

Exploring The Jewish Dread And Anxiety In *J* A Novel By Howard Jacobson

Smita Devi¹, Dr. Ajoy Batta², Dr. Manish Gupta³

¹Research Scholar, PhD, Department of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab

²Professor, Department of English, Lovely Professional University, Punjab

³Additional Registrar, Lovely Professional University, Punjab

ABSTRACT: *Jews are often brutally victimised and rejected from the society. This begins from the medieval era and continues till present era. Jews are also alleged for the blood-libel and also considered as the soul responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. Jews are being persecuted, tortured, interrogated with prejudice and also murdered. Such situation creates barriers for Jews to assimilate and acculturate with the other people of the society. Even, writers have penned down the history and tragedy of Jews to make society aware of their ongoing conditions as well as to prevent the dreadful antisemitic actions like the Holocaust. As tragedy and repressed memory of Jewish past create a sense of dreadfulness and anxiety in their inner minds. Therefore, they intentionally isolate themselves from the mainstream of the society. Nevertheless, alienation of Jews often brings psychological ailment like neurosis, psychosis, paranoia or other anxiety disorder. So, one needs to understand the tragic conditions of the victims considering the humanitarian ground. The understanding may help in preventing the re-occurrence of tragic past like the Holocaust which is still fuming. It haunts them and terrifies them with the futuristic consequences. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to project the fear and anxiety of Kevern and Ailinn in the *J a Novel* by Jacobson along with the impact of tragic past memories. This paper argues Kevern's inner dread of reoccurrence of catastrophic event like "What Happened if It Happened". It also tries to uncover the reason behind Kevern's gruesome act of self-killing.*

Key Words: *Anxiety, Paranoia, Dread, Antisemitism, Jewishness*

Howard Jacobson in his eccentric work *J a novel* projects the life of Jews with the dreadful waiting for of a gloomy future. "He repeatedly insists that he is going to stay away from the subject of Jews but his most recent novel, "J", was an anguished and painful look at the Jewish condition (Frazer, 2016)". Howard Jacobson in his fantastic work *J a novel* projects the paranoid life journey of Jews. In the novel "Something Has Happened" which is never clearly discussed but always felt and symbolically presented. Readers can identify from the depiction that "What Happened if It Happened" is the symbolic representation of catastrophic Jewish extermination during the Holocaust. The work brings the notion of haunting memories of past which are always preserved in memories of Jews which are experienced by their grandparents or sometimes they themselves witness it. Since their childhood Jews are instructed not to discuss about such precarious past. However, throughout the book the character beholds the fear of the incident "What Happened If It Happened". Before chancing his nose outside his cottage in the morning, Kevern "Coco" Cohen turned up the volume on the loop-television, poured tea—taking care to place the cup carelessly on the hall table—and checked twice to be certain that his utility phone was on and flashing. A

facility for making and receiving local telephone calls only—all other forms of electronic communication having been shut down after WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED, to the rapid spread of whose violence social media were thought to have contributed... (10)

Remembrance of that incident always remind Jews to uphold a specific position in the society by isolating themselves from the rest of the world. Jews know that if they themselves will not alienate then non-Jews will definitely exterminate them like the way it was done during the Holocaust. Even, Kevern is trained to avoid the utterance of the letter 'J' since his childhood. Because 'J' is not just a letter for Jews it is the matter of Jewish identity which carries the tragic remembrance of Jewish past during Nazi era. During that time Jewish identity was symbolized with the letter 'J'. Moreover, Jews were told to mark their passports to exhibit their specification of being the other. During that time Jews were not considered to be within the pure Aryan race which Hitler wanted to maintain. So to exclude them he has conducted the mass extermination of Jews. Thus, the Holocaust has propagated the notion of racial antisemitism and Jews became the prime victim of it. All the same, they carry the burden of their past and transmitted it to their predecessors with an instruction to be more careful with their present life and existence. Considering similar outlook Kevern's parents time and again instructed him to keep two fingers on his lips while uttering the letter 'J'. Assuming the upcoming horror a Jew believes in whispering while uttering the letter 'J'. It is also an attempt to not disclose his/her identity to other. It also expresses the enduring fear of Jews stored in the collective memory.

