Between Viewing and Experiencing: An Exploration of Benjamin Dix's *Vanni*.

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Abstract

Recent shifts in memory studies have informed us of the new modes of remembering trauma of violent events like war and ethnic conflicts. The circulation of memory across cultural boundaries has created avenues for alternative methods of representation. Graphic novels are one such medium. How can we understand this shift and arrive at a new ethics of representation? What do works of transcultural memory inform the readers of the political landscape of narratives? This paper will attempt to answer these questions by reading Benjamin Dix's *Vanni*. It is a graphic novel that depicts the final stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War. The paper will first provide a brief account of the war, its nationalistic narratives, and the social conditions against which the novel is set. Then the paper will explore the novel and its vision of witnessing by paying attention to its use of positions and spaces. Finally, the paper will discuss the implications of the transcultural turn and the arrival of a new aesthetics of empathy.

Keywords: Transcultural memory, Trauma, Nationalism, Graphic Representation, Witnessing

Memory is not old anymore

The study of memory is constantly evolving along with changing technologies. Recent shifts in memory studies acknowledge this multi-dimensional nature of memory. Moving from individual memory to communal memory, the patterns of memory practices are now discernable across diverse social, cultural, and political scenarios. This shift is nowhere more evident than in the field of cultural memory studies. The trajectory of the theories of memory and the material they study provides insight into how both memory and the study of memory keep changing, one informing the other in an endless loop. For example, in the earliest conceptualisations of cultural memory by Pierre Nora, memory was thought to be crystallised in certain material, symbolic, and functional spaces that hold meaning to specific communities, unrelatable to others. (Nora 19) This soon changes with a newer understanding of postcolonial movements and intergenerational exchanges. Individual or collective, memory is not fixed to an isolated place or community. Memory is a fluid affair, and it is more so given the migration of materials and meanings across generations and geographies. For example, in her work on holocaust memory, Marianne Hirsch coined the term ″postmemory" to refer to the mediated memory shared by second-generation trauma survivors. One gets the sense that memory isnʹt just contained to the self but has the capacity to be inherited by the other selves. With the global proliferation of media and inventive narrative practices, this phenomenon is more acute than ever. Memory can now be understood as both embodied and transferred — a part of the people who directly experience events and those who indirectly receive

them. As Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers puts it, "the range of mediated vicarious experience has grown exponentially" (Assmann and Detmers 3). This means that memory traverses communities and has taken a "transcultural turn" (Bond and Rapson 9) through the "transmission, circulation, mediation, and reception of memory behind ethnic, cultural, and national groups" (Bond et al. 3). Similar concepts such as "prosthetic memory" (Landsberg; Lury), "palimpsestic memory" (Silverman), and "transnational memory" (De Cesari and Rigney) has been proposed by other scholars. With these new developments, we can no longer say memory belongs to an exclusive group. What are the implications of such a turn? What are the uses and abuses of transferred memories? How can it inform us of the ethical dimensions of such transferred memories? These are some of the questions that these new modes of remembering, representing, and participating bring forth. With these questions in mind, this paper will attempt to read Benjamin Dix's *Vanni: A Family's Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict* and try to understand the ways in which works of transcultural memory can help us rethink notions of trauma and representation while also simultaneously informing us of the emergence of a new ethics of empathy and solidarity.

Graphic novels - a new medium to represent trauma ethically

Changes in the nature of memory mean that its modes of cultural production are also changing. Memory studies, specifically that of traumatic memories, has its roots in the schools of psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Trauma theory ethically engages with literature that represents the traumatic non-experience. Doing so, it attempts to bridge the gap between distinct communities that has trauma as their link. However, several criticisms of trauma theory's biases point out its exclusionary, Eurocentric frameworks. It excludes texts of non-western experience of trauma, making it implicitly aggressive in producing certain lives worthy of remembering and certain others not. With this in mind, trauma studies now attempts to focus on experimental modes of representation that don't particularly follow the traditions of the novel. Alternative forms such as poetry, oral narratives, and non-textual cultural forms like dance and art are now being explored. Among these new means of representation, the graphic novel stands out for its flexibility of medium and text. This can be understood on two levels.

One, the medium itself, with its unorthodoxy of structure and form, can provide a means for creative expression that can take many shapes based on the context. The use of different art styles, experimental display of time and space by breaking sequential narrative forms, and using the panel space to juxtapose images in order to create a particular sense of experience, makes the graphic novel a versatile form that can enable alternate forms of representation and viewing. As Hillary Chute writes, graphic novels skilfully use "the value of inventive textual practices to express trauma ethically" (Chute 4). The diversity of form and style available to the narrator can enable the creation of unique experiences that simultaneously display the cultural specificity of the characters while also engaging the readers to witness events in vivid details that cannot be ignored. Due to their specificity, the political, cultural, and psycho-social nuances can be put into pictures where words fail to do so. Also, the act of translating an experience from one language to another is easier when pictures do the work of expressing the complexities of an event. The graphic novelists 'intention can be seen as an attempt to move from "lost in translation" to "comprehension despite translation".

Here, by translation, I mean reiterating the culturally specific experience of one group to another, where the common language is images that portray human and environmental vulnerabilities.

