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Echoes of Trauma: Survivor's Guilt and Postmemory in Howard Jacobson's *Kalooki Nights*

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Abstract

This research article deals with survivor's guilt, which has been unnoticed and unrecognized in the lives of Jews settled in Britain. Howard Jacobson, a twentieth-century British Jewish writer, addresses this issue through his British Jewish characters. In his work Kalooki Nights, almost all the characters are aware of this guilt through post-memory. The nature of the religion and its customs, along with the constant hatred from anti-Semites, remind them of past tragedies. They respond differently to this inherited survivor's guilt. When Max sought to avoid this guilt, it manifested in the form of investigating his childhood friend, who had murdered both of his parents. Manny's obsession with taking revenge on the Nazis by exposing their world ultimately led to him killing his own parents, who had instilled religious values in him more than he had wished to learn. The study further explores how inherited trauma continues to shape the psychological and moral consciousness of later generations. It argues that Jacobson presents survivor's guilt as a persistent legacy that transcends lived experience and becomes embedded in collective Jewish identity. Both characters realize that the post-memory of the Holocaust causes them to question their meaningless existence and the unavoidable influence of anti-Semitism, even in the present.

Keywords: Story-telling, Massacre, Religion, Identity and Trauma

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Introduction

The term 'survivor's guilt' was coined by Dr. William G. Niederland to describe the emotions experienced by individuals who survive tragedies or massacres while those around them perish. This guilt arises from their struggle to find meaning in an otherwise meaningless situation. Survivor's guilt can also be inherited and passed down through generations. "Survivor's guilt is the response to an event that some people experience when they survive a traumatic event or situation that others did not" (Bistas et al).

For the present generation, this manifests as a deep sense of sorrow for the suffering endured by their ancestors in securing the freedoms they now enjoy. It can also stem from their inability to seek reparation or justify the past, as well as their failure to fully heal from the stigma of historical trauma and its impact on their identity in the contemporary world. The persistence of this trauma in contemporary Jewish identity is compounded by the struggle to reconcile past atrocities with present realities. Understanding how these feelings of guilt manifest through the lens of postmemory and identity formation is crucial in the exploration of trauma, especially in a diaspora context.

All Jews, both past and present, continue to endure the trauma and guilt of the Holocaust and its aftermath. For British Jews, this trauma was intensified by their physical distance from the Holocaust itself. Though they were safe, they could not truly celebrate their safety, knowing their kith and kin were being gassed, burned alive, or reduced to ashes. Survivor's guilt originated in the concentration camps, where those who lived often felt unworthy of survival while the rest of their community was annihilated. Despite their efforts to extend help, it was often too late. This guilt has been passed down through generations, resulting in many Jews born after the Holocaust and continuing into the present day, carrying the burden of this survivor's guilt syndrome. It manifests in distinct ways in each generation, particularly in how they relate to their Jewish identity, the larger world, and the past.

This article describes how British Jews in the twentieth century suffered from survivor's guilt, which caused long-term distress in comparison to other Jewish people. The current generation of Jews in England still bears the guilt passed down from their ancestors. They were sheltering far away from the Holocaust tragedy when it occurred. They were not close enough to escape the massacre or to absolve themselves of any responsibility for it. Survivor's guilt in this context is complicated by the sense of displacement and an inability to engage with the trauma in ways that feel authentic, especially when confronted with societal demands for assimilation.

Postmemory and Jewish Identity

The term "postmemory," coined by Marianne Hirsch, describes how the memories of a tragedy or massacre are kept alive through stories, rituals, or the lingering feelings of neglect from others, even long after the event. Hirsch introduced 'postmemory' in an essay on Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. He defines

postmemory as a predicament of the survivor's child "whose life is dominated by memories of what preceded his/her birth" (Hirsch, *Discourse* 8). Postmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up (Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, 5).

For British Jews, their survivor's guilt continues to persist, passed down either through external anti-Semitism, internalized anti-Semitism, or through personal feelings. This ongoing trauma is a key reason why they struggle to fully adapt to British culture, while also finding it difficult to completely embrace their Jewish identity. Survivor's guilt, compounded by postmemory, often results in fractured identity and a sense of being caught between two worlds. British Jews, in particular, grapple with the tension between living a "normal" life while feeling the burden of their ancestral trauma. "But I was an English Jew- that was my dysfunction – and somehow English Jews have had all the rudery squeezed out of them" (Jacobson 56).

