

Nuances of Graphic Story Telling: Critiquing the Narrative of
Pannimalathu

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Pannimalathu

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Contents

Page.No

Preface		i-ii
Chapter One	Introduction	1-10
Chapter Two	Theme, Character, and Canvas: A Critical Reading of <i>Pannimalathu</i>	11-26
Chapter Three	Panels over Paragraphs: Narrative Reconstruction in <i>Pannimalathu</i>	27-40
Chapter Four	Conclusion	41-47
Works Cited		48-50

Preface

The project entitled ‘‘Nuances of Graphic Storytelling: Critiquing the Narrative of *Pannimalathu*’’, undertakes a detailed examination of the evolution, structure, and distinctiveness of graphic narratives, with a central focus on Joshy Benedict’s *Pannimalathu*, the first Malayalam graphic novel. The study explores the medium of graphic storytelling both as a historical and cultural phenomenon and as a site of narrative innovation within Malayalam literature. The project begins by tracing the global trajectory of graphic novels, situating the form within a broader literary and visual tradition. From early sequential art and woodcut novels to the emergence of modern graphic novels in the 20th century, the first chapter examines how the medium matured through contributions from artists like Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, and Alan Moore, and how it shifted from pulp entertainment to a complex, literary format capable of handling serious sociopolitical themes.

The second chapter, ‘‘Theme, Character, and Canvas: A Critical Reading of *Pannimalathu*’’ narrows the focus to *Pannimalathu*, offering a critical analysis of the work as a landmark in the Indian, specifically Malayalam graphic novel landscape. In contrast to the mythological and fantastical themes that dominate much of Indian comics, *Pannimalathu* deals with the gritty realism of human addiction, moral decay, and existential entrapment. The study explores how Joshy Benedict uses panel design, spatial composition, and visual metaphors to convey inner turmoil and societal critique, positioning.

The third chapter ‘‘Panels over Paragraphs: Narrative Reconstruction in

Pannimalathu” offers a theoretical and comparative exploration of the narrative shifts that occur when a story is told through the medium of a graphic novel as opposed to a traditional prose novel. Using *Pannimalathu* as a case study, this section interrogates the formal and structural divergences between the two modes of storytelling. The chapter demonstrates how the graphic novel form enables new possibilities for emotional resonance, temporal manipulation, and psychological depth. Ultimately, this chapter situates *Pannimalathu* within a broader discourse on medium-specific storytelling, showing how its impact is shaped as much by what is seen as by what is said.

The fourth chapter “conclusion” brings the project to a close by foregrounding the narrative of Joshy Benedict’s *Pannimalathu* and offering a comprehensive analysis of his innovative engagement with the graphic novel form.

Chapter One

Introduction

A graphic novel is a self-contained, book-length form of sequential art. The term graphic novel is often applied broadly, including fiction, non-fiction, and anthologized work, though this practice is highly contested by comics scholars and industry professionals. It is, at least in the United States, typically distinct from the term comic book, which is generally used for comics periodicals and trade paperbacks. Fan historian Richard Kyle coined the term graphic novel in an essay in the November 1964 issue of the comics fanzine *Capa-Alpha*. The term gained popularity in the comics community after the publication of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) and the start of the *The Death of Captain Marvel* line (1982) and became familiar to the public in the late 1980s after the commercial successes of the first volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1986, the collected editions of Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* in 1987. The Book Industry Study Group began using graphic novel as a category in book stores in 2001.

The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck is the oldest recognized American example of comics used to this end. It originated as the 1828 publication *Histoire de Mr. Vieux Bois* by Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer, and was first published in English translation in 1841 by London's Tilt & Bogue, which used an 1833 Paris pirate edition. The first American edition was published in 1842 by Wilson & Company in New York City using the original printing plates from the 1841 edition. Another early predecessor is *Journey to the Gold Diggins* by Jeremiah Saddlebags by brothers J. A. D. and D. F. Read, inspired by *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*. In 1894, Caran d'Ache broached the

idea of a "drawn novel" in a letter to the newspaper '*Le Figaro*' and started work on a 360-page wordless book (which was never published). In the United States, there is a long tradition of reissuing previously published comic strips in book form. In 1897, the Hearst Syndicate published such a collection of *The Yellow Kid* by Richard Outcault and it quickly became a best seller.

The 1920s saw a revival of the medieval woodcut tradition, with Belgian Frans Masereel cited as "the undisputed king" of this revival. His works include *Passionate Journey* (1919). American Lynd Ward also worked in this tradition, publishing *Gods' Man*, in 1929 and going on to publish more during the 1930s. Other prototypical examples from this period include American Milt Gross's *He Done Her Wrong* (1930), a wordless comic published as a hardcover book, and *Une semaine de bonté* (1934), a novel in sequential images composed of collage by the surrealist painter Max Ernst.

The 1940s saw the launching of *Classics Illustrated*, a comic-book series that primarily adapted notable, public domain novels into standalone comic books for young readers. *Citizen 13660*, an illustrated, novel length retelling of Japanese internment during World War II, was published in 1946. In 1947, Fawcett Comics published Comics Novel "*Anarcho, Dictator of Death*", a 52-page comic dedicated to one story. In 1950, St. John Publications produced the digest-sized, adult-oriented "picture novel" *It Rhymes with Lust*, a film noir-influenced slice of steeltown life starring a scheming, manipulative redhead named Rust. Touted as "an original full-length novel" on its cover, the 128-page digest by pseudonymous writer "Drake Waller" (Arnold Drake and Leslie Waller), penciler Matt Baker and inker Ray Osrin proved successful enough to lead to an unrelated second picture novel, *The Case of the Winking Buddha* by pulp novelist

Manning Lee Stokes and illustrator Charles Raab. In the same year, Gold Medal Books released *Mansion of Evil* by Joseph Millard. Presaging Will Eisner's multiple-story graphic novel *A Contract with God* (1978), cartoonist Harvey Kurtzman wrote and drew the four-story mass-market paperback Harvey Kurtzman's *Jungle Book* (Ballantine Books #338K), published in 1959.

