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**The Caravan of grief: A  
narrative of resistance, the  
status of refugees and the  
longing for a Home**

## ABSTRACT

The birth of the concept of Nation States was conceived often with the intrinsic tendency of viewing it as a homogeneous and monolithic structure. Subsequently, it came to be reiterated in popular imagination and discourses in a more or less essentialistic and seclusive policy. The politics of membership to a Nation is nowhere as fascinating in all its complexity as in the Middle East, with Palestine as the epicentre. The occupation of Palestine by the forces of Zionism, has led to not only a historical disjuncture, but also forced migration and exile. My paper attempts to showcase how a particular '*narrative*' propagated by Zionism as well as the intervention of the West, has reinforced the myth of the absence of the Palestinians. In this case, I have tried to explore two texts: Joe Sacco's graphic novel *Palestine* and Eran Riklis's film *Lemon Tree*. My purpose is to show how both these texts acts as visual narratives that complicates, and counters the role of mainstream narrative. It is to show how narratives become an important trope in the politics of '*resistance*', through both these texts. Last, but not the least, my paper will focus through both these texts on the status of '*refugees*', to focus attention on the meaning of '*home*', in its spatial, temporal and material forms.

**Keywords:** Refugee, home, graphic novel, nation, resistance

The dystopic scenario of political conflicts highlights the exigencies of literature, often culminating in the narrative of protests and resistance. To counter the diabolical nature of the repressive state apparatus, traditionally, people have always sought the refuge of art in general and literature in particular. The site of 'Palestine', has become emblematic of a problematic discourse and therefore, is constantly focalised as that space, that seeks to resist the claims of popular narrativization. In this paper, I seek to discuss the politics of resistance in Joe Sacco's graphic novel, *Palestine* and Eran Riklis's film, *Lemon Tree*. I have chosen two very different visual narratives, which are also narratives of protests, whose very different media specificities and textual productions highlight the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

I hereby aim to showcase how both these texts situated within a very specific historio-political context, constantly resists and hence subverts the dynamics of power structure. It is also important to note that both these texts explore the different nuances of narratives of protest and resistance.

To understand the polemics of the narrative of protest used in both the texts, one must first be acquainted with the narrative that has been ubiquitously propagated, in historio-political consciousness. It is what Edward Said, in *The Question of Palestine*, would call the claims of 'Zionism', premised on the idea of a promised land (in the Old Testament) exclusively for the Jews, along with the negation of the presence of the native Arabs as non-existing in those lands. Thus Zionism, as an idea, based itself on "the excluded presence, that is the fictional absence of native people in Palestine; institutions were rebuilt deliberately shutting out the natives, laws were drafted

when Israel came into being that made sure the natives remained in their ‘non place’, Jews in theirs and so on.”(Said 42). This intentional motive of erasure of the Palestinians, for the creation of the State of Israel, is based on the concept of an ethnic purity (the dialectics offered to counter the Holocaust turns ironical, although officially not recognised) and found itself manifested in the (in)famous Balfour Declaration of 1917. Thus, Zionism in the very conceptualization of Israel not only ignored the presence of the Arabs, but also demanded its recognition on the “assumed subordination of a designated inferior Other” (Said 253). To add to the immense popularity of Zionism, is the Machiavellian role of the West, with its political baggage, adding fuel to fire. According to David Gardner, the role of the U.S.A and Britain in backing Israel is tied to their own national interests and is premised not only on a “double standard: but also a “wrong standard” (Gardner 143).

What one needs to recognize is the deep complexity of the “question of Palestine”, that has often been consciously obliterated from official history. At the same time, it is important to note, that despite the attempts to efface the Palestinians by sheer force, the Palestinians continue to exist, and it is in their daily struggles of resistance, that they counter mainstream narrative.