Hirsch's framework of postmemory is particularly relevant when examining British Jewish communities, which were geographically removed from the Holocaust yet emotionally and culturally bound to it. Unlike direct survivors, the second and third generations absorb the trauma through family narratives, photographs, rituals, and silences. These mediated memories carry as much psychological weight as lived experience, shaping how individuals understand themselves and their place in the world. For British Jews, postmemory operates alongside a persistent experience of social otherness, as anti-Semitic attitudes in Britain, though less violent than those in continental Europe, nonetheless reinforced a sense of alienation. The interplay between inherited guilt and daily experiences of marginality forms the psychological core of Jacobson's fictional universe.

They only lose their sense of identity as a result of this incapacity. As a writer with a tangential Jewish heritage, Howard Jacobson uses his characters to express his repressed desire for retribution for the atrocities committed against Jews. He is known for shedding light on the challenges British Jews face in the contemporary world, a topic frequently overshadowed by the focus on American Jews.

> The utopian projections connected to Latin America, once seen as a kind of paradise in the imagination of Jewish immigrants, gradually has given way to a more realistic and skeptical assessment of reality, while the increasing importance of economical power in the contemporary seems to determine, more than anything else, the future of Jewish presence in Latin America. (Krausz and Stavans 107)

Through each character from the novel Kalooki Nights, he echoes the different perceptions of Jews and their ways of coping with inherited trauma to survive in the present world.

Howard Jacobson: Background and Literary Contributions

Howard Jacobson was born on August 25, 1942, in Manchester. His paternal grandparents were from Ukraine, while his maternal side hailed from Lithuania. Albeit, he grew up in Britain, the Russian-Jewish background of his parents influences his exploration of contemporary Jewish experiences in his writing. Howard Jacobson is a British author of Jewish descent, known for his witty and ironic portrayals of modern Jewish life in Britain. In addition to his career as a novelist and broadcaster, he regularly writes op-eds for *The Independent.* Jacobson has authored sixteen novels and five non-fiction works.

Howard Jacobson was the recipient of the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Award in 2000 for *The Mighty Walzer* and again in 2013 for *Zoo Time*. His novels *Kalooki Nights* (2006) and *Who's Sorry Now?* (2002) were on the Man Booker Prize long list, and his novel *J* was on the 2014 Booker Prize shortlist. The 2007 JQ Wingate Prize went to *Kalooki Nights* as well.

The Function of Trauma and Survivor's Guilt in Jacobson's Work

Howard Jacobson's novels vividly capture the anxieties of Jewish people and the lingering stigma of their historical past with a blend of humour and Candor. While he does not delve deeply into the Holocaust or the Israel-Palestine conflict, his characters embody the enduring trauma in their everyday lives.

> Rather than guilt per se, it is suggested that it is collective defences against guilt that are threatened when the issue is raised in public. The West's dilemma has been to reconcile its commitment to universalist values with its support for Israel. Zionism's objective of a Jewish state in an already inhabited country has led inevitably to repression and racism. (Kemp 192)

The burden of collective memory haunts the present generation, compelling them to grapple with questions of identity both now and in the future. Jacobson also highlights that anti-Semitism is not solely about external adversaries; rather, it extends to the internal conflicts among Jews themselves, as differing perspectives often lead to mutual harm.

Religious Muslim women began appearing in the public arena in the 1990s, as they demonstrated their objection to Israel's control over the holy sites, using the religious method of ribat, or presence in holy places, to serve the Palestinian national struggle. In recent years, religious Muslim and Palestinian women have challenged Israel's authority over the al-Aqsa Mosque, while at the same time demanding a more equal status for themselves in Palestinian society (Alinat-Abed 487).

This intra-community tension is one of the defining features of Jacobson's literary vision. He does not romanticise Jewish suffering or offer a unified image of a resilient people. Instead, he presents a fractured community in which guilt, resentment, religious rigidity, and the desire to assimilate pull individuals in opposing directions. His fiction is thus a social document as much as a literary one,

capturing the psychological cost of living between cultures without fully belonging to either.

Character Analysis: Max Glickman and Manny Washinsky

At the beginning of the novel, Max Glickman is portrayed as a Jewish cartoonist with a somewhat indifferent attitude toward his Jewish identity. In contrast, his childhood friend Manny Washinsky is depicted as a devout believer, deeply committed to his faith, having been immersed in Jewish culture by his parents from birth until the day he murdered them.

