

## **Drawing the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict: An Analysis of Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock's Ethnographic Novel *Vanni***

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This paper seeks to expand the concept of counter-narratives to research component in and surrounding Sri Lanka civil war narratives. Historically, every act of militant reprisal demands the exigency of military warfare to annihilate them thereby, restoring peace in the land. Whereas, amidst the status quo of terrorism-counterterrorism and human rights compliance, the significance of human lives caught in the crossfire remains a disputed notion. As Stanley points out, “dominant culture have justified systems and rules ... in such a way that makes these models ‘the standard’” (Stanley 15). In this sense, the war on terror/fighting terrorism is the international standard master-narrative in which plight of the civilians caught in the crossfire are legalised in the name of combating terrorism. Yet, the testimonies of innocent civilians who witnessed and experienced the horrors of modern warfare act as a counter-narrative discourse exemplifying the injustice perpetrated on them, thereby demanding justice. The focus of the paper is what we may call ‘graphic dissent’ a mode of counter discursive strategy to bring in an alternative history or narrative. The study examines Benjamin Dix’s ethnographic novel, *Vanni a family’s struggle through Srilankan conflict* (2019) as a counter-narrative discourse that undermines the dominant military dogma of Sri Lanka in fighting terrorism through the lens of a civilian.

**Keywords:** Graphic novel, counter-narratives, narratives, Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, *Vanni* (2019), Benjamin Dix, Lindsay Pollock

## **Introduction**

In his seminal essay *The Art of Fiction*, Henry James argues that “Humanity is immense and reality has a myriad form; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it” (James 4). Given that, novels that are often regarded as works of fiction, are one of the predominantly accepted forms of literature for exploring social-political events interwoven within author’s creative world. Although the novelist camouflages the reality of the situation inside the web of a fictionalised world, the characters and plot within the novels are extremely drawn from the real world. Therefore, in its broadest definition, the novel is “a personal impression of life” (James 3). Through these novels, the writer explores, exposes, and encompass the otherwise dangerous socio-political realms of the nation. Indeed, world wars, cold wars, proxy wars, religious wars, civil wars, and so on are all instances of global disputes that need advocacy.

In the current epoch, there is a surge of graphic narratives or comics that engages in the discourse of a nation’s socio-political scenario. In the book *The Aspects of Novel*, E.M. Forester argues that the “fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect” (44). In this sense, graphic narratives, comics, or perhaps a photograph possessing the potential to communicate with the reader can be classified under novel. This article, on the other hand, examines the socio-political complexities of the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war through the ethnographic novel *Vanni* by Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock. The authors employ cartoon illustrations to depict the atrocities committed during the final stages of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. Thousands of Tamils were trapped bilaterally, mainly in the Vanni area of Sri Lanka’s northern province. The LTTE exploited the Vanni Tamils as human shields, while the state disregarded human lives in its war against terrorism. Here, the authors take a novel paradigm in recounting the humanitarian catastrophe experienced by the Tamils in Vanni district to a larger audience. These illustrations are diametrically opposed to the dominant official narratives generated in order to

legitimise Sri Lankan military operations in combating LTTE terrorism. As a result, the novel serves as a counter-narrative discourse portraying the social dimensions of the civil war.

The Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009) is one of the modern time's extremely atrocious ethnic conflict drawing international attention for its human rights violations. In the "on-again-off-again" (Huntington 253) structure of Sri Lanka's ethnic war, the fourth and final episode, popularly known as the Eelam War IV (2006-2009), is widely recognised as the most destructive phase in its history. However, according to Sri Lankan state narratives, the final stages of the civil war were a "Humanitarian Operation ...to free the country from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)" (Ministry of Defence 1). They further vindicate that the defence ministry had "no resort but to pursue a military strategy against the LTTE" amidst the escalating violence (Ministry of Defence 1). Nonetheless, the international resources contradict the state reports by providing the statistics as more than 40,000 dead and 70,000 civilians unaccounted in the final months alone (Petrie 14; Weiss 7).