Two, graphic narratives present a means to centre marginalised voices. Their vivid picturisation serves as a report in the absence of either journalistic evidence or explicit or implicit silencing of evidence by those in power. They help challenge dominant discourses that continue to erase certain subject positions from global witnessing. In Frames of War, Judith Butler writes about the differential allocation of precariousness to lives. While some lives are ″recognised" as grievable, others are not. This has both material and perceptual implications. While some lives aren′t regarded as living or don′t feature in the popular imagination as liveable lives, their loss then is essentially non-grievable. Materially, this translates into the denial of rights, needs, and the call for justice. Some lives are never acknowledged as victims of violence on a global scale (Butler 25). By reclaiming the space for pictorial representation, graphic novels can be said to balance out the one-sided narratives of violence by engaging more with the contexts, and agents involved in them, thereby making invisible violence more visible. As Chute argues, in understanding and engaging with violence on a global scale by serving as a form of *counterinscription*, ″Graphic narratives that bear witness to authors ′own traumas or to those of others materially retrace inscriptional effacement; they repeat and reconstruct in order to counteract" (Chute 4). In the following sections, this paper will attempt to understand how *Vanni* performs this act of counterinscription by working against the containing narratives of nation-states of both the subjects of the novel, the Sri Lankan Tamil civilians, and the author himself, an outside participant with an affective relation to the subjects, who both share memories of the same events but are invariably connected to them in divergent ways.

The Sri Lankan Civil War

The Sri Lankan Civil War lasted for a period of 26 years, from July 1983 to May 2009. It can be seen as the culmination of ethnic tensions that brewed since the late colonial and early periods of Independence in Sri Lanka. The reasons for the civil war are manifold. While ethnic tensions between the Sinhala Buddhist majority and the Tamil minority can be traced back in time, the large-scale ethnic conflict was predominantly a result of the exclusionary moves by the Sri Lankan state. Specifically, it can be said that the war was the culmination of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist project that increasingly sought to create a homogenised nation in postcolonial Sri Lanka. The nationalistic history of Sri Lanka is rife with anti-minority stances, the political dominance of upper-class elites[1], and a series of state-mediated violence against forms of dissent. Perhaps the position of the Sri Lankan state against the inclusion of minorities is no more evident than in the passing of the Citizenship Act in 1948. This act entailed the de-recognition of citizenship of the Tamil migrants from India who worked as indentured labourers in the Colonial estates[2]. This disenfranchisement set the tone for future political moves in the nation-state. As Daniel Bass notes, ″With the Citizenship Act of 1948 and 1949, the government for the first time codified in law that one group of Sri Lankans was not sufficiently Sri Lankan to continue to be considered citizens. This set a precedent for calling into question the legitimacy of a person′s belonging and allegiance to Sri Lanka." (Bass 141). This trend persisted at the legislative level, as can be seen through the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, which declared Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka and the Standardisation Policy of 1971 that reserved a number of seats in educational institutions in

proportion to the language of the applicants. It was popularly understood that this was an attempt to curb the overrepresentation of Tamils in institutes of higher education[3]. These moves by the state not only created an atmosphere of distrust among the Tamil minorities but also demonstrated that the state was preoccupied with coalescing the idea of the nation within ethnic terms. Therefore, it can be argued that the primary cause for the marginalisation of the Tamils and their subsequent discontent was due to, ″the centralisation of an exclusionary Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalism in the postcolonial government and in the state′s constitution" (Seoighe 57) that sought to appease the majority through focussing on the cultural factors of language and religion. This nationalistic manoeuvre resulted in a populist politics, with competing parties appealing to the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. The Sinhala political parties involved themselves in a process of ″ethnic outbidding", which Neil DeVotta describes as, ″the auction-like process wherein politicians create platforms and programmes to ′outbid ′their opponents on the anti-minority stance adopted." (DeVotta 141). In such an environment of ethnically charged divisive politics, the Tamil political parties feared discrimination and appealed for a federal governing structure to ensure adequate representation of the minorities and equitable socio-economic distribution of resources. However, any pact that promised a devolution of power was never implemented owing to the majoritarian sentiments. For example, in 1958, the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam pact was made between the then prime minister S. W. R. D Bandaranaike of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the leader of the Federal Party S. J. V Chelvanayagam. This pact offered a certain level of administrative autonomy to the Tamil regions of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka. However, it was widely objected to by the opposition United National Party and Sinhala-Buddhist monks who took to the streets in protest[4]. Such failures led to an increasingly separatist sentiment among the Tamil political parties. In 1976, a set of Tamil political parties, including the ones that represented the upcountry plantation workers, came together to form a united front, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). That year they proposed the Vaddukoddai Resolution, which envisioned an independent Tamil state of Eelam as the only viable solution to address their collective problems (″Vaddukoddai Resolution"). It is to be noted that this Tamil Nationalistic political aspiration attempted to achieve its vision through constitutional negotiations and not through militancy. However, the persistence of majoritarian violence against the Tamils and the failure to achieve a compromise through constitutional means instigated the Tamil youth to look for other radical means to address Tamil grievances[5]. This led to the development of a number of militant organisations with differing political leanings and affinities, all with the same goal of a separate Tamil nation. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was the most conservative and nationalistic of them all[6]. A turning point in the history of the war was the 1983 pogrom, where Tamil civilians across the state were attacked by Sinhalese mobs leading to the destruction of Tamil homes and business establishments. This week-long assault resulted in numerous deaths and displacement of the Tamil community[7]. This event came to be known as Black July and marks the point of escalation from ethnic conflict to a protracted war. Between 1983 and 2009, war raged between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state in four phases with brief periods of rest. The events of the war highlight the extremism of both sides. The LTTE was responsible for the displacement of thousands of Muslims from the Northern provinces, the assassination of two national leaders and the use of suicide bombers to terrorise civilians. The Sri Lankan state continued its offensive by breaching peace treaties and conducting large-scale massacres. In 2008, the government launched a massive attack on the Tiger-controlled territories, effectively putting an end to the ceasefire agreement signed in 2002. The war officially ended on

