to the minds of the readers through his skillful employment of the various techniques of humour. Jacobson has once explained the "greater truth" about *Kalooki Nights* in his interview with John Mullan:

> "It normally feels to me that I plunge into a novel as into a dark tunnel, without knowing where I'm going and certainly with no idea when or where I'm going to come out. Only now do I see that with *Kalooki*

> *Nights* there was a more rigorous intentionality – entirely unknown to me – at work all along. It's there on the very first page of the novel, where my hero Max, an unsuccessful Jewish cartoonist, recalls his time "ripping off the Tom of Finland books for an unscrupulous pirate publisher of gay eroticism". The subjects of Tom of Finland's art are, in Max's words, "deltoidal, no-necked, peach-bottomed sadists . . . romping in a spunky never-never sodomitic kindergarten" – the key word being "romping", something Max has never managed. Jews don't do "irresponsible recreation", Max says. Having been thrown out of the Garden of Eden once, they don't expect to re-enter it. Quite simply, life is too serious, even for a Jewish cartoonist, to be wearing bulging leather trousers and toying with cruelty.[26]

Max feels he has no choice. For him, this is what it means to be a Jew. "Where did our Jewish seriousness go?"[27] he asks his mother, a woman who watches trashy musicals and whiles away her evenings playing a footling card game called kalooki. “Fifty years ago we'd been close to extinction, and now”, Max complains, “we are given over to fatuousness and triviality”.[28] There is, of course, something equally fatuous about Max's high-mindedness. Kalooki is just a game. This is the other side of Max's refusal to "gambol" – he takes himself too seriously. Hence his comic book history of the Jewish people, entitled *Two Thousand Years of Bitterness*. Not only is Jacobson serious about his works, his characters too are no exception. The competing claims of memory became the subject of the novel. And the medium for expressing it was play – the joke. "Jew, Jew, Jew; joke, joke, joke,"[29] is the novel's refrain. But they are jokes that sometimes forget to play; jokes that smell of death. Jacobson also admits that:

> That I would treat the subject as humour was never in doubt – Max's comic book history of Jewish suffering, like his inability to fall in love with any woman who didn't have an umlaut in her name, setting the tone. The more tragic the themes – in this case massacre, murder, derangement (and, of course, taking oneself too seriously or not seriously enough) – the more obliged I feel as a novelist to mine the humour in them. Jewish themes, in particular, are susceptible to humour of the most stringent sort. It's what Jews have always done in the face of affliction – joked. Not to make light of catastrophe, but to bring every resource of intelligence to bear on it, to understand it fully, and to affirm the energy of life in the face of horror. Laughter might, in the end, be the only cure for the poisoned heart of memory."[30]

Thus, he takes laughter seriously in order to bring cure for the sufferings that have been experienced by Jews.

. The misanthrope at the heart of *Kalooki Nights* is Max Glickman, a cartoonist who hopes that his caricatures will reveal a "greater truth". Born into an irreligious Jewish family in the 40s, he was raised in an atmosphere of sweet reason comprising "socialism, syndicalism, Bundism, trade unionism, international brotherhoodism, atheism"[31] Glickman, in Yiddish, literally means "lucky-man", but this name is laden with irony. Although safely ensconced between "the ghettos and the greenery"[32] of North Manchester, with "extermination in his vocabulary and "the Nazis" in his living room"[33], Max "ate of the tree of knowledge and didn't know a day's happiness thereafter".[34] He is a serious

artist assumed to be joking all the time. Although Max may be a witty soul he is not possessed of brevity. He rambles backwards and forwards in time, returning to his numerous failed marriages and his own failures like so many picky scabs and he dwells long on the horrors of history.

Jacobson's depiction of "goyim" in *Kalooki Nights* is quite shocking. There are endless jokes about their foolishness, spite, and jealous hatred of Jewish "brainboxes". Many of these are distinctly nasty. Max's first wife had a previous lover who "anally ravaged" her because he was angry she wanted to go to art college. "Goyim do that,"[35] explains Max. This may results as a painful reading, but not without purpose. At first, a person may attribute such tasteless race remarks to the fact that Max is a cartoon artist. He tends to see everything through his artistic imagination but there is something else going on, too. It helps to understand better than ever how it must feel to have been the subject of such attentions and prejudice for – as Max would have it – the past 5,000 years. It also helps a person to understand how it feels to be Max as he also helplessly exclaims "Jew, Jew, Jew. Why, why, why, as my father asked until the asking killed him, does everything always have to come back to Jew, Jew, Jew?"[36] The powerful sense of revelation and empathy burns through the text of *Kalooki Nights* as much as the blazes of righteous anger and the bright sparks of humour. Max may draw with bold, crude strokes, but, as Jacobson writes: "it's the number of shades of darkness he has found you admire the cartoonist for."[37]

The subjects that Jacobson covers in *Kalooki Nights* so perceptively could hardly be more forbidding: the Holocaust; fathers and sons; imbalanced friendships; evil and

victimhood; forgiving and forgetting; race and religion; Jews and Gentiles; parenticide by gassing; and again and again, and over and over, what it means to be a “Jew, Jew, Jew”.[38] In *Kalooki Nights*, Jacobson tries to breach the whole business of the Holocaust without re-evoking the experiences of the Holocaust, but paying careful attention to the means and ways it has been talked about. He wants to change the language in which the Jews go on thinking about these experiences and he believes that humour is an useful tool of changing the discourse. Though he tries his best, the problem he has in *Kalooki Nights* is that, as Max says, it is "hard to get people to laugh at the Holocaust".[39] Jacobson, in all the three novels, has brilliantly projected humour with a touch of seriousness. He depicts certain cases in which laughter is not the only resulting factor of humour.

NOTES

[1] Jacobson, Howard. *Seriously Funny*. Review. *The Weekend Australian* 17-18/5/1997. Web. 22. Sept. 2011. http://cameronwoodhead.com/archives/howard-jacobson-wins-the-booker-seriously-funny/

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Jacobson, Howard. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. Print. 59

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid. 109

[11] Ibid. 57

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid. 26

[14] Ibid. 22

[15] Ibid. 120

[16] Jacobson, Howard. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. Print. 120

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid. 234

[20] Ibid. 20

[21] Ibid. 20

[22] Ibid. 114

[23] Ibid. 236

[24] Ibid. 283

[25] Ibid. 298

[26] Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 27

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid. 8

[30] Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Gerald Jacobs. *The Jewish Chronicle* 4 Sept. 2008. Web. 19 Dec. 2010.<http:// *www.thejc.com/...interviews/interview-howard-jacobson*>.

