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**Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of the Ethnographic Novel  
Representation of the Sri Lankan “No Fire Zone”**



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**Abstract**

This study is a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis of figures 8 and 9, Illustration of bombardment in a government-designated 'no fire zone' in Sri Lanka, 2009, of the graphic novel *Vanni: A Family Struggle* by Benjamin Dix, using the Sri Lankan Conflict. Although most of the current literature on the Sri Lankan conflict concentrates on the historical, political, or literary narration of the conflict, the ethnographic graphic novels as a multimodal expression of civilian sufferings have not been addressed well. The work is based on the Multimodal Theory and Visual Grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen, as well as the Cultural Violence Theory by Johan Galtung, which allows the researcher to examine the chosen panels in the graphic novel. This is analyzed in terms of visual means like framing, gaze, layout, desaturation of color, and onomatopoeic words. All these aspects show how fear, displacement, powerlessness, and normalized violence can be depicted visually. The invisibility of civilian victims is also helped by the invisibility of the perpetrators, who are not always visible in the dominant war discourses. The results reveal that *Vanni* is a multimodal ethnography that questions the official accounts about the security in the No Fire Zone. This paper employed multimodal discourse analysis and cultural violence theory to emphasize how the graphic novel contributes to giving marginalized voices of Tamil and how structural and symbolic violence have been normalized.

**Keywords:** Multimodality, trauma, violence, Interactive meaning, Compositional meaning, Representational meaning, *Vanni*, War

**1. Introduction**

The Sri-Lankan Civil War was exceptionally brutal, especially in the government-announced area labelled as the “no fire zone,” which was suggested as a safe place for civilians. Instead of giving protection, this place became a site where thousands of Tamil civilians experienced trauma, fear, loss, and displacement. Many scholars who have studied the Sri Lankan conflict have mainly focused on politics, military plans, and government actions, while paying little attention to the real lives of civilians and

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the physical and psychological pain they suffered during the war. As a result, the lived experiences of Tamil civilians were completely ignored and not included in the dominant war stories. To fill up this gap, researchers employed an ethnographic novel using text and images to build meaning and present suffering. This research is built on Multimodal Theory, Visual Grammar Theory, and Johan Galtung's Cultural Violence Theory, which together provide a detailed analysis of how violence and trauma are portrayed through images and words. Kress and van Leeuwen's Multimodal Theory looks into how text, image, color, gaze, and framing together generate meaning rather than language alone. According to this theory, multimodality is the creation of meaning through combination of multiple semiotic modes in a single product or event. (Kress, Leeuwen, 2001, p.20). This theory acknowledges the present study to analyse how text, image, layout, and colour work collectively in *Vanni* to uncover the pain and suffering of Tamil civilians during the war. In connection to multimodal theory, Kress and Leeuwen highlight that the visual grammar is formed due to social contexts. Its structure is not as simple as only displaying reality but it uses images that situate within the society's interests that construct, explain, and share them, that become ideological (Ibrahim, 2021, p. 269). This theory helps in how images construct meaning through representational, interactive, and compositional modes. This helps to convey through such meanings that the novel portrays the powerlessness and vulnerability of civilians. Furthermore, Johan Galtung's Cultural Violence Theory shows how violence against civilians has become normalised and legitimised in war narratives. According to this theory, the examination of Cultural Violence Theory explains how direct and structural violence are legitimised and made acceptable in society. (Galtung, 1990, p.292). This is evident in the novel, how violence and civilian suffering are normalised and accepted by society as something normal.