"Sammy Davis Junior," his father explained awkwardly when he saw him. His voice was hoarse and dry, a rattle from ruined lungs. Because he spoke with an accent even Kevern found strange, as though he'd never really listened to how people spoke in Port Reuben, he released his words reluctantly. He put two fingers across his mouth, like a tramp sucking on a cigarette butt he'd found in a rubbish bin. This he always did to stifle the letter before it left his lips. The boy was none the wiser. "Sammy Davis unior?" He too, religiously in his father's presence—and often even when his father wasn't there—sealed his lips against the letter when it began a word. He didn't know why. It had begun as a game between them when he was small. His father had played it with his own father, he'd told him. Begin a word with a without remembering to put two fingers across your mouth and it cost you a penny. It had not been much fun then and it was not much fun now. He knew it was expected of him, that was all. (06)

Similarly, little awareness of his family history develops a sense of suspicion in Kevern's mind. He is only aware of the fact that his parents were the first cousins. However, no specific reason is mentioned to him for their settlement in Port Reuben. He is well aware of the fact that his parents appreciate to keep things private therefore, they kept the reason to themselves, and also taught Kevern to live in the similar way. This leads Kevern to create a connection between their moves to Port Reuben with the horrified incident of 'What Happened, If It Happened'. Ultimately, Kevern also evolves as a paranoid person who suspects his neighbours and wants to live an isolated life.

Once Kevern had closed and double-locked the front door, he knelt and peered through the letter box, as he imagined a burglar or other intruder might. He could hear the television and smell the tea. He could see the phone quietly pulsing yellow, as though receiving dialysis, on the hall table. The silk runner, he noted with satisfaction, might have been trodden on by a household of small children. No sane man could possibly leave his own house without rearranging the runner on the way out. (07)

Focusing on the notion of Jewish paranoia the narrator has also concentrated on the importance of four D's in Jewish life. A Jew always need to live a dangers life which simultaneously carries the idea of death. Death leads to disappointment and disappointment

leads to disease and ultimately they develop a sense of disgust for themselves, their lives along with the persecutors. However, Kevern recalls that his grandmother often restricts him the sense of disgust as she considers it as a virus which will poison only his life.

“Oh, I’m not hiding you from people.” D “Then what?” He thought about it. “Danger.” “What kind of danger?” “Oh, the usual. Death. Disease. Disappointment.” She hugged her knees like a little girl on an awfully big adventure. In an older man’s bed. “The three Ds,” she said with a little shiver, as though the awfully big adventure might just be a little too big for her. “Four, actually. Disgust.” “Whose disgust?” “I don’t know, just disgust.” “You fear I will disgust you?” “I didn’t say that.” “You fear you will disgust me?” “I didn’t say that either.” “Then what are you saying? Disgust isn’t an entity that might creep in through your letter box. It isn’t out there, like some virus, to shut your doors and windows against.” (61)

Like Kevern, Ailinn is also unaware of her past. However, from some letters which are offered to her by Ez she gets to know about her past. Both of them meet accidentally in a small coastal village. Like everyone else, they are least aware of their family and other personal or national information. As personal and national history has been suppressed and all the original family names have been wiped away in a national order called ‘Project Ishmael’. It brings new generalized Jewish surname to everyone such as Cohen, Solomons, Rabinowitz, Nussbaum, Heilbronn, Kroplik, Gutkind whether the person a Jew or not. Such sense of loneliness and exclusion agonize Ailinn as she knows the pain of being an orphan and isolated. So she feels that birth of being Jew and specifically an orphan needs to be forgotten because if the person doesn’t do it then structure like “Ofnow” will definitely do so which is far more tormenting and distressful.

She didn’t know who her actual mother and father were and remembered little about her life before her faux parents picked her out from the orphanage like an orange, except for how unlike the way she thought a little girl was supposed to be she felt... “Don’t exaggerate, Ailinn,” people had always told her. (Twenty-five thousand years?) But it wasn’t she who exaggerated, it was they who reduced. Her head was like an echo chamber. If she concentrated long and hard enough, she sometimes thought, she would hear the great ice splitting and the first woolly mammoths come lolloping down from central Asia. Perhaps everybody—even the abridgers and condensers—could do the same but were embarrassed to talk about it. Unless infancy in the company of real parents had filled their minds with more immediate and, yes, trivial sensations. Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting—who said that? (05)

Thus, Jacobson has framed his characters as secluded and tormented people. The author even refrains from using word “Jew” in the novel. Apparently, it leads to the world of dystopia where similar fatalism is being expected by the characters with the warning for the present. As every society has two basic clusters like the way a coin has two sides. In the social framework people will always find out one “us” (the dear one) and one “them” (the other). We are always incomplete without them similarly, a non-Jewish society is incomplete without a Jew. Due to dreadful extermination of Jews during “What Happened if It Happened” most of the Jews are been exterminated. Later, during Operation Ishmael the authority makes an attempt to hide all their atrocities however, diminishing numbers of Jews from the society threatens their own sense of power and monarchy. In order to resolve that problem Esme plans to bring Kevern and Ailinn together so that they can plan their own family and have kids. Thus, they can recreate the Jewish existence in the society.