The term “resistance” (muqawamah) was first applied, in the context of Palestine, by the Palestinian writer and critic, Ghassan Kanafani in his work, *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine* in 1966. The point that Kanafani has tried to raise, is the question of how a cultural form of resistance constantly disrupts the power equations, often more than armed

resistance/protest itself. In the words of Kanafani, as quoted by Barbara Harlow,

If resistance springs from the barrel of a gun, the gun itself issues from the desire for liberation and that desire for liberation is nothing but the natural, logical and necessary production of resistance in its broadest sense: as refusal and as firm grasp of roots and situations (Harlow 11).

As such, Kanafani situates the literature of resistance as a powerful counter narrative within the ‘cultural siege’ imposed by the State machinery or to subvert what Harlow calls the “hegemonic domination and oppression” (Harlow 29)

In Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, we see an interesting hermeneutics of resistance being foregrounded. Joe Sacco is one of the most reputed graphic novelists of our times. Of a Maltese American nationality, Sacco did his graduation in journalism at the University of Oregon, before choosing the medium of comics to highlight important socio-political happenings in different historical settings. He is also the author of other famous graphic novels, namely, *Safe Area Gorazde* (2000), *The Fixer* (2003), and *Footnotes in Gaza*(2009), along with *Palestine*. His graphic reportage has earned him worldwide acclaim and he is the recipient of the famous *American Book Award* and *Eisner Award* among many others. This graphic narrative was initially published in serial forms in nine volumes and later in 2001, assembled as a complete book, with an introduction by Edward Said. We are introduced to Sacco’s *Palestine* and the Palestinians as a discursive presence that seeks to

de-establish the myth propounded by the Israeli and other Western mainstream media narrative.

*In Palestine*, we are presented graphically with the scenario of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We as readers, much like Sacco himself, are initially equipped with only the populist and stereotyped understanding of the Palestinians as terrorists. The story about the killing of the American Jew, Klinghoffer, by the Palestinian terrorists as well as Sacco's racist and abusive language against the Palestinians showcase the generalisations made by Western media, as part of the 'Orientalising' process. It is only when Sacco traverses through the different areas of Palestine, collecting testimonies from the Palestinians themselves, that he, along with the readers is implicated. The graphic narrative then becomes the meta-narrative, where the reader, like Sacco, in turn become the 'witness'. Here, an interesting facet explored by the graphic narrative, is the subject position of Sacco himself, which further complicates the narrative. Sacco becomes a chief character for the telling of this narrative of protest, with his own idiosyncrasies and biases. This is again fitting with Kanafani's rejection of the concept of "academic objectivity" and "scientific dispassion", in literature of resistance (Harlow 3). According to Bhakti Shringarpure, this dismissal of objectivity is a "sly, intelligent trope that covers more ground in a few pages than entire political tomes" (Shringarpure 213).

What is more important is how Sacco, in his journalistic report, presents the account of the lives of the Palestinians, giving them the space to narrate their stories, in their chequered experiences of being under Israeli

occupation. In his depictions, Sacco not only presents a world, “trapped within an inferno of war and violence: the despair and resilience of people in an extreme crisis, of lives regulated by curfews, where torture and prisons constitute everyday realities” (Shringapure 213), but also the stories of each individual, often taking the resort of memory, to prevent generalizations and stereotyping. We recognise the fact that despite the scepticisms on the part of the Palestinians before the Western media, their only viable option is to constantly narrativize their stories. According to Helen Taylor, the need for telling stories becomes almost an act of claiming self recognition. Quoting Andrews, Taylor states, “stories are not only the way, in which we come to ascribe significance to experiences we and others have had; they are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves” (Taylor 37). Almost everyone whom Sacco meets in his journey, has a story to narrate. Incidents of past horror, leaving physical and psychological wounds, are narrated without any hesitation with precision and graphic details, by almost all the interviewees. The point I am trying to raise here, is not only the significance of the narrative self but how these narratives also become a tool of resistance. It is the Arab guide that Sacco meets at Hebron, with his faith in God, that acts as a narrative of protest with its completely different cultural logic, that undercuts the role of history and power. His recognition of the omnipotence of God, and the fragility of the discourses of State power, from the Romans to the English, might seem all too baffling and irrational to a secular audience, but also a powerful reminder of the politics of piety as deeply embedded in the Middle East crisis. “They are gone/ We all go/Only God is great.” (Sacco 40). The politics of the narrative of protest is also dealt with

