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Graphic Witnessing and the Ethics of Visualizing Gendered War Trauma

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Abstract: This study explores the representational strategies of war and gender violence in *Vanni: A Family's Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict* (2019), the ethno-graphic novel by Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock. By fusing sequential art with testimonial narrative, *Vanni* renders visible the lived realities of Sri Lankan Tamil civilians during the civil war, with a particular focus on the gendered dimensions of trauma. Drawing upon trauma theory, feminist criticism, and visual narratology, this research analyzes how the graphic novel medium facilitates a form of critical witnessing that transcends journalistic or historiographic limits. Through a close reading of visual-verbal interplay, focalization, panel structure, and affective sequencing, the article interrogates how *Vanni* mediates the unspeakable experiences of wartime sexual violence, displacement, and survival. The methodology used is rooted in textual-visual analysis and supported by ethnographic scholarship. The paper offers an interdisciplinary framework for interpreting graphic novels as tools of human rights advocacy and feminist memory work. The findings contribute to discourses on graphic testimony, the ethics of representation, and the evolving aesthetics of humanitarian comics.

Keywords: Gendered trauma, graphic novels, trauma theory, war and conflict, narratology, ethnography, feminism

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In *The Human Rights Graphic Novel: Drawing it Just Right*, Pramod K Nayar explores the use of graphic novels in human rights discourses and campaigns. Human rights discourses have always used visual media in its campaigns as it permits the narration of anxiety and trauma. “The graphic novel is a pre-eminent form to thematize HR concerns, with its ability to merge text and image, force a critical literacy upon the reader, enable a visibilization of the act – and politics – of witnessing, capture trauma, embody violence, generate empathetic and affective connections...” (Nayar 4)

The HR graphic novel could be subsumed in what Michael Galchinsky terms ‘the culture of Human Rights’. This ‘culture’ permits a juncture of feelings and forms. (Nayar 4) not afforded by journalistic accounts that concern themselves with facts and norms.

Emotionally resonant human rights art typically doesn’t change laws or regimes; rather, it seeks to change the prevailing ethos, by depicting what human rights mean for the individuals who are deprived of them, who witness the abuse, who perpetrate it, who mourn the victims, who intervene, who provide aid, or who transmit the stories. By relating such experiences, human rights culture tries to shape a durable recollection for the wounded community. (Galchinsky viii)

This study explores how *Vanni: A Family's Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict* (2019) mobilizes visual storytelling to represent gender-based violence and war trauma in ways that elicit empathy, resist voyeurism, and foster ethical witnessing. In addressing this question, the study also examines the narrative techniques such as optical focalization, panel sequencing, and spatial arrangement, which allow for subjective engagement with atrocity without objectifying the victims. The objective is also to look at the question of how the fictional nonfictional axis plays out in the HR graphic novel.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to enrich our understanding of humanitarian comics as both political and affective texts. *Vanni*, as an ethnographic graphic novel, complicates boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, personal narrative and collective memory.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses trauma theory to understand how the experiences of extreme violence are narrated, especially that which resist articulation. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is not fully experienced in the moment of occurrence, but it returns later through involuntary flashbacks, nightmares and symbolic re-enactments (1996). The graphic novel can reflect this disorientation of trauma with its fragmented panels and non-linear sequencing.

Focussing on gendered trauma, Judith Herman posits that the psychological impact of women's experiences of domestic violence and rape is similar to that experienced by combat survivors in World War I (Card 6). Disturbingly, the most common stress disorders are not of men in war but that of violated women in civilian life. Yet they remain unacknowledged in clinical and cultural discourses. The visual depiction of wartime rape and forced conscription brings gendered trauma to the fore in *Vanni*.

Gender-related abuse often remains an under-represented human rights issue. Challenges are often made to the concept of human rights that largely ignore violations based on gender, to expand and reconceive human rights "to include degradation and violation of women" (Bunch 487). With graphic novels like *Vanni*, such war crimes acquire a face and are situated decisively in lived experience. The bare line-drawings schematize atrocities like rape even while anonymizing and humanizing the difficult area.

Images have the potential to shape human rights practice. They are not just tools for advocacy. In the graphic novel, they become critical evidence that relay information on their own terms. Dix and Pollock's ethno-graphic novel *Vanni* engages with the human cost of the 2009 war in Sri Lanka. The non-linear narrative employs sequential art to document the atrocities of war that devastate the whole population. But the medium of graphic novel lends itself particularly well to the crimes towards women in events like war. Women's human rights are violated in a number of ways during political insurgencies, apart from the political repression they face similar to male counterparts.