Despite the fact that previous studies have studied war stories using multimodal analysis, very few have collectively integrated Multimodal Theory, Visual Grammar Theory, and Johan Galtung's Cultural Violence Theory together to deeply analyse the ethnographic novel on the Sri Lankan Conflict. Researchers bridge that gap by building a theoretical nexus that connects these frameworks to analyse how visuals and texts work together in conveying meaning, violence normalisation, and

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marginalised civilians. The study reveals that by integrating multiple theories together, the novel shows how images and texts are used to document the real experiences of war and trauma. The ethnographic novel questions the government's claim that "no fire zone" was safe and rather makes civilian suffering visible. This study is important because it connects the readers to the novel as if they are part of it and can feel their suffering. It also helps readers visually show that violence is made to seem as something ordinary.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The paper discusses the depiction of violence, trauma, and fear in the novel with special attention given to the Vanni region in the later days of the Sri Lankan civil war. The graphic novel focuses on a fictionalized family of the Ramachandran family whose lives are based on the real accounts of the Tamils refugee experience making it to be more ethnographic in nature than the graphic narration (Dix, 2010). This research is a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis instead of a quantitative one because it is interested in the meaning-making using visual and textual modes and not in measurement. The study incorporates Multimodal Theory, Visual Grammar and the Cultural Violence Theory as developed by Johan Galtung as the theoretical frameworks. The visual grammar is used to interpret representational, interactive, and compositional meaning on several chosen panels with the emphasis on the elements of gaze, framing, frame size, viewing angle, facial expression, and space arrangement (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). These visual materials are discussed together with the linguistic factors such as words that are audible and dialogues in order to make meaning about how the constructs of trauma and fear come into being using the interplay between image and text. The normalization of violence is explained with the help of the concept of cultural violence by Galtung, as a characteristic of the continuous exposure to bombardment and fear becoming a part of the reality of the civilian population in the narrative (Galtung, 1990).

In the collection of data, there is an intentional choice of panels in the graphic novel. The sample is comprised of panels that clearly show the bombardment of No Fire Zone, exodus of civilians, family responses to shelling, panic, survivalist behavior, and emotional distress. These panels are chosen because they have high

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emotional intensity, symbolic images, relationships among the characters, as well as the availability of visual and textual elements that can be examined using multimodal analysis. It is justifiable to place emphasis on these particular images as it shows clearly the intermingling of visual design and cultural violence in the presentation of civilian trauma. The process of analysis is systematic. To begin with, the individual panels are analyzed using representational meanings in order to determine the participants, actions, and circumstances. Second, the interactive meaning is examined with the help of gaze, distance, and perspective in order to consider the authoritative relationships between the characters and readers. Third, the framing, salience, and value of information are examined in learning the compositional meanings of fear and violence foregrounding. The linguistic features (including abrupt commands and onomatopoeic words) are discussed in comparison with visual signs (including the rubble, body posture, and faces) in order to show how the trauma is being normalized under the conditions of every-day civilian life. Overall, the methodology uses a qualitative multimodal discursive analysis based on a two-fold theoretical framework to deliver an explanation of how Vanni manifests the trauma, fear, and the normalization of violence with the intervention of visual and textual modes (Dix; Kress and van Leeuwen; Galtung).

### **3. Literature Review**

Hillary chute's (2016) offers a multi-media historical framework for the rise of comics that draws attention towards political unrest in her work *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. She argues that comics play an important role in shedding light on complex historical events of crisis. She further emphasizes that Comics are not only for entertainment purposes but also for historical documentation. Further, it begins in the earlier tradition of visual documentation for revealing horrors of war, its personal and collective trauma. She structures her analysis as "comics as history" and explores autobiographical narratives in which the artist serves both as an author and a witness, highlighting the reshaping of subjectivity through the act of witnessing. The other study states that like all representation, visual images are not innocent depictions of reality; instead of just mirroring the world, they re-present the world (Midalia, 1999, p. 131). Other scholars state that the 21st century

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is renowned for multimodal society, and communication is also inclined to be multimodal. Scholars have defined Multimodal discourse as a combination of different semiotic modes, such as language and music, within the same communicative event (Van Leeuwen, 2005). O'Hallorant et (2011) highlighted the interaction of such multi semiotic modes, including various semiotic sources such as language, gesture, dress, architecture, proximity lighting, movement, gaze, and camera angle. Though, these multiple modes depend on each other to convey meaning.