[31] Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 13

[32] Ibid. 5

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid. 7

[36] Ibid

[37] Ibid. 23

[38] Ibid. 8

[39] Ibid. 58

CHAPTER IV

HUMOURIC SELF-AWARENESS WITHIN THE NARRATIVES

Humouric self - awareness is one of the most important techniques that Howard Jacobson has skillfully employed in his writings in order to bring out the various humouric qualities that he intend to denote. It is a common trait that can be identified almost in all of the characters that have been created by Jacobson in his works. Failures may be at the root of their fortune, but Jacobson skillfully utilizes the workings of failures to bring out the humouric side of humanity. A writer who firmly admits that "The better a writer you are, the more ways you find of accessing those parts of yourself" is in fact accessing a large part of his "Jewish mind" and his "Jewish intelligence" through his writings.

Jewish humour has always remained central in the works of Jacobson because he believes that it is the best means of pouring his heart out to the readers and this is the reason why humouric self-awareness can be distinguished in most of the characters that Jacobson has created. Sigmund Freud has also once mentioned in his work *Jokes And Their Relation To The Unconscious* while defining the workings of Jewish humour that "…I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character."[1] Jewish people are no doubt famous for their jokes which are commonly directed against Jewish characteristics and Jacobson has also briefly remarked that "You tell a joke against yourself, you've achieved an intellectual moral superiority. We make more fun of ourselves than anybody else could. In the act of doing that, we appear to be on the back foot but we're winning…"[2] Jewish people themselves are good at handling their jokes instead of a foreigner making jokes about Jews because for the most part of it, a foreigner tends to regard Jews as comic figures and thus their jokes often turns out to be brutal comic stories. Freud has explained that

"The Jewish jokes which originate from Jews…know their real faults as well as the connection between them and their good qualities, and the share which the subject has in the person found fault with creates the subjective determinant (usually so hard to arrive at) of the joke-work."[3] Therefore, Jewish jokes which are originally created by their own people often contains a deeper meaning as well as an inner quality of humour than those that have been made about them by foreigners.

In *Roots Schoomts Journeys Among Jews*, under the title "A Little Bit Cuckoo", Jacobson has inherently explained:

> "…I must hit the pillow wondering why Jews think it's so funny to say, 'I'm Jewish,' whether they add 'And fuck you' or they don't. the comedy - the comedy to *them*: the comedy to *us* – must reside in the release, in the act of saying the unsayable. Jew Jew Jew…I go to sleep, counting Hasids."[4]

From this statement, it is clear that Jews are often aware of the fact that humour is deeply rooted in their being and that it always play an important part in releasing their tensions, sorrows and their long sufferings. The same case can be found in the character of Max Glickman in *Kalooki Nights* who keeps on uttering the words "Jew Jew Jew" throughout the novel in order to relieve himself from the intense "Jewishness" that he feels including his constant contemplation about their past history. Max Glickman, on the other side, always has the capacity to make fun of himself and his failures in life. For instance, when one of his 'shikseh' wives Zoe wanted him to have his nose cropped, his reaction to this suggestion is that:

> "You can get sick of looking like a Jew. And you can get sick of being

> looked at like a Jew as well. It would be interesting to see how it felt not to be forever earmarked for something or other. They regard you oddly, the Gentiles, whether they mean you harm or not."[5]

Max's mixture of shame and disillusionment often results in evoking the humouric nature and the funny side of his life. When his uncle Tsedraiter Ike warned him about his constant relationship with a 'shikseh' girl by saying "She'll call you dirty Jew"[6] and his mother too "She'll accuse you of killing Christ"[7], Max still has the ability to defend himself by thinking "Zoe never did accuse me of killing Christ. Only as behaving as though I were Christ, which is a subtly different charge. But 'dirty Jew', yes, or at least 'Jew' with the dirty – meaning heated, meaning tumultous, meaning unrefreshed and unrefreshable - implied."[8] Yet, this is how most of the characters of Jacobson are made aware of the humouric qualities that lies within their identities and they hardly deviate themselves from remaining firmly in this position.

The Jewish comic actress Madeline Kahn has highlighted pain as intrinsic to all laughter: "Laughter is a strange response. I mean, what is it? It's a spasm of some kind! Is that always joy? It's very often discomfort. It's some sort of explosive reaction"[9]. Max Glickman is one type of a character who has the tendency to evoke this type of discomfort explosive reaction from the readers. At the beginning of the novel, Max Glickman has introduced himself to the readers:

> "Thus did I grow up in Crumpsall Park in the 1950s, somewhere between the ghettos and the greenery of North Manchester, with 'extermination' in my vocabulary and the Nazis in my living room."[10]

From this introduction, it can be assumed that Max Glickman is another character of Howard Jacobson who will be honest enough to stay true to himself and will keep making fun at his own expense. It is quite amusing to learn that in his own notion, Max Glickman holds the view that the afflictions of Jewish "began from the minute we showed we couldn't be natural in nature. We did a Jewish thing, we ate of the tree of knowledge, and we didn't know a day's happiness thereafter."[11] As a reader, instead of sympathising the long sufferings that the Jews have had experienced, it is more likely to find the humouric side of it as Max Glickman narrates his experience from his own point of view.

Henri Bergson has the notion that 'tension' and 'elasticity' are two important forces that will enable a person to adapt himself in consequence. "If these two forces are lacking in the body to any considerable extent, we have sickness and infirmity and accidents of every kind. If they are lacking in the mind, we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity. Finally, if they are lacking in the character, we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the causes of crime"[12], Henry Nagel in *The Making of Henry* is also lacking in these two forces which turns him into a comic figure and this is also the reason why he is considered as a 'solipsistic' old man by the other characters around him. He is introduced at the beginning of the novel . Henry Nagel is a type of character who often contemplates about his life and these are the questions that he longed to ask his deceased father:

"Who am I? Who are you? Do you love me? Am I a dissapointment to you? Don't you want to know whether you're a

dissapointment to me? Did you never care? Did you ever feel bad now? About me? About Mum? About yourself?"[13]

In reality, one may actually have the notion that Henry is old enough to follow this same routine and be stuck in his own shell. But "The trouble is, Henry has no children to give him grandchildren. And no friends disposed to lend him theirs. Henry has dishonoured his friendships, whether by disparaging his friends' achievements, or by turning away from their society, or by borrowing their wives, and you know what friends are like when you start that"[14]. This brings out the funny side of Henry amidst his loneliness and being devoid of sharing a deep bond of friendship with the other characters around him. Rather his notion about friendship is that he either envies someone or he 'burrows their wives'. "Nothing in his life has interested Henry more than this. Woman. Never mind the phenomenology or metaphysics of woman, just woman. Just the aesthetic of her. Just the *prospect*."[15]

Jacobson's heroes willingly, if with bad grace, haul themselves up their own trees and then invite the world to hurl itself at them. And the world, for them, is unendurable. Here is how the contemporary insanity strikes Henry Nagel, "revving when you're stationary and driving with your hand on your horn ... text messaging the person standing next to you, or being wired up so that you can speak into thin air ... or wearing running shoes when you're not running, or coming up to Henry with a bad face and a dog on a piece of string and asking him for money. Why would Henry give someone with a bad face money? Because of the dog? Because of the string?"[16] This is exactly what Henri Bergson has explained about 'tension' and 'elasticity', Henry Nagel is lacking both of these two forces and this is the main reason that allows himself to be

considered insane by the other characters as well as by the readers and often let himself be the subject of laughter. He is the type of man who prefers to ventures out and be a "stranger among strangers…than to be even partially at home among the indigenous"[17] even while there is a corpse next door, which clearly reflects that he is a man who bears a distinct characteristic trait, a special kind of his own, than a man who tries to conform and adjust himself within the society that he lives.