Graphic narratives collapse the distance between viewer and victim, offering an emotive and ethical mode of witnessing that aligns with Bunch's call for a more inclusive human rights imaginary.

In reading graphic novels, the critical tools applied to literature do not suffice. The fusion of visuals and text call for a new kind of literacy in interpreting the verbal-visual medium. Pramod K Nayar talks of critical literacy which the Indian reader already possesses as part of his or her exposure to visual culture stimuli. The critical literacy of the average Indian in the demotic register of the graphic narrative from early comics like *Amar Chitra Katha* and *Chandamama* lend an easy transition to reading graphic novels.

Scott McCloud explores how transitions tell us about temporality, spatial and thematic relationships. According to him, a moment to moment transition is when something moves or changes slightly over a very small timeframe. An action to action transition shows a figure doing an action by a sequence of frames. A subject to subject transition changes the subject, whilst staying within the same scene or idea. A scene to scene transition transports the reader across significant distances of time and

space. An aspect to aspect transition bypasses time and sets the wandering eye on different aspects of the place, idea or mood. A non-sequitur transition offers no logical relationship between panels. These transitions become meaningful when depicting trauma, where chronology is disrupted and affective intensities transcend linear representation.

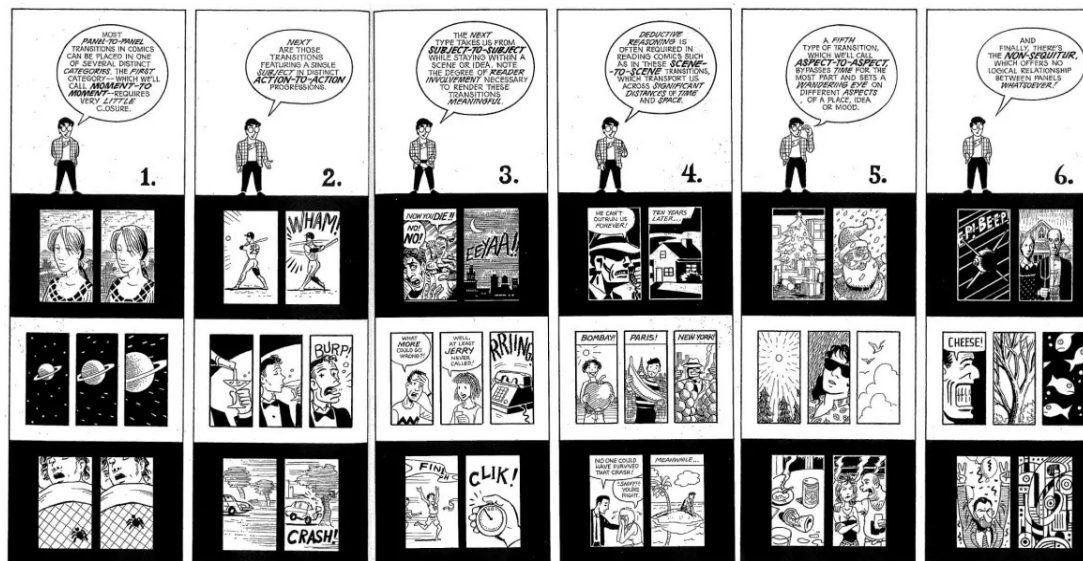


Fig. 1 Panel transitions illustrated in McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. Harper Collins, 1994.

The methodological process however requires employment of film studies terminology to unravel the multiplicity of metaphors where space and time become discontinuous. The medium of graphic novel is steeped in diversity rather than grounded in coherence (Groensteen qtd in Dix 17). The potential of these verbalized visuals need to be studied like that a film which constantly transgresses the langue. The visual medium of comics offers a unique grammar for representing the unspeakable aspects of war trauma, including the fragmentation, silence, and shame often associated with sexual violence. Thierry Groensteen emphasizes the relational nature of panels and their interdependent syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes in his theory of arthrology (2007). Meaning, according to him, comes not only from what is within the panel but from its relation to other panels in the sequence and on the page. In *Vanni*, seemingly disjointed panels resonate with adjacent images evoking spatial anxiety and empathy. This paper builds on these insights to offer a close reading of *Vanni*.