May 16, 2009, with the defeat of the LTTE. The causalities of the war are estimated to be between 70,000 - 80,000, and around 65,000 people are considered missing. ("Sri Lanka Country Profile")

Vanni and the politics of witnessing

Before venturing into a description of the novel, it is necessary to understand the complex dynamics it is located within. This involves a deeper understanding of the war, its links to state power, and the narratives of truth and untruth that operates within the state apparatus. While the war has its roots in ethnic discrimination and the failure of political processes to address minority concerns, it grew into a nation-building process that codified characteristics of loyalty to the nation and hence, the right to belong and the right to rights. While the Sri Lankan state, emboldened by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, sought to systematically build a homogenised nation, the LTTE envisioned a Tamil nation built on their version of Tamil Nationalism and systems of legislation embedded in Tamil cultural history.This phenomenon could be understood through Uyangoda's explanation of the war mechanism, "For the LTTE, war-making has been fundamentally a process of state-making. For the Sri Lankan state, however, war has been the key way to maintain the existing unitary state, with or without reforms, while "defeating" the LTTE's state-making project." (Uyangoda 10) Needless to say, such a position meant that both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE were involved in the process of producing the codes of rightful behaviour and citizenship for their respective nations. One can start this line of enquiry by understanding the language employed in addressing the other, which in turn informs policy and military action. This politics of language can be understood within the terrorist-traitor dichotomy — the nomenclatures employed by the Sri Lankan state and LTTE to create a mode of belonging to their national myth and, in turn, dissociate from or discard out those who don't subscribe to their said myth. In 1978, the Sri Lankan government passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act, providing the police with the power to arrest or detain anybody who they suspected to be a threat to national security. Therefore, not only were the militant organisations deemed as terrorists, but also any other person who is suspected to be involved with them. Therefore any Tamil person, regardless of their allegiance, was subject to scrutiny and doubt and was detained regardless of involvement. While the law and its subsequent developments can give one an insight into the atmosphere of distrust and implicit violence that the Tamils had to navigate in Sri Lanka, this paper is interested in the language or narrative that is involved in the nationalistic project. As the Sri Lankan state was involved in the process of deeming dissident militant activism as terrorism, the LTTE had their nomenclature that one, attempted to subsume the entirety of Tamils into a singular cause and two, called into question the loyalty of those who didn't subscribe to its narrative. The word "traitor" came to be associated with anyone who didn't entirely contribute to the nationalistic cause of the LTTE. In her work on the LTTE and the Tamil community, Thiranagama writes about how extrajudicial killings were legitimised through a rationalisation that the "traitors" were worse than their "enemies" as their lack of involvement pronounced their indifference to the Tamil cause. She understands this process as a means to establish the sovereignty of the LTTE by weeding out any internal conflict, "That the Tamil traitor is considered more abhorrent than the enemy reveals that the LTTE was fighting a war on two fronts, one against an external enemy, the other against an internal foe, in an effort to define a people and a place, a task that brooks no opposition and necessitates frequent cleansing. The

