



The Postcolonial Graphic Novel and the Image of Violence in Palestine of Joe Sacco's *Palestine*

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Abstract

The postcolonial image within the graphic novel continues to be a field where most critics have not delved in to due to a considerate lack of literary productions. This paper therefore tries to look at the ways in which the postcolonial graphic novel portrays violence. It is against this backdrop that Joe Sacco's novel Palestine depicts violence. The paper argues that Sacco's novel merges both language and image to expose the characteristics of the oppressive postcolonial boundaries that lead to violence. We will attempt to illustrate various instances in the text that justify that the postcolonial graphic novel is a glorious presentation of the inglorious confrontation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that emerged from the Balfour Declaration of 1917, heightened with the 1948 El Nakba 'the catastrophe' and transcended with the construction of Jewish settlements that make Palestine a postcolonial unstable zone. Thus, this paper concludes by noting that the postcolonial graphic novel presents ekphrasis of violence through the content of its images. The analysis of this study is guided by New Historicism and postcolonial theory.

L'image dans le roman graphique continue à être un espace moins parcouru par des chercheurs. Le papier a pour but de présenter les scènes de violence dans le roman graphique postcoloniale de Joe Sacco intitulé Palestine. Ce papier se base sur l'hypothèse que l'image de la violence cause par l'érection des frontières coloniales est une préoccupation majeure dans ce roman. On peut aussi illustrer que la violence est le résultat de la Déclaration de Balfour de 1917 suivie de Al Nakba de 1948 instaurant l'état d'Israël et la 'Catastrophe'.

I. INTRODUCTION

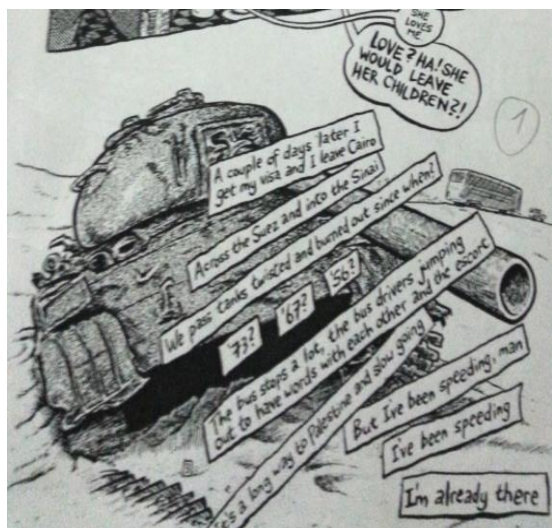
The Graphic novel is significant in presenting vivid images of actions in the text. Sheri Tucker and Philip Tucker in their article “Winning Graphic Novels: Blending Visual Literacy with the Common Core Graphic Novels” note thus:

Graphica is the umbrella term for the visual literacy genres of graphic novels, comics, and mangas. In the 1940s, comics were widely read for entertainment and served as a political medium for antiwar statements or for rallying nationalism. In 1978, Will Eisner coined the term graphic novel as a marketing ploy for his new work, *A Contract with God*, in an effort to distinguish it from traditional comic writing. In doing so, he established a new genre of literature that merged the longer prose narratives of novel writing with intense illustrations and the layouts of comic panels. (Tucker, Sheri, J. & Tucker, Philip, J. 2014: 2)

The definition shows that the graphic novel was first written as a means to oppose mainstream literature. Postcolonial scholars appropriate this genre, to give it a postcolonial twist by illustrating the extent to which the graphic novel becomes a postcolonial sub-genre as it presents violence from a previously colonized fictional state.

II. VIOLENCE, TERRORISM AND SUBJECTIVITY

Joe Sacco’s graphic postcolonial novel illustrates that violence continues to be a necessity as most characters are victims of various facets of violence. The border conflict that characterizes Israel/Palestine, and most of the nations that surround it, is significant in understanding the ways in which violence erupts. Sacco’s *Palestine* exposes the image of heavy military artillery used to illustrate violence. The image and the instrument of violence are presented in the picture below.