The Making of Henry can be considered as a novel that is inherently filled with jokes at Henry's expense, yet "solipsistic Henry" never feels sorry for himself, nor asks for pity. Having lost his job, his youth and someone to love "with one dry foot on the cobblestones of the town and one wet one in the drains and delfs of a moor so dour it was a miracle a single flower could find the will to bloom there, and few did"[18], but Henry hardly complains about his life, his present condition and the loneliness that binds him in and out. Even after he has shifted to the luxurious apartment he has inherited from his father but which he finds it hard to believe, he is aware of the fact that he was happy to have stayed in his "rented crofter's cottage"[19] and never did he like "people to talk ill of his heartlands"[20] because "ever since he could remember, Henry had woken up to a view fringed like an eyelash by the Pennines. The Pennines were his Mountains of Mourne. He attached lyrical significance to their green and purple. They were his Alps. They extended his conception of the possible. They were all foreignness and promise."[21] This shows that Henry is one type of a character who finds happiness in every situation that he has encountered in his miserable world. He is not the type to complain about the failures and the mishaps that falls upon his lot, rather he finds comfort and relief in having the ability to create humour out of any situation. He knows

that he has been given the choice for which he is grateful for, but still he also knows that “you need life to be out there if you are going to find peace in your heart.”[22]

For so long Henry has been living his life with shame and sorrows. At one point of time, Henry, being a failed literature lecturer, recalls being introduced to the great American authors:

> "In America the Jews had taken on a version of the national identity, had made the American cause their own, had even shaped it, sometimes dangerously - tempting fate, risking a backlash - in their own image. Not in England, not in Manchester, not on the Pennines. Yes, they were dutiful citizens; they paid their taxes, fought in wars, performed charitable deeds, gave service to the community, but only for the right, at last, to be left alone to notice nothing."[23]

Assimilated Henry actually notices everything, particularly the details of his own disastrous life. He is retired - a condition that, in his case, merges with semi-redundancy, and complete ignominy. His career as a lecturer at a technological college in the Pennines has been spectacularly downwardly mobile. Henry, both professionally and personally, has become horribly marginalised, but he remains true to himself throughout the novel. With his fortune unexpectedly reviving itself, Henry has moved into the luxurious apartment which causes him to constantly brood into his childhood and his deceased father Izzi Nagel. Henry’s contemplation about his past intensify as the novel progresses and this is the main important part of the story which sets the novel to move on with laughter amidst Henry’s miserable life.

Henry's Jewish upbringing in Manchester is also laced with farce and humour. His mother's idea of cooking was "dropping cans into boiling water and then forgetting them until the water boiled away and the kitchen filled with the smell of roasting metal. Eventually the cans exploded - that was how you knew the meal was ready. Sometimes, when his father came home late asking for tea, Ekaterina would point to the kitchen ceiling. 'It's there,' she'd say. Then Henry's Father would go out into the garden, fill his mouth with paraffin, and burn down more trees."[24] At the beginning of the novel, it is mentioned that Henry's father was a children's party entertainer - "origamist, illusionist and fire-eater"[25]. Due to his fire-eating business, "People have seen our garden,"[26] Henry's mother complains, surveying the scorched earth and boiled goldfish pond. "Nothing will ever grow there again for another thousand years."[27] But Henry knows them too well that he even admits:

> "I have pyromaniacal parents… They lay waste to everything."[28] He has the ability to console himself and to see things as well as take things on the brighter side of life, therefore "what he still can't decide is whether they had laid waste to him as well, or whether he had done that to himself."[29]

This is the nature of Henry Nagel who never blames anyone for any circumstances and thus, it is doubtless that he even questions his mother "Isn't it a Jewish speciality,' he said, 'to enjoy making jokes at our own expense? Hasn't that been the saving of us, our comic self-awareness?"[30]

What seems more amusing in tracing the life of Henry is his envy about the subsequent fame and success of his chilhood bullying friend 'Hovis' Belkin. Apart from his deceased father, Henry's life is also continually haunted by 'Hovis' Belkin (nicknamed for the shape of his head), who has turned himself to become a Hollywood director, and above all, who has children and grandchildren. "Producer, director - don't ask Henry, what's the career of 'Hovis' Belkin to Henry Nagel? But his health is not the best, and he has grandchildren he wants to see. Lots of grandchildren. Grandchildren, as Henry puts it to himself, coming out of his fundament."[31] Henry's envy of him has fed an emotional vendetta that has partly shaped the course of his life, and Belkin provides the novel's subplot. "And what exactly was it that Osmond Belkin and Henry's father did to Henry, that shames him now, so long after the events, even where no one can see him, in the enclosing all-consoling blackness of St John's Wood?

> They Devitalised him. They impugned his masculinity.
> They called him a girl."[32]

Thus, it can be learnt that Henry has been a vulnerable victim to be bullied by his schoolmates even during his childhood. He has often falls prey to his friends to be made fun off, mocked and being laughed at. From the first day of entering his grammer school he is not allowed to ask questions to the boy next to him because he has been warned "Stop asking me dumb questions - you girl!"[33] and the boy sitting next to him is none other than Osmond Belkin, the man he envies throughout his life. He doesn't possess the strength and the courage to fight back than to turn himself into "the colour of damson jam."[34] From this incident, one will not be amazed by the way he has been

introduced to the American authors and the reason why he has never been awarded a doctorate degree, the only dream that he longs to achieve.

