



Black Humour in Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name*

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Abstract

Howard Jacobson is a British Jewish writer, journalist and former professor of English Literature who has authored sixteen novels and six non-fiction with different social topics. A study of Jacobson's plays with black humour shows his remarkable versatility. His black humour combines the study of the unchangeable human nature and the contemporary situation with its unique features. In Jacobson's hand, black humour becomes the most intellectual instrument of social criticism, as it is searching and replete with entertainment. Like all comic visions of life, black humour concerns itself with social realities. Jacobson's on Jewish has a universal significance. He is not thoroughly pessimistic and analyses the overstrained relationship but displays black humour to give an excellent and shrewd commentary on Jewish life.

Keywords: British Jewish literature, Howard Jacobson, black humour, comic vision of life, Jewish life.

1. Introduction

Humour in the human race is considered crucial among the factors distinguishing humans from other living things. Arousing humour in a person is not a unique phenomenon. It is complex and varies from country to country, centuries and cultures. People also evolve their pattern of humour according to their unique mental perceptions. Humour arises chiefly from external actions or situations and is felt visually or orally. It induces creativity and provides healthy solutions. Humour can be traced clearly and relished in art, entertainment and literature. Today, humour plays a pivotal role in the medical field.

Humour generates personality and acts as a pain reliever of modern man's stress, strain, confusion, frustration, depression, challenge and struggle and puts him at ease. Humour owes more to literary work than to real life with spontaneity and reality. Like a wave, it creates and recreates all genres of literature. Ancient Greek writers framed and proved humour's theory of determining a person's temperament according to the imbalances caused by the human body fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. Contemporary writers continue to inhale humour like a whiff of fresh air in their literary works. In all, humour's glory in literature keeps booming and continues to reign throughout the centuries in all genres and forms of literature.

Humorous writing plays a vital role as an element of the developing nations' cultural identity. It paved the way for the writers to reflect on their vision of their country and the role of people to fit in the society rather than satire harshly. A new comedy emerged in the late 19th century and continued its existence even in the early 20th century called Slapstick comedy. It became popular in music halls and theatres. This comedy is characterised by crude practical jokes, absurd situations, and violent actions. On the basic framework, it was laudable only for the humour. Its main challenge is to bring from depression to normal with comic energy. Later it became very familiar and was adapted extensively in silent movies.

Black humour is a distinct strain from traditional popular humour, which sprouted from America, which is often mistaken and has a form of racial literature. It is an artistic expression of humankind of the post-war era. Any genre with 'black' as an adjective is often associated with African-American literature or black literature. Black humour engages with the intellectual and creative standpoint, a very vague concept to understand. However, it can be identified in the literature and related arts with pain and fun garnished. French surrealist, critic and poet Andre Breton was the first to give the name 'Black Humour' in 1939. Many fiction writers of the 1960s followed and welcomed this pattern, creating a new development in British American fiction of post-modernism.

Black humour differs in technique, with absurdism considering life as meaningless and conveying the grim absurdity of human honesty. Due to this, it became active in The Theatre of the Absurd. The black humorist, like the absurdist, revealed the dirty things of day-to-day life and ridiculed the distress in the absurd world. Both handled the fragmented life of the man with utmost care and sensitivity with their original values. Pessimism seems to be an unavoidable component of black humour. As black humour became the ground to present the current complicated, dark issues bluntly along with the blacker side of the human psyche, the pleasant took the back seat, and the gloomy, unpleasant came to the forefront.

Pathos is ridiculed to highlight the parallel realities. Black humorists boldly focus on the sufferings in the doom of the central characters and the pathos of various episodes. Another profusely illustrated feature of black humour is the artistic, bewildering combination of pathos and humour, which maintains a sense of balance and channels the emotions steering the cynical picture of the absurd world. Pathos and humour are combined under different strands. Among the pathos, the impact of death and the various destruction images became more common. Death, the heightened pathos in black humour, dwells against the sickening realisation. It is rendered with a little comic edge.