in the issue about women and the discourse of the 'hijab', where we find the dialectics of resistance even further complicated and often as a counter narrative to Western Imperialism and First World Feminism. The cultural shock for Sacco speaks volumes about the general stereotyping of the West in relation to the idea of freedom of Muslim Women. "You could say the hijab was more my problem than hers.."(Sacco 137). It is in the stories of 'Ammar', who has been unable to get the work permit from Israel, or the story of 'Sameh', who works in a Rehabilitation centre catering to the needs of handicapped children, without much help, or the story of the old woman who has lost both his sons, that we recognise the importance of these private narratives. All of these narratives, along with other testimonies, marks the point of departure, the departure being the voice of the Palestinians claiming space and history through their acts of registering their voice and often through memory. This provides an axiomatic idea of self-identity to the Palestinians, giving them the power, through what Said called 'individual acts of rhetoric.'(Said 134). These testimonies are filled with outbursts of anger, pain, hope and hopelessness and although these may seem trivial initially, as Debbie Van Kerckem notes, "these events are anything but trivial and passing for they have implications until long beyond their end"(Kerckem 38). It is also interesting to note how disparate events narrated by different individuals about their lives under Israeli occupation, somehow have an uncanny similarity. In the horrors recounted by the family members of Jibril, the readers learn how nearly 20 homes were attacked last night" (Sacco 64), how the "attack lasted 15 minutes" and how, in the morning [they] found 60 stones" (Sacco 66) or how an old woman, estranged from her family, recalled the demolition of her house

(Sacco 68). Through such recollections we find an undercurrent of suffering that unites these people. In the words of Helen Taylor, quoting Jackson, “In narrating one’s own story, one salvages and reaffirms, in the face of dispersal, defeat and death, the social bonds that bind one to a community” (Taylor 37). In other words, the testimonies collected by Sacco helps him to record social histories, situating individual desire within a particular social circumstance, and helps to counter the official history and narrative. As such, these narratives offer an “alternative way of conceiving human history” (Said 260), using memory and often the past to highlight, what accounts most significant to these individuals in their suffering.

In chapter four, the part entitled, ‘The Tough and the Dead’, the graphic narration about the woman interrogated by the ‘Shin Bet’, provides an interesting dimension to the narrative. Her robust attitude and defiance of the threats imposed by the Shin Bet, shows her not just as an ordinary female Activist, but one who counters the stereotypes of Arab women. Her refusal to give up showcases a complete reversal of the gaze. Similarly, in the same chapter, the part dealing with the stories of ‘Ansar iii’, evinces the different strategies deployed by the prisoners in the face of oppression. It is in their acts of organising the inmates under different political affiliations, disciplining and educating themselves, observing silence at the death of ‘Abu Jihad’, that completely unsettles and unnerves the Israelis, if only temporarily. It also depicts how the prison gets transformed into a centre to “counteract the policy of recruiting Israelis to be Palestinian haters” (Sacco 92).

What is also unique about this genre dealing with the narrative of protest is how Sacco uses the realm of the comic, where the caricatured sketches have more than a few serious, in fact, philosophical implications. To this is added the element of dark humour, sometimes in a stark manner and at times with subtleties. Sacco must be applauded for the extensive detailing used, where every twitch of the eyebrows, every facial expression or gesticulations, assume the language of the narrative of protest. *Palestine* has an interesting tapestry that moves between black and white illustration and photographic representation. Moreover, “his layouts shift in style to match the material: stories told to him emerge in symmetrical panel grids, while incidents in which he is involved, or engage his emotions are rendered in a far looser style, in which images and captions slide across the page” (Murray).