Francis Harrison best demonstrates these contentious executions in her book *Still Counting the Dead* as a "slaughter on an apocalyptic scale" (45). *Sri Lankan Killing Fields*, a documentary series shown on Channel 4 (since 2011), is yet another attempt to depict amateur video footage of the humanitarian catastrophe perpetrated by Sri Lankan armed forces during the last phases of the conflict. However, during the UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva (2013), the Sri Lankan government denounced all of these allegations and denied the authenticity of the recordings (Wickramasinghe 354). Therefore, international accounts on the final stages of the civil war explicitly contradict the army warfare's dogma as not limited to war on terror but as an appalling insidious strategy that blurs "the boundary between civilian and combatant and sealing conflict areas from media coverage" (Wickramasinghe 355).

Given such a polarized and disputed account of the final stages of the war, this paper proposes that Benjamin Dix's ethnographic novel *Vanni*, co-authored by Lindsay Pollock, serve as a counter-narrative

discourse that depicts the humanitarian catastrophe contested during the final stages of the civil war in cartoon drawings. The graphic novel taken for study delineate the atrocities from a humanitarian perspective countering the Sri Lankan state hegemonic narratives. The novel illustrates the horrific ordeal of a fictional family “against the forces that seek to erase their memory” (Dix 2020). With such standpoints, this paper sets out the objective of the ethnographic novel *Vanni* as a counter-narrative discourse that delineate the atrocities from a humanitarian perspective, in contrast to the Sri Lankan state’s hegemonic narratives. The research is significant, as it contributes further to the study of human life significance amidst the status quo of terrorism-counterterrorism and human rights compliance.

### **Ideology of counter-narratives in our study**

The notion of narratives and counter-narratives may be conceived of as a static normative dichotomy adhered between a dominant organizational narrative and an alternate perspective to undermine the normative narratives of the existing social organisation. Where, the dominant narratives are the societal denominator that “serve as a blueprint for all stories... through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well” (Bamberg and Andrews 1). It has the ability “to shape individuals’ and organizations’ worldviews, identities and values” (Sanne Frandsen et al 4). Whereas, counter-narratives discourses “offer resistance to, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (Bamberg and Andrews 1). These narratives negotiate and destabilises the prevailing narratives by “representing different worldviews and collective identities” (Sanne Frandsen et al 4).

Numerous studies are based to explore this dichotomy in different context. For instance, in Nelson’s seminal work *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (2001) counter-narratives act as a form of resistance wherein one may restore the damaged identity by crafting a respectable counter-narrative discourse. Similarly, Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews *Considering Counter-narratives* (2004) sets out to explore the status quo of individual live by manifesting counter-narratives as an arduous process of self-identification with respect to

a dominant society. Aside from research that investigates how counter-narratives challenge mainstream cultural norms, recent studies such as Sanne Frandsen's *Counter-Narratives and Organization* (2017) position the concept of counter-narratives into the dichotomy of state organisational and non-organisation apparatus such as NGOs, social media, journalism and more. With myriad mechanisms of counter-narrative discourse as a form of resistance, a process of self-identification, and as a political tool that call for justice this paper seeks to expand the concept of counter-narratives to research component in and surrounding narratives on the Sri Lanka civil war.

In the context of the Sri Lankan civil war, state officials purposefully dismissed international journalists to conceal the impending humanitarian disaster from the international community. As a result, the UN and other foreign organisations were coerced to abandon Tamil civilians to the anticipated carnage. The Sri Lankan government wanted to preserve their international image of combating terrorism at the cost of the deaths of thousands of innocent people “caught up in someone else’s battle” (Dix and Pollock 2020). Therefore, using a counter-narrative lens this study examines Benjamin Dix’s and Lindsay Pollock’s ethnographic novel, *Vanni* (2019) as a counter-narrative discourse that challenges Sri Lanka’s dominant hegemonic military doctrine in fighting terrorism.