Sounding the Violence

Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock's ethno-graphic novel, *Vanni* is a fictional nonfiction work which combines visuals and text to represent the brutalities of the Civil War in Sri Lanka. The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE is told in this graphic narrative through the perspective of the families affected by the civil war. The novel follows the life of mainly two families the Ramachandrans and the Chologars. The already precarious living conditions of the Tamils in Sri Lanka are worsened by the 2004 tsunami. The families move from one displacement camp to another struggling to stay alive. Amid jets and explosions close enough to feel the ground tremble, the families move on foot, carts, tractors and bikes to reach the ever-elusive no fire zone that keeps shifting and is finally designated as an area of approximately three square kilometers in which there are as many as 100,000 civilians who are trapped.

Sri Lankan government at the time announced to the diplomatic community that the current government would not use heavy weapons in the area but the graphic narrative brings home a very different picture which represents the mass exodus with helpless people moving with vacant eyes in the rain.

As distinct from illustrations being used as an addition or supplement to the written text, the graphic novel tracing ethnography uses an intertwining of image and text to create unique representations that "can have synchronous affective intensities" and not just explanations of the other. (Dix 16)

This two-way exercise where elements of fieldwork for ethnography become the base material for creating fictionalized accounts is designated as the ethnographic novel.

The ethno-graphic novel becomes one other outlet for anthropological research to add to the more experimental forms that have appeared over the last few decades seeking to provide a more subjective, self-reflexive and interactive method for the anthropological endeavour... This representational practice alludes to the collaborative and interactive engagement with participants' contributions and views, and their distillation and fictionalisation through sequential art. As we demonstrate below, it both borrows from Rouch and departs from it along a truth-fiction spectrum that further interrogates the presumed objectivity of what is seen, experienced, co-created and revealed. (Dix16)

The graphic novel becomes a kind of veil where realism is reconstructed through lines and shadow drawings. In this distillate fiction, "truth is less about getting to authenticity but appreciating the possibilities to reimagine and re-create a sense of authenticity" (Dix 47). This methodology is

especially pertinent in handling such areas of research which involve trauma, violence and torture without disclosing the identity of the persons involved. Rather than objective realities, The intersubjectivities are explored without sensationalizing the particularities.

The sequential feedback system employed in the making of this novel where truth is schematized and fictionalized produces an empathetic narrative that oscillates between testimony and novel- truth and fiction. Ethnographic evidence collected from survivors are fictionalized and presented to them for feedback and ratification as to the affective intensities portrayed.

The Ramachandrans and Chologars are neighbours in *Vanni*, the northern region of Sri Lanka. Antoni Ramachandran earns his livelihood as a fisherman while his brother is a Tamil Tiger. He lives with his mother, his wife Rajini and two young children. Rajini's sister, Priya later come to help the family. The Chologars have four children, the eldest of whom is with the LTTE.