By the late 1960s, American comic book creators were beginning to experiment more boldly with the medium. In 1968, Gil Kane and Archie Goodwin self-published *His Name Is... Savage*, a 40-page, magazine-format comic novel released through Adventure House Press, the same year Marvel Comics released two magazine-format issues of *The Spectacular Spider-Man*. Comic writer and columnist Steven Grant has argued that Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's *Doctor Strange* storyline in *Strange Tales*, originally serialized from 1965 to 1966, qualifies as “the first American graphic novel.” Similarly, critic Jason Sacks identified *Panther's Rage*, a 13-issue arc from 1973 to 1975 in Marvel's *Jungle Action* featuring the Black Panther, as “Marvel's first graphic novel” due to its cohesive, self-contained narrative structure. Meanwhile, in continental Europe, the longstanding tradition of compiling serialized stories like *The Adventures of Tintin* and *Asterix* into albums contributed to the development of extended, long-form comic storytelling.

In January 1968, *Vida del Che* was published in Argentina, a graphic novel written by Héctor Germán Oesterheld and drawn by Alberto Breccia. The book told the story of Che Guevara in comics form, but the military dictatorship confiscated the books and destroyed them. It was later re-released in corrected versions. By 1969, the author John Updike, who had entertained ideas of becoming a cartoonist in his youth, addressed the Bristol Literary Society, on ‘the death of the novel’. Updike offered examples of new

areas of exploration for novelists, declaring he saw "no intrinsic reason why a doubly talented artist might not arise and create a comic strip novel masterpiece"(Gravett 77).

European creators were also experimenting with the longer narrative in comics form. In the United Kingdom, Raymond Briggs was producing works such as *Father Christmas* (1972) and *The Snowman* (1978), which he himself described as being from the "bottomless abyss of strip cartooning"(Gravett 44), although they, along with such other Briggs works as the more mature *When the Wind Blows* (1982), have been re-marketed as graphic novels in the wake of the term's popularity. In 1976, the term "graphic novel" appeared in print to describe three separate works. *Chandler: Red Tide* by Jim Steranko, published in August 1976 under the Fiction Illustrated imprint and released in both regular 8.5 x 11" size, and a digest size designed to be sold on newsstands, used the term "graphic novel" in its introduction and "a visual novel" on its cover, predating by two years the usage of this term for Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*. It is therefore considered the first modern graphic novel to be done as an original work, and not collected from previously published segments.

Bloodstar by Richard Corben (adapted from a story by Robert E. Howard), *Morning Star Press*, 1976, also a non-reprinted original presentation, used the term 'graphic novel' to categorize itself as well on its dust jacket and introduction. George Metzger's *Beyond Time and Again*, serialized in underground comix from 1967 to 1972, was subtitled "A Graphic Novel" on the inside title page when collected as a 48-page, black-and-white, hardcover book published by Kyle & Wheary. The first six issues of writer-artist Jack Katz's 1974 Comics and Comix Co. series *The First Kingdom* were collected as a trade paperback (Pocket Books, March 1978), which described itself as the

first graphic novel. Issues of the comic had described themselves as graphic prose, or simply as a novel.

Another early graphic novel, though it carried no self-description, was *The Silver Surfer* (Simon & Schuster/Fireside Books, August 1978), by Marvel Comics' Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. Significantly, this was published by a traditional book publisher and distributed through bookstores, as was cartoonist Jules Feiffer's *Tantrum* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) described on its dust jacket as a "novel-in-pictures" (Gravett 78). Hyperbolic descriptions of longer comic books as novels appear on covers as early as the 1940s. Early issues of DC Comics' *All-Flash*, for example, described their contents as "novel-length stories" and "full-length four chapter novels"(Hatfield 45)

In its earliest known citation, comic-book reviewer Richard Kyle used the term "graphic novel" in *Capa-Alpha* (November 1964), a newsletter published by the Comic Amateur Press Alliance. Kyle, inspired by European and East Asian graphic albums (especially Japanese manga), used the label to designate comics of an artistically 'serious' sort. Following this, Spicer, with Kyle's acknowledgment, edited and published a periodical titled *Graphic Story Magazine* in the fall of 1967.

The critical and commercial success of *A Contract with God* helped to establish the term graphic novel in common usage, and many sources have incorrectly credited Eisner with being the first to use it. These included the Time magazine website in 2003, which said in its correction: "Eisner acknowledges that the term 'graphic novel' had been coined prior to his book. But, he says, 'I had not known at the time that someone had used that term before'. Nor does he take credit for creating the first graphic book" (Time). One of the earliest contemporaneous applications of the term post-Eisner came in

1979, when *Blackmark's* sequel, published a year after *A Contract with God* though written and drawn in the early 1970s, was labeled a graphic novel on the cover of Marvel Comics' black- and-white comics magazine *Marvel Preview* (Winter 1979), where *Blackmark: The Mind Demons* premiered: its 117-page contents remained intact, but its panel-layout reconfigured to fit 62 pages.

Between 1982 and 1988, Marvel published the *Marvel Graphic Novel* series, trade paperbacks measuring 10" × 7" and sequentially numbered like comic books, beginning with #1, *The Death of Captain Marvel* by Jim Starlin, and concluding with #35, Hitler's *Astrologer* by Dennis O'Neil, Mike Kaluta, and Russ Heath. The final volume, released in hardcover, featured the pulp-era character *The Shadow*. Marvel commissioned original works from prominent creators including John Byrne, J. M. DeMatteis, Steve Gerber, graphic novel pioneer Don McGregor, Frank Miller, Bill Sienkiewicz, Walt Simonson, Charles Vess, and Bernie Wrightson. While many of these graphic novels spotlighted Marvel superheroes, others explored new ground, such as Rick Veitch's *Heartburst*, which introduced original science fiction/fantasy characters. Some works adapted classic literature, like John J. Muth's *Dracula*, while others, like Sam Glanzman's *A Sailor's Story*, depicted real-life events, in this case, a World War II naval memoir.