### **The ethno-graphic novel, *Vanni* (2019)**

*Vanni: A Family’s Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict* (2019), authored by Benjamin Dix and illustrated by Lindsay Pollock, depicts the human side perspective on the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war. Set in the Vanni district of northern Sri Lanka (2004-2009), Dix explores the personal experiences of modern warfare atrocities such as internal displacement, induced migration, torture, shelling, abduction, execution, rape, and so forth. Even though these traumas are widely addressed in Sri Lankan Anglophonic literature, portraying them using simple visuals intertwined with words to form a graphic book is less explored. Through the fictitious protagonist Antoni and his family, the graphic novel under consideration portrays the trials and tribulations of civilian lives. They are the ultimate allegory for the

traumatised Tamil citizens who were profoundly disrupted and emotionally riddled by personal loss and grief during the war's closing stages.

*Vanni* is significant for presenting hitherto unreported ramifications of these upheavals on individual life, ranging from the 2004 tsunami, which “killed 36,000 people” (Dix and Pollock 50), to accounts of “300,000 internally displaced individuals seeking refuge and assistance” by May 2009 at Manik Farm (ibid 222). In an interview with Indian Express, Dix discusses how the Sri Lankan government effectively complicates facts by presenting the world with its hegemonic narrative on battling terrorism. He observes that “the Sri Lankan government to effectively black-out their actions by excluding journalists from the war zone” (Dutta para.7). Furthermore, according to Human Rights Watch, “the absence of the UN would result in no one to bear witness to incidents ...” (“Besieged, Displaced, and Detained,” 8). With such perspectives, it is apparent that measures were made to conceal the contested overall collateral damage from the outside world. As a result, narratives revolving around the humanitarian crisis, in this case, *Vanni* by Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock, which the state forces were explicitly attempting to conceal may be classified as counter-narrative discourse.

### **Dimensions of *Vanni* as a counter-narrative discourse**

Counter-narrative discourse is a countervailing force that incorporates “creative, innovative forces fostering beneficial societal change...as well as for ethical issues such as justice and accessible resource” (Klarissa Lueg 4). On that note, the ethnographic novel *Vanni* (2019) can be classified under the counter-narrative discourse in myriad manifestations. First and foremost, as an international witness to the Sri Lankan civil conflict from 2004 to 2008, Benjamin Dix provides the impartial account of the civil war that challenges both the hegemonic Sri Lankan as well as LTTE narratives. The Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence referred their military strategy towards the last phase of the civil war as a “Humanitarian Operation” (Ministry of Defence 1), wherein the international organisations’ reports contradict it by referring the final stages as a “Humanitarian Catastrophe”

(“Report” 75; Harrison 127). Looking through the perspective of the LTTE, the graphic novel embarks to illustrate the paradox on how the LTTE endangered its own people. Through speech bubbles scattered within the book he states, “Civilians were also used for forced labour, building military defences and children were forced into the dwindling LTTE ranks” (Dix and Pollock 156). Within such contradictions, it is necessary to “offer an active strategy of challenging homogenizing master-narratives by articulating experiences that deviate from such blueprints, validating them within a plurality of perspectives” (Leug et al. 307). On that basis, Benjamin Dix narrative challenges the otherwise internalised normative narratives of both the state’s hegemonic discourse of the war on terrorism and the marginalised Tamil Tigers narratives of manifesting a safe haven for its citizens.

Second, by employing the fictional protagonist of Antoni and his family, the work examines the human side story countering the hegemonic state powers that were trying to silence them. As Benjamin Dix says, the methodological procedure behind the graphic novel was based on intense interactions with twenty Sri Lankan Tamil communities who are “now scattered around the world- from London to Zurich, Geneva to Chennai and Toronto to Paris” (Dix and Pollock 260). He amalgamated these testimonies from survivors into sequential art for a graphic book through two fictional families: the Ramachandras (Antoni and his family) and the Chologars (Suji and his family). The respondents were sensitive about disclosing their identities for the fear of jeopardising their asylum applications as well as the safety of their beloved who still remain in Sri Lanka. As a result, according to Dix, it was necessary to anonymize identities so that neither the government nor the Tigers could track them down (“Vanni: A Sri Lankan Story” 00:29:28-00:30:06). Each character is paradigmatic to thousands of civilians who had to experience dimensions of personal loss and bereavement due to the escalating violence during the final stages of the civil war. In the beginning of the novel, Antoni is introduced as a refugee in London, who like many other civilian men “fled out of being interrogated and labelled as Tamil Tiger sympathizers” (Dix and Pollock 261). Likewise, Rajini and Theepa (Antoni’s wife and child) portray thousands of Tamil women who had to bribe their way