Julian Treslove in *The Finkler Question* is another character of Jacobson whose life is filled with envy upon his two Jewish widower friends, namely Sam Finkler and Libor Sevick. Like Henry Nagel who has lost his job, Julian Treslove is also another failed BBC producer and hapless romantic, while his old school pal Sam Finkler is a populist and popular Jewish philosopher and Libor Sevick is an old Czech who once taught them the history of Prague. The novel begins with these lines "He should have seen it coming. His life had been one mishap after another. So he should have been prepared for this one. He was a man who saw things coming. Not shadowy premonitions before and after sleep, but real and present dangers in the daylit world"[35], hence, sooner or later Julian Treslove is "grabbed, thrown, eviscerated. By a woman." This incident remains an important theme throughout the novel because Julian Treslove has cultivated the notion that this attack has been motivated by anti-semitism as the woman who has attacked Julian Treslove called him "You Ju!" which lingers on in his mind and keeps on wondering why she spat that word against him. " No matter how often often he revolved it in his mind, he came out at the same place. No to jewels, no to jewel, no to Jules, no to Jule, and yes to Ju. *You Ju*…"[36], which evokes a deep sense of laughter in the minds of the readers instead of pitying him. "Was it simply a case, therefore, of mistaken identity?"[37] is another question which overwhelms him. The problem with this theory is that Julian is not a Jew. The incident, therefore, sends Julian into an identity crisis, causing him to wonder if he might actually be Jewish without knowing it and leading him into a romance with a Jewish woman. On the other hand, Julian Treslove,

like Henry Nagel, knows himself too well that he admits that he is a type of man who is loathed by woman than loved , "He bored them into hating him, he knew that."[38]

As a result of this incident, Sam Finkler draws a conclusion that Julian Treslove wants to be a Jew "Look – you got mugged. It isn't nice. And you were already in an emotional state… You can't be us. You shouldn't be us"[39], to which Julian Treslove replies "Sam – Samuel – read my lips. I. Do. Not. Want. To. Be. A. Jew. OK? Nothing against them but I like being what I am" but the question is that whether he truly knows who he is and is not. So when he is questioned again by Sam Finkler "So what are you?... 'You said you like being what you are, so what are you?'… 'What am I?' Treslove stared at the ceiling. It felt like a trick question."[40] This statement precisely reveals what Julian Treslove feels about his identity and to make it worst, he often becomes the victim of Sam Finkler's witty questions of manipulating him. Thus, "whatever Sam Finkler wanted, his effect on Julian Treslove was always to put him out of sorts and make him feel excluded from something…Finkler made him feel like someone he wasn't. Clownish, somehow."[41] This is the reason why he is enviously troubled and preoccupied by their Finklerishness. He envies almost everything about Libor Sevick and Sam Finkler.

> "Envy he was capable of, yes – he'd been envious and was envious still of Libor's life lived mono – erotically… but jealousy no. Death was his only serious rival."[42]

Julian Treslove holds the bleak view that "just to be a human animal is to be a disgrace. Life is a disgrace, an absurd disgrace, to be exceeded in disgracefulness only

by death."[43] This pessimistic outlook, coupled with Julian's relentless expectation that he is always about to fall victim to a tragic event remains central within the narratives.

What is more strange about Julian Treslove is that at the start of any relationship with a woman, Julian Treslove immediately pictures its poignant end: the woman carried off by disease or fate, accompanied by the music of Verdi or Puccini as "he was a man who ordinarily woke to a sense of loss. He could not remember a single morning of his life when he had woken to a sense of possession."[44] It can be assumed that Julian Treslove is slowly breaking away from logic and gradually detaching himself from reality as he continue to perceive images. He has a dream that he constantly dreams where a young girl, a school girl in uniform with a pleated skirt and a white blouse runs towards him, who takes off her shoes so that she can run faster and freer. "He has dreamed this dream all his life and no longer knows if it has its origin in something he once saw. But it is real to him as reality and he welcomes its recurrence…"[45] which denotes that he is trapped in the world of dreams and absurdities. A comic character, thus, according to Henri Bergson, "more or less resembles the absentminded. Maybe his will is here even more concerned than his intellect…he is absent, away from his work, taking it easy. He abandons social convention…he abandoned logic."[46]

Once in his childhood days, as narrated in the text, Julian Treslove had met a beautiful hippy girl at a gestalt nostalgia party in East Sussex where they painted one another's face and the girl requested him to "Paint the me you see".[47] Unfortunately, Julian Treslove has painted a clown with an "absurd red nose", big white mouth and a crimson patches on the cheeks which has made the girl sobbed with tears. As a result,

this incident has "marked him, in his own eyes, as a man who didn't know how to relate to people, especially women. Thereafter, he hesitated when he was invited to a party. And started, in the way that some people start from spiders, whenever he saw a box of children's paints or people painting one another's faces at a fete."[48] Undoubtedly, Julian Treslove is another character of Jacobson who knows his weakness, his clumsy attitude towards the opposite sex as he himself admits "he bored them into hating him"[49]. Like Henry Nagel, there is always a touch of humouric self-awareness in Julian Treslove despite his failures and the baffling envy that he feels towards his friends.

Likewise, the characters of Howard Jacobson, have the abilities to make fun at their own expenses. They are not the sort of characters who are placed in a fun-filled world, but they always tend to struggle hard enough to survive in the harsh world in which they belong. These experiences allow them to transform themselves into another realm of life where they find joy and amusement. *In Kalooki Nights*, Max Glickman can always be identified as a person who is trapped in the tragic past history of Jews which remains the guiding factor of his artistic works. He is portrayed as a person who suffers immense abuses from his "interchangeable shikseh wives", but he is well aware of the fact that his life is enmeshed with shame and throughout the narratives he remains one of the most important characters who possess the utmost potential of making fun about himself. Henry Nagel, the main protagonist in *The Making of Henry*, is yet another character of Howard Jacobson who lives within his own shell, jobless and continually haunted by his deceased father, but amidst his failures and misfortunes in life, he can still rise out to be the sort of character who is likely to be laughed at instead of sympathising him. Also, in *The Finkler Question*, Howard Jacobson portrays

Julian Treslove as a person who envies his two widower friends and the ways in which he tries to live upto their standards remains the central theme that brings out the humouric element of the novel. Howard Jacobson, indeed brings out the various humouric elements in his works by carefully caricaturing his characters with the technique of humouric self-awareness within them.

NOTES

[1]Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. New York: Penguin Books. 1976. Print. 157

[2]Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept. 2004.web. 16 Jan. 2011. <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

[3]Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. New York: Penguin Books. 1976. Print. 156

[4]Jacobson, Howard. *Roots Schmoots Journey Among Jews*. New York: The Overlook Press. 1993. Print. 81

[5]Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 27

[6]Ibid.26

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print. 93

[10]Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. 5

[11]Ibid.33

[12]Bergson, Henry. *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Maryland: ArcManor. 2008.Print.12

[13]Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print.5

[14] Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print.5

[15]Ibid. 71

[16]Ibid. 2

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.3

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid. 5

[23]Ibid.146

[24]Ibid.55

[25]Ibid. 42

[26]Ibid. 53

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.55

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.293

[31]Ibid. 85

[32]Ibid. 79

[33]Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35]Ibid. 3

[36]Ibid.56

[37] Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print.56.