Manny Washinsky would secretly share stories about the concentration camps while he and Max played together. This was necessary because Max kept their friendship hidden and spent time with other friends in public. The two had planned to publish a book titled *Five Thousand Years of Bitterness*. While Manny was deeply committed to exposing the true nature of the Nazi soldiers and the suffering of their ancestors, Max lacked the curiosity to fully grasp its seriousness and depth.

Errol Tobias and Intra-Community Tensions

Errol Tobias, another friend of Max's, detested Manny for being too Jewish. Errol was controlling even as a small child, regularly berating and assaulting Manny with physical force. Max was conscious of this, yet he chose to stay friends with both Manny and Errol, never standing up to either. The purpose of this research paper is to examine how the trauma caused by the Germans made it difficult for many Jews to stand by and support their own community members.

Errol may seem brave and strong, but his disassociation from his Jewish background probably made him feel insecure around Manny, which fuelled his animosity towards him. Max, however, tries to balance both beliefs, but in the process, he loses sight of his own viewpoint. At first glance, Manny seems to be in a good place, but his brother's involvement with a non-Jewish lady completely upends their lives. Manny eventually learns that blindly adhering to one's culture or religion might lead to one's demise.

After many years, Max learned that Manny Washinsky had killed his parents. Though the revelation initially did not affect him deeply, everything changed when a publishing house approached Max to write a book about Manny's crime and requested a face-to-face interview with the murderer. In his novel, Jacobson employs the stream-of-consciousness technique to depict Max's journey, weaving childhood memories into each step of his encounter with Manny. Once again, Manny became a central figure in Max's life, guiding him toward a deeper understanding of the trauma of being Jewish.

At the outset, the character of Max could be seen living unsettled and unbothered about his life and the people around him. When the story unfolds, the survivor's guilt in him comes to the surface. One of his feelings of guilt stems from his ignorance about his ancestors' past and his inability to do anything about it, coupled with his own struggle to identify with any specific identity. He was first

hesitant to interview Manny because he believed he lacked the strength to deal with the issue, which reminded him of his own hidden trauma. At the end of the novel, he was mature enough to understand Manny's actions instead of judging him. He realised that dwelling on one's culture, particularly Jewish culture, would not make up for the loss or bring meaning to their current existence.

Manny, on the other hand, was an obedient child to his parents and to his religion at the initial stage of his life. He was consumed with revealing to the world who their real enemy was. Because Manny had no other Jewish pals and Max had been cartooning since he was young, he ended up collaborating with him on books that exposed the enemy. Even though Max paid little attention to it, Manny became irritated and snapped at him. Coming from an Orthodox Jewish household, he felt it was his responsibility to get retribution for an unjust war. He believed that his book would enlighten the uninformed masses.

The triangle formed by Max, Manny, and Errol functions as a microcosm of the fragmented Jewish identity in post-Holocaust Britain. Errol's rejection, Manny's obsession, and Max's indecision form three modes of response to trauma and marginality:

1. Errol - total rejection of Jewishness; embraces dominance through erasure of the self.
2. Manny - obsessive preservation of tradition; adopts a martyr-like posture.
3. Max - ironic detachment; navigates both worlds, but belongs fully to neither.

Jacobson revealed the extent of the cruelty by providing detailed accounts of Nazi commanders, including Vera Salvequart, the poisoner; Dorothea Binz, the dog-woman; Carmen Mory, also called 'The Monster'; Ilse Koch; and Irma Grese. The irony in the novel lies in Manny's transformation from a devoted son and committed Jew to someone profoundly changed after his brother's relationship with a non-Jew ultimately leads to the murder of his parents. Despite spending his life in prison, he believes he has punished his parents for ruining Ashley's love life by allowing Ashley to live happily with the woman he likes, without regard for any religious identity.

Manny's Radical Transformation and Act of Violence

Manny first believed that Nazi commanders were opponents of Jews. He had a strong belief in the religion that his parents had taught him to follow. When he recognised that the underlying pain had started at home, he took inspiration from the enemy and murdered his parents using their gas-chamber technique. All of the stories he heard about what transpired in the concentration camp, whether unwittingly or purposefully, influenced him. He became the enemy he had despised all his life. His survival instincts prompted him to commit a heinous act against his parents in order to protect his sibling and himself from religious madness.