The next important facet that the graphic novel explores is the question and status of the refugees in Palestine. The intifada of 1948, or what came to be known as ‘Al Naqba’ (the catastrophe) resulted in the displacement and forced migration of millions of Palestinians from what they had previously called their homeland. According to Gardner, “The other Arab-Israeli minefield which can still be traversed with a pragmatic compass concerns the fate of the roughly 5 million Palestinian refugees-still used by rejectionists on both sides as the reason why no reconciliation of this tragic history will ever be possible” (Gardner 161). What becomes pertinent is how these refugees continue to exist and define their identity, despite all obstacles. With the loss of their home, they are living in a continuous siege and exile. In *Palestine*, Sacco captures brilliantly the horrors of the Israeli occupation through his journey into what he terms as ‘Refugeeland’, covering the areas of ‘Jabalia’,

‘Nuseirat’, ‘West Bank’ and most importantly, ‘Gaza’. Almost two entire pages (146-147) are devoted in the graphic novel, to showcase pictorially, Sacco’s journey into the lives of the refugees. The extensive detailing is used to represent graphically the physical condition of the topography, with clustered buildings, swarming population, potholes, garbage and yet people continuing their daily routines – “The camp looks like small cities, only even more crowded and sometimes they are built next to the already existing cities, which makes the transition from city to refugee camp even more blurry” (Kerckem 36) The despicable condition of living highlights the reality of the refugees, without even the basic amenities of living and yet it is in this same locale, that the refugees are struggling for a living, trying to spread education and even formulating ways to counter the Israeli occupation. Their daily lives with their quest for the most mundane things, registers their identity beyond the nationalist struggle. It is intriguing to note how the reference to the refugees in their struggle is quite subtly juxtaposed with servings of tea, black coffee and tomatoes. Almost all the narrations revolve around the ritual of gatherings with the accompaniment of tea and coffee. As such, one must recognise how these objects attain meaning in the narrative beyond their materiality, as part of a tradition that “merge individual sorrow or joy with communally prescribed forms of observance” (Taylor 144).

As a visual medium, the graphic narrative also plays with the idea of, what McCloud would call “closure”. It is interesting to note that as a narrative of protest, *Palestine* does not provide any ethical closure to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. This is most poetically rendered in the last chapter, where a Palestinian child is being interrogated by an Israeli soldier. It is a moment

that captures the extreme tension and fragility of relationship between two individuals separated by the burden of history, politics and blood. At the same time, the graphic mode, allows for a certain closure by bringing about a wholeness, from the disparate slides of images. To quote McCloud, “Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (Kerckem 55).

The feeling of unease that one has to grapple with in the graphic novel is further intensified in Eran Riklis’s film, *Lemon Tree*. One of the most unsettling things that one encounters, is this sense of longing and bereavement for the loss of ‘home’, in the entire Israeli Palestine conflict. Time and again, it is the central metaphor of the home that beguiles the tragedy of this entire discourse. The next visual narrative, that I intend to discuss in this paper is Eran Riklis’s film, *Lemon Tree*. Based on an actual story, originally written as a Novel, this trans-mediation into cinematic representation, beautifully captures the moment of crisis between two individuals, within the larger spectrum of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The film with its own poetic rendition complicates the politics of resistance to a whole new level. We see how the land, with its agricultural metaphors and imageries, becomes the umbilical cord that connects both the Israelis and the Palestinians, irrespective of the interjection of history, complicating the roles of the victim and executioner.

Eran Riklis is a name famous in World cinema today. Born of an Israeli origin, he spent some of his childhood years in New York, before returning back to Israel. Despite his Israeli affiliations, as a film maker, he has always

tried to capture the intricacies of human relationships that develop in politically disturbed regions, especially in the Middle East. He started his cinematic career with his political thriller, *On a Clear Day You Can See Damascus* and his other notable contribution to film making has been recognised all throughout the world.

