

A Critique of Max Glickman's Sexuality in Howard Jacobson's *Kalooki Nights*

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Abstract

This research article aims at critiquing the sexuality of Max Glickman's character in Howard Jacobson's novel Kalooki Nights by tracing the instances from the text that can reveal information on the formation and complexities of his sexual identity. The article is divided into four segments namely "Author's Introduction", "About the Novel", "A Critique of Max Glickman's Sexuality", and the "Conclusion". Three metonyms feminising the male Jewish body are critiqued in the light of post-Holocaust setting. The article concludes with Max Glickman's sexual identity defies heteronormativity, failing traditional masculinity expectations, and his masochistic and fetishistic tendencies shape his complex sexual realm, influenced by the Jewish stereotypes, history, and post-Holocaust trauma.

Keywords: Holocaust, Post-Holocaust, Anti-Semitism, Heteronormativity, Circumcision, Judenname, Foetor Judaicus, Judaism, Fetishization, Masculinity, Objectification, Masochism

Born in Manchester, England in 1942, novelist and broadcaster Howard Jacobson, known for his wit, humor, and insightful exploration of themes such as Jewish identity, love, and human relationships, was educated at Cambridge University. He lectured at the University of Sydney for three years before returning to England where he taught English at Selwyn College. Howard Jacobson has written sixteen novels and eight works of non-fiction. (Jacobson)

In the recent years, Howard Jacobson's literary contributions include *The Finkler Question* (2010). His subsequent works encompass *Zoo Time* (2012), the dystopian novel *J* (2014), *Shylock Is My Name* (2016), and *Pussy* (2017), a savagely funny satire on Donald Trump. His latest novel, *Live a Little*, was published in 2019. (Jacobson)

He won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize twice; for *The Mighty Walzer* in 2000 and for *Zoo Time* in 2013. Also, he was awarded with Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize, considered as British Jewry's top literary award, for *The Mighty Walzer* in 2000. *Who's Sorry Now* (2002) was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2002. *Kalooki Nights* (2006) was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2006. Particularly, *The Finkler Question* won the Man Booker prize of 2010. (Jacobson)

Kalooki Nights (2006) is the second of Jacobson's novels to be longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Arguably, the novel stands out as one of Jacobson's most ambitious works and certainly ranks among his finest. It skillfully blends the humour of *Coming of Age* within the Jewish community in Manchester. *Kalooki Nights* is, as Jacobson claimed, "the most Jewish novel written by anyone, ever" (Buckley 23).

The central character and narrator in *Kalooki Nights* is Max Glickman, a Jewish cartoonist who grew up in Crumpsall Park, Manchester during the 1950s. Max's father, a former Communist and an unsuccessful boxer, and his mother, who hosts nightly games of 'Kalooki' with his sister, shape his upbringing. Glickman has experienced three unsuccessful marriages, with two non-Jewish wives (Zoë, Chloë) and one Jewish wife (Alÿs). The narrative unfolds as Max reflects on his past and present, delving into the life incidents of his childhood friend and Orthodox Jewish neighbour, Manny Washinsky.

Manny, driven by a childhood obsession with the Holocaust, takes an unexpected turn by murdering his parents with gas while they sleep. This tragic event is influenced, in part, by Manny's brother's scandalous affair with the daughter of a non-Jewish German émigré. Max's cartoon history of the Jews, titled *Five Thousand Years of Bitterness, Bitterness: The Fucking of the Jews*, initiated during his teenage years with Manny and inspired by Lord Russell's early account of Holocaust atrocities, faces a lack of recognition when published by Max.

Max Glickman's Sexuality

When the novel opens, the narrator Max Glickman expresses his dejection due to his failed marriages, frustrated artistic career, and more importantly, the burden of hailing from an ethno-minority religious identity. During a confrontation between Max and his 'gentile' wife Zoë, an anti-Semite, she confronts him by asking, 'Why is everything a negotiation with you? Why can't you stop swearing and stop looking Jewish?' Max is visibly perplexed and asks her satirically and playfully, 'What do you want me to do, have a fucking nose job?'. She replies curtly: 'Good idea ... Have it off' (Jacobson 25).

