



Depiction of Trauma and Conflict in Joe Sacco's graphic narrative 'Palestine'

1. Sadiya Nair S 2. Dr Prakrithi HN

1. Research Scholar, Jain University, Bangalore. Assistant Professor- NMKRV Degree College, Bangalore

2. Professor- Jyothi Nivas College, Bangalore. Research Supervisor- Jain University- Bangalore.

Abstract

Graphics have always evoked interest and curiosity, and when it had a serious theme to discuss, it became more all the more endearing. Working on the depiction of trauma and conflict in Joe Sacco's graphic narrative Palestine, the paper enables to understand the effects of the Israeli Palestinian conflict on the lives of its victims and survivors. The study provides an account on the multifarious dimensions of conflict and helps to understand the life during times of conflict and also strives to depict the trauma endured by the civilians. People who lived in such conflict zones had to keep their lives moving amidst the bitter realities of life which shrouded them. Thus, the narratives from such conflict zones became testimonials of soul stirring accounts of pain and survival. The narrations described the oppression and subjugation faced by the people during times of conflict, such as detainment, crude modes of interrogation, arrests, torture, cruelty and many more stories of physical and mental torture. The paper thereby, focusses on the life in the Israeli Palestine conflict zone, and how Joe Sacco depicts trauma through his brilliant socio-political graphic narrative 'Palestine'.

Keywords:

Depiction, Trauma, Endearing, Multifarious, Oppression, Subjugation, Detainment.

Conflict and trauma are the two sides of the same coin- as conflict is the inevitable aspect of any literary narrative and trauma is the emotional outcome of the individual's suppressed pain and agony. Literature has depicted trauma in numerous ways and scenarios. Shakespeare in his historic drama *Henry IV Part-I* reveals how Lady Percy observes the impact of war in her husband's demeanour as he returns from the battlefield. Henry Percy (aka. Hotspur) who was an able and courageous soldier, was greatly disturbed and constantly affected by delusions, nightmares and derelictions. Though medieval science considered these ailments as the 'malady of the soul', the feelings that the protagonist experienced were essentially connected to the impact of the disturbing experiences which affected the individual physically or emotionally. Though Hotspur experienced the traumatic rupture from

a military aggression, later the term ‘trauma’ categorically denoted any disturbing experiences which affected the emotional state of the individual.

As time passed by, psychoanalysts and theorists such as Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth and Jacques Lacan came up with their own interpretative theories of trauma and conflict. When Freud called trauma as the ‘unrepresentable’, Caruth stated that trauma was the ‘unclaimed experience’ of the mind. Traumatic memories were the instantaneous and unconscious events in the mind of the individual, which became occurrences in the form of nightmares, recurrent flashbacks and occasional violent outbursts. Literature rebounds with numerous and multifarious representations of trauma.

Graphic Narratives heralded a new trend in literature, especially when it came to the depiction of serious and sober themes such as conflict and war, and it emerged as a successful genre in literature. Art Spiegelman through his graphic narrative *Maus* narrates the personal experiences faced by his family during the Second World War. Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* graphically narrates the account of Iran during the revolution of 1979. Joe Sacco, on the other hand, narrates the dynamics of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict as a detached spectator through his powerful graphic images.

The book is a collected anthology from Sacco’s own travel experiences to Israel, Jerusalem and the other occupied territories. Sacco narrates the events from the experiences of his visit to the West Bank and Gaza Strip on a two month visit between 1991-1992. Sacco collected his excerpts through his interviews with the first-hand victims and the survivors from the conflict zones. As the civilians narrate how they endured the pain and the sufferings of the conflict, Sacco stays aloof, only to represent the factual details through the objective lens of a detached spectator. The stories of the conflict were basically narratives of the victims who re-count the early days of the Palestinian conflict and the Intifada and how they suffered under the Israeli preoccupation with threats, arrests, mass destruction and how it affected the lives of the civilians in these places. Sacco’s drawings also depict the anger and the resentment among the masses who comprised of the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Sacco makes his narrative unique by presenting himself in a grim image as a skinny guy, with a thick pair of goggles and a short rubble of hair. His carefully careless attitude and his cynical approach are the typical gestures that he adopts for an objective observation. As he takes his journey to explore Palestine, he understands that there were many people- such as farmers, refugee, migrants and many who merely wished to share their lives and their experiences with the author. A similar note can be seen in his twin narrative *Footnotes in Gaza* where he portrays a man who

“has this soft thing for the animal (being butchered) He couldn’t bring himself to eat it. However, he isn’t averse to the idea of suicide bombing and killing Israeli civilians.”