In this film, *Lemon Tree*, it is the singular spectacular image of a lemon grove that becomes the central metaphor determining the Israeli-Palestinian relationship. The film opens with the image of lemon trees growing in and around the Green Bank, showcasing how lemon trees have always been a shared symbol in the poetic consciousness of both the communities. The lemon tree becomes a pervasive image that captures the many nuances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as a “recurring flashpoint in this conflict, dire symbols of the idiocy and the waste of war” (Kennicott 1). The movie itself opens with the song, “Lemon Tree”, that poignantly speaks of a “love that once existed, was untenable and is now lost” (Shutek 17), between these two communities. This once existing bond between the Jew and the Arab, in the same place where both claim to be their homeland, was also narrated in the graphic novel, when Sacco meets Ammar’s uncle. Ammar’s uncle, an old man who had witnessed the catastrophe of 1948, speaks too about his relationship with the Jews, “Yes, I had Jewish friends...A Jew used to visit my brother...They would drink coffee together, black coffee” (Sacco 165).

In this film, we see how the lemon trees becomes the bone of contention between the Palestinian woman, Salma Zidane (and by extension, the entire Palestinian community) to whom belongs the lemon orchard, and Israel’s

Defence Minister ( by that extension, the Israeli Nation). As such, the lemon trees in this film becomes “non textual elements of Nation building”(Shutek 15). At the same time, it becomes the site that hinges on the bleak possibility of reconciliation between Israel and Palestine ( as mediated by the relationship of Salma and Mira, the wife of Israel’s defence minister.)

As we note in the film, Salma Zidane, a middle-aged widowed Palestinian woman, owns the lemon orchard, that suddenly emerges as a site posing potential threat of terrorism, when Israel’s Defence Minister and his wife, become her neighbour. As such, Salma receives official orders that inform her about Israel’s decision to uproot her lemon trees, along with necessary ‘compensations’ for the ‘losses’ thereby incurred. The film, then revolves around this singular narrative of protest of Salma, to protect her orchard from being uprooted and destroyed by Israeli forces.

This brings us to the question and meaning of home, in all its complexity. The idea of home in popular imagination is almost always conceptualised as situated within a particular geographical location, which in turn becomes the legitimate premise for most Nation States to draw borders, to demarcate their space. However, despite the attempts of the statist narratives to fix the locale of the Nation, the subjective experience surrounding the idea of home moves beyond borders. In other words, the attachment of an individual or a community to their conceptualization of a home, has different registers, especially that connected with belonging and emotional attachments. In the words of Nira Yuval Davis, “Belonging is where the sociology of emotions interfaces with the sociology of power, where identification and participation

collude, or at least aspire to or yearn for”(Yuval-Davis 216). As such, the construction of a house can be on a fixed geographical position, and yet its transformation into home contains a kind of fluidity, in the sense that it becomes spatial. This idea of the home as spatial, is the argument of Helen Taylor, for whom the meaning of a home is acquired over time, with personal memories, rituals, ancestral ties etc.(Taylor 12). The problem arises when different individuals attach different meanings to a land, that often causes conflict as one witnesses it in Palestine. It thereby, complicates our epistemology of history, making a detour from our comfortable notions of ‘home’, where both the voice of the Invader/Settler and Exiled/Settler, intersect. It is also important to note that despite the fact, that a home is not fixed in that sense, the fact of forced migration and displacement often reinforces the feeling of locating the home, within a geographical space in the refugees. At the same time, it instils in the refugee’s imagination a feeling of exile, of mourning for a homeland that once was there and is now lost forever or receded in the distance. In the words of Brah, home is often a “mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination..a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory” (qtd. In Taylor 12). In other words, the home then becomes a temporal identity for the refugees, where through this ritual of mourning and memory, one attributes a cyclical pattern that delineates from the linear notion of progression of time. As such, it is important to note, that for Salma, the lemon trees are not just her source of sustenance, but associated with it is the memory of her childhood along with her father. The film cinematically captures the poignant moment when we can see the lemons falling to the ground and Salma being awakened by the rustle