out of “the densely crowded Manik Farm international camp-malnourished, exhausted and traumatized by the incidences of sexual abuse by the SLA” (ibid 260). Character like Priya (Antoni’s sister-in-law) serves paradigmatic to Tamil children who were forcefully conscripted by the LTTE and later raped or brutally executed at the hands of the Sri Lankan army. Even a decade after the civil war, such carefully orchestrated attempts to anonymize identities, emphasize the reality of how people are still living in the shadows of a protracted war. Benjamin Dix calls the graphic novel as “a non-fiction fiction” (Dix and Pollock 265) and that “these are true stories but the characters are hidden behind Lindsay’s illustrations and no one can go after an illustration... but their stories exists” (“JLF London 2020” 00:12:23-00:12:37). As a result of exposing the non-fiction narrative of the humanitarian disaster through these fictionalised characters, the true voices of the victims are heard and these alternate voices constitute feature of a counter-narrative discourse that call for justice and action.

Finally, from the perspective of cultural anthropological narratives, retelling these traumatic experiences through a “visual-verbal narrative that can come alive as a graphic novel” (Dix and Kaur 1) is in opposition to the mainstream written narratives. Benjamin Dix calls the graphic novel as “a non-fiction fiction” and that “these are true stories but the characters are hidden behind Lindsay’s illustrations and no one can go after an illustration . . . but their stories exist” (“JLF London 2020” 00:12:23-00:12:37). For instance, the panel colour employed throughout the graphic novel is black and white, to signify the trauma of the civilians caught in the Vanni district. Their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways which more conventional discourse cannot (Delgado 2415). The illustrator and co-author, Lindsay Pollock comments on the power of a visual anthropologic approach particularly in this case, the genre of graphic novel “operates on a system of juxtapositions... and with the help of panels you’re able to juxtapose different moments ...of rendering the experience of PTSD, the experience of memory and particularly intrusions of unwanted memory also” (00:36:07-00:36:54). Similarly, the deployment of limited speech bubbles and depiction of the brutality of the situation through



drawing exemplifies the humanitarian catastrophe contested in the final months of the civil war.

## Conclusion

With the use of illustrations, Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock's ethnographic book *Vanni* (2019) skilfully depicts the humanitarian catastrophe experienced during the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war. The use of illustrations to depict the devastating civil war emphasises the gravity of the situation to a broader audience. Thereby, contributing to the discourse of the disputed notions of atrocities and death occurred in Sri Lankan. In the modern times, graphic novels have emerged as a popular literary medium for exposing conflicts, violence, and political conditions to a broad audience that would otherwise be difficult to express. These genres enable authors to explore areas that are often inaccessible.

Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock's ethno-graphic novel *Vanni* (2019) depicts the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict in a processual, interactive, and representational aspect that contributes to the discourse of the demand for denied justice since the conclusion of the Sri Lankan civil war. It defines the trauma of tyranny, injustice, violence, and other systems of discrimination, all of which play an important part in fostering advocacy. The ethnographic book has successfully enabled its readers to engage with these visuals, resulting in the creation of a sympathetic imagined parallel universe. The genre of graphic novels facilitates the reader to be an active participant in determining their own perspectives of the atrocities perpetrated without prejudices. This paper concludes with Dix and Kaur's statement, that promotes the importance and relevance of graphic novels in contributing to the discourse of conflicts, political circumstances, and violence. According to the authors, graphic narratives serve as a "tool to pursue fieldwork, explore difficult and sensitive areas of research, provide a relatively accessible multi-layered platform for participants' feedback, and become a means of communicating ethnographically informed practise and knowledge to wider audiences" (Dix and Kraur 17).

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