Cartoonist Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (1980-91), helped establish both the term and the concept of graphic novels in the minds of the mainstream public. Two DC Comics book reprints of self-contained miniseries did likewise, though they were not originally published as graphic novels: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), a collection of Frank Miller's four-part comic-book series featuring an older

Batman faced with the problems of a dystopian future; and *Watchmen* (1986-1987), a collection of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' 12-issue limited series in which Moore notes he "set out to explore, amongst other things, the dynamics of power in a post-Hiroshima world" (Moore, qtd. in Gravett 88). These works and others were reviewed in newspapers and magazines, leading to increased coverage. Sales of graphic novels increased, with *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, for example, lasting 40 weeks on a UK best-seller list. Writer-artist Bryan Talbot claims that the first collection of his *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright*, published by Prouitt in 1982, was the first British graphic novel. American comic critics have occasionally referred to European graphic as Euro-comics, and attempts were made in the late 1980s to cross-fertilize the American market with these works. American publishers Catalan Communications and NBM Publishing released translated titles, predominantly from the backlog catalogs of Casterman and Les Humanoïdes Associés.

Graphic novels appeared in the Indian literary tradition during the advent of 20th century. In order to reach the main stream it had to struggle so much to gain recognition. Also, there were some scholars who believed the genre of graphic novels as not an established part of serious literature because of its origin as comic books. However, graphic novels have evolved from both thematic and artistic style and tries to move away from the traditional style of comic books. In the Indian scenario, the most internationally acknowledged comic series *Amar Chitra Katha* pioneered this form. This was a comic series started in 1967, by Anant Pai. It was more culture oriented focusing on the narratives from Hindu mythology and nationalism. Soon, the first Indian graphic novel was published as a successor of these comic series, which was *River of stories* by Orjit

Sen in 1994. This novel focused on the socio-political concerns during the construction of a dam across the river Narmada. Simultaneously, the 20th century witnessed the advent of many graphic novel publishers such as *Pop Culture Publishing House*, *Vimanika comics*, *Campfire comics*, *Arkin Comics*, *Liquid Comics*, etc. This was predominantly because of the impact of the western graphic novels and an increase in the consumer culture (Monika). E. Dawson Varughese points out that graphic novels in India invite readers to engage with a range of “ideas, critiques and notions of Indian identity”(Varughese 6). Those acclaimed authors like Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Sarnath Banerjee, Amruta Patil, Prateek Thomas and others through their themes and narratives of Graphic novels played a pivotal role in changing the perception of Indian comics and graphic novels by making it a reflection of the prevalent socio-cultural realities.

Today, Graphic novels deal with a wide-ranging issue, which includes the socio-cultural and political scenario. They eventually began to represent the issues like partition, sexual abuse, migration and so on. Like other novels, they also try to redefine and reinterpret things by challenging the mythical narratives. By these attempts they thrive to free themselves from the clutches of their comic traces, which are still curbed regarding their subject matter.

In the Kerala context, critics have found out that the tradition of Graphic novels began from the comic strip by G. Aravindan, titled, *Cheriyā manushyarum valiya lokavum*. This has been believed to be published 17 years before Will Eisner’s publication of *A Contract with God*. The eminent cartoonist and graphic narrator E. P. Unny has claimed that “This is such a medium which could bring those people who were used to good reading but departed from it, back to reading” (Sudhakaran). Writer N. S.

Madhavan observed that Graphic novels are now a part of the mainstream literature though it evolved as a voice of protest in the 1970s and was initially a part of the underground literature. He feels quite happy about this positive change in the reading habits of the natives of Kerala. , This project aims to study the Malayalam graphic novel '*Pannimalathu*' by Joshy Benedict, an artist and animator from Kerala. The novel has been translated into English as *The Pig Flip* by K.K. Muralidharan.

The graphic novel, *Pannimalathu* delves into the world of gambling dens, the human proclivity later turns to be addictive and gets trapped in the dark cave of death. The novel depicts the addiction of the protagonist Babycha towards a card game called *Spot Flip*. Babycha's words regarding his addictive game. Joshy Benedict says *Pannimalathu* is a card game popular in the villages of Kerala. He himself has witnessed his own village gamblers losing their minds and money to it. This is a game which is based solely on luck and requires zero talent. Benedict remarks, who is from Pulloorampara, a hillside village about 40kms from Kozhikode city.

Joshy Benedict's second graphic novel is titled *Koprachevu* which is very different in treatment and style and uses more visuals than texts. Although, after becoming a successful Graphic novelist, Joshy Benedict claims that Graphic novel is still a niche and the industry has not yet utilized its potential.



Fig.1 Benedict Joshy. *Pannimalathu*. 2020, *The Hindu*

Chapter Two

Theme, Character, and Canvas: A Critical Reading of *Pannimalathu*

Joshy Benedict's *Pannimalathu* is a milestone in the development of Indian graphic narratives, if not specifically in Malayalam literature. Where the majority of Indian comics have traditionally been stuck in retellings of myth, folklore, or heroic fantasy, *Pannimalathu* takes a different route. *Pannimalathu* avoids the spectacle and the mythical and opts for an uncomfortable realism based on the social and psychological environment of Kerala. By avoiding the fantastical and instead anchoring himself in the day-to-day details of emotional disintegration, Benedict creates a tale that is both regionally specific and internationally relatable. At its core is a scorching investigation into a richly human, richly fissured hero, Babycha, a man of conflicted personal failure and societal duty, self-destruction and the dim possibility of redemption. The visual and textual blending that is the graphic novel genre makes the narrative's medium itself become not merely a transmission system but part of the psychological and thematic content. A story results, but an emotional landscape remains, done in roughed-out ink, unbalanced paneling, tonal discord, and visual metaphor. In its rejection of aestheticizing pain or sanitizing human weaknesses, the novel achieves an artistic maturity that is rare in Indian graphic writing.

Benedict spurns addicting addiction as a device for plot or a moral flaw. Addiction is in *Pannimalathu* a social affliction, a deep-seated hurt, not a condition that can be cured quickly by family intervention or ritual reclamation. Babycha's gambling disease is not merely an individual failing but a sign of something greater, a chronic emotional and psychological dislocation brought about by class unease,

masculine insecurity, and a culture that provides little outlet for recovery. His backsliding after marriage indicates not a collapse of willpower but the limitation of external efforts at reform. Benedict catches the compulsive cycle of addiction, the high, the crash, the short respite of abstinence, and the inevitable recurrence to disorder. In doing so, he reflects actual patterns of relapse and recovery, transcending any linear or redemptive narrative structure. The narrative rhythm therefore resists traditional storytelling, instead functioning through repetition and break, in keeping with the nature of trauma itself. The outcome is a hero who provokes sympathy not pity, whose inner turmoil is an embodied representation of the knotted life of mental illness and societal dysfunction in modern Kerala. Benedict's realism is unsentimental but not clinical, intimate but not self-indulgent, painful but not gratuitous.