of the leaves and the sound of the falling lemons. This is followed by a flashback, where she recollects the time she spent with her father amidst the lemon trees as a child, her hands caressing the lemons hanging from the trees. The lemon trees then become associated with her yearning for nostalgia, as well as a token of legacy, she has inherited from her grandfather. The desire and conviction that Salma has, to protect her trees from being uprooted at any cost, emanates from the desire to preserve her memory from being colonised. As such, here the politics of resistance is displayed by the role of Salma's memory. At the same time, it adds a temporal dimension to her notion of home. However, what becomes the most important factor for Salma in the film, in her attempt to save her lemon trees, is the material aspect of the home. The material aspect of a home, surrounds not only the physical structure of the building, but also the land and vegetation, that for the refugee has wider implications than simply its economic surplus. Another interesting argument to substantiate the idea of resistance is to understand that the lemon trees have a wider semiotics for Salma, that move beyond the question of 'materiality of objects'. In fact, Shuteck talks about how several food historians, and anthropologists have observed that 'food is never simply food but carries multiple meanings and associations (Shuteck 17). This obviously reminds us of the third chapter in Sacco's *Palestine*, where the old man laments the loss of his olive trees and associates the feeling of being forced to cut down his own trees as, filled with excruciating pain. "I was crying...I felt I was killing my son when I cut them down" (Sacco 62). It is also akin to chapter six of the graphic novel, dealing with 'tomatoes', that showcase how these agricultural metaphors become an important constituent in the narratives

of protest. In a similar way, in the *Lemon Tree*, Salma constantly goes through all struggle just to save her lemon orchard, instead of taking any economic compensation from Israel, for these lemon orchards are synonymous to her feeling of being at home. It also highlights what Ben-Ze'ev found in her study of Palestinian refugees, that for them, the plants acts as “mnemonic devices enabling a temporary (re)creation of the past. The particular taste and smell of home points to the specificity of individual villages, each with their own significant plants” (qtd. in Taylor 17). In regards to Salma, the lemon trees acquire a symbolic value, of “not only reaching back in time, but recreating the features of a place to which one cannot return” (qtd. in Taylor 18).

The film revolves around the single handed struggle of Salma to save her lemon trees. Her display of courage is directed not only against the state of Israel but also against the patriarchal norms of her own society, as displayed by her defiance of societal honour, while engaging in an emotional affair with her lawyer, Ziad Daud. Thus, her narrative of protest is at two levels, both within and outside of Palestine. She takes her case, initially to the military tribunal and then later puts everything at stake, taking her case to Israel's Supreme Court, after her plea is rejected. At the end, the Supreme Court allows Salma to keep her lemon trees, albeit to a certain height only, for security issues. Although, Salma considers the judgement as an ‘insult’, Ziad Daud sees it as a partial victory, a sign of hope for the larger Palestinian cause, alluding it to the story of David's triumph over Goliath. It is interesting to see how the Old Testament allusion, so very significant for the Jewish tradition, is appropriated by the Palestinians in this film, making it a meta narrative.

What is even more interesting about this film, as far as the politics of resistance is concerned, is the relationship shown between Salma and Mira. We find both these women uncannily similar in the way they both struggle against their respective systems. At the same time, there is an unbridgeable gap between them, owing to the lemon groves between them, that disrupt normalcy through political intrusion. Besides, there is also the barrier of language, preventing them to actually communicate, and yet Mira's expression of solidarity for Salma turns the relationship between the Israeli and the Palestinian to a more nuanced understanding.

As far as the use of visual tropes are concerned, its treatment is different from the graphic novel, yet similar in approach. The use of ocular observations through 'binoculars', 'windows', 'tree branches', 'webcams' etc, showcase the opacity of vision that hinders 'truth' and 'knowledge' about others. Similarly, all throughout the film, we hear a nonsensical gibberish used as a subtext to deflate the seriousness of the issue and render it 'comical'. Moreover, the film itself being directed by an Israeli points to a different dimension of the politics of resistance, in which both the Israelis and Palestinians are victims of their own history.

Thus, both the texts in their own way highlight the story of Palestinian lives, of the brave resilience of Palestinians for self-assertion. At the end of both the texts, one inevitably realises that the dynamics of power structure is far more convoluted and calls for self-reflexivity. This is where literature, with its semiotics of truth, provides only an ambivalent space and acts as a constant deterrent to clichéd oversimplification of history and politics.

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