“We are dead matter,” Esme continued at last, “indeed I was very nearly dead matter myself when I realized this—we are dead matter until we distinguish ourselves from what’s not dead. I was alive, I told myself as I was lying there. Very nearly dead, but alive. And it made me more alive to realize that. I wasn’t the me I’d been, but nor was I the me they wanted me

to be, which was no me at all. Only when we have a different state to strive against do we have reason to strive at all. And different people the same. I am me because I am not her, or you. If we were all red earthworms there'd be no point in life. Identity is just the name we give to the act of making ourselves distinct." "So you're saying it's irrelevant what our identities really are? As long as we assume one and fight against someone else's." (207)

Her plan succeeds till the moment Kevern steps back from the relationship. Kevern is well aware of the treatment of Jews in a non-Jewish society. Moreover, he often doubts Esme's intentions. Therefore, he decides to leave Ailinn as he is not in a mental state of bearing and growing a child in such heinous society which beholds tragedy like the Holocaust. The moment of their separation is overwhelmingly portrayed by the author-

Glass shatters. They both hear it. She is at one end of the country and he is at another, yet still they hear it. The smashing mania, the shattering of every window in the land. After all the fires, all the beheadings, all the iron hooks and crowbars, the frenzy to kill has not abated. Only now it has become centralized. He is frightened, she less so. She thinks they've done their worst already. He thinks there's always something further they might come up with; he has more admiration for the ingenuity of man; viewing things millennially, he thinks they haven't even started yet. And look, he could be right. This time the mob wears uniforms, and answers to a higher authority even than God. She reads quietly, waiting for the knock. He hides his head. That is how they sit on the train heading east, looking out at the snow, not exchanging a word, she reading, he hiding his head. The train is not a surprise. They were always going to be put aboard this train. There are some among their fellow passengers for whom the train is a relief now that they are finally on it. In the snow everything will be washed away. (86)

Ultimately, Kevern commits suicide choosing death over life which displays one's inability to accept the reality of being hated, excluded and used as a commodity. Therefore, Kevern rejects to support the procreation of Jews in order to save them from experiencing any further anxiety and distress. Thus, he also tries to fail the social control of oppressing system like Ofnow. At the end of the novel, he listens to the voice of his mother whom he mostly doubts. Later, he needs to escape from the duty of present moment i.e. to grow a child so, he himself runs to the lap of his mother. Kevern is so dreadful about that while he surrenders everything in his life and ready to kill himself at that moment also he can't forget the instruction of not uttering the letter "J" while pronouncing the word "Jump".

"Key-vern ... Key-vern ..." He put his ear to the wind. He had always been a good boy. When your mother called ... "Key-vern," she called again. He smiled to hear her voice. "What is it, Ma?" "ump," he heard her say. Not feeling he should make her say it twice, he put his fingers to his lips, as though blowing her a kiss, and Jumped... "This is not a good way to start," Ailinn said, "with anger between us." "On the contrary," ... "this is the best possible way to start." (325)

Thus, Jacobson depicts a contemporaneous picture of Jewish life with catastrophic memory of the Holocaust like incidents which further results with the loss of peace, tolerance or ability to adapt in the society. It also challenges Jewish existence and their power of survival in pain. Often such distress proves an individual to be a failure in life as Kevern surrenders by killing himself. However, Jacobson offers exemplary character like Ailinn who knows the pain of being orphan as well as the value of life. Therefore, unlike Kevern she decides bear the child. The death of Kevern has deeply wounded her psyche therefore, she rejects to continue with Esme however, Esme wants to continue with the feeling of anguish and loathing. Jews and the perpetrators only share the feeling of never-ending hatred which can be eliminated with true love and optimism. The heinous act like Holocaust can be measured as present-day retroactive of the anti-Jewish violence which deeply affected the

psyche of the victims but also their predecessors. Jews are still surviving with the fear of reoccurrence of the Holocaust which prevents them from living a normal life and being culturally, politically and economically paralysed sensing the reoccurrence of ‘Shoah’ with the outrageous consequences.

REFERENCES

- [1] “Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. N.p., n.d. Web. 5 Sept. 2017.
- [2] Atlani, Aviva. *The Ha-Ha Holocaust: Exploring Levity Amidst the Ruins and Beyond in Testimony, Literature and Film*. p. 230.
- [3] Bal, Mieke, et al. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. UPNE, 1999.
- [4] *How Would Shylock Have Fared in 21st Century Britain? | The Times of Israel*. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/how-would-shylock-have-fared-in-21st-century-britain/>. Accessed 16 June 2020.
- [5] Jacobson, Howard. *J: A Novel*. Random House, 2014. Print.
- [6] Kellerman, Peter Felix. *Sociodrama and collective trauma*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007.
- [7] LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing the Holocaust: History, theory, trauma*. Cornell University Press, 1996.
- [8] Marrus, Michael Robert. *The Holocaust in history*. Vol. 7. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1987.
- [9] *Screen-Memories.Pdf*. <https://icpla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Screen-Memories.pdf>. Accessed 26 Feb. 2020.
- [10] “Trauma.” *Administration for Children and Families*, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/trauma-concept>. Accessed 29 Feb. 2020.