Through Babycha, the novel addresses the troubled performances of masculinity. His desire to be perceived as competent, dignified, and powerful is again and again undercut by his actual failures and by his failure to reconcile fantasy and reality. *Pannimalathu's* masculinity has nothing to do with power or stoicism, but rather with the draining and often self-destructive performance of such ideals. Babycha does not wish to work in pig farming not because the work is beneath him in any logical sense, but because he has inculcated a class-based contempt for manual labor. This opposition is multi-layered it not only reflects his individual insecurities but also a deeper critique of the ways in which caste, class, and labor are interconnected in the socio-cultural nexus of Kerala. The agricultural economy of his village provides material sustenance, but he turns it down for empty fantasies of mobility and legitimacy through urban consumption. This turning away from rootedness is both individual tragedy and collective shame. In articulating against such a frame of mind, Benedict reveals the psychic cost of class shame and how it

deforms the conditions of survival and dignity. The novel's understated probing of masculinity also intersects with issues of power, exposure, and performance, articulating a crisis of male identity worldwide in societies suspended between tradition and neoliberal desire.

Juxtaposed with Babycha's ferocity is Paulikutty, his wife, whose introverted strength emerges as perhaps the most affecting aspect of the story. Her silences are not absence but accumulation, a thick reserve of sorrow, rage, stamina, and affective labor. She does not rage or abandon him, but she is not a passive presence either. Paulikutty becomes a conduit through which the novel says a lot about gendered economies of care. While Babycha disintegrates publicly, she keeps the private space intact by stoic endurance. Her strength is then a counter-narrative to Babycha's breakdown, showing how women are usually compelled to maintain dignity in the face of emotional wreck. Benedict presents her not as a martyr but as a quietly radical woman, a survivor who endures not through submission, but through a muted resistance that serves to protect herself as well as the domestic space. Her emotional resilience does not obfuscate her pain, but rather indicates a more sophisticated kind of agency, one not often rewarded but essential in the texture of daily life. She emerges as the moral axis of the novel, not by exerting control, but by surviving chaos without sacrificing her identity.

The narrative structure of *Pannimalathu* supports its motifs of instability and psychological disintegration. Instead of a chronological account, the novel is presented through fractured timelines, memories intrude upon the present, dreams bleed into reality, and episodes of trauma recur with varied emotional intensity. This stylistic option echoes the functioning of trauma: not as a locked-away past action, but as an ever- reemerging wound that breaks temporal continuity. Transitions happen

without textual prompts, requiring a intuitive response from the reader. These jumps characteristic of film, typically lacking explanatory frames, immerse us in Babycha's mind frame and produce a subjective world in which completeness is unattainable and time loops back upon itself. The text invites us to experience disorientation, not just observe it, placing us within the emotional architecture of a fractured consciousness. This technique draws from both filmic language and modernist literary aesthetics, creating a hybrid form of storytelling that only the graphic novel medium can adequately express. It resists closure, favors ambiguity, and thrives in the interstices of memory and immediacy, inviting a deeper form of readerly engagement.

Sound or its silence serves as a significant sensory plane in *Panimalathu*. Benedict uses a soundscape of sound, silence, ambient sound, onomatopoeia, and hinted auditory presence to chart Babycha's world of mind and society. The sonic world of the novel traverses the village din and the bazaar brashness to the pigs' gruesome grunt and the intimating silence of wedded alienation. The periods of absolute silence frames without dialogue or ambient text have specific emotional significance, frequently signifying moments of inner retreat, repression, or introspection. Silence, in Benedict's directorial skill, is never an absence. It is rather a character unto itself: a carrier of unstated truths, an emblem for social and emotional stasis, and a place of narrative authority. These soundscapes, or their intentional erasure, enrich the novel's emotional depth, placing us in the stifling quiet of desperation or the cacophonous sensory overload of public collapse. The graphic novel form, with its distinctive visual grammar, makes silence both seen and heard, its format implying the manner in which trauma defies expression.

Aesthetically, the novel adopts an unflinching, bare-bones style. Benedict's drawing style defies the smoothness of digital sleekness; his lines are jagged, his

compositions unbalanced, his textures lovingly analog. Far from being a deficiency of refinement, it is an active choice of form and theme. The smudged ink, ragged edges, and twisted panels mirror the turmoil within Babycha's own psyche. The painting itself is an emotional reflection, its visual roughness and blemishes mirroring the psychic scars of its inhabitants. Another compelling narrative device employed by Benedict is the use of object motifs seemingly mundane items that accrue symbolic weight through repetition and context. The playing cards, for instance, are not simply tools of Babycha's addiction but function as metaphors for fate, randomness, and the illusion of control. Similarly, the repeated depiction of worn-out slippers, alcohol bottles, broken clocks, and household objects point to the gradual erosion of domestic stability and the piling up of personal neglect. These objects serve as externalized representations of internal decay. Their prominence across the panels invites the reader to interpret them not merely as background props but as active participants in the story. Benedict's mastery lies in allowing the inanimate to speak each item carrying emotional residue, thus enriching the layered texture of the visual narrative.

The haptic materiality of the images makes the process of reading more intense, inviting us to a world not stylized for consumption but drawn with the rough integrity of confession. The visual grammar of *Pannimalathu* tells us what words cannot: emotional textures, spatial metaphors, fragmentation of the psyche. The deliberate choice of monochromatic or subdued color schemes in *Pannimalathu* also merits attention. Benedict does not use color merely for aesthetic pleasure but as a psychological and narrative tool. The palette tends to oscillate between earthy browns, muted grays, and jarring blacks, evoking the mood of a life in slow decay. These shades are not neutral; they symbolize stagnation, moral ambiguity, and an environment drained of vitality. In moments of heightened emotion or hallucinatory

escapism, the visual tone may momentarily shift offering a visual jolt that mirrors Babycha's psychological oscillation between numbness and frenzy. The absence of vibrant hues speaks not only to the bleakness of his circumstances but also to a larger commentary on how the color of life itself is sapped when one is trapped in cycles of emotional deterioration. The visuals thereby become emotive spectrums, telling the story through shade, contrast, and visual weight rather than relying solely on plot or dialogue. It is as if the graphic novel itself was disintegrating as its hero disintegrates, each page showing the wounds of its own creation. This visual susceptibility is a compelling narrative power, as the tactility of the shape reinforces the intangibility of pain.

