

The Mediocre Growth of a Grandiose Simpleton: An Analysis of Howard Jacobson's *The Mighty Walzer*

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Abstract

The Mighty Walzer is the story of a boy who dreams of winning fame, fortune and the adoration of beautiful women, as a table tennis player. He wants to make his life grandiose like all of us. However, it is a pity that he fails. Oliver, the protagonist is not disheartened. Even though he has not struck his fortune, life gives him other riches- the riches of life and growing up itself. Thus, the novel can be seen as the celebration of the trivial processes of growing up. The more we read, the more we realise that the mediocre lives presented in the novel are grandiose in their own ways. Thus, the author is examining the grandiosities of our mediocre lives. The novel is the life story of each and every one of us. It is the celebration of the simple life of a commoner with its trivialities and mediocrities. However, there is an

exuberant grandiosity in this existence. It is this grandiose process of life which is emphasised in this study.

Set in the 1950s England, *The Mighty Walzer* is semi-autobiographical. Howard Jacobson in the veil of the character Oliver, Walzer depicts his own self as a confused Jewish boy growing up in Manchester. When it comes to home, nothing is closer to heart than the childhood memories. Jacobson's *the Mighty Walzer* is indeed a childhood memoir. The novel is a bildungsroman narrative. It is absolutely hilarious, comic and sublime. It has the grace and charm of a childhood dream. Jacobson's wit was lauded from all quarters, when the novel was first published. *Sunday Times* observes: "Jacobson writes with agility that gives pleasure akin to humour even when it isn't actually funny. It is the sheer charm of his intelligence that feels like wit." *The Independent* in its review quotes: "This mature novel has the sustained exuberance and passion of his youthful writing but within an epic.... An aching funny book....An amazing achievement....There is few novelists today who can imbue the trifles of life with such poetry."

Jacobson wrote this rollicking, loose limbed, semi-autobiographical novel in Australia at the end of 90s, having finally put enough distance between events to revisit the humiliation. He puts before us a number of childhood milieus in a straight forward and grandiose fashion. There is no holding back when it comes to a number of intimate sexual and mental give and takes. It is these truthful ejaculations that make the novel hilarious. One can really denominate the novel in Mario Vargas Llosa's terms as a piece of 'mental masturbation.' Howard Jacobson amuses his readers in *The Mighty Walzer*. The characters and milieus in the novel are regular, common and mediocre. We can connect ourselves with the various characters and their eccentricities. The more we go into the novel, the more we realize that the desires, anxieties, failures, successes, sufferings and frailties of the characters are in fact the mirror reflections of our own milieus. Thus, when we look at with disdain the

‘jacking off’ –of Oliver, Sheeney’s women hunting, Sabine’s promiscuity, Aunt Fay’s mid 30’s love affair etc., we are pitying our own repressed desires and inhibitions. Such is the psychological depth with which each of the characters are handled.

Oliver Walzer’s life as it seems is grandiose- Grandiose with mediocrity, ambivalences, difficulties and resolutions. Perhaps this is the life story of many of us. The confusions and embarrassments of Oliver are ours too. Oliver is a mirror image of our own self. His secret wishes, desires, feelings, and longings are our own repressed wishes- the intimacies of which we never want to reveal. Oliver masturbates; he has infatuations, love affairs, unsatisfied desires, narcissist proclivities, arrogance, confusions, and jealousies... just like any one of us. Jacobson is in a way taunting and digging out his own raw self through Oliver. We laugh at his humorous rendering only to later realize that we were laughing at ourselves. *The Mighty Walzer* ever since its publications has been highly regarded and lauded for its comic elements. Perhaps, the author couldn’t find any better way to express his serious thoughts than through laughter. It is serious in his treatment but laughter is his tool of reinforcement.

Oliver’s childhood is centered mostly on his mother and his aunts. They listen to the ‘morning story’ in the radiogram and later in the day to ‘women’s hour’. They do crosswords and a jigsaw together; pour over an old family photograph together, play hang-man and snap and crosses together, and on special occasions snakes and ladders or ‘hoop-la’. Oliver is much attached to them. On the other hand, his father is not a friendly pitcher to him initially. Oliver has his trouble with him. This perhaps is the inhibition of ‘Oedipus Complex’ and the influence of its formative fore bearings on him. This infliction is common to all boys and girls of his age. The theory formulated by Sigmund Freud is rather intriguing.

In psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex (or, less commonly, oedipal complex) is a child’s desire, which the mind keeps in unconscious via dynamic repression, to have sexual

relations with the parent of the opposite sex. The Oedipus complex occurs in the third phallic stage (ages 3-6) of the five psychosexual development stages: i) the oral ii) the anal, iii) the phallic, iv) the latent, v) the genital in which the source of libidinal pleasure is in a different erogenous zone of the infant's body. The Oedipus complex originally refers to the sexual desires of a son for his mother and does not need to be reciprocated.