Picture 1 (Sacco, 2003: 3)

The image presents a tank that has been destroyed due to the conflicts that oppose Israel and neighboring Arab countries. The Sinai is the border landscape between Egypt and Israel/Palestine. Within the Sinai, desert it is visible to illustrate that the tank contains writings that highlight the major battles marking the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The passengers who take this route are able to see that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict has had a devastating effect on both belligerents as well as the allies.

Sacco’s graphic presentation exposes the effect of colonial and foreign interventions in fueling the conflict between Palestine and Israel. The conflict between both belligerent leads to popularization of some restoration Palestinian organizations like

the HAMAS and the PLO. The Palestinian liberation front executes Klinghoffer an American Jew who is suspected of being in accordance with Israeli oppression. The image that follows registers thus:



Picture 2 (Sacco, 2003: 6)

By reiterating this claim on postcolonial studies it is possible to demonstrate that the colonial boundaries that have been put in place are artefacts that spur violence within the postcolony. The effect of the Palestine/Israel conflict espouses the idea that the human

The brutality of the hideous act is illustrated in the image. This is explicit of the fact those who are directly involved in the armed conflict are under surveillance, this also accounts for the Palestinian liberation front. It is worth noting that assassination is also a method used by the Palestinians to resist Jewish occupation. Postcolonial studies illustrates the different levels at which the process of internal colonization leads to an atmosphere of uncertainty in the postcolony.

as the new world order. This is due to the way in which it has bred a neo-cold war principle between Israel and Palestine and their various allies. Sacco illustrates thus:



Picture 3 (Sacco, 2003: 7)

The image of violence is presented here, as the most valuable asserts of the Israelis become the target of Palestinian resistant movements. Even though the Palestinians are considered as terrorists, this does not discourage acts of violence on the graphic presentation of Sacco's novel. Thus, "the suicide bombing phenomenon has appeared with all its hideous damage" (Said, 2003: xii).

Moreover, Sacco's graphic novel exposes us to the extent to which the religious perspective has been used to justify Palestine as the Promised Land of the Jews. In understanding this biblical allusion, it is possible to understand that religion has been used from a colonial perspective to impose domination on the Palestinians. This is noted thus:

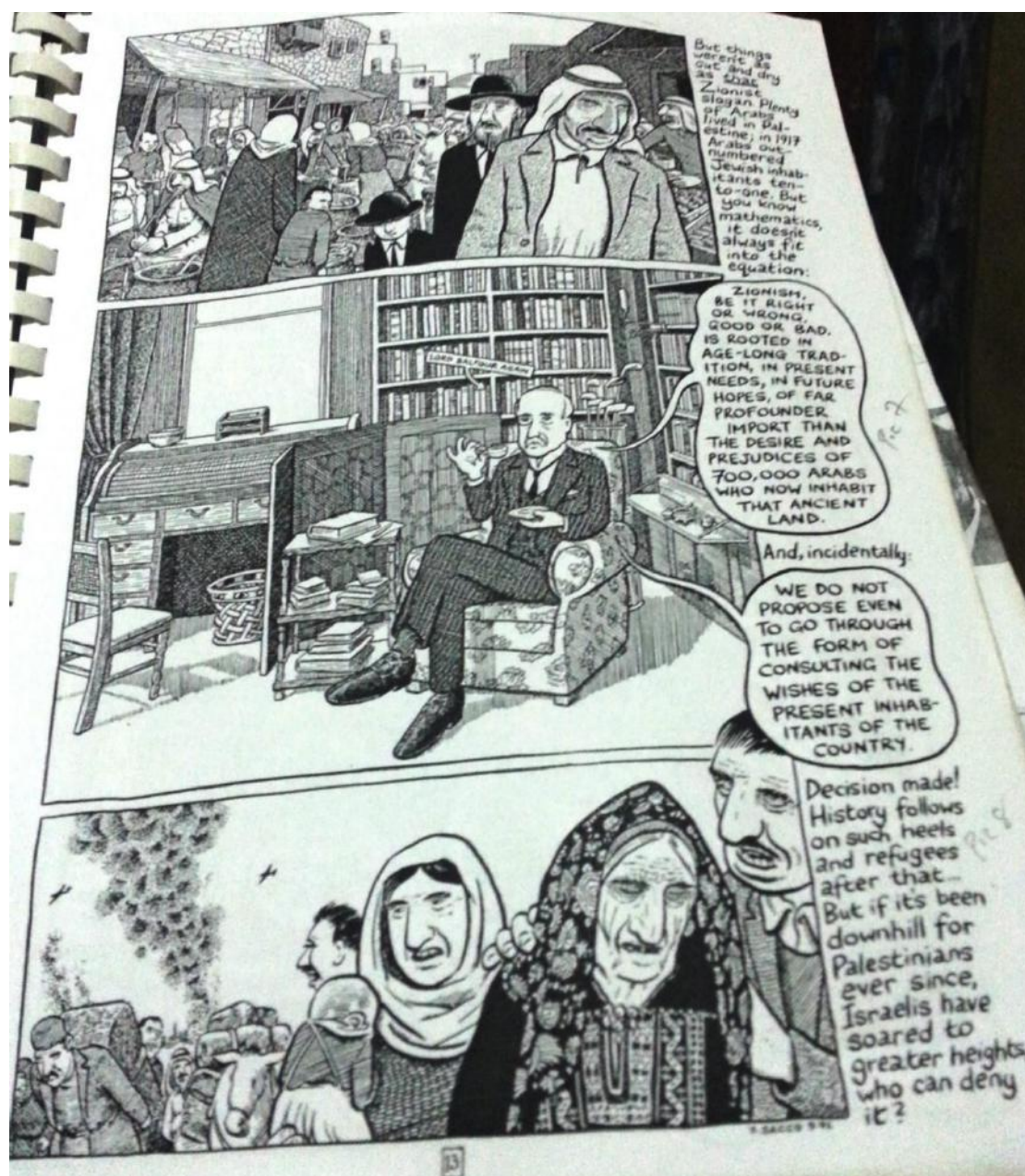


Picture 4 (Sacco, 2003:12)

The picture exposes a sacred shrine in Jerusalem where some Jews are seen meditating. This picture justifies the fact that the Jews believe that their integrity is to be protected by God almighty. The image underscores this. The picture above is a presentation of God himself as described by the Jews in the Bible. Sacco uses this image to specify that the destruction of Palestine has been legalized by the God of destruction. In other words, Sacco's preoccupation could equally be linked to his

other graphic novel *Footnotes in Gaza* where he equally paints the image of Israelis as God's chosen people.

From a similar perspective, the postcolonial graphic novel avers the ways in which British colonialism in Palestine was put in place to support the Jewish diaspora following the Balfour Declaration. The image underscores thus:



Picture 5 (Sacco, 2003:12)

The image informs us of the maneuvers that serve as the bedrock of Jewish invasion of Palestine and the violence that this invasion occasioned. It is primordial to note that Arthur's Balfour's facilitation of "Home" for the Jews in Palestine can account as one of the major reasons leading to the Arab/ Jewish conflict.

A Historicist reading of this postcolonial graphic novel makes us understand that the Balfour Declaration did not take in to consideration the number of Palestinians that had lived in Palestine before 1917. This did not really facilitate the insertion of such colonial ideology in the minds of these Palestinians. However, the

British imperial power was out to impose its imperial agenda on Palestine. Thus, the process of internal colonization expresses the continuity set forth by the British Empire to dominate.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the representation of Arabs as primitive and exotic people are presented in the image above. For Balfour, what the Arabs will undergo in the hands of the Jews following the creation of these imperial boundaries is not an issue to be debated. Balfour has no remorse when he takes this type of division because the intention is to strengthen the continuity of the empire. The casualties of these decisions are immediately felt,

as most Palestinian natives are forced to flee from their land because of an unpredicted number of

Jewish attacks on the Palestinian population. The narrator records thus:

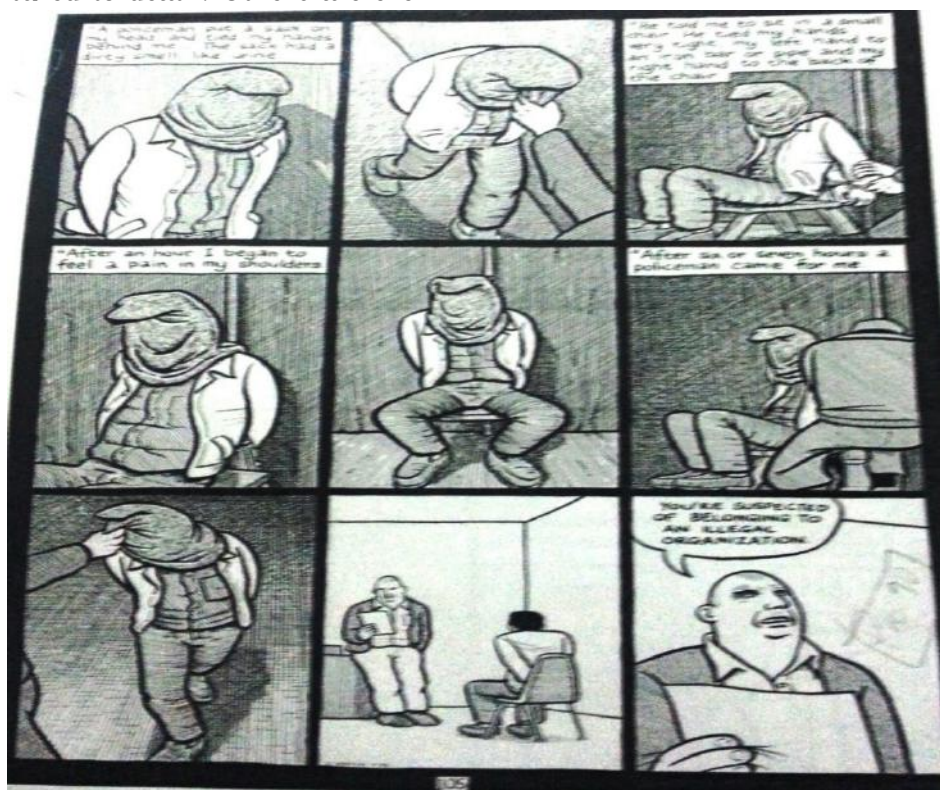


The awful suffering of the Palestinians on the reinvaded West Bank and Gaza, with Israeli F-16's and Apache helicopters used routinely on the defenseless civilians as part of their collective punishment" (Said, 2003: xii).

Picture 6 (Sacco, 2003: 13)

The human casualties are enormous as many Palestinians become homeless. Most Palestinian leave, because they fear being killed by Israeli soldiers or other Israeli terrorist groups like the Hagganah and the Sterngang. The image above equally demonstrates the extent to which Jewish planes are used to administer air raids and missile strikes on Arab positions. The humanitarian casualties are also pointed in the image as men, women and children are forced to leave. Those who attempt to stay are either executed or tortured to death. Others are even

imprisoned. Sacco's *Palestine* illustrates the fact that Palestinians who refuse to give up their homelands are accused of belonging to terrorists or illegal organizations. This is seen with the numerous arbitrary arrests that take place. Sacco's text captures the view that "a text is identified as a literary work by recognizing the author's intention that the text is produced and meant to be read within a framework of conventions defining the practice (constituting the institution) of literature" (Eisner: 5).



Picture 7 (Sacco, 2003: 165)

The image is a portrayal of the ways in which the colonial encounter is wrought with violence and

surveillance. Most Arabs like Ghassan are put in jail because of their ideologies. However, the

Jews expose the approaches in which they have infiltrated themselves in all spheres of political

and economic spaces of Palestinian life to create havoc.



Picture 8 (Sacco, 2003: 106)

The treatment Ghassan receives while in the cell is explicit of the violence Palestinians face on daily basis from Jewish police men. Ghassan is interviewed with handcuffs. Also, he is not allowed to meet a lawyer as is required by the law. Rather, the Jews have taken the laws into their hands to arrest any Palestinian who refuses to leave his land. The prison conditions are exposed to elucidate the extent of oppression of Palestinians. It could be noted that they are an oppressed people. It is for this reason that each time that the policemen dare to interview Ghassan they make sure that they torture him. Even when he is innocent they retain him saying they want more evidence from their investigators. This proves that arrests are done from a subjective perspective.