[38]Ibid.58

[39]Ibid. 67

[40]Ibid. 68

[41]Ibid. 26

[42]Ibid. 28

[43]Ibid. 290

[44]Ibid. 4

[45]Ibid.

[46]Bergson, Henry. *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Maryland: ArcManor. 2008. Print. 92

[47]Jacobson, Howard. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010. Print. 262

[48]Ibid. 263

[49]Ibid. 58

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Humour is often characteristically woven into profundity in almost all of the works of Howard Jacobson. His own style of humour is always central to his themes, however tragic, dark or profound. Howard Jacobson, most widely admired for his creative handling of humour wants his fellow Jews to be serious and this element can be commonly found in his works. He is a writer who treats humour with seriousness and to evoke laughter is not only what his works focus upon. Howard Jacobson quite reasonably describes himself as "entirely and completely Jewish"[1]. In this context, he has also once described some of his clashes with the rabbis - over the most serious and tragic of all Jewish themes:

> "It was very important to me in *Kalooki Nights* to try and broach the whole business of the Holocaust. Not to re-evoke the Holocaust, but to think about the way we talk about it. Not because I think it's funny. Not because I feel we need to 'lighten up' - if anything, I felt we needed to go on darkening down. Occassionally I find myself on the radio with a rabbi, and I'm the one saying: 'Never forget.' They say: 'Well, we've got to move on. 'You move on, rabbi, I'm not.' "But I do want to change the language in which we go on thinking about this…Comedy is one way to change the discourse."[2]

Howard Jacobson has been placed firmly at the acerbic end of the humour scale. His works hardly deviate from the world of Jews within which he is deeply rooted and his accomplishment lies in the varied sources of interest that he is able to discover in the lives of Jews. Howard Jacobson is at his best in fusing humour and tragedy in his

works as can be seen in three of his humour fiction, *Kalooki Nights*, *The Finkler Question* and *The Making of Henry* which have been chosen for study. Failures are often at the root of the lives of the characters that are portrayed in the works of Howard Jacobson but these failures are in turn narrated by Howard Jacobson for the readers with a touch of his own technique of humour. For instance Julian Treslove in *The Finkler Question* and Henry Nagel in *The Making of Henry* who has been introduced at the beginning of the novel as persons who have lost their jobs and are left in critical circumstances, but as the novel proceeds they evolve as characters who possess the utmost capacity to evoke laughter despite the failures and sufferings that they have gone through. *Kalooki Nights*, on the other hand, can be seen as a kind of anger management, which is best revealed through the life of the main protagonist Max Glickman. His life is troubled due to his constant flashback of the past history of the Jews which, as a cartoonist, act as a guiding factor for his works. His frequent utterance of the words "Jew Jew Jew" and the number of failed relationships that he has been through with his interchangeable wives along with the innumerable insults that he has received from them are the elements which Howard Jacobson has employed in order to create a fine balance between humour and tragedy.

Immanuel Kant, the great eighteenth-century Prussian philosopher has agreed that humour can be created from an intellectual recognition of incongruity, but adds a certain reason as to why there is a resulting pleasant reaction to that intellectual recognition. According to Kant, one laughs at absurdities not because the intellect itself finds pleasure in that which frustrates it, but the intellect's attempt to reconcile an absurd conjunction of ideas causes a physical response that can be deemed as pleasant.

Howard Jacobson also carefully employ the incongruity theory in his works by juxtaposing certain events and ideas through his writings which actually evolves laughter and amusement when coming to terms with them. In *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson frequently talks about the ASHamed Jews, a movement inspired by one of his character Sam Finkler:

> …Sam's on the phone to them every minute God sends.
>
> And then there are the meetings.
>
> …Not public ones, as far as I know. Not yet, anyway.
>
> But they meet at another's houses. Sounds disgusting to me.
>
> Like group confessionals. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.
>
> …Sam's their father confessor. "I forgive you my child.
>
> Say three *I Am Ashameds* and don't go to Eliat for your holidays."[3]

From these lines, it can easily be noticed that there is an amusing juxtaposition between the Christian rituals of a confession with that of the meetings that is held by a fictional Jewish movement created by Jacobson, namely the ASHamed Jews.

The three novels have focused upon similar themes: the workings of Jewish humour, the willingness of Jews to make fun at their own expenses and the shame that continues to linger on within their beings. Howard Jacobson mainly traces upon the experience that have been undergone by Jews for a long period of time. He frequently brings forward the tragic past history of Jews within his narratives but with a touch of humour. Howard Jacobson can be considered as a writer who excels in handling Jewish humour which remains central in his works. Jewish humour has been highlighted at large

especially in chapter two of the study which has been entitled “Locating Jewish Humour”. It can be learnt at the end of the study that the history of Jews is a mixture of pain and suffering, of tragedies, of great losses, and of surviving against all odds. Throughout their history they have found themselves powerless in their dealings with hostile rulers, malicious brainless peasants, and anti-Semites. For this reason, Jews created a humor where laughter and tears, happiness and fear were inextricable. Howard Jacobson had once mentioned about the workings of Jewish humour in one of his interviews:

> “What a Jew is has been made by the experience of 5,000 years, that's what shapes the Jewish sense of humour, that's what shaped Jewish pugnacity or tenaciousness”.[4]

Humour plays an important role in the lives of Jews as they believe that it helps them cope with the world around them. They also acquire the notion that if they keep making fun of themselves, they win over the other people who laugh at them. This is the reason why most of the characters of Howard Jacobson are never ashamed to reveal their identities, and this applies not merely to their identities, but also towards their past history and how they have been treated by the world at large. On the other hand, what makes them an interesting characters is the fact that they always have the ability to evoke laughter upon the readers instead of manipulating them to sympathise with their sufferings.