Max, later on, remarks that

With a smaller nose they say you give better cunnilingus. In fact Jews give the best cunnilingus in the world precisely because they have the nasal cartilage to give it with; though I grant you that in that case what they're giving isn't strictly cunnilingus. So maybe, pedantry aside, I'd give worse cunnilingus. That too was a consideration. Cut off my nose to spite the bitch. (Jacobson 27)

Max mentions the notion that people with smaller noses are believed to perform better cunnilingus, specifically attributing this quality to Jews due to their nasal cartilage. But at the same time he raises the consideration of giving worse cunnilingus as a form of retaliation, symbolized by cutting off the nose. Max's sexual commentary, somewhat cynical, can be extended and linked to a Jewish male's fetishistic connection between nose and phallus, observed and explained by Sigmund Freud. Freud, in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, states that "comparisons between nose and penis are common" (Freud 387).

Sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld suggests the possibility that a nose could serve as a fetishistic substitute for phallus: "Often there is connected with the fetishistic prepossession for large noses a more or less unconscious phallic cult, or the old folk belief, which is in no way organically founded, that the size of the nose is indicative of the size of the male organ" (Hirschfeld 73).

Geller remarks that throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Jew was figured by the 'Judennase', the Jewish nose, and the 'foetor Judaicus', the Jewish stench. Furthermore, in addition to the fetishized nose and the foul smell, circumcision constitutes a third feminising

metonym of the Jewish body. There is a connection between these three figures (Geller 437). According to Gilman, thus, the Jewish nose “represented that hidden sign of [the Jewish male’s] sexual difference, his circumcised penis” (Gilman 301). In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), where Freud claims that “[w]hen our children come to hear of ritual circumcision, they think of castration” which in Jews’ case is equated with their reduction to effeminate men by the Gentiles. (Freud 177)

In medieval and early modern times, people thought Jewish men were different in terms of sexuality as they were circumcised in ‘brit milah’, a ceremony. There was a widespread idea that Jewish men had more blood flow, especially from hemorrhoids, which they believed happened because Jews ate salty foods and had a melancholic personality. This belief was connected to the idea of the four humours and the balance of bodily fluids at that time. According to this belief, men were seen as giving off more heat, while women were thought to be cooler. However, there was a specific idea about Jewish men—they were considered unable to naturally reduce their heat and were seen as having characteristics that were more like women. So, some people suggested that these Jewish men needed a form of “menstruation,” involving a real discharge of blood, to balance their bodies. This belief wasn’t just a medical idea; it also had a strong anti-Semitic aspect with religious roots, suggesting that Jews menstruated because they were punished for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This belief marked one of the early instances where anti-Semitic feelings mixed with scientific explanations, emphasizing the metaphorical moral impurity linked to Jews. The idea that Jewish men menstruated had significant historical consequences for Jewish communities in Europe, lasting until the mid-twentieth century. It showed a shift from mainly religious reasons for anti-Semitism to a mix with pseudo-scientific ideas, which helped spread harmful stereotypes and discrimination.

While European Christians lacked purity rituals, they asserted superiority over Muslims and Jews by framing them as impure. Medieval Christian men claimed intellectual and biological superiority over women, associating masculinity with aggression and femininity with submission. Male illness was seen as feminine, and traits like timidity were considered womanish. Medieval authors recognized the potential for individuals to exhibit traits of the opposite gender. “In the Castilian Reconquista epic, *Cantar de Mio Cid*, for example, a male Jew was given the female name Raquel, to depict a Jew as feminine, making him weak” (Noga Roguin et al 1-5).

Max remarks on the Primal Father’s cruel Exactions: “Once upon a time, confusing circumcision with castration, the Gentiles saw us as an effeminated people. They even believed we menstruated. The men, I mean. So degenerate were we, we bled like women” reiterates the conception of the Gentiles about the metaphorical moral impurity linked to Jews (Jacobson 446).