Moreover, Maruo claims that graphic novels and comics with complicated and detailed texts allow readers to fully understand, and become sufficient for teaching literacy: they contain different modes, mostly images, and written texts reflect and critique each other. Elhalawany in his study explain the trauma of war including haunting memories and brutal acts, provide insight to readers through comic and visual literature. Whereas, one scholar claims that war comics are used as a means to reflect history and testify from the scars left behind. Even though earlier studies addresses comics and graphic novels as a multimodal historical discourse that reflects war, conflicts, and trauma with the help of visual and verbal modes. Some scholars such as Chute consider comics as a visual witnessed of past traumas. On contrary, few scholars emphasizes that images are the representation shaped by ideologies and semiotic choices rather than simple interpretation of reality. However, these growing studies discusses the stories about graphic novels on Sri Lankan war, while there is limited research on use of graphic novel as a strategy to reflect trauma, memory, and silent voices or the blending of truth, fiction, and its effects on readers' mind.

Multimodal discourse analysis is something through which one can examine any kind of situation. It can help to interpret the intensity author has used to depict the deep messages in the work. Similar multimodal discourse analysis along with trauma theory is used to analyze the role of visuals and texts in depicting trauma of a perpetrator especially in context of war. The author of the research Elhalawany (2025) investigates *Waltz with Bashir (2009)* taking Kress and van Leeuwen's *Grammar of Visual Design (1996)* along with multimodal analysis given by Machin (2007) as a theoretical foundation to conduct the research. According to their study language is not only mean of communication but there is an interplay of different modes, with

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semiotic potentials to draw meaning. Moral injury and trauma of perpetrator is main agenda of the paper and states that horrific effects of war are visualized in *Waltz with Bashir*. It is providing a foundation for the current research as it is analyzing the multimodal representation of war trauma. It depicts how multimodality can create ethical linkage between audience and the narrative. Same theorist as a theoretical foundation is used in *Comics and Migration* (2015) to investigate the novel *Memories of Vanni*. It states that the ethnographic graphic novel is a narrative that takes its counterpart towards the war narratives coming from officials. It plays with multimodal such as text, visuals, backgrounds, expressions and language to make it both a site of memory and resistance. Therefore, it concludes multimodality is very significant and have the authority to highlight power, narratives, ideology making and sufferings faced by human in context of war discourse. Being an influential work does not explicitly encounter the role of multimodal technique to engage the reader and make them secondary witness in war setting. Moreover, Gowricharn (2009) and Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) talks about Tamil identity and argues that their second-generation identity is made by the integrated tension between British and Tamil. This identity is shaped by the trauma they inherit from their parents and the narratives that spread within the society. Their research can help the other researches in drawing attention towards the identification of Antoni children identity. Their identity is depicted in the same way in the novel or does it give new dimension towards identity making in second-generation post war Srilanka.

*Vanni* portrays the civil war between the Sri Lankan forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE are equally responsible for the deaths of civilians. Around 4,000 Tamil civilians died, although there was a peace period between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, but the war continued till 2009. (Harris, 2012, p. 68). Most scholars on the civil war mentioned politics, military actions, and how the government sent the Tamil people towards the so-called no-fire zone, but in reality, the no-fire zone area was not safe either. The government intentionally bombed civilians, attacked hospitals, and stopped the medical facilities. This step is taken by the government to stop the LTTE, even if it takes the lives of civilians. (Harris, 2012, p. 75). This is evident in the

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Ministry of Defence statement, which commands civilians to move to Safety Zones, and those who did not follow the order were considered the supporters of the LTTE and enemies of the country. (Human Rights Watch, 2009b). This review only focuses on the facts, wars, and politics, but neglects the emotional trauma and visual representation of their suffering.