Edward Said in the Introduction to *Palestine* states Sacco’s mode of narrating the trauma thus:

“In Joe Sacco’s world there are no smooth talking announcers and presenters, no unctuous narrative of Israeli triumphs, democracy, achievements...what we get instead is through the eyes and persona of a modest looking ubiquitous crew cut young American man who appears to have wandered into unfamiliar,

inhospitable world of military occupation, arbitrary arrest, harrowing experiences of houses demolished and land expropriated, torture ('moderate physical pressure') and sheer brute force generally, if cruelly, applied...at whose mercy Palestinians live on a daily indeed hourly basis." (iii)



The above image from *Palestine* reveals the life of the civilians who were caught in the mesh and the wildfire of conflict. Edward Said states how Sacco records the episodes and the trauma of conflict faced by the Palestinians, as they lived under the radar and the constant surveillance of the Israeli Armed Forces. To quote:

“The vacancy of time, the drabness not to say sordidness of everyday life in the refugee camps, the network of relief workers, bereaved mothers, unemployed young men, teachers, police, hanger-on, the ubiquitous tea or coffee circle, the sense of confinement, permanent muddiness and ugliness conveyed by the refugee camp which is so iconic to the whole Palestinian experience: these are rendered with almost terrifying accuracy and, paradoxically enough, gentleness at the same time.” (iv-v)



The figure from Sacco's *Palestine* illustrates the plight of an old woman who searches among a pile of debris. The makeshift tent in the background of the dilapidated buildings suggests the conditions of the refugees who lived a miserable life during the conflict.

The narratives depict the alternating frames with exaggerated caricature images to indicate the survival in the conflict zones. Most often it can be seen that the testimonies reverberate with the agony faced by the Palestinians

during the Israeli preoccupation. They urge Sacco to document their woes and to voice forth their sufferings. ‘You write something about us? I showed you, you saw! You tell about us.’ (10)

Through the lens of a colonial American tourist, Sacco tries to capture the action of the conflict scenario. Sacco’s narrative helps to understand how people recollect, narrate and re-live the experiences of their traumatic memories. Like a distant observer, Sacco stands amidst the mob and tries to capture the moments of conflict in his narrative. ‘He is standing in the streets like it’s no one’s business...like it’s his Intifada’. (121)



The above image reveals the callous attitude of Sacco, as he walks past the Palestinians in the old city of Jerusalem. Harping on the grotesque details of the conflict, Sacco continues his harangue with the Palestinians probing them with deliberately disturbing questions such as- ‘How long did they beat you? What did they feed you?’... The only intension being to re-emphasize on the traumatic experiences and to present it to the Westerners, who were only familiar with the Israelian part of the narrative. With an unending sense of curiosity, the interlocutor poses his queries to the disillusioned Palestinians. The civilians who were already tired and frustrated with the repeated acts of violence, arrests, beatings and horrible experiences of detainment, still had the same old tales of woe, and they believed that nothing could improve or save them from their miserable plight. Similarly, the author presents the grit and the anger of the Palestinians who felt that the Israelites were the cause of their mishap and sufferings. This attitude and resentment are clearly evident in the picture illustrated below:



Sacco narrates the trauma of generations through his usual comic voyeuristic style of narration, which reveals a callous attitude without any sense of apathy for the suffering lot. The author's narration helps to capture all the cacophonous sounds of the conflict zone such as the screeching sounds of the cars, the yelling of the bystanders, the protests and the demonstrations, the signs of the army bunkers, police stand points and checkpoints and the curfew. To add on to the visual impact, the author creates the onomatopoeic sounds such as 'bham splat', 'hush', 'ssssh' to instil the state of fear and panic in the readers. Sacco assumes the role of a callous reporter who jostles from one refugee camp to another to get some juicy report 'another authentic refugee experience' (217), hunting out for the most interesting reports of pain and suffering, hardly realising the fact that it was his own brethren who underwent such painfully humiliating experiences.