Max says that “it is considered inappropriate by Jews to show strangers of either sex the outline of your glans penis” (Jacobson 4). The narrator explicitly states that, according to Jewish customs, it is considered as inappropriate to reveal the contours of one’s glans penis to individuals of any gender. Ironically, he is reduced to replicating homosexual cartoon pornography from Finland for a pirate publisher. This career choice, in a metaphorical sense, implies a potential contradiction in his sexuality as he fails to fulfill neither the cultural norms of the Jewish community nor heteronormativity.

External factors that form Max’s sexual realm starts from his home guided by his father. Despite growing up in an atheist household—his father, who only supported trade unionism and pugilism—Max is burdened with his Jewish heritage. Max’s father spends his life trying to exert “a kind of muscular Zionism” on his family (Jacobson 18). Motivated by a strong desire to break away from old traditions steeped in grim and tragic tales, he rejects the idea of a ‘Bar Mitzvah’, a Jewish rite of passage into manhood, for Max. Instead, he opts for a boxing tussle with Max in the garden as a foil for the rite of passage into manhood. Determined to steer clear of the somber and often gruesome

aspects of Jewish traditions, he goes so far as to encourage Max to marry a non-Jewish woman, a choice that goes against conventional norms of Judaism.

Max, however, is not happy with his father's decision to do away with his 'Bar Mitzvah' rite as he, partly, envies the Orthodox Jewishism in Manny and desires to celebrate his entrance into manhood as Errol, Max's friend, does in a grand manner. Max plays the 'nominal Jew' (Dauermann and Dauermann) here as he thinks that "bar mitzvah wasn't just about religion. It was also about giving the family a party" (Jacobson 124). As an alternate arrangement to the rite, Max's mother invites him as a guest of honour to her Gala Kalooki Night, which Max accepts on one condition; she must invite Gittel Franks and Simone Kaye to the game and he is to sit in between them. Gittel is Dodgy Ike's wife and Simone Kaye, a divorcee. Max is besotted with them both as they are voluptuous. He even fantasies "What if Gittel Franks, ... , were actually to slide her slit Persian pussy eyes my way and mean it this time? What if Simone Kaye, ... , pulled me to her and trapped me between her silken knees?" (Jacobson 129). Even though the gala kalooki night serves as a de facto bar mitzvah, the gala night is reduced to a womanly, effeminate version of the bar mitzvah rite as Kalooki is a card game generally played by Jewish women. Thus, the de facto rite does not allow Max to attain 'masculinity'.

Moreover, Max, in the sub-narrative on Ilse Koch and Mendel, suggests that "For some men there has to be sadness in voluptuousness, and Mendel is one such man" (Jacobson 107). Mendel, a cartoonist and Max's alter ego, imprisoned in a concentration camp, engineers a situation where he is compelled to create a portrait of Ilse, subject to specific sexual limitations, piece by piece. Mendel finds it strange that when the Commandant's wife, Ilse Koch, displays the downward cast of features, as seen in his mother, it only intensifies his awareness of his own oppression and fuels his desire for her to increase it. He seems willing to absorb whatever troubles her, almost as if he welcomes the additional burden of her dissatisfaction. This is an evidence of a masochistic erotic desire that he feels towards voluptuous women. Max falls prey to the same trait with the anti-Semite Francine, the real life parallel for Ilse Koch from the fantasy sub-narrative, of Lipsync Productions who hires Glickman to derive information from Manny Washinsky for a projected television drama based on Washinsky's double murder of his parents. In the turn of events, Max rejects the offer only because of the timely warning from Errol "She's lethal because she's white, because she's English, ... , because she's beautiful, because she's got a middle-class voice, because she's got nice tits, and because she's a woman" (Jacobson 455).