The Exodus: Spatial Anxiety and Collective Trauma

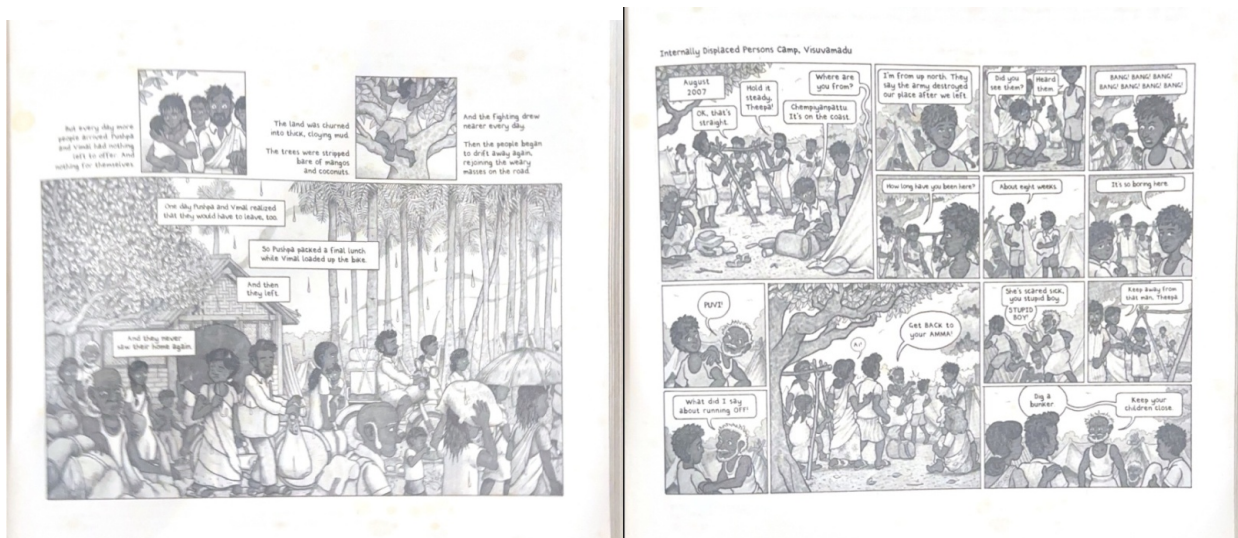


Fig. 2 and 3. Dix, Benjamin, and Lindsay Pollock. *Vanni: A Family's Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict*. Penguin Random House India, 2019. p. 85 and 87

In this sequence, the displaced families traverse a desolate rain-soaked landscape towards an ever-shifting “No Fire Zone.” The visual composition of tightly packed square panels conveys a sense of claustrophobia mirroring the lack of escape faced by the characters. The geometric regularity of the panels contrasts sharply, with the chaotic content that the panels depict. The internal trauma of the characters is depicted through alternating close-ups of the characters’ vacant eyes and wide panels of monotonous repetition of refugee movement. This rhythmic spatial anxiety portrays their emotional numbness and collective trauma.

Martial Rape: Focalization and Ethical Tension

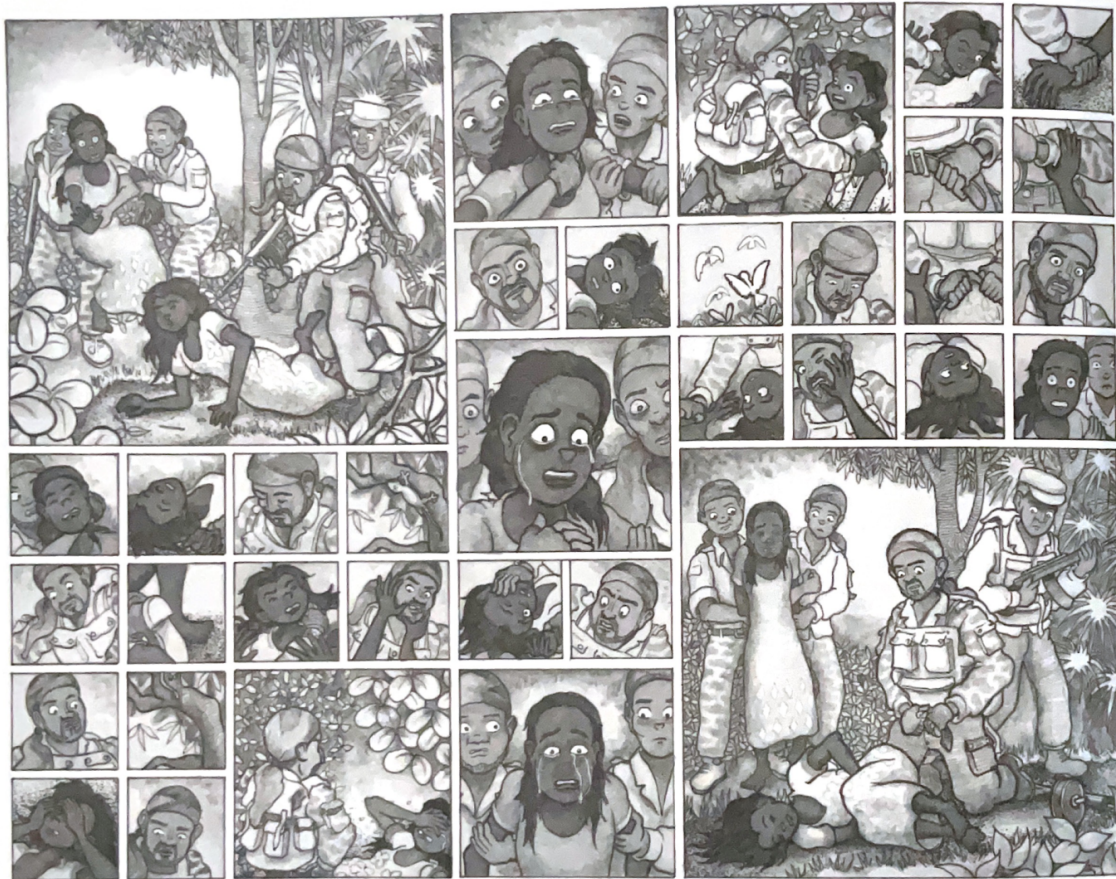


Fig 4 (Dix 218)