Furthermore, the image of torture is very recurrent in Sacco's postcolonial novel. The brutality of the Israeli police forces is reaffirmed with the way they torture Ghassan. Various panels are portrayed by the author to explain the recurrent nature of violence in the postcolonial graphic novel. The specificity of this sub-genre of postcolonial narratives significantly highlights and presents vivid expositions of scenes that appeal to the mind and the senses. It is the representation of life in a fictional perspective but that illustrates life in a more realistic way because the drawing clearly points this. Similarly, torture is used in prison to put pressure on arrested Palestinians. Ghassan's child is killed because he says he is not part of any organization. The image below presents thus:



Ghassan's daughter killed

When Ghassan says he has no extra information to give the Israel policemen, they use his daughter as a means to put him pressure. It is for this reason that she is killed and thrown in the prison where he is. The intension is to dehumanize him, to push him to the extremes of his trauma. They ask him to cooperate or he will be forced to receive another blow. The only means he has in the cell to survive is to endure

Picture 9 (Sacco, 2003: 109-110)

the daily torture. Sacco's presentation explores violence in different strands of the postcolonial graphic novel.

From another perspective the postcolonial graphic novel retraces the ways in which colonial boundaries are ambiguous in palestine. it is difficult to make a demonstration between where Palestinians have to move in public and where they are not to trespass. Most Palestinians who

move on the streets of Gaza especially the West Bank are constantly molested and threatened by Israeli military men. The picture records thus:

Image A



Image A gives a vivid description of the daily violence faced by Palestinians. Sacco puts in place the psychological and the physical side of the violence.

Image B also illustrates the gruesome violence.

It is for this reason that he makes use of the balloon. "The balloon is used to express the character's thoughts and words. The shape of the balloon varies depending on what situation is being illustrated" (Maloy, 2010: 15).

Image B



Picture 10 (Sacco, 2003: 127-128)

The above images are a recrudescence of the indiscriminate violence faced by the Palestinians in the street. The Israeli soldiers do not discriminate youths and women from men. Their intention is to arrest any potential suspect irrespective of the person's social class in as much as it is a Palestinian. However most of these Palestinians especially the old women try as much as possible no to get into the claws of the Israeli soldiers.

III. RESISTANCE AND TRAUMA

Most of the Palestinian that decide to resist the occupation of their homelands became victim of brutality by Israeli forces. Sacco's postcolonial graphic illustration emphasizes on the fact that the problem of colonization stands as a difficult task to solve. This is because most settler expose their disregards for Arab cultural artefacts and as a result Arabs retaliate by stoning Jewish settlers. The act of using stones on Jewish settlers leads to deadly conflicts between both parties. The image of unproportioned power of arms is seen below:



Picture 11 (Sacco, 2003: 132)

From a similar perspective, Palestinian schools become sites of violence. This is also one of the main reasons why violence erupts within such schools. Many teenagers of Palestinian origin

The image presents headlines that show the killings that take place in Hebron. The image is a snapshot of numerous killings that go unpunished in Palestine. It is a battle between settlers and indigenes. The cause of the conflict is defined by the difficulty of representing these colonial boundaries. The excerpt also shows that the settlers have taken the law into their hands.



Picture 12 (Sacco, 2003: 153)

Schools that are frequented by Palestinians become targets of the Jewish soldiers. These soldiers regard the schools as threats. The Jews believe that it is in these schools that terrorist ideologies against Israel are taught to these Palestinian children. It is for this reason that Nuseirat and Gaza strip become scenes of human casualties.

IV. DOUBLE FACETS OF VIOLENCE

The nature of violence in Sacco's Palestine enables his audience to understand that the violence in Palestine has created a new world order. This is seen with the implication of other Gulf States in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Saddam Hussein from Iraq, in his political stance and foreign policy toward the conflict shows that he supports Palestinian military against Israel forces. Though Iraq does not send in its army directly, it finances and supports Palestinian guerrilla movements like PFLP, the HAMAS and

the Fateh. It is therefore clear in this partnership that violence is perpetrated by Israel and Palestine. However, the justification of violence by Palestinian forces is based on the fact that they are resisting the Jewish oppressor. Meanwhile, Israel considers Palestine and other resistance allies as forces of darkness that need to be extinct from the Promised Land. Thus, other guerrilla fighters in the Palestine liberation movement decide to take personal isolated initiatives to damage Israel.