traitor had become the central figure by which the LTTE poses questions of community, loyalty, and Tamilness." (Thiranagama 127) The figure of the terrorist and the traitor looms large in the political discourse of the war. This centrality of labels and the language that consecrates status or belonging and hence, legitimacy can be expanded further to understand the narratives of nationalistic memory that are embedded within factors of cultural history, territorial entanglements, and primordial allegiance to past kingdoms. Studies on Sinhala and Tamil nationalism show how both sides were involved in constructing competing narratives of legitimacy by employing archaeology, literary revivalism, and archival records. Analysing the myth-making of both these groups, Perera writes how these narratives have very little to do with the evidence from the past and more to do with a need to establish racial superiority in the present, "These assumptions and claims, part of the origin myths of Sinhalas and Tamils, are replete with inaccuracies in terms of history which the few critical scholarship on the subject have not yet been able to dispel.The general thrust of such myth making in both groups was to establish the "greatness" of each group and its long term presence in the country preceding the claims of the rival groups" (Perera 6). How can untrue claims survive the reception of people and lead to violence of this scale? What was the aspect of these myths that held such emotional meanings to them? Perhaps these questions can be answered by how the nationalistic projects were concerned with controlling the narrative in order to homogenise belonging and exclude differences. As Ismail writes, "In being exclusivist, Tamil nationalism rhymes with its Sinhalese counterpart" (Ismail 167). He adds how nationalistic principles are found on the ideal of dominating a minority by establishing a majority. Therefore, Tamil nationalism, similar to Sinhala nationalism, is only interested in recreating the "structural logic of domination" by "merely reversing the problematic" (168). Viewing the war through this lens helps one understand it from the realm of ethnic clashes to the realm of nation-making. As it is so, nation-making projects require a dominant stream of narrative that creates a sense of glory and triumphalism against perceived wounds. This is not to say that the LTTE and the Sri Lankan state were on equal footing and that there existed no structural imbalances among them. Rather, it is to say that their aspirations operated in a similar vein and both were involved in memorialising projects that were congruent with their nationalistic myths. This phenomenon is even more evident in the aftermaths of the war, where the Sri Lankan government created an industry of warzone tourism to celebrate "heroic military deaths" (Perera 9) while also demolishing LTTE's memorials and enfolding the tragedies of the war within a cultural reasoning of Buddhism's struggle against terror (43). Perhaps the construction and circulation of these memories is the final assertion of the Sri Lankan state's nationalistic imagination, "The portrayal of army leaders as war heroes and the construction of the final phase of the war as a humanitarian operation designed to eradicate terrorism and bring peace is the ultimate expression of victor's memory" (Kent). However, these reductions of the war into nationalistic binaries fail to express the trauma and mourning of the people and their lives, whose realities were far more complex than that could be encompassed within their terms. The situation is further complicated by the contesting legacy that the LTTE holds within the Tamil community (Alwis; Ravindran). Therefore, as expressed earlier, it is in this space of competing nationalisms and their discursive confrontations that this novel of counterinscription is located. First, the novel acts as a testimony to the memories of people by making their invisible realities visible against the established narratives of the Sri Lankan state. Second, the novel also

attempts to create an alternate mode of empathy by placing the violence on a global scale and re-writing the default narratives of refugees and migration. As Dix explains,
"Refugees arriving in the West found themselves contending with a hostile media and governmental policies, specifically intended to discourage them from seeking asylum. Tamils were suspected – or accused – of exaggerating the horror of the conflict and the risks they faced. Many of them were forcibly repatriated or suffered further torture, discrimination and exploitation" (Dix 262)

The concerns of the novel are to then envision a community that isn't tied to distinctions of nation and ethnicity but rather to memorialise the human cost of the war, its effects on the survivors and arrive at an alternative way of looking at the violence away from the dominant narratives of national security in the West. It is a fictionalised account of the interviews collected from survivors, reports of the war, and the author's own experience as a witness to the events while in the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka. Therefore this work exists in a liminal space between insider, outsider and beyond the governmental terms of victim and perpetrator or terrorist and refugee. What it seeks to achieve is to re-member the jagged realities that aren't accounted for or couldn't be articulated through the authoritative narratives of the state.

A work of memory - between the visible and the erased

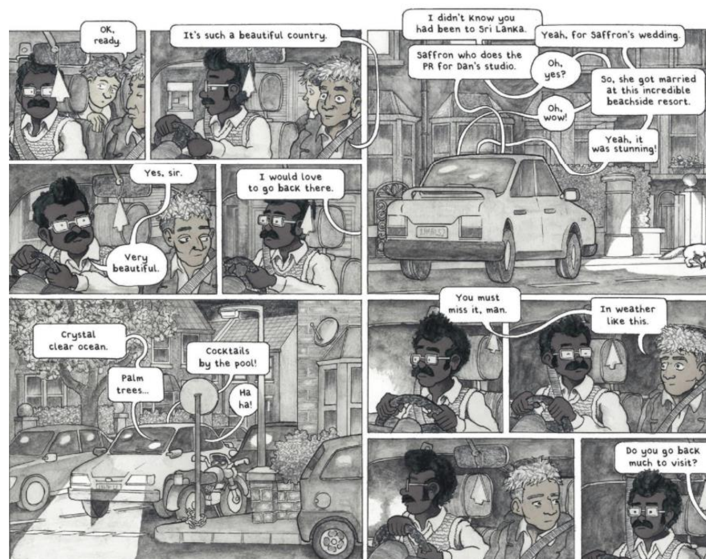
Vanni is an account of the final months of the war. This period is marked by a sense of ungraspability as the Sri Lankan government banned the presence of journalists or international agencies to serve as outside witnesses for the events. This meant that the experience of the people caught in the crossfire between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE was obscured through the channels of representation of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government[8]. This condition was worsened by the erasure of primary experience as the civilian survivors were detained in camps and interrogated for their involvement with the LTTE with little to no option to escape. Therefore, no survivor account could exist without the risk of persecution. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the event resulted in a massive internal and external displacement where a survivor could only recount the story within specific frameworks. Especially in the international borders, the narrative of trauma had to fit within the conditions that deemed them to be sympathy figures uninvolved in militant activities in order to be considered less of a threat.