Unlike political and military forces, another critic focuses on the trauma, fear, and disillusionment of the people during the war. In the fire zone, the LTTE is constantly shelling on the people. The family is barely surviving, trying to stay calm and save their children from the shells, the parents telling their children to stay low so that they can save themselves from the bombardment. (Somasundaram, 2010, p.9). This highlights the emotional pain and destruction of war on ordinary people. This research includes visuals but does not mention how layout, framing, and gaze construct meaning, so there is a limited criticality.

However, different scholars extended the trauma portrayed in Vanni and conducted research through a multimodal and ecological lens. According to the ecological perspective, humans are equal to all other things in the world, including plants and animals. They are part of nature, not above it. Eco linguistics studies critique how language centralizes humans and treats nature merely to be used. (Trampe, 2017). Moreover, the concept of social ecosophy explores the relationships between humans and between humans and nature. In Vanni, the visual of Antoni with his family, a poor working-class family, shows how social inequality and economic factors affect his life. This emphasizes that human relations, social structure, environment, and everything is related to each other, and the violence of war affects humans and nature as well. (Abbas and Janjua, 154). The study shows how the environment is affected by the war through multimodal discourse analyses, but does not highlight how multimodal analyses normalize civilian suffering and violence.

Building on this, recent scholarships shift focus on the themes of displacement, struggles, and the lives of civilians, showing how novel uses personal memories and stories from the perspective of ordinary people, giving a real image of war. (Joseph et al.). On the other hand, different critics also highlight the importance of cultural texts as they portray collective memory to show how violence is remembered by society.

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The authors use the theoretical framework of post memory and prosthetic memory to show how trauma is shifted from generation to generation and how the audience is emotionally connected with the experience they did not live through. (Anupama and Nagamani 63). Although these theories focus on collective trauma, but do not connect it through multimodal analyses to explore how visuals and texts together create a big picture of war and suffering.

## **4. Analysis and Discussion**



FIGURES 8 AND 9. Illustrations of bombardment in a government-designated "no fire zone" in Sri Lanka, 2009.

#### 4.1 Representative Meaning

The picture consists of multiple scenes showing a bomb scene, which represents the theme of war. In the upper left corner, the very first panel shows Antoni Ramachandran's family, including his parents and sister. They are currently living in a

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refugee camp, expecting that there will be no danger outside. The sub panel reflects a sudden experience of excessive bombing, which is shocking for them. The noisy environment wakes the family, and fear is evident on their faces. Antoni's wife wakes him up, and his children look at their parents anxiously. Now the focus shifts again to the wider panel where his family is shrapnelled by the bomb, which turns out to be ironic. The family is using sacks for their protection. The particles in the air show huge destruction after shelling, creating an eerie environment. The children shrieking and screaming, "Ama". Here, cultural violence is reflected, when Tamil civilians and their suffering were completely ignored, as it diminishes their empathy. Also, it makes structural and direct violence justified, since their suffering is accepted as normal. The family wakes up when they hear a loud boom. It shows how war becomes a normal part of daily life. The text and the images in the novel work together to create a broader meaning, as depicted in Multimodal theory. Facial expressions, along with the word boom, reflect the collective traumatic situation of war. Together these theories provide unique and rich mode of communication to make the audience be the part of the situation.

The second panel continues with Antoni's family tightly holding each other as they are terrified because of another bomb which explodes nearby. The bold "BOOM" text attracts the attention of the reader that they can feel war is there and it cannot be shrug off. When they hear the loud noise of bomb, Antoni, out of fear said "that was close" and mother whispered "Are they moving away?" The tensed face expressions of the family, their squeezed bodies, sitting close to each other, trying to protect each other from harm shows how they feel helpless and petrified in that situation. The sacks lying beside them demonstrate that how civilians are ignored and no safety measures are given to them to protect their selves. They are using simple things like sack from not getting hurt by the war. This panel reveals Johan Galtung's Cultural Violence theory where the continual bombardment are seen as normal. The nonstop bombing has become an everyday part of their life. The family's curled-up position shows how they have become used to living in fear and war. Society is completely ignoring all this; they do not care for their pain, suffering and accept it as normal. The dominant word "BOOM" reflects the noise and pain of the sufferers, while the

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family's silence and their worried faces show their fear. This juxtapose makes the scene more effective. The frightened faces and huddled bodies implement visual grammar theory which shows how they are helpless and powerless.