Sigmund Freud, who coined the term "Oedipus Complex", believed that the Oedipus complex is a desire for the parent in both males and females; he deprecated the term "Electra Complex", which was introduced by Carl Gustav Jung in regard to the Oedipus complex manifested in young girls. Freud further proposed that boys and girls experienced the complex differently: boys in the form of castration anxiety, girls in a form of penis envy; and that unsuccessful resolution of the complex might lead to a neurosis, pedophilia, and homosexuality. A child's identification with the same sex parent is the successful resolution of the complex. Men and women who are fixated in the Oedipus and Electra stages of their psychosexual development might be considered "mother fixated" and "father fixated". In adult life, this can lead to a choice of sexual partner who resembles one's parent.

In classical psychoanalytic theory, the Oedipus complex occurs during the phallic stage of psychosexual development, when also occurs the formation of the libido and the ego; yet it might manifest itself in an earlier age. In the phallic stage a boy's decisive psychosexual experience is the Oedipus complex – his son- father competition for possession of mother. It is in this third stage of psychosexual development that the child's genitalia are his or her primary erogenous zone; thus, when children become aware of their bodies and the bodies of other children and the bodies of their parents, they gratify physical curiosity by undressing and exploring their genitals, so learning the anatomic differences between 'male' and 'female' and the gender differences between 'boy' and 'girl'.

Oliver's obsessions with the photographs of his mother, grandmother, and his unmarried aunts can be analyzed in terms of the inherent Oedipus complex in him. He cuts out the head from these photos to be attached to lewd pictures from *Span*, a pin-up magazine which he collected. The lewd pictures of girl hitching up their skirts showing a suspender, looking down at their own disarrangement in astonishment to account for how a breast with an unaroused nipple or a star where the nipple should have been etc. are used by him. To these he attaches the photos of his grandmother and his aunts. Oliver knows his actions are sinister, but he can't resist "jacking off", as his classmates referred to the activity. However, Oliver justifies himself: "In its clumsy way, doesn't beating one's meat over the female branches of the family tree shows a certain groping genealogical respect(45)".

Perhaps, this genealogical respect is the working of Oedipus complex in him. The inherent Oedipus complex in Oliver is not only manifested through affection to his mother or his aunts but also through a pseudo-rivalry with his father. His father doesn't like his hours long lavatory ventures. Perhaps he knows or rather can really guess the 'Kuni-Lemele' habits of Oliver. Unlike the women folks in the family' his father doesn't pamper him or appreciates anything in him. The difference in affection of his mother and father is further caricatured in their journey to Black pool. Oliver who apparently is not happy about the trip happens to have an ugly conversation with a gas-station operator. His father intervenes. Oliver is punished. The incident was so embarrassing. He at the same time has concerns for his own masculinity and desires. He observes other men. He has jealousies towards his father and a number of paternal substitutes. He envies them, their prowesses and the superior masculinity in them. The desires to emulate them are also inherent in him. Oliver describes one of his encounters with his uncle Motty, a parental substitute. Even though the description as it seems is trivial and uncouth, the anxieties and mental concerns of a boy are well depicted.

However, Oliver later realizes his own self and develops an identity. The workings of 'psycho-logic defence' are seen working in him. The defence mechanism of repression and later that of identification is manifest in him. He learns to repress his desires like any other child of his age. Perhaps his regular masturbations and unfruitful infatuations with girls can be seen in this regard. Oliver, who soon joins the Akiva club, learns from his peers. He identifies himself with them. The likes of Sheeny helps him resolve his repressed wishes. Id-ego conflict in him is diminished as he chooses to comply with societal rules. The fear of punishment which always lurks in one's mind is another reason for this denouement. The son-father competition too is resolved. Oliver gradually comes to terms with his father. They are later seen having a good rapport with each other. Oliver and his father, Joel Walzer learns to appreciate each other. Joel shows concerns for Oliver's ping pong games. And Oliver helps out his father in his 'swag businesses. It is Oliver who later takes Sheeny to his father who becomes his new partner and assistant. Thus, Oliver's Oedipus inflictions are seen resolved to a good effect.

Like the tragic flaws as seen in Shakespearean characters, Oliver as it seems is troubled throughout his life by his flaw-Sexual jealousy. He perhaps harbors the 'Othello-Syndrome'. It is this harboring hurt which later prompts him to make Sabine Weinberger to suck his dick' even though his morality is disturbed. Oliver disrespects her against her wish. However, Oliver soon realizes the absurdity of his fetishism. In spite of this resolution, Oliver is never completely able to overcome his defect. It carries on with him. His unsuccessful marriage life and his denunciation of family, children and marital status are perhaps because of this repressed jealousy. This jealousy as it seems is always dormant in his unconscious self. Freud in his treatise *The Interpretation of Dreams* comments that the interpretation of dreams and wishes are the royal road to the knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind. This observation thus, holds true for Oliver.