Black humour shows few traces of Existentialism, where it is an optimistic system. Existentialism means to continue living rather than end life. Black humour is nothing more than laughing at a tragically insensitive environment. In *Black Humour, Existentialism and Absurdity; A Generic Confusion*, Bruce James relates black humorists and existentialists as "Both groups are obviously aware of the dismal realities of aging, human suffering, and the inevitability of death. It differs philosophically and adversely" (32).

Black humorists focus on society and try to show the various misfits in society. It assesses the stark realities of society and an individual's life. They attack not the misfits alone but finally the norm and the helplessness to fight it. Thus, black humour became an apt ground to express a grim comment. Hence, critical expressions take an effective means and move beyond satire. A towering and yet another zone where black humour often dwells is in the reflection of satire.

Howard Jacobson immensely dedicated himself to producing unique plays. Each of his plays was a masterpiece. In the forty years of his writing career, he had brought out more than thirty-one plays. His plays can be classified as Off-Broadway, one-act plays, full-length plays and adaptations from famous black humour novels. Every play by Howard Jacobson is dedicated to a well-intentioned person. Just like the novel *Shylock is My Name*. Jacobson's black humour possesses the two emotions intensely pathos and humour. Their strength lies in the rich notion with unique strength and originality. His pathos and humour serve a purpose and bring forth multiple layers of meaning. They take a new path dealing with a different approach in a sombre light extensively and refreshingly. A person under the turmoil of

pathos finds it difficult to perceive reality but through humour becomes fathomable to him. More than above, pathos and humour suggest not looking at life as a solemn burden but instead bearing and being content with it, or else life will become miserable.

Humour, an indispensable instrument in Jacobson's hands, realistically runs a quick nudge throughout. The magnitude of humour in a literary piece is decided by the degree of existence with which it deals. Jacobson's humour, a minor and vital element dismissing its plain comic qualities limits with few but show moments of delight. It also functions as the soul of the play and the mind's eye, which will be viewing humour from a different perspective. Jacobson's humour does not provide boisterous laughter but a meaningful laugh with an essential purpose.

The human mind is fickle. It is not easy to control. Though there are several ways to combat stress and its impact, black humour therapy combats it effectively. Black humour helps relieve stress-related issues through indulgence in laughing activities. Laugh has been shown to reduce stress hormones such as cortisol and epinephrine. Jacobson's pathos possesses unpleasant negative emotions as much stress. Black humour must help to maintain calm under the most adverse situation and pushes the thought in awakening and developing the proper function to the extent of self-realisation.

Jacobson's *Shylock is My Name* derives the encumbrance of hope. Jacobson re-inscribes and reimagines the creation of Shakespeare by readapting masterpieces to conform to the responsiveness of the current era. Retelling Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*, Jacobson wants to explore the mysteries of Jewishness, negative stereotypes of Jews and black humour in contemporary society. Though the title of the book brings the notion of retelling *Merchant of Venice* by providing a point of view from Shylock's side, the book brings much more information than the expected outcomes. Alan Pratt in *Black Humour: Critical Essays* says, "It's funny, I've heard Shapiro was asked 'couldn't it be called *The Jews and Shakespeare* rather *Shakespeare and the Jews?*' I do not think *The Merchant of Venice* is an anti-Semitic play. It's inconceivable that Shakespeare was anti-Semitic. He goes to find the human in the object of other disdain. He finds the man" (36).

Howard Jacobson, the undisputed British master of black comedies featuring Jewish characters, relocates the drama to 'Golden Triangle. It is provocative interrogation of Shakespeare's play and, most notably, of its antagonist Shylock, whose name has passed into common usage as a byword for usury, malice, or anti-Semitism. Jacobson's solution in this novel gives an approximate fictional counterpart. According to Jacobson, the role of Shylock is replaced by Simon Strulovitch, a resolutely non-observant Jew, except in the matter of his only daughter's liaisons. Strulovitch's troubles with his daughter, Beatrice, echo those of Shylock with Jessica in the original. Around these exchanges, Portia becomes Plurabelle, an heiress turned reality TV star, and Antonio is D'Anton, a philanthropist.