The third panel shows that the family is still scared and stays close to each other under the ongoing violence and war. The small particles and text "TAK" "TAK" shows that shelling and firing is still going on. This aligns with cultural violence, where people forced to stay silent, survive, and protect themselves from more harm. The family's bent bodies, lowered heads, and tightly held hands convey how vulnerable they are feeling. The falling dust shows that eruption is almost near to them. Here we can clearly see multimodal perspectives, the particles, body posture all visually communicate the moment of terror. Visual grammar shows meaning through body language and how things are laid down. Here the family's disturbing face expressions and body gestures help us understand how war have affected them and their lives.

In panel four of the second row, couple is scared and their children is shown in a horror condition. Antoni's wife inform the family to go out and run, but the external state of affairs is not safe due to war. Trauma within families is created by war. In panel 9 of the third row, another emotionally detached couple is visible. They are screaming and shouting to one another, yet they are powerless. The traumatic effects of war are easily exhibited in this panel. Children have taken the fear, and they are very depressed. When the words "Listen... Screaming' appear, the abstract, mechanical violence is replaced by real pain of people. The ellipsis reflects doubt and trauma processing. These are the direct violence shows as per the idea of Galtung's. According to Galtung's, direct violence can be seen through physical or verbal aggression which may be war, assault or terrorism.

In the right corner of the second row, panel 6 shows the reaction to something horrific. The family is sitting low on the ground to avoid the danger of the explosion. The father is commanding his wife and children: "No!" "Stay low", "Stay low". The family is holding each other, creating a strong physical bond that highlights the collective fear and trauma. In this panel, there is no proper background; family's facial expressions and gestures are foregrounded to make the audience part of their pain. The seventh image shows the daughter screaming "Amma" when the explosion

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occurs around them. The child's cry signifies the pain, panic, and the fearful state of the family. The main action is shifted towards the child in this panel.

The picture continues to show the bombardment even in the “no fire zone”. If we look at the objects in the picture our focus is drawn towards the tents, fire, and the same pillows around the family that can also be taken as symbol used to hide and protect themselves. The action here is that someone with a child is trapped in a fire due to explosion and seeking help, and Antoni’s family are witnessing it. As Gultang’s cultural violence theory, we can interpret that the war is internalized here. Even the restricted area, which is supposed not to be affected by the outside situation also become the victim and people in there cannot escape. Their culture is ruined, and only the war’s effects and consequences are left. Kress and Leeuwen in visual grammar theory claim that the text and the visual can contradict which we can witness here. The text says “its ok, its ok” for almost three times to calm the children in that extreme situation but the image and their faces do not align with the words written. It is actually not tolerable and this emphasizes the extreme trauma in their minds and the deep effect on their psyche. The family of Antoni along with one other person holding a child is presented in the panel showing that each and every person is stuck and the broken tents, ashes of fire makes the reader to be empathetic.

Moving towards the ninth panel, here Antoni is actually helping the woman and the child. This is the main action women stepping in Antoni refugee camp and the entire world around her is full of fire and everything is burning. Here, only two words are uttered “quick” and “in here”, it can be analyzed as having lost of words. During the scenario, characters have nothing to say. The absence of full sentence is also symbolic and representing some meaning. It reflects the intensity and emotional dislocation that the characters feel and the only concern here is to just save life and nothing else. This also shows emptiness and hollowness filled everywhere.