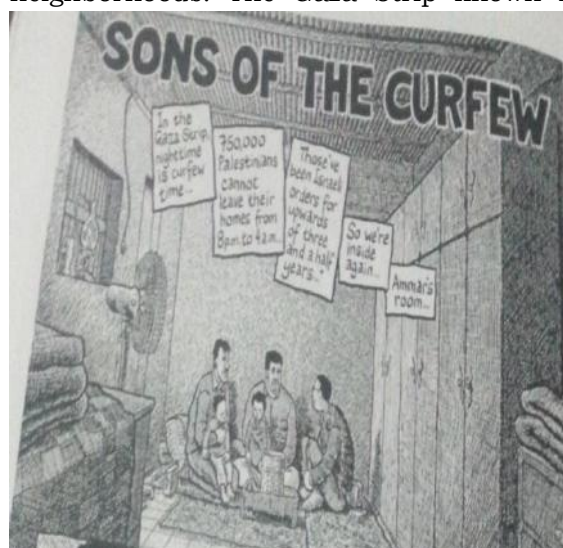
The image speaks for itself as resistance becomes a means of liberation.

Butcher and Manning (2004) note that, “graphic novels offer possibilities for teaching across content areas. They can be useful as historical literature” (quoted in Dallacqua, 2012: 365).

Picture 13 (Sacco, 2003: 155)

Also, psychological violence is presented Sacco's postcolonial graphic novel in his presentation of the curfew imposed by Israel on some Palestinian neighborhoods. The Gaza Strip known for its

large Palestinian population is in a curfew that has lasted more than expected. This is submitted as follows:



Palestinians become house prisoners in the Gaza Strip. They are not allowed to leave their houses at particular periods of the day. It is even noticed that some children are born under the caption ‘son of the curfew.’ Sacco's presentation of these Palestinian fathers and their sons is a way in which violence has been witnessed from one generation to the other since the 1917 Balfour Declaration.

Picture 14 (Sacco, 2003: 166)

Most youths who are born under the curfew directly become instruments of violence against Jewish settlements. Some of them are seen enrolling in military groups as a means to liberate their land from the Jewish occupation. This is the case of Firas, who is 15years old who feels that he has joined the Population Front for the liberation of Palestine as “a way of taking back his country” (196). According to fifteen-years-old Firas, the way his parents are molested and tortured in front of him occasions his will to fight the oppressor by all means. It has been two

years since Firas enrolled in to the PLO with the goal of liberating Palestine.

V. VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE AND REHABILITATION

Sacco's *Palestine* undergoes the trends of the casualties that characterize or that had been under imperial influences. The postcolonial graphic novel is a clear cutting stone on the plight of the colonized that belongs to zones of instability. Most of these zones, especially those

faced with wars are generally an area for refugees and habitation camps. A common case is seen with the number of refugee camps that have been erected for people fleeing from violence. UNRWA's presence in Palestine attests to this. Similarly, some of these refugee camps harbor habitation centers for victims of war and other victims of violence caused by Israel occupation.

A good number of children are seen with stigmas of their conflict that operates between Israel and Palestine. Some are handicapped after receiving stray bullets. While some others lost some parts of their bodies. The narrator of this postcolonial graphic novel makes it a purpose of investigation in the way in which he merges facts to reality. The narrators present in the various sites of violence and the interview he has with victims of the Arab/Jewish conflict illustrates his intention to write history along with the image that go with it. For Sacco, the picture is the story in all its forms because the content of the image speaks for itself. The interviews Sacco has with Palestinian demonstrates that he has a perfect mastery of story and the events that have taken place or that take place in his absence or presence. It is for this reason that Sacco does not present himself as the writer. He rather goes further to present himself as the medium through which the plight of the Palestinians can be visualized. His visit to Edward Said's residence and the discourse he has within the Palestinian question demonstrates that Sacco is an investigative journalist and writer who has as objective to bring the scenes that happened in the background to the line light of reality. With his consideration, most events and scenes of violence are presented are presented to the audience rather than narrated. As a postcolonial graphic novel, Sacco's *Palestine*, has not limited itself to reported speech, and is rather a presentation of what is happening and not just what happened. Sacco's images make the postcolonial novel real in the sense that the novel touches the sensibility of the people who give information of the novel to be written. In other words, Sacco has to have a conversation with Arabs on the Palestinian question he does not hesitate to introduce himself with the normal "peace be with you" this permits him to recognize himself amongst them and to evidently gain acceptance from his informants.