This novel gripes a study of the inner life nature of vengeance, duty, fatherhood and history. On another side it pictures black humour. Jacobson humorously projects the sorry state of Jews. "Don't check your mother, his father told him. If she said she saw Hitler, she was Hitler. Your Auntie Annie ran into Stalin on Stockport market last year and when I was your age I saw Moses rowing on Heaton Park Lake.... Moses would just have parted the waters... Unless it was Noah....." (04). For passing such unpleasant remarks to religion he is later punished by his parents. Due to the tragic history and executed life Jews hardly possess any faith to other or a serene memory of past. So they migrated from one place to another and had unlimited excess to world topography.

The lives of the Jewish people are not happy. They are passionately associated to every miniature of their culture and religion. They are emotionally too incredulous to ignore any mockery on them. Throughout their life Jews need to experience massive brutalities. Therefore, life becomes excessively outrageous for them. The amusing incidents are not generally comic for Jews since it brings a note of fear for them. Jewish humour is always laughter under tears, called black humour. It is used to hide their inner fear and anxiety; therefore, Jewish jokes are enchanting, and it is witnessed in the personality of Strulovitch and Ophelia.

Jacobson identifies *The Merchant of Venice's* emotional centre with that loss and with the Christians' rupture of Jewish cultural continuity through the destruction of Shylock and the appropriation of Jewish tenets for Christian ends. The most famous scene, pound of flesh, is updated to the Jewish faith. The role of the flesh is equalised with non-Jewishness. It recalls a type of scare rhetoric in contemporary conversation. Jacobson's story makes all too clear according to context. He also shares about the Jewish experience, and Strulovitch's relationship with his daughter makes the reader to feel pity at the same time, it makes to realise the hidden black humour in their conversation. Jacobson somewhat mirrors the primary storyline of *Merchant of Venice* which is reimagined as vapid rather self-centred hipsters with all the characters. Strulovitch's daughter falls in love with a non-Jewish man, which makes him feel awkward. Jacobson here introduces a new version of 'sadness therapy'. Similarly, D'Anton, modern Antonio, has undergone emotional tragedy, considered sadness therapy according to Jacobson.

2. Conclusion

Jacobson reframes the characters according to his stereotypes by comparing the works of Shakespeare. Projecting both sides of the coin, Jacobson not only shows prejudice against Jewish but also shows hatred of Jewish. Jacobson beautifully portrays the humour even in this situation. Black humour reflects an individual's inner turmoil and reverses hatred through mockery. It may be unknown to the readers, but it is the hidden truth. Strulovitch is in pain as he lost two women and is going to lose his daughter. This ultimate loss is unbearable to him. In an interview, Jacobson explicates, "My Jessica is a much more admirable figure than Shakespeare's Jessica. I've reimaginedreimagined the relationship much more intensely on both the father's and daughter's behalf. Shakespeare does not allow me to bear Jessica. I think she's one of the most horrible characters; she's a horrible, horrible girl. Shylock brings this girl up, cares for her, and then she comes home with Lorenzo....." (8). Even circumcision evolves due to the father's Oedipus complex and the inferiority of the Jew.

Earlier, Shylock was ordered to convert his religion to Christianity; therefore, in the modern title, they seek revenge and demand the conversion of Graton, which can be observed as reverse hatred of Jews. This hatred comes from dejection, cheating, and abhorrence as Beatrice also seeks revenge when Graton leaves her. Humour reflects through the mockery of D'Anton, even the demand for a pound of flesh. "That's how vilification works. The victim ingests the views of his tormentor. If that's how I look, that's what I must be" (20).

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