The pig figure from which the work gets its name is charged with symbolic meaning. Pigs, in most cultural systems, are associated with filth, debasement, or bestiality. In *Panimalathu*, however, the pig stands in a more nuanced position. The pig is at once food and bane. It marks the potential for grounded toil and the specter of social disrepute. Babycha's dislike of pig farming is not a distaste for the animal, but for what it stands for, a challenge to his socio-economic status and a reflection of his own perceived abjection. The pig serves as a synecdoche for Babycha himself: abjected, misinterpreted, at once required and disavowed. There is a quiet reworking here of the biblical parable of the prodigal son. Babycha comes home, not with fanfare and forgiveness, but to a life that insists on confrontation, humility, and a readiness to interact with the very things he has run away from. The pig, in this respect, is a symbol of redemption denied, a reminder of the material conditions that hold nonetheless independent of narrative desire.

Furthermore, the animal imagery in *Panimalathu* deserves closer scrutiny. Beyond the central pig symbolism, animals, both domesticated and wild appear at key

moments, reinforcing thematic currents. Crows perch ominously during moments of despair; stray dogs roam scenes of loneliness or collapse. These animals, though marginal in literal terms, function as atmospheric agents. They contribute to the graphic novel's ecology of discomfort, reminding us that in this world, even nature is not neutral it reflects, absorbs, and sometimes amplifies human suffering. In this regard, *Pannimalathu* stands apart from other graphic novels by developing not only human-centered stories but a broader environmental realism where non-human elements function as emotional barometers.

Benedict's refusal to offer neat moral resolutions distinguishes *Pannimalathu* from standard stories of addiction and redemption. There is no climactic change, no neat rehabilitation, no denouement that makes the pain significant. Instead, the novel describes a world where healing, if at all, is done silently, in stillness, or not at all. This lack of moral resolution positions the work within a more mature, psychologically realistic literary tradition. Babycha is not absolved, nor is he entirely condemned. He remains suspended in a complex moral terrain where compassion and critique coexist. Benedict invites the reader not to judge, but to witness a more difficult and humane task. The story's emotional honesty lies in its unwillingness to fabricate hope where none exists. It resists instrumentalizing trauma, instead depicting it as a condition of existence rather than a narrative obstacle to be surmounted. The strength of the novel is that it refuses to settle into pain without resolving it.

Memory works as an almost ghostly presence in the work. The novel is haunted not by supernatural ghosts, but by the presence of past decisions, mistakes, and unmentioned regrets. The look of memory becomes dreamlike: sepia tonal values, blurred edges, softened lines. These are visual signals that differentiate the past not as apart from the present, but as mixed in with it. Memory becomes a contaminant that

interrupts the passage of time and the potential for renewal. It intrudes in the present without authorization, transforming even everyday moments into places of emotional ambush. This ubiquitous presence of the past makes *Pannimalathu* not just a psychological novel but one that is temporal in nature, whereby each present moment becomes haunted by what previously existed. Time, according to Benedict's imagination, is neither linear nor redemptive but circular and haunted by ghosts.

The North Kerala rural landscape is not a mere background but a living, breathing figure in the novel. The physical texture of the village, its close-set houses, its shared rhythm, its generational conflict composes the social landscape in which the characters live and fail. Benedict is fastidious about environmental detail: how smoke uncurls from a kitchen, the specific design of a pigsty, the winding of tight lanes that direct rumor and suspicion along with rainwater. This local detail reinforces the emotional realism of the novel. The village is both surveillance state and place of groundedness, a location where privacy is an illusion and all failure is exposed. This spatial psychology is used by Benedict to criticize the manner in which community nourishes but also annihilates, offering bond as well as imposing conformity and judgment. One of the greatest strengths of this novel is cultural specificity. In its idiomatic dialogue, in its representation of local traditions, in its visual rendering of home and agrarian landscapes, *Pannimalathu* establishes a regional voice that stands against the forces of homogenization of urban Anglophone narratives. It adheres to the aesthetics of vernacular narration, intimate, situated, polyphonic.

Joshy Benedict's refusal to cater to either commercial expectations or sanitized representations is also a subtle but powerful political gesture. The novel's very existence challenges the boundaries of what is considered "literature" within the Malayalam canon. In a state where literary culture has traditionally valorized prose,

poetry, and politically engaged drama, a graphic novel focusing on internal trauma and existential decay might have easily been dismissed. Yet, *Pannimalathu* forces its readers and its critics to rethink the hierarchy of forms. By choosing the graphic novel format to tell a story of social breakdown, Benedict asserts that visual language is not secondary to verbal language but capable of equal, if not deeper, psychological articulation. This intervention into literary form marks the novel not just as content-driven, but as formally subversive and hence culturally significant. This embeddedness does not constrain the novel's universality; instead, it is through its rooted particularity that it gathers force. It's addressed to the daily tragedies and the silent heroism that characterize life in any society in which dignity has to be struggled. For, silently as a rule, and in which redemption, if it occurs at all, is gradual, incomplete, and unnoticed.