The second last panel shows the sudden collapse of a small shelter camp amid shelling. While the final panel sheds light on the situation after the explosion. Antoni’s family, being Tamil civilians try to secure themselves, but wooden pieces start falling on them. Further, the image expresses the painful agitation of the family and the poor woman caught in the explosion, who runs towards their camp while

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tightly holding her child for safety. On the other hand, Antoni also falls in the ground and tries to reach out to protect their family, who are thrown off-balance. The environment is also looking chaotic and polluted, with smoke and dust everywhere. Additionally, it demonstrates the irony of the family caught in a government “No Fire Zone,” which is also unsafe during the war. The participants' downward movement, along with falling debris, highlights the devastation caused by bombardment.

## **4.2 Interactive Meaning**

In interactive meaning, researchers analyze distance, focus, and gaze.

### **4.2.1 Distance**

In any image, the distance between the participant and the audience refers to the social distance. The closer the shot is, the closer the social distance is. At the first panel, the long shot describes the remoteness from the viewers. The aloofness highlights the sense of dislocation and isolation. At the back of the small picture, the large one shows a close shot, which creates closeness and emotional attachment with the audience. The characters around the protagonist are close, which shows the intimacy of social relationships. This emphasizes the chaotic situation of war that does not increase the distance within the family but highlights the fact that the audience is helpless and can do nothing except sympathize.

The distance in second panel is medium-close, which allows audience to see character's detailed face expressions. This closeness makes us feel how they are experiencing the horrors of war and reduces the distance between the viewer and the characters. This makes scene feel emotional and personal to us. The third panel is close-up, which helps in bringing viewers close to the family as we can clearly see tension on their faces. This closeness shows strong emotions and let us feel the tension they are going through.

In the following fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh panel. The viewer and the characters are not separated by too much distance as the panels are drawn in close and mid-range shots. This closeness causes a close relationship, which compels the viewer to experience the violence instead of being an observer. The proximity of the bodies circling each other and the lack of blank space increase the emotional engagement and emphasize the helplessness of civilians. It represents how war not just harms

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physically but also disturbs their mental conditions.

Interpreting the eighth panel's distance, Antoni and his family is positioned center. The distance is maintained in such a way that the expressions in their faces could easily be visible. The fear in their faces is clearly observable, the tension of what to do and what not to, is exquisite. The distance of man from the person seeking help is a way too far incorporating confusion and hesitation, preparation towards proceeding action in the next panel. The next panel shows the distance between Antoni and the woman starts to lessen. The woman and Antoni are both in the center with little distance between them. This can also apply on the viewers to lessen the distance and feel themselves in there and comment what they would have done being in the situation.

At the second final panel, the close-up shot evokes a sense of loss and fear in viewers, reflecting what the Antoni Family is going through. This choice of a close-up shot intends to connect viewers with Antoni's struggle within the collapsing shelter. In this panel, viewers are emotionally attached during the massive bombing event when his family falls to the ground, heightening the feeling of mutual loss. At the final panel, the medium close-up shots full scene is represented as within the viewers' reach to emphasize the effect of war on Antoni's family life.

## **4.2.2 Focus**

In panel one, the word "BOOM" is foregrounded while Antoine and his family are backgrounded. In the second panel, Antoni's family is foregrounded and text "BOOM" is backgrounded. In the third panel, the word "BOOM" is foregrounded and Antoni's family is backgrounded. But the still the main focus is on Antoni and how his family together tightly sitting close to each other. Their bodies play a central role in this pane, displaying how undefended they are by the society. The particles are not of that much importance just showing that danger is all around, but the only thing they can do in this situation is to hold onto each other. In the fifth panel, the text in the bubbles "No! "Stay low", "Stay low," and the fearful facial expressions are the most salient in the panel. Here, the focus wants the viewers to pay close attention to the dreadful situation that the participants are facing. Similarly, in the sixth panel, the family is foregrounded. In the fourth and seventh panel, the focus centers on the word "we