Jacobson's portrayal of Manny's transformation raises a significant ethical question: at what point does the preservation of cultural memory become an act of self-destruction? Manny's tragedy lies not only in his crime but in the inability of his

community to offer him a language for processing grief that does not also demand total sacrifice. His radicalism is thus a symptom of a broader failure within the Orthodox household to acknowledge the psychological wounds of inherited trauma.

Comparing Jewish Households: Max vs. Manny

This research article also differentiates between the two Jewish households and their beliefs in religion. Max's parents, for instance, have differences of opinion within their own household. His father is aware that Jewish people are often looked down upon. To address this, he teaches Max not to place too much importance on religious identity. At the same time, he is aware that blindly following the culture of non-Jews will neither help Max assimilate with them nor lead to their acceptance of him.

They buried him in the land allotted for Jews, knowing he would have loathed such so-called special treatment, which only further isolated them from globalization. After his death, Shani unconsciously followed a similar path by falling in love with Mick Kalooki, a non-Jew. Max's mother cared for little beyond their cultural games, Kalooki. She was so deeply entrenched in her ways that even after her husband's death, she mourned by quickly returning to her Kalooki games, which seemed far too soon to others. Manny's household paints the picture of an orthodox Jewish home. Jacobson symbolically portrays them as clinging to their roots more than necessary by describing their house as one covered in dust and filled with tattered clothes. His father spends all day sitting at the sewing machine. Even when the kids throw stones at his window, he merely scolds them and continues sewing, ignoring the broken window.

His mother seems to blend into the dust of the house. She is portrayed as a typical Jewish mother, contributing to their religious life by cooking Jewish food, such as kosher dishes, in the kitchen. From the look of their home, one could guess that they are not as educated or engaging as Max's father and mother. They cling to Jewish customs and rituals as if they are essential for survival. Ultimately, their religion became the very reason they lost their lives.

Ashley Washinsky: Rebellion and Assimilation

The conflict in the novel emerges only when Ashley's love affair with Dorothy comes to light. The Washinskys could not fathom that their Jewish son had become emotionally entangled with the daughter of a servant. Their reaction was akin to a fire-yekelte, even in the twentieth century. It wasn't the difference in social status that humiliated them, but rather Dorothy's German heritage. They already held a low opinion of Gentiles, and the fact that Dorothy's father was German only intensified their outrage.

Though they lived in a Jewish neighbourhood, theirs was the only family still steadfastly adhering to scriptures and customs. This unwavering devotion is a clear sign of their survivor's guilt, which constantly keeps them vigilant, fearing that modern influences in Britain might erode their religious identity.

As victims of this turmoil, Manny and Ashley dealt with their survivors' guilt in very different ways. Initially, Ashley stood firm in his decision to stay with Dorothy despite his parents' objections. When they refused to relent, he withdrew further from his Jewish heritage, perceiving it as a restrictive force rather than a source of identity. His rebellion was not merely about love or personal freedom. It was an attempt to break away from a past that felt suffocating; as time passed, the weight of his choices bore down on him. Though he outwardly rejected his family's expectations, an underlying guilt lingered, manifesting in quiet moments of self-doubt. His detachment from Judaism was not one of indifference but of internal conflict, as he found himself torn between his desire to escape and an unshakable connection to his roots. Unlike Manny, who actively confronted his trauma in extreme and violent ways, Ashley's response was passive, rooted in avoidance rather than action.

Manny, in contrast, internalized his suffering until it festered into an obsessive need for justice, or perhaps revenge. His inability to reconcile his inherited trauma with his present reality ultimately led to his tragic downfall. Unlike Ashley, who sought to erase the past by assimilating, Manny clung to it, allowing it to consume him. His crime was not only an act of defiance against his parents but also a desperate attempt to reclaim control over a history that had always dictated his life.

Both characters illustrate the varied ways in which survivor's guilt manifests. While Ashley's struggle is one of silent estrangement, Manny's is a loud, destructive outburst against the forces that shaped him. Their stories serve as two ends of a spectrum, highlighting the complexity of inherited trauma and the different paths individuals take in their attempts to cope.

Max's Evolution and the Impact of Postmemory

Max's journey throughout *Kalooki Nights* is one of reluctant confrontation with his own identity. He initially dismisses the seriousness of Jewish trauma, regarding his upbringing with detached irony. However, as he reconnects with Manny later in life, the reality of postmemory takes hold. His conversations with Manny force him to re-evaluate the way Jewish history has shaped him, even when he tried to remain indifferent. By the end of the novel, his transformation is subtle but significant. He no longer mocks Jewish suffering with the same light-heartedness. Instead, he acknowledges its weight, though he does not completely surrender to a traditionalist Jewish identity.