Wartime rape, one of the most horrific aspects of conflict, is an inevitable brutality most likely to occur in ethnic wars. Though least understood, this deeply traumatizing sexual violence points to the relative inequality of women.

In *Vanni*, Priya and her friend Kavita attempt to escape the Sri Lankan army in civilian clothes by blending in with the moving crowd. But they are picked out and isolated. The sexual violence that ensues is represented in the panels through emotionally resonant art that witness the abuse. The panels produce structures of feeling that appeal across cultures. In a human rights novel, this works in garnering support for the victims from public around the world.



Fig 5 (Dix 219)

The images of sexual violence are depicted over two pages. In seeking to capture pictorially the stages of violence, Dix and Pollock use a series of transition methods that Scott McCloud describes as aspect to aspect and action to action. The two pages that depict the sexual violence are made up of very orderly square panels that fit into the orderly rectangular border of the page as seen on every other page of the graphic novel. This orderly presentation of the disorder and chaos of the action that constitute the panel is jarring. Unlike the possibilities employed by other graphic novels like panel bleeds and various speech bubble styles, this graphic novel employs the predictable square panel all through. This style is not violated even in the event of the extreme violence of war and gender transgression.

The optical focalization constantly resituates the reader in various positions-sometimes from the perpetrators' angle and at others from that of the victim. There are images that close up on the victims faces and that of the perpetrators. These images form the majority which are interspersed with images of representations of action and also an image that cuts away from the action. The crowding of the small panels and arranging these panels closely to form a busy page creates a sort of spatial anxiety that warrants a reading that does not clearly move from left to right or from top to bottom. The reader's eyes need to constantly move all across the page to take in the violence. These depictions of the emotional response of Priya when her friend is violated evoke a visceral unease in the reader ruling out any hint of scopophilia.

Chirapathi's Grief and Enlistment: Temporal Stillness

In the graphic novel, the path of Chirapathi and that of Priya in response to the Civil War depict the recruitment of Women Tigers. After the loss of her father and brother Jaga to the Tsunami, Chira and her brother Segar are devastated. Their psychological trauma is depicted in the sparsely populated panels of the siblings in a bleak seascape. The siblings stare out to the sea which perplexes them as much as life itself by being both life-giver and life-taker. The narrative silence traverses the gutters and transitions are paced from moment to moment. Their attempts to make sense of their situation are rendered impossible by the repeated waves of personal losses they face at too short an interval. This is compounded by the deaths and destruction around them. The debilitating trauma of the characters is mirrored in the inaction in the panels. The ferment results in the siblings volunteering to join the Tamil Tigers.