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should get out. run” and “Amma”. Additionally, Antoine, his wife, and daughter are also focused. The son is neglected here, because the word “Amma” is spoken by the daughter, and her parents are becoming worried and trying to calm her by moving closer to her. In the panel eight and nine, the focus is on the Antoni and his family and the women is shown far behind them. The main agenda here is to show the expression and the action of Antoni and his family that how they see the woman seeking for help. Will they be helping her or end up ignoring maintaining their own safety? Antoni has his arms extended around his family as a gesture to save them becomes the main focal point and so becomes the vector. The same woman in the panel who is calling for guidance and help becomes the secondary focus. In the leading panel the women with the child and Antoni is on the main focus to show the main action and the fire behind them also gains attention but in secondary level. The main focal point is Antoni helping woman even in the worst situation and the words uttered by him. This helps the reader to become the witness of what is happening and what is going to happen. A kind of emotional connection is being tried to make between the reader and the characters in the panel. In the last two panel, the main focus is on how bodies and things are floating in the air because of bomb explosion.

### **4.2.3 Gaze**

The relationship between represented participants and interactive participants are identified through direction of look the gaze of representative’s participants, the size of frame and viewing angle.

In the first sub-panel, the gaze is inward, and all family members are looking at Antoni. The audience becomes the passive observer. In the large panel, the family is looking outside at the spot of bombardment. The characters' eye contact in the panel is shown from a horizontal perspective, reflecting an emotional closeness, which makes it engaging, and the audience becomes a part of them. The gaze in second panel is internal. The family is not looking at us. They are looking toward the explosions, terror, and war which is happening outside. We can clearly see their eyes and the horror in the eyes as it is shown from front. Again, the gaze in the third panel is inward, none of the character is looking at us. They are more into protecting each other. This makes us feel like we are only observers and can’t do anything to get them

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out of that war. This shows how civilians were treated during war and no shelter and protection was given to them. In panel four, the eyes of the characters are open, jerky and staring in the direction of danger. The gaze of the parents turns nervous and alternates between the child and the external turmoil, which is the protective fear. In panel five, none of the family members looks at the audience, but they are looking here and there so that no danger can creep up. This emphasizes that spectators are witnesses, not participants. In panel six, the looks are desperate and undirected, being panic-stricken and hopeless. The gaze conveys emotional truth, terror, urgency, and inability to process rapid violence and this is what makes trauma become visible. In panel seven, Antoine and his wife are looking towards their daughter, as she is becoming afraid of the sounds of the bombardment. This image shows that the viewers are observing their suffering even when the family is not looking at them. In panel eight and nine, the eye contact is the matter of attention. In both panel, none of the character is directed towards the viewer. This indicates the intention to focus on the event, not on the people to fully engage in the situation in both panels. The gaze is on the situation, giving the meaning that war can be affecting you so intensely that you cannot think of anything else and your eyes constantly seeking towards what will happen afterwards. In both final panels, Antoni family not directly looking at the viewers. Their eyes looking at falling wooden pieces and debris. The sense of loss, fear, and confusion can depict through their shocking facial expression. Their downward gaze gives an opportunity to viewers to observe their suffering and vulnerability during war.

## **4.3 Compositional Meaning**

In compositional meaning, researchers explore color and framing of the panel.

### **4.3.1 Color**

The color in image is greyish white, which shows the stillness and erasing of the family's identity. The colorless background symbolizes the blankness of people's minds. Additionally, it reflects the trauma of war and how the situation erases color from their lives. Despite the black and white image of the panels, the lack of color is made meaningful. The darkness is another step towards the gloom of war, which is a representation of fear, uncertainty and trauma. Grey palette deprives the distraction

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and makes the audiences focus on the expressions, movement, and violence. This bareness resembles the heartlessness of families in war.