Sacco edifies us with the concept that peace in Palestine is always short lived since the declaration of the 1948 Al Nakba. Sacco's experience with Sameh who works at the UNRWA rehabilitation center explains this according to Sameh, Israel will never leave Palestine and Palestinians will never accept the disproportionate occupation of Jewish settlers and the forceful erection of colonial boundaries that constantly contributes to strengthen the process of internal colonialism. Roadblocks are used as the means to curb movements of Palestinians from one part of the country the other. In Rafah it is almost impossible to move for five kilometers without meeting those blocks erected by Jewish soldiers. These road blocks are used to oppress Palestinians considered to be suspects. Most of them are constructed to step out of the cars transporting them and others are violently tortured because they lacked identification papers. Even when they possess these papers they are not spared by the Jewish soldiers on the various barricaded checkpoints. Picture 15 (Sacco, 2003: 233)

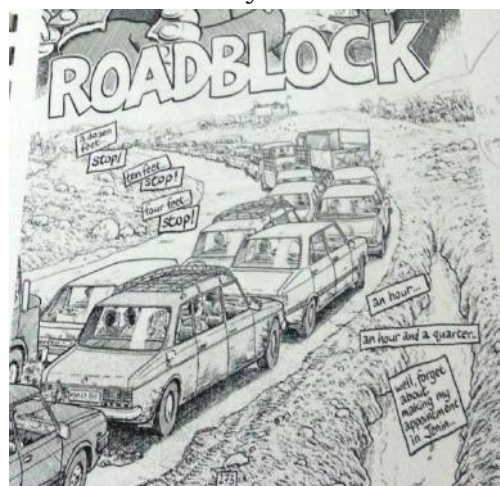
The images show that Palestine is in a constant siege. Most Palestinians have limited routes to trespass and at other areas, they are forbidden to even step there. Such areas include thickly populated Jewish settlements especially those found in Tel Aviv.

Furthermore, most of the road blocks are imposed curfews are structure of violence on Palestinians. They are unable to move out of their neighborhoods of tunes they are not allowed to go out of Palestine even if they are in a critical health situation. A case in common is seen with the death of Ahmed's father (241). He is refused permission to go to Egypt for medical attention. The Israeli police migration service denies giving him a pass that will permit him to go to Egypt to receive treatment for his heart problems. When he eventually receives the pass it is too late, he dies on the road to Egypt.

Sacco presents various in which violence is established in his graphic illustration. He separates each image with a gutter but it does not mean that the ideas are separated. This actually emphasizes on the fact that each gutter is just a transition to another image that strengthens the idea he is trying to bring out. The

two images juxtaposed are explicit representations of the conflict that is seen through those road blocks. The casualties are uncountable. Many Palestinians found in the line

of vehicles are forced to stay on the same spot for several hours. Those with critical cases are also subjected to the same treatment.



The image is a vivid description of the situation of Palestinians found in Palestine. They are under surveillance and their live could be abridged anytime especially if they get in to violent clash with a Jew. Most Palestinians are seen leaving their native land for against their wish.

Picture 18 (Sacco, 2003: 273)

VI. CONCLUSION

Thus, Joe Sacco's postcolonial graphic novel *Palestine* is an explicit illustration of the ways in which violence is occasioned with the erection of imperial boundaries. Sacco uses various facets of violence to expose the extent to which the Arab/Jewish conflict has led to an unstable situation within the Middle East in general and Palestine in particular. Sacco presents both psychological and physical violence through the content of the images he uses in his graphic postcolonial novel. It was revealed that the postcolonial graphic novel is an adequate channel through which the image in its entire context could be clearly analyzed and interpreted.

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