The story depicts the journey of the Ramachandran family and their neighbours on a chase for survival moving from one temporary settlement to another in the war-torn parts of Northern Sri Lanka. Although the novel's focus is on the conflict and its consequences, it begins by portraying the 2004 Tsunami and its effects, thereby setting the mood for the precarious state of life that only gets increasingly worse through the course of the novel. Living in the LTTE-controlled areas during the final phases of the war, the Ramachandrans represent the aspects of sociality that the Tamils lived through within the frames of the war. While the nationalistic portrayal of the war always slips into binaries of either side, the lived realities of the Northern Tamils, their complex relations with the LTTE, the people and the land cannot be defined through these binaries. This novel gives an account of their everyday life where allegiances were never straightforward, and the state of survival becomes their primary focus.

The timeline of the novel begins at a relatively peaceful time in the war's trajectory. The novel's protagonist Antoni and his family are depicted as having full lives away from and in relation to the LTTE. The family members have their individual dreams and aspirations that, at times, intersect

with those of the LTTE, but one can never be reduced to the other. At its beginning, the novel establishes this complexity. Antoni, a fisherman, is attached to the land, its natural resources, and the relations forged in the space. His brother, on the other hand, signs up as a soldier for the LTTE driven by responsibility. While Antoni holds doubt and is reserved about involving oneself in the militant process, his concern for his brother means he is invested in the outcome of the LTTE′s operation. It is this ambiguity that can be sensed through the reflections of the characters in the novel — a sense of uncertainty about the Tamil nationalistic cause along with a sense of connection to it. The novel portrays how common it was among the Tamil community to have some family members to be involved with the LTTE, while most others went on to live their ordinary lives that had its intimacies and anxieties related and unrelated to the Tamil Tigers. After setting this condition of life, the novel jumps to the 2004 Tsunami, thus beginning the series of trauma that the Tamils living in the region had to face. They lose their homes and belongings and move into relief camps. This moment marks their state of existence that is filled with uncertainties and is entirely dependent on aides for survival necessities. In 2005, the period of peace came to an end with the new presidential elections. The newly elected government deployed the army to reclaim the Tiger-owned territories while the LTTE recruited new troops and involved themselves in intense training. These moves soon escalated into massacres of Tamil villagers as the army kept advancing into the Tiger territories, destroying anything on its way. Thousands of civilians were displaced in the process, making migration a norm in order to stay away from the zones of conflict. Therefore, the life of the civilians was reduced to living in makeshift tents, with little to no nourishment, along with the constant fear of being annihilated. On July 2008, the Sri Lankan army deployed a barrage of air strikes on Killinochi, the headquarters of the LTTE. The LTTE, on the other hand, were involved in a counter-strike by forcefully recruiting civilians to make up for their scarcity of forces. The situation worsened as the demarcations between the conflict zones and the civilian dwellings became arbitrary. Living in these areas meant that a shelling could happen at any moment without warning, and one could lose parts of themselves (limbs) or parts of their community (people). The state of helplessness was compounded by the departure of the international aid agencies situated in the area. Until then, a hope prevailed that with outsider witnesses in place, the UN would step in and put an end to the war. Not only did that not happen, but the Sri Lankan army also enforced a media blackout, thereby making any information on the happenings unavailable to anybody. The government declared ″No fire zones" by announcing that civilians could stay in these zones without being attacked. However, accounts of the final days of the war record how these zones were deliberately shelled by the army, thereby trapping the civilians in a horrifying and inescapable situation[9]. Stuck in this fog of uncertainty and abandonment, the Ramachandran family moves from one ″No fire zone" to another until there is no place left to move as it is surrounded by a lagoon on the one side and the ocean on the other. On the course of their journey, they lose friends and family members to a series of events entirely out of their control —to the indiscriminate shellings by the Sri Lankan army, to the forceful recruitment of the LTTE, to the sexual violence unleashed on the survivors after the Tigers ′defeat, and finally, to the inhumane conditions of living as they awaited to be released from the internment camps. At the internment camp, Antoni is arrested and taken to an isolated, dark cell where he is tortured and interrogated about his involvement with the LTTE. His family, without the knowledge of where he was taken, struggle with the fear that he is either dead or would never return. This state of limbo represents the lived realities of many survivors of the civil war. Unexplained disappearances were a common reality during the many years of the war[10]. Finally, through the help of a relative, Antoni′s wife, Rajini bribes an officer at the camp to

release them. In a regime of absolute control and deprivation, it was only through avenues such as bribery and smuggling were the survivors able to free themselves.However, this too came at a cost. Rajini's relative is shown to have sold his house and cows to be able to fund their release. After their release, the family is smuggled to Chennai, India. In India, they live secretively as they might be forced to return were they to be caught by the Indian police or a Sri Lankan Intelligence personnel. Despite living with this precaution, Antoni is caught by an Indian police who asks for his documentation. Antoni pays a heavy bribe to keep the police from reporting him and his family and



continues to do so until another relative from London offers to help them. The novel ends with Antoni as an asylum seeker in London, narrating his story to a lawyer. He is depicted as retelling the trauma faced by his family, his relations to his brother and sister-in-law who were part of the Tiger's forces, and attesting to the unfathomable horrors faced in Sri Lanka.