In the beginning of the novel, Max describes that he does "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" (Jacobson 5). According to David Brauner "[t]he strength of the novel lies in its ability simultaneously to interrogate seriously the effect of the legacy of the Holocaust on a generation of Jews who were insulated from any direct contact with it and comically to deconstruct that legacy, to parody the way in which the Holocaust has been fetishized." (Brauner 25). This conception contributes to the majority of Max's sexual identity, who engages in and satirizes the fetishization of the Holocaust. Mendel, part of the camp, consciously fetishizes his Nazi abuser, Ilse Koch; Mendel being "an alter ego: his erotic fascination with Koch" (Brauner 25). This is evident from Max's statement: "Whatever the reasons, I was a mournful, withdrawn, apparently biblical looking baby – Mendel, Tsedraiter Ike called me..." (Jacobson 15). Additionally, Mendel fully comprehends the perverse nature of his desires and acknowledges the impossibility of fulfilling them. Mendel's story is seamlessly woven into Glickman's narrative without explicit explanation. Moreover, Mendel's fanciful fetishization is borrowed by Max, in reality, in his dating, marrying and remaining almost a sex-slave to: "Zoë, Chloë, Björk, Märike, Alÿs, and Kätchen, little Kate . . ." and he wonders "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?” (Jacobson 23). Umlauts are used over a vowel, especially in German, to indicate a different vowel quality, thus, reminding him of the Nazi. This notion is further extended by his admiration in calling Zoë, a “Übermädchen”, a rough German equivalent for “Supergirl” and Zoë calling him, a Shmoë, meaning, a stupid person. A similar master-slave kind of subjugation he faces from his other wife, Chloë. Max recalls an incident that hints the readers his subjugated position, sexually, in the marriage: “Chloë came at me with a knife once. I ran into the bathroom, said ‘God fucking help me!’ into the mirror, and began to cry”... “She kept me in there for two hours, then swore on her mother’s life that it was all right for me to come out ” (Jacobson 423). Knife being a symbol for male phallus, violence, being generally associated with the males, and ‘crying’ generally a womanly mannerism; thus, suggesting a reversal of gender roles.

Glickman’s mind is so engrossed with the Holocaust that a train reminds him of ‘The Auschwitz Express’, and Umlauts, the Nazi. A similar parallelism can be traced from his Holocaust-fetishization induced sexual thought process in comprehending the sexual body of the opposite sex. Max reflects on his wife, Zoë’s, breasts: “Oy gevalt, a gorgeous little shikseh with hand-grenade breasts and features so diminutive and precise she looked as though a fairy god had pinched them out of Plasticine” (Jacobson 323). Parts of a woman’s body are associated by him with objects that remind him of the Holocaust.

Likewise, Max narrates an event from his childhood wherein he gets to have a look at a print copy of the illustrated *Scourge of the Swastika*, a book on Nazi crimes written by Russell, Lord of Liverpool:

And finally and most famously and shamelessly, the one we looked at longest, the naked Jewish women being paraded for medical inspection, running across the prison yard while the German guards, some with their hands in the pockets of their uniforms, look on. My first sighting, God forgive me, of pubic hair in print. (Jacobson 80)

Upon this experience, Max reflects ambivalently, providing an insight into his complex sexual psyche:

It was unwelcomely arousing, too, without a doubt, to share the experience with Errol in the long grass. Whatever else we knew, we knew we should not have been looking. Because what might just have been most arousing of all was our knowledge that the women were petrified, perhaps about to be subjected to all the degradations a boy’s imagination can invent, death being among the kinder of them. (Jacobson 81)

His duality in his objectification of women by simultaneous attraction and aversion towards the Holocaust related porn is solely induced by his fetishization of Holocaust. Also, later in the novel, Max, shows an extreme fascination for and is aroused by the infamous Holocaust soft porn film, *Ilse, She-Wolf of the SS*. In Freud’s terms, Max, through his fetishization, is “able at one and the same time to believe in his fantasy and to recognise that it is nothing but a fantasy” (Freud 199).

Conclusion

Max Glickman’s sexual identity is not entirely heteronormative as the character fails to fulfill the expectations of masculinity. His sexuality is highly influenced, and determined by the mythical, religious, historical, social, and stereotypical notions on Jewish men that are prevalent in the European society for a long period of time. His sexual tendency is deranged as it is masochistic and fetishistic in nature. Also, his sexual realm, perception and objectification of the opposite sex are informed by the aftermath of Holocaust. Thus, the researcher is of the view that by reading this article in the light of the sexuality of Max Glickman, a better understanding of the narrator of the novel, *Kalooki Nights*, is attempted.

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