He hardly digresses his theme about what it feels to be Jews and how humour is the main essence in their lives. Throughout the ages Jewish humour has characterized

itself with wisdom and prophecy by colliding between two mutual values: acknowledging the appeal of the prevailing wisdom while discrediting it; recognizing the comforts of home and inherited identity while insisting that intellectual integrity, moral system, and even artistic distinction more often than not require renouncing these comforts. Funny Jews, as Irving Kristol has observed, inhabit "a knife edge between faith and nihilism". For instance, Henry Nagel, a neurotic Jewish academic in *The Making of Henry* whose life is nothing but a continuous contemplation of failed relationships, friendships and hopes. He is portrayed as a solipsistic old man consumed by his own mortality and endlessly picking over his own failures are not just entertaining but often gloriously funny, as he declares who:

> knows what's waiting. He will hobble homewards one ordinary madhouse afternoon, he will feel a stabbing in his heart, and he will beshit himself…He will beshit himself in a public place. He will come out of himself, his own entrails the waste matter of his life and being. See that mess? That's Henry.[6]

This is the manner in which Howard Jacobson portrays the main protagonist of his novel. His characters breathe with shame and hardly belong to the society in which they exist. *Kalooki Nights* also proves him that he deals humour with careful seriousness. He strives to jolt people out of their complacency, rather than comfort them with their prejudices, and yet still succeeds in making them laugh. The novel is inextricably woven with jokes that will leave the readers breathless with laughter, but about things that are no laughing matter. For instance, Manny tells the narrator Max Glickman that a mutual

acquaintance – a "sexy woman" – is not just "your friendly neighbourhood anti-Semite. " She's a "Nazi" and the friend has a photograph to prove it: "One of her schmoozing with Klan members at a hate rally in Mississipi. I'm not joking. And you can see the way they're looking at her. Even under their fucking hoods you can see they're smitten. Now I'm joking. But in fact I'm not joking."[7] It's a passage that encapsulates much of what the book is about: a discomfiting mix of lust and loathing, Yiddish and fascism, and, most of all, the joking and not-joking. This is another humour fiction of Jacobson that brings new meaning to the phrase "seriously funny".

Howard Jacobson has acquired the notion that by implementing the techniques of Jewish humour in his works, there is a means of changing the discourse in which Jews contemplate about their past history along with their long suffering. Theodor Reik has envisioned that:

> …the telling of Jewish jokes has the unconscious aim of cementing the bond that was originally founded on certain common values and on the awareness of Jewish isolation in the nations within which they live. Telling these jokes has…the significance of reaching one's arms out to the other fellow.[8]

Howard Jacobson holds a strong view on the Israel Palestine issue and he has often inculcated this issue in his writings. He has once discussed Jews who criticise Israel, in *The Jewish Chronicle*, in August 2010:

> "If you had to say in one sentence what being Jewish means, it is being

> able to make fun of yourself Jewishly... (but) when it's without the affection, I worry."[9]

Jacobson has carefully tackled the problems of Jewish anti-Zionists and those Jews that reject Israel in his novel *The Finkler Question,* especially through the characters of Libor and Finkler who are at opposite ends over Jews and Israel, and especially over Jews who loudly criticise Israel.

Howard Jacobson is thus a writer who earns his fame through his skillfull employment of the various techniques of humour, and especially of Jewish humour. His characters may vary, but the themes of the novels are the same in terms of the various experiences of Jews that commonly features in his novels. Jacobson, time and again, stresses upon the fact that Jews have acquired the utmost tendency to make more fun of themselves in order to cope with the society in which they live. According to the notion of Jacobson, in making fun of themselves they gain superiority and win over people who poke fun at them. Also, one common theme that runs through all the narratives is the feelings of shame that has been undergone by Jews. All the characters in the three selected novels are found to be breathing shame within their own existence. They carry shame wherever they move about and it can be easily identified that Jews have to struggle hard enough to cope with the society in which they live.

Thus, an in-depth study of the three selected novels of Howard Jacobson brings out the important reason as to why Jews and humour cannot be separated from each other. Humour is deeply bonded within their culture and it plays one of the most important means and ways to relief their stress and sufferings. In humour, Jews find a

medium of escape where they can pour out their hearts and appears to be winning instead of remaining at the back-foot. Jacobson is at his best in bringing out his inner thoughts without deviating from the realm of humour. He opens a new window for the readers to understand and delve into the various lives and experiences of Jews. His works are mostly coloured by humour that is both penetrating and playful, but it also conveys varying shades of humiliation and resignation. The stimulating elements of his writing, those that are "seriously funny", have also been blended together within the novels selected for study in a manner that locates and situates Jacobson's humouric mode.

NOTES

[1]Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Gerald Jacobs. *The Jewish Chronicle* 4 Sept. 2008. Web. 19 Dec. 2010.<http:// *www.thejc.com/...interviews/interview-howard-jacobson*>.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Jacobson, Howard. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010. Print.120

[4]Jacobson, Howard. "Interview by Elizabeth Manus". *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004.Web.16Jan.2011.<http://www.thejc.com/arts/artsinterviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print.4

[7]Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print.12

[8]Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print.463

[9]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Jacobson. 13 Nov. 2011

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES:

Jacobson, Howard. *The Finkler Question*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 2010.

---. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007.

---. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. New Delhi: Thomson Business International India Pvt. Ltd. 2006. Print.

Bergson, Henry. *An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Maryland: ArcManor. 2008. Print

Charney, Maurice, ed. *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*. 2 vols. Westport CT: Praeger Publishers. 2005. Print.

---. *Comedy High and Low: An Introduction to the Experience of Comedy*. New York: Oxford UP. 1978. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. Angela Richards. New York: Penguin Books. 1976. Print.

Jacobson, Howard. *Roots Schmoots Journey Among Jews*. New York: The Overlook Press. 1993. Print.

Palmer, D. J., ed. *Comedy: Developments in Criticism*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1984. Print.

Prop, Vladimir. *On the Comic and Laughter*. Trans. and Ed. Jean Patrick Debbeche and Paul Perron. London: University of Toronto Press. 2009. Print.

Stott, Andrew. *Comedy: the New Critical Idiom*. New York: Routledge. 2005. Print

PERIODICALS AND ELECTRONIC SOURCES:

Bates, Alfred, ed. *The Drama: Its History, Literature and Influence on Civilization*. Vol.2. London: Historical Publishing Company. 1906. Web. 7 Apr. 2011.

<http://www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/aristophanes001.html.>

Charles, Ron. "Howard Jacobson's Booker-winning "Finkler Question"." Rev. of *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson. *Washington Post* 13 Oct. 2010. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/10/12/AR201 0101204537.html>

Cheyette, Bryan. "Howard Jacobson launches his missiles at adolescence once again in Kalooki Nights". Rev. of *Kalooki Nights* by Howard Jacobson. *The Guardian* 8 July. 2006. Web. 25 Jan. 2011. <
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview24>.

Cleave, Christopher. "The theme to knock out all themes". Rev. of *Kalooki Nights* by Howard Jacobson. The Telegraph 9 July. 2006. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3653680/The-theme-to-knock-out-all-themes.html>.

Dodge, Barbara. "Comic Art in the Renaissance". Rev. of *The Case Is Altered: Brecht's Use of Shakespeare*, by Helen M. Whall. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56.1 (1986): 125-148. Print.