Picturing a Position

Right from the beginning, the graphic novel sets a mood of positions as looking from the outside to the inside. By establishing this mode of seeing, *Vanni* underlines a contradiction throughout its narrative. It simultaneously represents the vulnerability of humanity while also distinguishing the subjects as occupying spaces that cannot be shared but only be witnessed as an outsider. It does so by showing the characters 'relation to the landscape of "home". This home, while visible from the outside, has unique experiential and sensory connections to its inhabitants — It can only be seen and connected to from the outsider's perspective but never fully occupied or understood in terms of the subjects 'lived experience.

Fig. 1. Illustrated by Lindsay Pollock. *Vanni*, p. 11

The above section of the novel depicts this characteristic of positions that the novel is explicit about. The main character Antoni is a refugee in London who drives a Taxi when his client, a Londoner, strikes up a conversation with him. The striking contrast in the association with Sri Lanka is made unequivocally evident. To the Londoner, Sri Lanka is a tourist destination with beautiful beaches and stunning natural sceneries. However, to Antoni, the space is his home that he cannot return to. Through this distinction of association with space based on positions, Dix explores the relationship between the characters as a transcultural witness.

This aspect of the novel can be similarly seen in the subject′s relation to the violence of war and the law. In the panel below, we see Antoni walking through the streets of London after his meeting with an Asylum and immigration lawyer.

Fig. 2 Illustrated by Lindsay Pollock. *Vanni*, p. 249

On the walls of the street, we see a poster for a video game titled, ″Warzone 4 Counterinsurgency Strike" with a review that reads, ″Heart-pounding and Multiplayer" and a call to gamers to, ″become a war-hero (by signing up) at the nearest Tesco". This poster exemplifies the way war occupies the popular imagination — as righteous violence that upholds the ideals of the nation-state by establishing its power through spirited attacks on opposing enemies by force. The panel also expresses the distinction in experience between a survivor and an outsider. To the inhabitants of London, war exists only in the cultural landscape of representation, where the affective quality of experience exists only as a reaction to an imaginary, make-believe situation. The physical responses might be real (as in heart pounding), but the consequences are not really real. For Antoni, on the other hand, war is a lived reality that has actual physical and mental effects. Through this positioning, Dix presents a self-aware reflection on the novel and its effects. Expanding this distance in experiencing from the real to the fictional, the novel itself is a cultural artefact that produces a certain reality that the reader can experience and feel for but will never have to live through.

In the next picture, we see Antoni on a bus with other commuters. We see a man holding a newspaper with a headline that reads, ″EU Deal sparks migrant fears." The same relational difference to violence is now transferred to the law. To a citizen of London, a migrant serves as a threat to the economy and security, and the laws are protective forces that work to quell this fear. To Antoni, immigrant laws are dehumanising and alienating. In this respect, it can be said that while Antoni occupies a space in a European nation, he doesn′t occupy the space as a legal person. Therefore he is an outsider on the inside. It is the same outside-inside dynamic that the author consciously expresses in the novel. His relational aspect to the Sri Lankan war is that of an aide worker witnessing the violence and, at times being on the receiving end of the violence and, later, suffering from haunting memories of the violence. However, this intimacy doesn′t necessarily equate to familiarity — the awareness of the experience doesn′t translate to the experience itself. In that regard, the author, as well as the reader, are outsiders looking on the inside.

Drawing Space

In her work on the use of ground in graphic novels, Scherr writes, ″Comics, as a popular as well as highly participatory form, is one such place to begin looking, where nuanced artists can, and do, use specific techniques to draw the ground in ways that both deeply move readers and allow for powerful political readings to emerge" (Scherr 476)In a similar tone, *Vanni* uses space creatively to speak about its concerns. The treatment of space can be seen in two ways, literal and symbolic.First, a literal geographical expanse of land and its objects that starts very open and slowly gets claustrophobic throughout the narrative. Then a symbolic flow of space from living one with nature to living amidst war machinery and from living as independent families to name-less humans in forsaken lands — the status from human to dispensable becoming more evident as the space constricts.