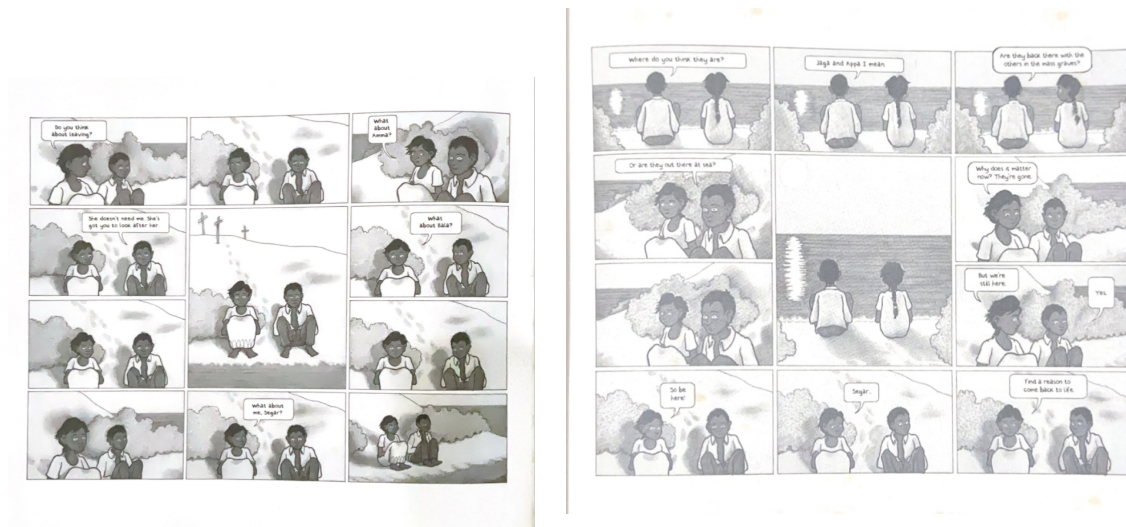


Fig 6 and 7 – (Dix 62 – 63)

Forcible Conscription of Priya: Betrayal, Gaze and Female Sacrifice



Fig 8 (Dix 99)

Priya, the sister of Rajini is forcibly recruited by the Tamil Tigers. The Ramachandrans and the Chologars that have been on the move along with thousands of others in search of a safe haven from the explosions with family members and all their life belongings in hand suffer yet another shock. Priya had gone to gather firewood for the family when the Tigers stop by eyeing Bala the young son of Nelani. Nelani who had already suffered a lot with the maiming of her eldest son as a Tiger and losing him along with her husband to the Tsunami; and yet again her other children Segar and Chirapati signing up in the LTTE, she is victim to untold anxieties. This paranoia is evident in the panels where she points out Priya, a member of the Ramachandrans family as an alternative to save her own son.

Priya is forcibly enlisted. The violence and trauma that force individuals to act in certain ways is intelligible though hard to suffer. The subsequent reaction of Priya's niece who witnesses the event is represented in the panels in an aspect to aspect transition that bring out the irrationality of war. The deceiving quiet of the No Fire Zone in a wide panel is deconstructed with panels of Nelani with her son and Antoni consoling his wife Rajini intercut with the wide-eyed stare of little Theepa.



Fig 9 (Dix 100)

The interwoven panel configurations contrasting wide landscape shots with zoomed-in close-ups of facial expressions, highlight the multiple perspectives involved in the scene. The panels include various gazes ranging from the mother's pointing finger, the LTTE recruiter's evaluation, Priya's confusion to Theeps's tear-filled eyes. These underscore the emotional complexity and moral ambiguity in war.