What stands out in *The Mighty Walzer* is the subtle portrayal of eccentricities of its characters. If Oliver's case stands for the eccentric Oedipal resolutions, there is Sabine Weinberger who shows us the Electra complex proclivities. Initially, Freud equally applied the Oedipal complex to the psychosexual development of boys and girls, but later modified the female aspects of the theory as 'Feminine Oedipal attitude' and 'Negative oedipal complex'; yet, it was his student – collaborator Carl Jung, who, in 1913, proposed the Electra complex to describe a girl's daughter- mother competition for psychosexual possession of the father. In the phallic stage, a girl's Electra complex is her decisive psychodynamic experience in forming a discrete sexual identity (ego). Whereas a boy develops castration anxiety, a girl develops penis envy rooted in anatomic fact. Without a penis she cannot sexually possess mother, as the infantile id demands. Resultantly, the girl redirects her desire for sexual union upon father, thus progressing to heterosexual femininity, which culminates in bearing a child, who replaces the absent penis. Furthermore, after phallic stage, the girl's psychosexual development includes transferring her primary erogenous zone from the infantile clitoris to adult vagina. Freud thus considered a girl's negative Oedipal complex to be more emotionally intense than that of a boy, resulting, potentially, in a woman of submission, insecure personality, thus might an unresolved Electra complex, daughter- mother competition for psychosexual possession of father, lead to a phallic-fixation conducive to a girl becoming a woman who continually strives to dominate men, either as an unusually seductive woman (high self-esteem) or as an unusually submissive woman (low self-esteem). Therefore, the satisfactory parental handling and resolution of the Electra complex are most important in developing the female infantile super- ego, because, by identifying with a parent, the girl internalizes morality, thereby, she chooses to comply with societal rules, rather than reflexively complying in fear of punishment.

The eccentricities of growth, maturation, confusion, anxieties are seen in a number of other characters too. Lorna Preachley, the regular submissive female representative, Sheeny Waxman, the merry womanizer, Fay, the fantasy seeking woman, Selwyn who is always on the lookout for anti-Semitic sentiments are well depicted by Howard Jacobson. Jacobson depicts not only the inner psychological growth resolutions of his characters; he gives much importance to the environment outside. Thus, Oliver is seen being influenced by the men and world around him. His parents, aunts, friends, lovers, bitches, professors, Ping-Pong opponents, all have a determining influence on Oliver. His mother guides him through his childhood, so does his aunts whom he admires very much. His father initiates him to the world of Ping-Pong and Akiva, which later proves pivotal for his development. His friend Sheeny Waxman and his first love, Sabine teaches him love making which often presents him hard but sweet times. When Ping-Pong fails to initiate meaning in his life, it is his Cambridge life and the professors, Yorath and Rubella, who picks him up. They take him to the world of 'Collins-classics'. Even though he fails in love and marriage as seen at the end of the novel, Oliver is not downhearted like many of us. This is because he realizes that life is a process of growing up which flows continuously with its fill of unprecedented dramas and adventures. Oliver is optimistic and so is Jacobson and his readers.

The *Mighty Walzer* is also rife with a number of intimate and intricate relationships. Relations are as an essential part in our life. It is essential for our growing up. After all we define ourselves in relationship with others. The gossamer relationships that surround us are well depicted by Howard Jacobson. The Mother-son relationship between Oliver and his mother, the son-father relationship, the friendship between Sheeny and Oliver, the marriage life of Sabine and Oliver etc. are some of the intricate relationships mentioned in the novel. Oliver loves his mother deeply; in fact, she is the most influential and caring person in his life. Like all mothers, she stands by him during his childhood confusions. She is the pacifist

when there are standoffs between the son and the father. Oliver is close to her in his childhood and adolescent years. It is after his 'Collins-classic' stint that there is a separation. Oliver is very happy to see her when he comes back. He is happy about her condition. She, at the end of the novel is depicted almost with the aura of 'Miranda', the 'all seeing and divine' mother figure in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However unlike Miranda, Oliver's mother is witness to real and raw life and not mirages of existence.

The intricacies of father-son relationship too are explored in the novel. Oliver's father Joel Walzer is not much of an expressive man. Oliver initially has a very difficult time with him. But Joel is not really a 'shit-brick house' stoic, as Oliver conceptualizes him. He is really concerned and loving father. However, he never expresses himself in front of his son. Joel's concerns are evident when he presents Oliver a Ping-Pong bat and ensure him a spot at the Akiva Club after their journey to the Blackpool, Tower Ball room. As it seems, Joel can really understand the issues haunting his son, who is struggling to come out of his shell. After their initial stand offs, they both makeup to each other. They are later in good terms with each other. Oliver stands by his father in his difficult times as he had stood for him in his childhood days. Later, when Joel Walzer is hospitalized, it is Oliver who spends his time with him. They are both happy. They look back to their 'swag' days and laugh it out. They talk like friends. They talk about Venice, gaffs, their follies, old days with Sheeny etc. They laugh out the joke which was their life.

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