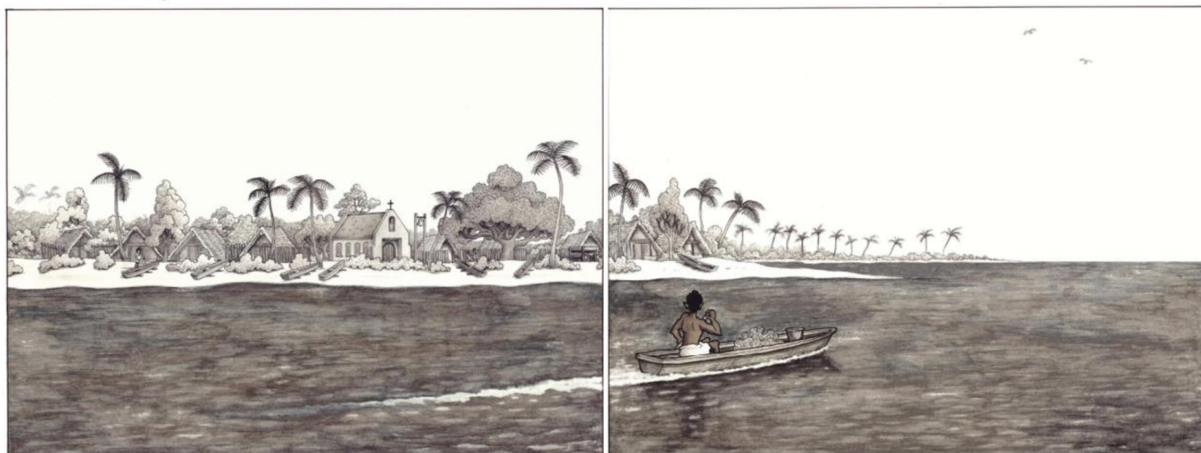


Fig. 3 Illustrated by Lindsay Pollock. *Vanni*, pp. 12-13

In the beginning, we see panels depicting natural scenery that spans across pages. The characters and their families are depicted as occupying vast geographical spaces, co-living with nature and its organisms. This space slowly narrows down to a claustrophobic level. It is not only the humans who lose each other but also nature that gets broken down into its constituent elements as the violence progresses. This shows the destructive nature of the war that wounded not just the people but also the entire material world they occupied. By the end of the novel, the landscape is unrecognisable from the vibrant depictions in the beginning. This loss becomes evident to the reader as the land, in the end, is a haunting reminder of an unliveable location that is forever lost to its inhabitants.

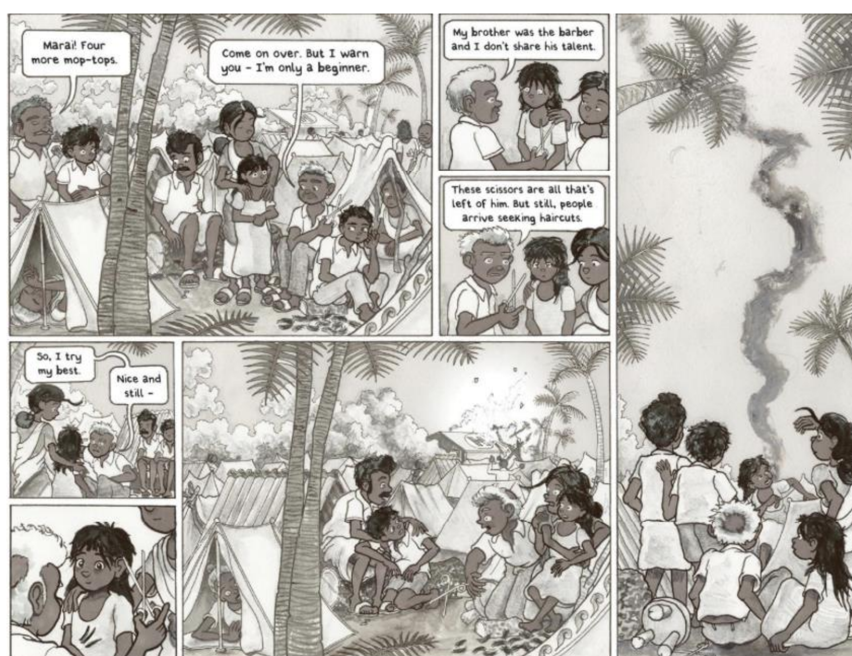


Fig. 4 Illustrated by Lindsay Pollock. *Vanni*, p. 161

The symbolic treatment of space traces the status of identity to the anonymity of the inhabitants. We see them move from home and its material reality to large barren lands of non-existence. As the war progresses, subjects descend from having a personhood to victims that depends on external aid for everyday survival. Soon, this too isn't available as their humanity is stripped to merely a collateral damage of the conflict. The space moves from being a home to a space of abandonment, neglect, and scarcity. Amidst this reduction, however, despite becoming part of a number of the forgotten and displaced, the humanistic dimensions of the inhabitants continue to be present. In the above panel, we see the Ramachandrans living in cramped spaces with billowing smoke in the background. In this space, we see an old man performing haircuts for the children in the area. This simple act to him, is an act of remembering his brother, the scissor being the only reminder. To the children getting their haircuts, life continues, albeit in catastrophic ways, even when their existence is threatened to become part of a larger story. This depiction, I argue, is not to

highlight the spoils of the war or bring out the truths lost in official reports. Rather, it is to portray the effects of war at its most physical and tangible levels — to view it not from governmental accounts of truth and reconciliation but from a personal level of grief and melancholy where the trauma is not a closed wound but an ongoing one that continues to become a part of their lived lives during and after the war. Here I would like to refer to Jeganathan′s work on the work of truth and memory in post-conflict spaces. He writes that memorialisation projects of the state or the work of truth commissions are not to uncover truths or injustices. Rather, they are normalisation projects that promote forgetting and forging a different connection to the past that would help move on with social life(Jeganathan 15). Therefore he argues that rather than focusing on the agential or resistant aspects of the works of memory, one is to focus on the *ordinary* and the mundane, the ″more basic understanding of the texture of the lived lives of melancholics" (17). It is through these observations on the everyday lives of the survivors do we get access to their relationship to the trauma and how it figures in their ordinary actions and orientations. Connecting this to Dix′s work, it can be said by highlighting the structural forces at play - the war and its machinations and the post-war memorialisation projects of the Sri Lankan government, the story of the Ramachandrans stands out as an irreconcilable event that unveils the human experience of the war that cannot be encompassed into dominant narratives or statistical numbers or accounts of truth and untruth. The effect then is to move from these figurations and to observe the complicated lived realities of the inhabitants of Northern Sri Lanka.