The No Fire Zone: Visual Irony and Political Critique

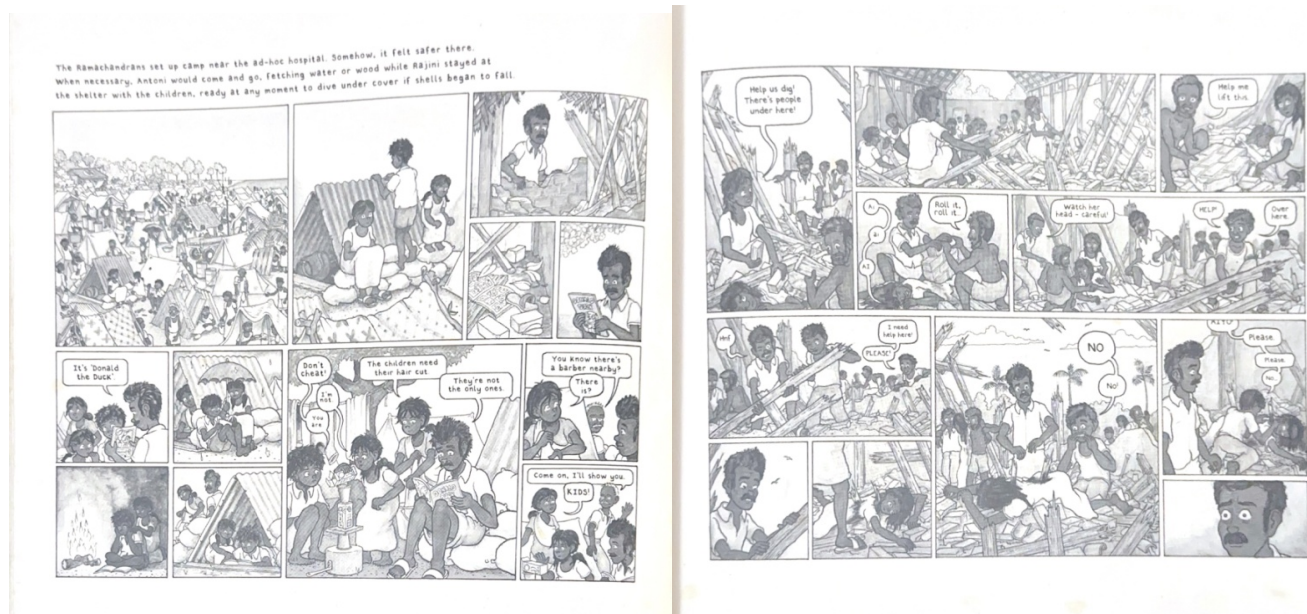


Fig 10 and Fig 11 (Dix 160, 163)

The sequence depicting the arrival of the families at the “No Fire Zone” presents a moment of devastating irony. The ever-evasive “No Fire Zone” that is supposed to accommodate 3,00,000 people, is only a tiny sliver of coast that is just 12 km long. There is a brief interlude of seeming respite in the next pages. Families arrive by the sea, the children engage in play and get haircuts evoking a semblance of normality. But the subsequent panels portray shelling and destruction exposing the state’s violence, that contradicts the official narrative. The increasing panel density during shelling intensifies the kinetic chaos. These pages use irony to expose the gap between the official story and the violent reality.

Conclusion

Vanni employs a deliberate combination of visual and narrative strategies that slow down the reader’s engagement to engagement to encourage ethical witnessing. The careful manipulation of panel configuration and focalization, alongside the avoidance of sensationalism, constructs a narrative that is deeply affective, creating a space for reflection and empathy. The novel’s visual irony and its refusal to provide neat resolutions serve as a critique of both the politics of war and the commodification of trauma in media.

The present study attempted to analyze the potential and scope of the graphic novel to depict human right violations, especially those on women. The human rights graphic novel is a part of the culture of human rights that seeks to share individual experiences on an agreed code. The visual which is in active and sequential engagement with the verbal creates a new medium of expression with potentials that are absent in journalistic accounts either because they require permissions often not granted or due to the disturbing nature of such images or events. Truth can be portrayed without objectification or sensationalization as seen in the analysis of the scenes of sexual transgression in the graphic novel studied. Rather than reproducing sexual violence as a spectacle, the rape sequence uses neutral and shifting focalization and empty landscapes to disrupt voyeurism. Charlotte Bunch's critique of the male-centredness of human rights narratives is powerfully addressed through these visual strategies.

The protracted plight of victims caught between the crossfire in the Sri Lankan Civil War is portrayed through subjective stories. This process allows the narrative to "see inside the war not where the camera is close [sic]" (Dominic qtd in Dix 45). This sort of narrativising brings out the emotional impact of the lived experience; of the horror of living through a Civil War. Rather than relying on photographic evidence, *Vanni* generates credibility through the construction of emotional truths. Anthropological knowledge is gleaned from personal and collaborative accounts like these when nonfiction is represented through fiction. The methodology embraced by the creators of this graphic novel was to interview the survivors of violence and create a line drawing of their ordeal. The narrative so produced was sounded off the victims to integrate feedback into the media; thus creating a collaborative anthropological account formed by shared experience. The experiences of the Ramachandrans and the Chologars in the graphic novel *Vanni* is not the experience of any one or two families. A number of families and individuals were interviewed and the particular events were distilled to form a representative narrative that rings true for the survivors. This oscillation between truth and fiction or non-fiction and fiction create a medium that is simultaneously both truth and fiction functioning with testimonial authenticity.

Apart from the potential of making visible the invisible atrocities of war, by entering spaces that are not usually accessible to the camera, the graphic novel has the potential of affecting sensibilities and humanizing crises unlike other media. While the physical or material losses of war end up as statistics, the psychological trauma often goes underreported. As mentioned earlier, the post traumatic stress of a woman who is a victim of domestic rape is more than that of the "ShellShock" experienced during World War I. This magnitude of trauma experienced by women largely remains outside the purview of human rights.

Vanni, thus, exemplifies the power of the graphic novel to function not only as a mode of storytelling, but also as a form of political testimony and collaborative ethnography. It contributes to what scholars like Pramod K. Nayar and Michael Galchinsky describe as the evolving culture of human rights, where aesthetic forms carry the burden of advocacy and memory.

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