Jacobs, Gerald. "Humour, insight and chutzpah pepper this fictional foray into what it means to be Jewish". Rev. of *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson. *The Telegraph* 28 July 2010. Web. *20 Dec. 2010.* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/.../The-Finkler-Question-by-Howard-Jacobson-review.html>.

Horspool, David. "A grand slam". Rev. of *Kalooki Nights* by Howard Jacobson. *The Sunday Times* 25 June. 2006. Web. *12 Dec. 2010.* <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/fiction/article676741.ece>.

Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept. 2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011. <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Gerald Jacobs. *The Jewish Chronicle* 4 Sept. 2008. Web. 19 Dec. 2010. <http:// *www.thejc.com/...interviews/interview-howard- jacobson*>.

Keenoy, Kathleen C. "The Nature of Humour". *The Irish Monthly* 72.849 (Mar.1944): 112-119. Web. 20 Dec. 2010.<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20515235>.

Parker, Douglas H. "Shakespeare's Use of Comic Conventions in *Titus Andronicus*". *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56.1 (1986): 486-497. Print.

Slights, William W. E. “The Incarnations of Comedy”. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56.1 (1986): 13-27. Print.

Strimpel, Zoe. “Jewish Nights in Manchester”. Rev. of *Kalooki Nights* by Howard Jacobson. 11 May. 2007. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.<http://www.nysun.com/arts/jewish-nights-in-manchester/54288/>.

APPENDICES

NAME OF CANDIDATE	**: Ramdinmawii**
DEGREE	**: M.Phil.**
DEPARTMENT	**: English**
TITLE OF DISSERTATION	**: Situating Humour in Select Works by Howard Jacobson.**
DATE OF PAYMENT OF ADMISSION	**: No. 2432, Dt. 27/7/2010**
(Commencement of First Sem)	
COMMENCEMENT OF SECOND SEM/DISSERTATION	**: Dt. 15/12/2010**

APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL-

1. BOS	**: Dt. 2/05/2011**
2. SCHOOL BOARD	**: Dt. 13/05/2011**
REGISTRATION NO. & DATE	**: MZU/M.Phil/57 of 13.05.2011**
DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION	**: Dt. 19/12/2011**
EXTENSION (IF ANY)	**: N.A.**

Head

Department of English.

BIO-DATA

Name: Ramdinmawii

Father's name: Lianrikhuma

Address: Tlangnuam Dam Veng, Aizawl, Mizoram

Phone No.: 09774236873

Educational Qualification:

Class	Board/University	Year of Passing	Division/Grade	Percentage
X	MBSE	2003	Distinction	76%
XII	ISC	2005	First	64.5%
BA	Calcutta University	2008	Second	45.37%
MA	Mizoram University	2010	Second	57.25%
M.Phil.	Mizoram University	Course work completed in December 2010	'A' grade awarded. 10 pt. scale grading system, 'A' corresponds to 6.00-6.99 pts.	

M.Phil. Regn. No and Date: MZU/M.Phil/57 of 13.05.2011

Other relevant information:

i. Currently working on M.Phil. dissertation entitled "Situating Humour in Select Works by Howard Jacobson" under the supervision of Dr.Margaret L. Pachuau, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mizoram University.
ii. Secured UGC-MZU Fellowship for a tenure of thirteen months.

SITUATING HUMOUR IN SELECT WORKS BY HOWARD JACOBSON

ABSTRACT

SUBMITTED BY :

RAMDINMAWII

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Degree of Masters of Philosophy in English of Mizoram University, Aizawl

Recipient of Man Booker Prize 2010 for his novel The Finkler Question, Howard Jacobson was born on 25th August 1942 in Manchester, London . It was the first humouric fiction to win the said prize since Kingsley Amis's *The Old Devils* in 1986. For all this while, humouric fiction has not gained literary interest and wide acceptance and thus the award is all the more significant in terms of an enhanced literary perspective. This study dwells upon the various humouric modes and conventions that have been successfully employed by Howard Jacobson in three of his novels, *The Finkler Question* (2010), *Kalooki Nights* (2006), and *The Making of Henry* (2004). It attempts to portray an in-depth study of the various techniques and styles that falls within the aspect of humour, as denoted in his works. Jacobson's handling of humour certainly depends upon the amount of humour that he is able to work out of any situation in life, whether dark or tragic, failures or successes and make it "seriously funny".

Howard Jacobson's employment of humour in his writings is always at the heart of Jewish humour and in his words,

> It's partly to do with the seriousness of the Jewish imagination, which can turn a joke against itself. Jewish writers are sadistic toward their readers, not only Jewish readers… You tell a joke against yourself, you've achieved an intellectual moral superiority. We make more fun of ourselves than anybody else could. In the act of doing that, we appear to be on the back foot but we're winning…[1]

In *Kalooki Nights*, Jacobson skillfully blends the bittersweet Yiddish-inspired humour at which he excels. Being an acute observer of the bottomless embarrassment of Jewish adolescents, the novel takes the readers back to the boyhood years of Max Glickman and his two friends, Manny and Errol, who offer two extreme ways of coping with their discomfiture. Max's mixture of shame and transgression is extremely amusing and also reveals a convincing character beneath the caricatures. At the heart of Max's story is the explanation of why he has made so many disastrous choices, and why such a "lucky man" continually creates situations where he is the most willing of victims. This is an aspect where Jacobson is most admired. He always has the ability to bring out the humourous aspects even in the most tragic situation. The flashback to his "shikseh" wives and their mothers is denoted at the other end of the Jewish extended family which characterizes the novel. This is the hard-boiled humouric of over-statement, with wives and girlfriends denoted as suitably interchangeable: "Zoë, Chloë, Björk, Märike, Alÿs, and Kätchen"[2], as Max asks, "what does it say about me that the only people with whom I am able to enjoy intimacy must have diaereses or umlauts in their names?"[3] (Jacobson, *Kalooki Nights* 23). Jacobson's accomplishment has been to discover the varied sources of interest in the lives of English Jews. *The Finkler Question* is characterized by his structuring skill and intelligence, picking through the connections and differences, between vicariousness and parasitism, and between Jewishness, Judaism and Zionism. *The Finkler Question* is a novel about love, loss and male friendship, and once again explores what it means to be Jewish. Julian Treslove, a 49-year-old bachelor, cowardly and blandly good-looking, envies the suffering of his Jewish widower friends: 90-year-old Libor Sevick, who is at one-time intimate to the stars, and

his old schoolmate Sam Finkler. Wandering late at night, Treslove is mugged by a woman, but he believes that the attack is racially motivated, rather than sexually motivated, a case of mistaken ethnic identity. Treslove becomes interested in Jewish teachings and customs, the irony being that he is spurred in this direction only by an experience of anti-Semitic violence. Jacobson also exquisitely conveys the willful posturing of 'ASHamed Jews'.