A new ethics of viewing and remembering

As discussed earlier in the essay, new changes in technologies and narrative forms have given rise to a memory boom where vicarious experience of trauma has become a part of everyday reality. Furthermore, works of transcultural memory like *Vanni* produce new representations of traumatic memory that are both shared and separate, visible and invisible, and individual and collective. The nature of these works and their graphic presentations work within the reasoning to make invisible violence more visible on a global scale. However, this situation makes one consider the implications of such a turn. There exists a doubt that with such inundation of pictorial representations, the violence it represents becomes everyday, or worse, simply a part of consumption without reflection. Furthermore, the ethical question of who gets to represent whose trauma persists as the conventional reception of literature sidelines marginal voices. The question of what can one do with the knowledge of an event that one obviously can do nothing about is also pertinent. In her work on viewing the suffering of others, Sontag writes that the desire to view such images is the same desire to view naked bodies. In other words, it becomes part of a perversive pleasure. Therefore she adds, ″Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it—say, the surgeons at the military hospital where the photograph was taken—or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be (Sontag 42). If we were to consider her warnings, then works like *Vanni* only become part of the problem they are attempting to work against. However, the question of representation is not about the ability or inability to do something about it. Rather, it is precisely this inability that is traumatic. By highlighting this gap or inability, the works of trauma can help reimagine a new kind of relationality. As Ahmed writes on the possibility of connection through pain, ″The connection is not made as a form of fellow-feeling, and it is not about feeling the other′s pain. Pain is evoked as that which even our most intimate others cannot feel. The

impossibility of 'fellow feeling 'is itself the confirmation of injury" (Ahmed 39). Reading *Vanni*, the reader or the author himself, of course, cannot feel the actual suffering of its subjects. At the same time, we are also invariably affected by the images and the memories. It is within this liminal space that a new aesthetics of empathy and solidarity arrives. While the grand narratives of the nation view the violence through dichotomies or law-derived categories, always attempting at a closure or, as Jeganathan observes at a normalisation project of forgetting, *Vanni* functions by bringing the readers to attend to the incapability of such a closure by laying bare the complexities of experience and the ongoing haunting of the memories that cannot be undone. The relationality that it arrives at is not one of closure and reconciliation but rather one that acknowledges the evasiveness of such a closure.

Notes

[1] See Wickramasinghe's, "Sri Lanka's Independence: Shadows over a colonial graft", where he analysis the vestiges of colonialism that remained in the governmental institutions of Sri Lanka and how the post-Independence politics was dominated by upper-class elites who had more in common with the British colonialists than the rural populations of Sri Lanka. He writes about how this elite class came to be the ruling class by accumulating power against minorities and quashing any opposition through an appeal to the Sinhala-Buddhist ideals.

[2] For more on upcountry Tamils and the legislations that led to their disenfranchisement, see Kanapathipillai's *Citizenship and Statelessness in Sri Lanka.*

[3] Scholars view this as an extension of the colonial legacy where the Jaffna Tamils had access to English education through American Christian missionaries and hence, held more positions in the colonial civil services. The Sinhala population, on the other hand, were mostly influenced by British Christian missionaries and preferred to continue their traditional occupations. This, of course, became a matter of contention post-independence. See Manogaran's *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka*, esp. ch 4, for an analysis of the contexts and effects of these policies on language and education.

[4] See Rajasingham's, "Honorable Wounds of War" in *Sri Lanka: The Untold Story* for a detailed exploration of these protests.

[5] See Sabaratnam's, "Tamil Youths Turn Assertive" in *Pirapaharan: Vol 1*. Here he discusses how the Tamil youth were inspired by the JVP uprising in Sri Lanka and the Bangladeshi liberation.

[6] For an analysis of the different militant organisations, their alliances and clashes, see Uyangoda's, "Ethnic Conflict and the Civil War in Sri Lanka" 292 - 96.

[7] It has been suggested that this massive-scale violence was state-sponsored. For an account of the logistics of the violence and the impunity afterwards, see Perera, *The Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: A Historical and Sociopolitical Outline* 19; Hoole et al., ″The July 1983 Violence against Tamils" in The Broken Palmyra; Seoighe, War, Denial, and Nation-building in Sri Lanka 54 - 56.

[8] See Harrison′s *Still Counting the Dead*, where she explores the lack of journalistic reporting and provides detailed accounts of the final days of the war by interviewing survivors.

[9] This has been documented by Macrae's, *Sri Lanka′s Killing Fields*.

[10] See Manimekalai′s *White Van Stories*.

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