## **4.3.2 Framing**

The presence or absence of framing devices disconnects or connects elements of the image, signifying that they belong or do not belong together in some sense. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). The borders and lines in the image show framing that emphasizes the relationship between different elements. It includes the lines themselves, their limited space, and the area they enclose. The image under study has the stillness of color, which reflects the traumatic experience. In the second panel, the frame is compact, making the family visibly congested. The “BOOM” text is on the top beyond the frame, showing how violence has spread everywhere and is unstoppable. The next panel is narrower than the previous one, showing the family visibly looking suffocated. It also shows there is no way for them to escape, either physically or emotionally.

In the following four to seven panels, the tight framing is used in the panels to confine the characters to the tent-like area. It is this proximity that forms a suffocating effect and conveys the notion that families are unable to escape anywhere. The claustrophobic shots literally signify being trapped, physically through the fading up tent and emotionally through constant dread. The chaos of every explosion is more enhanced by the framing and invites the viewers into the claustrophobic environment. In the fifth panel, the image is tightly framed; there is no space around the family. It shows how war snatches the family’s space, and they are forced to live in a dilapidated place for their survival and to protect themselves from the bombs. These panels intensify the cultural violence that is being normalized and makes the war feel “ordinary.” Most importantly, the perpetrator is not shown in the panel, which highlights the idea that shooting or bombing has become just a background voice. In the picture, the family and the word “Amma” are framed, which makes it cluttered. This shows confusion and a state of terror for the family and for the witnesses. Overall, these panels represent cultural violence through silencing and normalizing the civilian’s sufferings. The panel shows the screaming of the child but gives no information regarding who is responsible for this violence. By hiding the perpetrator

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and showing the sufferings and trauma to the audience, this panel shows cultural violence that is only possible during war. It also reflects Johan Galtung's idea that cultural violence pushes human beings into survival mode, making their sufferings as an ordinary or being normal.

The whole family picture is framed in such a way that shows their unity. The family is tightly bound together and are very close. This shows the close connection of them. The first panel is enclosed in long rectangular pattern while the second is little short in length. This unequal distribution suggests the idea of different narration in different panel. The story is proceeding in the next panel and there is something new in here. This framing suggests the mutual experience and unity within the experience. This also reflects the idea of their solidarity towards each other and that they are one single unit in this bleak reality and will handle everything together. Their closeness can also be interpreted that they are confined in very little place for protection. This kind of framing thus has dual meaning and depends on the interpreter. It can be both confinement and unity at the same time depicted by the author. The borders on each panel thus also be taken as a meaning of confinement of safety, confinement of place and a border against danger. The danger to their self, to their family, to their culture and to their mental processing.

In the last two panels, the war image has no frame around the figures, aside from those created by the two sequential panels. These final panels isolate the moment of attack while also connecting it as part of one violent event. In the second final panel, debris filling the air forms a convenient line which separates the child at its center from everyone else above, as if to exemplify their vulnerability. Meanwhile, the final panel, refers to the loose horizontal boundary created by scattered wooden chips over the bodies. These frames are shaping the viewers' perception about chaos of bombardment and fragmentation.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research study reveals the pain and traumatic experiences of Tamil civilians living under "no fire zone" through the use of multimodal elements. These elements in the graphic novel shows the fear, loss, and struggle of civilians. By integrating Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal theory, it shows how pictures and words

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work together in conveying meaning. Along with this, framing, gaze, focus, distance, and the repeated use of greyish-white color demonstrate the coldness, loss of identity, and homeland of affected civilians. In addition, Johan Galtung's Cultural Violence Theory exhibits how people's suffering was ignored and disregarded in dominant war narratives. Overall, the current study shows that this graphic novel is important as it not only tells the story but also presents it visually. It also gives voice to silenced Tamil civilians whose pain was overlooked. Together, theory and visuals make the novel reflective, as it questions the war, records trauma, remembers lost lives, and refuses to let their stories. Future researchers should delve deep into graphic novels about the historical trauma and suffering of civilians and also expose the role of society and their ignorance. Furthermore, they can look at how women and children are affected and how they are portrayed and treated in the war and the role of society in protecting or ignoring them during conflicts.

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