Shame has always been an impetus behind the writings of Jacobson and this shame is brought out at length in the portrayal of Henry Nagel, a neurotic Jewish academic in *The Making of Henry* whose life is nothing but a continuous contemplation of failed relationships, friendships and hopes. But, to no surprise, the humouric elements finely balance the story and prevents it from getting too weighed down in melancholy. Henry's taste in women is quite amusing, and he is portrayed as a solipsistic old man who prefers older women, but at one point of his life he realizes that "The thing about older women once you've reached Henry's age is that there aren't any."[4] Sooner or later he finds himself attracted to Moira Aultback, who is a little younger than him. Another interesting and funny side of Henry's character is that Henry hates dogs, mainly because their compulsion to sniff other dog's urine reminds him of his own compulsion to hound other men's women. Thus, *The Making of Henry* revolves around the psyche of a solipsistic old man whose life is consumed by his own mortality and endlessly picking over his own failures, which are entertaining and hilariously funny.

Jacobson fearlessly delves into the aspect of male-female relationships, the dark spaces of the male psyche, and the dilemmas of Judaism. He does this by incorporating the essence of humour, and indeed humour plays an

important tool in understanding human nature as well as the psychological workings of the human mind. Jacobson has placed himself firmly at the acerbic end of the humour scale. He is best known for writing humouric novels that often revolve around the dilemmas of Jewish characters. Being a Jew himself, most of his works dwell upon the lives and experiences of the Jews, and in his interview with Elizabeth Manus, Jacobson admits that,

> I'm not by any means conventionally Jewish… 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 humour, that's what shaped Jewish pugnacity or tenaciousness.[5]

Most widely admired for his creative handling of humouric modes and conventions in his literary works, it is beyond doubt that humour always remain central to Jacobson's themes, however dark, tragic or profound. Howard Jacobson's employment of the humouric technique is characterized chiefly by a discursive and humourous style. Most of the common recurring features in his work include the portrayal of male-female relationships and the Jewish experience in Britain in the mid 20th to late 20th century. Jacobson has his own way of producing what is 'seriously funny' even from the serious things in life, be it failures or any undesirable obstacles rather than trying to convey serious messages through his writings. As to whether he has regarded himself as a humouric writer or not, he replied, "As long as it means I'm a serious writer. Comedy

is a very important part of what I do…"[6] Indeed, it would not be wrong to consider him as a humouric writer who is able to recognize and make use of humour in almost any situation or condition in life.

Reflecting upon select texts of Howard Jacobson, this study has probed upon the various humouric modes and techniques that commonly features in his writings. The research has dwelt intrinsically upon Jewish humour that remains the most recurring theme of his writings. Aspects such as humouric self- awareness as well as satire and irony in order to bring out the seriousness that lies within the concepts of humour are also employed by Jacobson at length in most of his works, therefore, this study has focussed primarily on these aspects in an attempt to bring out the concept of humouric forms that are central to the works of Jacobson. A brief synoptic view of the five chapters in the dissertation has been presented as follows:

Chapter 1 - Situating Jacobson in Literature:

This chapter has included a brief biographical sketch of Howard Jacobson, and situate him in the realm of humour and literature.

Chapter 2 - Locating Jewish humour

The writings of Howard Jacobson hardly deviates from his Jewish background and there is always a touch of Jewish humour in almost all of his works. Jacobson explains how Jewish humour works, " We make more fun of ourselves than anybody else could. In the act of doing that, we appear to be on the back foot but we're winning…"[7] In

The Making of Henry, Henry asks his mother "Isn't it a Jewish speciality to enjoy making jokes at our own expense ? Hasn't that been the saving of us, our comic self-awareness?" "I call it rubbing at an itch," his mother replies, "If you leave it, the itch will eventually go away of its own accord. But of course it feels like relief while you're rubbing."[8] In *Kalooki Nights* there is a certain point that mentions, "you don't say "gassed" to Jews if u can help it. One of those words…gassed, camp, extermination, concentration, experiment, march, train, rally, German. Words made unholy just as ground is made unholy."[9] This is inherently how Jacobson handles instances that are related to Jewish humour in his works.

Chapter 3 - Jacobson and the "seriously funny"

Jacobson is often related with the phrase "seriously funny" because he treats humour as a serious subject. For him, humour is an important tool of expressing his inner thoughts and is an useful medium of pouring his heart out upon the readers. He earns his fame through his creative handling of the humouric aspects, but the seriousness that lies within his humour cannot be ignored. This chapter is an attempt to bring out the ways and means of how jokes, humour and laughter are being treated with seriousness by Howard Jacobson. For instance, in *Kalooki Nights*, Jacobson tries to breach the whole business of the Holocaust without re-evoking the experiences of the Holocaust, but paying careful attention to the means and ways it has been talked about. He wants to change the language in which the Jews go on thinking about these experiences and he believes that humour is an useful tool of changing the discourse.

Chapter 4 - Humouric self-awareness within the narratives

Humouric self-awareness is a common trait that can be identified in the various characters that have been created by Howard Jacobson in his works. Failures may be at the root of their fortune, but Jacobson skillfully utilizes the workings of failures to bring out the humouric side of humanity. This chapter explores arenas that are related to how the characters examine themselves even at the worst of times and what it feels to be human and to suffer. For instance, Henry Nagel in *The Making of Henry* is portrayed as a solipsistic old man who has been living in shame almost throughout the whole of his life and whose life is consumed by his own mortality. As he endlessly picks over his own failures, Henry is not just entertaining but often gloriously funny. Julian Treslove in *The Finkler Question* is another character who keeps on contemplating about his life because he envies his Jewish widower friends and because he is mugged by a woman. In this manner, the chapter denotes how Jacobson explores aspects that centre around a humouric awareness of the self in his texts.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

The last chapter has included critical observations both primary as well as secondary that has been denoted in terms of the related texts.

NOTES:

1 Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

2 Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 23

3 ibid.

4 Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print. 102

5 Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

6 ibid.

7 ibid.

8 Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print. 293

9 Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print. 49

WORKS CITED

Jacobson, Howard. Interview by Elizabeth Manus. *The Jewish Chronicle* 14 Sept.2004. Web. 16 Jan. 2011.<http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-interviews/36461/interview-howard-jacobson>.

Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print.

Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print.

Jacobson, Howard. *The Making of Henry*. London: Vintage. 2005. Print.

Jacobson, Howard. *Kalooki Nights*. London: Vintage. 2007. Print.