The hallucinatory sequence of the "*Island of Gamblers*" constitutes a turning point in the film's visual register. Here, Benedict breaks out of the rural realism of the village to descend into a hallucinatory world of twisted colors and collapsed time. This dream-world, in which the gamblers float with no anchor, becomes a visual analogue for Babycha's psychic breakdown. Time no longer operates, logic disintegrates, and morality is irrelevant. The island is an environment of complete escapism, but of complete isolation. It is the temptation and destruction of addiction, a sanctuary that gradually turns into a trap. The contrast with the earthy textures of the village heightens the tension between fantasy and responsibility that propels

Babycha's crisis. Spatial metaphors are used throughout the novel to devastating effect. Closed-in interiors, dark places, cramped passageways, and messy rooms resonate with Babycha's mounting sense of imprisonment. Mirrors, when they materialize, promise moments of intolerable self-knowing; doorways provide the

illusion of egress but inevitably back into recurrence. These visual tropes build a world where space itself appears to work against cure. The influence of cinema particularly Malayalam New Wave and neorealism can also be felt in the pacing and framing of the panels. Long silences, still frames, abrupt cuts, and atmospheric buildups resemble the grammar of auteurs like Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Shaji N. Karun. The novel's editing rhythm is neither fast-paced nor action-driven; it is instead meditative, observational, and disjunctive, allowing space for ambiguity and reflection. This cinematic sensibility enhances the narrative's immersive quality, blurring the lines between comic and film, image and memory. The absence of sensational sound effects or melodramatic visuals contributes to the novel's quiet intensity a silence that demands attention rather than being merely an absence of noise. Isolation is not only affective but also architectural. We can find in these frames the way in which the form of the graphic novel allows for a multi-sensory language of the interior in which emotions are not only presented in dialogue or narrative, but in the very turns and enclosures of the page.

The visual grammar of *Pannimalathu* plays a crucial role in constructing the inner lives of its characters. Panels vary not just in size but in weight, density, and border style, signaling shifts in emotional tone. Jagged panel edges often accompany scenes of mental turmoil or violent memory; stark black frames are reserved for episodes of despair. Benedict utilizes these formal elements with a cinematic instinct, his pacing, his use of flashbacks, and his manipulation of white space create a rhythm that mirrors the psychological ebb and flow of the characters. There are entire sequences in which the lack of text forces the reader to dwell within the visual, allowing time to dilate. These moments are not narrative pauses but immersive descents into affective depth. It is here that the graphic novel format reveals its unique

capacity for psychological realism.

There is no religion to be found in *Pannimalathu*. In an area commonly defined by its ritual abundance and religious infrastructure, the novel presents a very noticeable silence. No divine will is invoked, no salvation by spiritual authorities. This lack implies a world in which meaning institutions, religious, familial, or communal have nothing meaningful to say when confronted with psychic suffering. The ethics of the novel are humanist, based on sympathy rather than creed. In this moral world, redemption is a function of within or nothing at all, and understanding must supplant judgment as ultimate engagement. Even the role of the community in the story is dualistic. Although Babycha's family and neighbors frequently demonstrate concern or provide aid, it comes in the context of systems of surveillance and control. Their love is tangled up with gossip, their interventions with judging. A recurring motif in the novel is that of failed escape. Babycha is frequently depicted in transitional spaces, bus stops, train platforms, junctions but movement never delivers him from his condition. These are not spaces of transition but traps of circularity. In a striking sequence, he boards a bus intending to leave but ends up returning without having gone anywhere. The journey becomes metaphorical, emphasizing the futility of escape when internal torment remains unaddressed. This failure of mobility critiques the illusion of geographic change as emotional solution, a theme that resonates with a larger postmodern condition where movement does not guarantee transformation. Benedict uses physical space as an extension of psychological space, and in doing so, maps the internal collapse onto the external environment. Benedict diagnoses the ways in which societies tend to consume members' suffering as narrative entertainment. Babycha is as much a social narrative figure as he is an individual in distress. This strand of theme reaches its culmination in the pig-killing

scenes a moment that amalgamates the novel's metaphors of flesh, work, sacrifice, and exposure. In the pig's death, we see a kind of dissection that reflects Babycha's own coming apart.

Body language is meticulously detailed in *Pannimalathu*, often replacing the need for dialogue. Babycha's slouched posture, drooping eyes, and dragging feet communicate more than any internal monologue might. His body becomes the primary site of narrative, marked by fatigue, desperation, and disintegration. In one panel, he is drawn sitting alone on the threshold of a doorway, half in light and half in shadow. This framing is not incidental; it visualizes his existential in-betweenness, his suspension between belonging and exile, hope and despair. Such visual storytelling elevates the body to a narrative medium, much like in classical theatre or dance, where posture and gesture signify inner truth. Benedict's attention to corporeality ties into broader themes of labor, exhaustion, and bodily decay under social and emotional pressure.

The linguistic choices in *Pannimalathu* deserve special attention. Far from using sanitized or standardized Malayalam, the dialogue is richly idiomatic, laden with colloquialisms, rural inflections, and cultural specificity that resist easy translation. This use of dialect not only grounds the characters but also extends the novel's realism. Language here becomes a living force, reflective of social class, generational conflict, and emotional repression. Unlike many Indian comics that rely on English or code-switching to appeal to a pan-national readership, *Pannimalathu* remains unapologetically local. Even its silence is culturally located, the spaces between speech, the hesitations, the unsaid are all expressions of a cultural context where affect is often buried rather than voiced. Any translation of the novel would face the difficult task of capturing these nuances, underscoring the linguistic richness

that makes the novel so rooted in place and community.

The novel's resistance to linearity not only structures its plot but also asks the reader to adopt an entirely different mode of attention. Reading *Pannimalathu* is not a passive act; it requires the reader to move between fragmented timelines, visual metaphors, and non-verbal sequences. This is not merely a stylistic flourish but a form of narrative ethics. Trauma, addiction, and emotional rupture do not follow a linear path, and neither does the novel. The reader is asked to mimic the mental disarray of the protagonist to feel disoriented, delayed, even frustrated. In doing so, the graphic novel form achieves something that prose often cannot: it draws the reader into a temporality of suffering that is cyclical, repetitive, and unresolved.

Pannimalathu also speaks intertextually to other Malayalam cultural narratives of shame, failure, and marginalization. There are echoes of O.V. Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Itihasam* in its treatment of rural alienation and mysticism, and one might detect a distant kinship with M.T. Vasudevan Nair's focus on familial disappointment and inner disquiet. Benedict does not mimic these predecessors but reworks their concerns within a different form and a different era. The influence of contemporary Malayalam cinema, especially the "New Wave" realist style, is also apparent, with its emphasis on texture, mood, and silence. The novel thus sits within a continuum of Malayali artistic expressions of existential malaise, but distinguishes itself by harnessing the comic-book form for serious, slow-burning reflection.