Manny's Downfall and the Dangers of Obsession

Manny, on the other hand, is an embodiment of the destructive power of survivor's guilt. His adherence to Jewish trauma and his obsessive desire to define Jewish identity in opposition to the enemy ultimately consume him. His final act of murder is not just a crime against his parents but a symbolic rejection of the rigid religious identity they imposed on him. Unlike Max, who tries to navigate a middle ground, Manny succumbs to the very forces he sought to resist, becoming a distorted reflection of the perpetrators he despised.

Satire and Dark Humour as Narrative Tools

One of Jacobson's most striking literary techniques is his use of satire and dark humour to explore survivor's guilt and Jewish identity. Instead of presenting Jewish suffering in a solemn or sentimental manner, he infuses his narrative with irony and irreverence. This approach serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it reflects the way many Jewish individuals cope with trauma by using humour as a defence mechanism. Secondly, it allows Jacobson to critique the way Jewish history is narrated, challenging both romanticized victimhood and unyielding religious conservatism.

For instance, Max's father's belief that assimilation into British culture is a losing battle is presented with both frustration and comedic exaggeration. The tension between British Jews and their host society is not depicted as an explicit conflict but rather as a subtle, ongoing struggle. In *Kalooki Nights*, Jewishness is not merely a matter of history or religion. It also reflects the difficulty of belonging in a world that often views Jewish identity as something inherently 'other'.

Similarly, the character of Errol Tobias embodies a different form of Jewish self -denial. He actively resents his Jewish identity, seeing it as a burden. His antagonism toward Manny is not merely a childhood rivalry; it symbolizes the internal conflict within many Jewish communities, where some embrace their heritage while others reject it entirely. This dynamic stands as one of the novel's central themes: Jewish identity is not monolithic, and the varied ways in which Jews respond to their inherited trauma are deeply influenced by personal experience and historical context.

The Struggle of Jewish Identity in British Society

The novel also raises important questions about the Jewish diaspora and the burden of memory. British Jews, as depicted in *Kalooki Nights*, are caught between the weight of their past and the reality of their present. They are not direct survivors of the Holocaust, yet they carry its imprint. Their experience is shaped by a history they did not personally endure, yet they feel responsible for preserving its memory.

Max's hesitation to fully embrace his Jewish identity stems from this paradox. He is caught between being detached from his heritage and being immersed in it. His internal conflict reflects that of many second-generation Jews who grapple with balancing the weight of ancestral expectations while carving their own identity. Rather than providing a neat resolution, Jacobson's portrayal of Max suggests that Jewish identity is fluid and complex. Max's journey is not marked by a sharp transformation or total rejection of his past, but by a subtle, continuous process of negotiation that reflects the ongoing nature of identity formation.

Theme	Character	Manifestation
Survivor's Guilt	Max	Detached irony turning to reflection
Revenge	Manny	Murder of parents
Assimilation vs Identity	Ashley	Love for a non-Jewish woman

Table 1: Key Themes in Kalooki Nights

Conclusion: A Spectrum of Trauma and Identity

Howard Jacobson's *Kalooki Nights* is a profound exploration of survivor's guilt, postmemory, and the complexities of Jewish identity. Through the contrasting characters of Max and Manny, he illustrates the different ways in which Jewish individuals process their inherited trauma. The novel's dark humour and satirical edge make it a unique contribution to Holocaust literature, challenging traditional narratives of Jewish suffering while still honoring its impact.

Jacobson ultimately suggests that Jewish identity is fluid rather than fixed. His novel does not offer easy resolutions or redemptive narratives. Instead, it insists on the difficulty of living with inherited pain, suggesting that the very act of confronting it, however imperfectly, is itself a form of survival, of the cruel word. Survivor's guilt does not manifest in a single way, nor does it dictate a singular response. Instead, it is a spectrum of experiences, shaped by history, personal choices, and the ongoing negotiation between past and present. By the end of the novel, Max is not fully at peace with his Jewishness, but he has gained a deeper understanding of the forces that shaped him. In this way, *Kalooki Nights* offers not just a meditation on trauma, but a broader commentary on what it means to live with the weight of history.

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