Sacco also becomes successful in hiding his subjective emotional response from his readers as he describes the condition of the Palestinians with the graphic portrayal of the violence such as the piercing of the bullets, the rotting corpses, images of bloodshed and violence. He states:

“Well, what about a Palestinian state? Can you imagine that?

... The territories are economically suppressed. There are a captive market and a source of cheap labour for Israel... The occupation is harsh. Do you really know what goes on over there?” (263-4)

Providing interpretations from multiple perspectives, Sacco strives to delineate the conditions of the refugees in their real state of existence, not just by euphemistically decreeing them as 'internally displaced victims', who had neither any voice nor agency of their own. Joe Sacco's novel *Palestine* (2001) and his later narrative *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) deals with the cyclic nature of conflict and focuses on the trauma and the endless pain of the victims. Sacco also states how trauma affects the individuals, how the trauma of the parents affects the children and also on the status of the first-generation immigrants who search for their national identity as refugees within their own spaces. Even though, Sacco socially distances himself from his readers, he understands the pain and the trauma of a generation who crave for identity, recognition and understanding. Through his novel *Palestine*, Sacco associates the Palestine-Israel conflict with the historical background of the Jews during the holocaust. Sacco narrates the excerpts of his conversation with a German American lady whose family died in the holocaust. She narrates on how the Israelis had to 'carry their guns because there was always a threat'. (281) Holocaust according to them, was a way of justifying the Israeli politics.

Sacco expresses the pain of the Palestinian communities who narrate the pain and oppression which they had to face all these years. The author also narrates the chaos of the conflict zone, as he witnesses the conflict in the form of street protests, abuse, arrests, violence and death. The narrator jostles from the street angle to the inner coffee and tea circles, where the Palestinian refugees narrate their pain, sufferings and victimhood. The author gets into the inner circle of family and his friendly gestures helps the readers to understand the pain of women and the old people in the camps, who continue with their routine schedules and the drudgery of their day to day life. Mothers often silently narrated the stories of how their children faced violent and brutal attacks and some even narrate the pathetic incidents of their children's death. Women who were silent and resilient within their personal spaces, protested and fought vehemently in the streets for their families and communities.

The third chapter in *Palestine*, depicts a scene of protest organised by women and children in the streets who were ‘screaming like their lives depended on it!’ (20) Sacco strives to project the popular resistance of the public against the Israeli state and how women protest and confront the IDF. The novel describes the daily struggles of the people who suffer inexplicable torture facing the threat of terrorism when he states: ‘...terrorism is the bread, Palestinians get buttered on’.(07) Sacco also delineates the pain of oppression and subjugation in the brilliant graphic angles, through which he portrays the power politics of the society i.e. the powerful and the powerlessness.



The image from Sacco's narrative *Palestine* illustrates the power relations in the social spaces of the conflict zones, and how such power relations create a sense of insecurity, leading to a sense of apathy among the civilians themselves. Sacco narrates another episode (Moderate Pressure- Part-2) with a twelve-page narration of a Palestinian named Ghassan who narrates the painful accounts of how he has been arrested, detained and tortured for several weeks. He narrates the extremities of the police brutalities, as he was blindfolded, handcuffed and inflicted with wounds as he succumbed to excessive physical torture. (102-113) Ghassan states on the struggle faced by the Palestinians under the Israeli pre-occupation, as almost 1,00,000 Palestinians were detained, and thousands faced interrogation and physical abuse.

Joe Sacco's journalistic texture of storytelling brilliantly depicts the pain and the trauma faced by the civilians in such conflict zones. The narrative seamlessly shifts back and forth from 1991-92 to the experiences of physical oppression to the political conflict during the Intifada in 1987-88. Sacco's extraordinary eye-witness method of reportage helps him to successfully delineate the pain and trauma faced by the civilians in the conflict zones. The author renders a detailed and graphic account of the conflict by refuting the misrepresentations of Palestinian history created by the popular narratives, and also helps in giving a shape, voice and recognition to the subjugated victims and survivors of conflict.

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