The act of re-reading becomes essential, not to unlock a hidden meaning, but to sit with what remains broken. Critics and fellow artists have lauded *Pannimalathu* as a major contribution to Indian graphic literature. Sarnath Banerjee called it "a significant milestone," and acclaimed Malayalam writer Paul Zacharia described it as

“an arresting chronicle... enchanting and haunting.” Such endorsements reflect a broader shift in the perception of graphic novels within Kerala’s literary circles. Prominent cartoonist E.P. Unny has emphasized the medium’s potential to revitalize reading habits in an era of declining attention spans, while author N.S. Madhavan has argued for the inclusion of graphic novels in serious literary discourse, going so far as to propose that Art Spiegelman be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Finally, *Pannimalathu* evades closure. Its last shots defy the neat resolutions of traditional fiction. If there is redemption, it is partial, uncertain, and intimate. This decision confirms the novel's devotion to realism, not as a style but as an ethics. Its characters' struggles are continuous, unsolved, and profoundly human. In depicting addiction, shame, and emotional survival without melodrama or moralization, Benedict has not only written a great story, he has transformed what the Malayalam graphic novel can do. There are moments in the novel when nature, typically associated with healing, is turned ominous. The rain, for instance, does not cleanse; it seeps into roofs and destroys belongings. Trees cast shadows that elongate loneliness rather than offer refuge. Nighttime brings not calm but hallucination. This inversion of the natural order reflects the thematic concern that the external world has turned indifferent or even hostile to Babycha’s suffering. The Kerala landscape, often romanticized in literature and tourism, is here stripped of such exoticization. It is instead rendered as a terrain that neither consoles nor condemns. This aesthetic decision complicates pastoral imaginaries and aligns the novel with a grittier, more truthful realism. *Pannimalathu* does not simply recount a tale; it acts it out in every brush, every blank space, every shattered panel. It welcomes us into the richness of a life disintegrating and challenges us to stay on, to bear witness, to feel.

The theme of surveillance, both external and internal, operates subtly

throughout the text. Babycha is not just watched by others; he watches himself through a lens of internalized judgment. Mirrors, reflections in water, or even the eyes of animals become sites of uncomfortable self-recognition. This motif deepens the portrayal of psychological fragmentation: the addict as both actor and audience of his own ruin. The graphic form allows for creative play with this theme, double panels, split frames, and recursive visuals all reinforce this duality. The viewer's gaze is doubled: we see Babycha seeing himself, and in doing so, are forced into complicity. This layered seeing builds a reflexive ethics into the act of reading, where empathy replaces voyeurism.



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4

Chapter Three

Panels over Paragraphs: Narrative Reconstruction in *Pannimalathu*

The shift from the conventional prose novel to the form of the graphic novel is more than mere surface-level transformation of form; it is a complete restructuring of the processes by which narratives are imagined, shaped, communicated, and finally received by readers. The change entails not merely exchanging paragraphs for panels or substituting internal monologues for visualization but rather requires a rethinking of narrative architecture itself. As Will Eisner, one of the creators of the graphic novel, observes in *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), "the format of the comic book and graphic novel is not merely an alternate method of storytelling, it is a unique language in itself." (Eisner 8). When a narrative crosses over from an exclusively verbal form to one where text is combined with sequential pictures, it is not just the narrative methods that are altered; the texture of the story, its affective tone, interpretive freedom, and emotional rhythm is readjusted as well. Within the context of Indian literature, in which oral and literary cultures have traditionally given the primacy to the written form, the emergence of the graphic novel mode is both a disruption and a rethinking. This is particularly pertinent for regional literatures such as Malayalam, which have conventionally formed their own narrative aesthetics within linguistic and cultural particularities.

In this environment, Joshy Benedict's *Pannimalathu* is a revolutionary book, not only in being one of the first serious Malayalam graphic novels, but in how it illustrates that change in medium can redefine the experience and potential of storytelling. The narrative of Babycha, the disturbed protagonist caught up in gambling, family pathology, and social isolation, would have been existentially

distinct, possibly less effective had it been presented entirely through prose. Benedict's calculated deployment of sequential art, watercolour illustrations, and visual metaphor performs an existential rewriting of narrative logic, tone, and reader involvement.

At its core lies the graphic novel's insistence on the pre-eminence of the visual as a storytelling force. In a prose novel, the writer constructs the world through words, depending on the reader's imagination to see characters, places, and feelings. The process is interior, interpretive, and mediated through the language code. Conversely, the graphic novel outsources this visualisation, taking the reader along a scripted visual landscape wherein colors, lines, spatial configurations, and panel order structure the way the story is interpreted. According to graphic novelist Alan Moore, "Comics are a medium that can do things no other medium can do just as every medium has its own unique properties." Gravet 86) In *Pannimalathu*, Benedict's watercolor paintings are not decorative but narrative-engaged. The instability of the medium, the bleeding of the colours, wobbling of lines and unevenness of spaces reflects the inner turbulence of the characters. Babycha's mental turmoil is expressed through the lack of stability in form: pages break apart when subjected to emotional pressure, colours weaken with despair and spatial deviations reflect his loss of balance. These visual methods convey significance on their own without text and complement it, offering a two-way channel of narration that prose can try to mimic but never with the same urgency or impact.

This immediacy allows for an intense form of emotional resonance. Where prose may spend many words explaining the emotional state of a character through description, metaphor, or internal monologue, the graphic novel can convey affect in the space of one panel. Half-shadowed face of Babycha, eyes evading the reader's

gaze, brushstrokes bleeding into the background is like the inexpressible complexity of shame, fear, and resignation. Silence is eloquent at these moments. Benedict often avoids dialogue and narration itself, letting the image speak on its own terms. These silences in the image are not vacuums; they are heavily loaded with implication and mood. As Pulitzer Prize-winning author Art Spiegelman of *Maus* once put it: "Comics are a way of seeing. It's not just drawing; it's a way of making the invisible visible.(Miller 98)" They engage the reader in the arena of interpretive closeness, where meaning is not delivered but rather has to be gathered. This is an important departure from prose, which tends to value clarity, coherence, and psychological accessibility. The graphic novel, on the other hand, accepts ambiguity and calls upon the reader to become more active in meaning construction.

This is facilitated by the formal nature of comics, which lays out narrative in fragmented form, panels that the reader must link both logically and emotionally. This process, called "closure" by comics theory, asks the reader to complete gaps between panels and to infer what occurs in the gutters, the spaces between the images. Scott McCloud, in his early work *Understanding Comics* (1993), describes that this act of interpretation is where a lot of the meaning in comics is produced: "In the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea."(McCloud 66) In *Pannimalathu*, Benedict tends to create emotionally intense moments through discontinuous panelling, where significant transitions take place in the gaps between pictures rather than in them. For example, Babycha's fall into debt is not recounted in a straight-forward chronology of incidents, but by fragmented images: a shaking hand, a dropped coin, a figure in the shadows bending forward. The reader has to fill in the gaps and reconstruct what has happened, making an implication montage. This disjointed narrative style reflects the disjointed psyche

of the protagonist, and thus the form fulfils the content in ways that prose's linear temporality cannot help but fall short.

There is also a quiet but important formal experiment in how *Pannimalathu* approaches gaze, both the character's gaze and the readers. Benedict regularly interrupts the traditional eye-line matches of comics, in which the direction of characters' gazes usually directs the reader's own. Rather, Babycha tends to gaze away, down, or into empty space, withholding the reader of sharp visual impressions. This establishes an impression of affective withdrawal and alienation that aligns with the character's state of isolation. Conversely, when other characters do lock eyes with the reader, the impact is typically aggressive, disrupting the taken-for-granted distance between reader and narrative. These affective manipulations of vision are profoundly discomfiting, creating feelings of discomfort, sympathy, or resistance in the reader. In prose, look needs to be described, told. In the graphic novel, look is sensed, immediate, bodily, and conversationally. The reader is not simply watching the character but is included in the visual economy of the text.

Time itself is treated differently in graphic novels. Whereas prose fiction will usually depend on paragraph separation, chapter breakdowns, and adverbs of time to indicate passage through time, the comic book is able to implode, contrast, and recycle temporalities within one page. Benedict exploits all of this in *Pannimalathu*, where past and present frequently exist simultaneously in cross-over panels or hazy background layers. Babycha's memories break into visions of the present, generating a form of temporal layering which refuses to be lined up chronologically. This is reminiscent of how trauma works not as a linear memory but as an ongoing emotional trace. A panel could show Babycha silently sitting at a kitchen table, surrounded by ghostly visions of his childhood, unannotated and uncommented. These temporal

interruptions are not just matters of stylistic flair; they are narrative tools that express psychological reality. Thierry Groensteen's theory of spatialised time in *The System of Comics* (2007) applies: comics can structure time on the page so that it becomes legible, manipulable, and affective so that it becomes legible, manipulable, and affective (Groensteen 147) Benedict's manipulation of temporal forms in *Panimalathu* therefore deepens the reader's identification with the fractured psyche of his hero, enabling time to become a figural aspect instead of a background limit.

The emotional depth of the graphic novel is also enhanced by its potential to mobilize metaphor and symbolism visually. Benedict's tendency to reuse particular motifs, the pig, the mud, the electric bulb flicker serves both a narrative and a metaphorical purpose. The pig, central to title and subject of the novel, is not just a member of Babycha's family enterprise but a sign of debasement, confinement, and reluctant self-identification. It is a presence that intrudes, appearing again and again even where not directly pertinent to the action of the scene. At times in the background, at times as part of Babycha's hallucinations, at times in abstract, as smear or silhouette. This symbolic richness would be hard to achieve in prose, where such repetition could feel forced or heavy-handed. In comics, however, repetition feels organic, built visually into the space and pacing of the page. As Hillary Chute contends in *Graphic Women* (2010), "The image in comics is capable of layering and refracting meaning in ways that extend beyond what prose can convey alone."that it becomes legible, manipulable, and affective kazhnj (Groensteen 147) The mud caked around the feet of the characters, the water that threatens to overflow their bottom-level abode, and the flickering lightbulb that goes out when there are confrontations these and other such details build into a visual grammar of desperation. These are not merely props or backgrounds; they are part of a symbolic system that speaks in image

rather than in exposition, adding resonance to thematic material in ways that textual description might overdetermine. This density of symbol means that *Pannimalathu* is able to touch on wider social and political themes without being forced to compromise narrative nuance.

Questions of caste-coded work, economic decline, duty to family, and masculine anxiety emerge organically via the images. There is no overt moralizing; rather, the social critique is woven into the textures of the worlds Benedict describes. The pig farming business of the family, for example, is visually coded as shame and resistance. Characters are depicted scrubbing pens in alleyways, not looking people in the eye, scrubbing themselves compulsively afterwards. These scenes ring true to the social shame of particular types of labour in Kerala's caste hierarchy, a truth that prose could not easily express without its becoming didactic. Being forced into visual tropes, Benedict can indicate the emotional costs of such realities without ever describing them outright, maintaining narrative sophistication while enhancing thematic resonance. The end result is a socially conscious narrative whose emotional complexity and aesthetic refinement remain intact.

The material environment of *Pannimalathu* is also a bearer of meaning. Kerala is made out not as a promotional landscape of palm trees and backwaters, but as a lived-in, frequently cluttered space figured by decay and overgrowth. Benedict's Kerala is close, textured, and specifically detailed: cracked tiled roofs, rainy slippery alleys, the dim flicker of TV lights on peeling walls. These specifics anchor the story in a regional world both immediate and evocative. For Malayalam readers, they are instantly recognizable; for others, they serve as doors into a specific cultural world. *Pannimalathu*'s regional particularity is therefore not a barrier to its universality but the very soil on which its emotional and narrative power are constructed. Sarnath

Banerjee, one of India's best known graphic novelists, has congratulated *Pannimalathu* on its very strengths, its capacity to incorporate Malayalam social realities into international storytelling without sacrificing cultural reality. Its local soil is deeply rooted, yet it is intelligible to global readers who experience alienation, anxiety, and family fracture in their own idioms.

Another aspect transformed by the move from prose to graphic novel is the role of the reader's body in the reading process. In prose fiction, the reader occupies an ideational realm of mental involvement; language moves over time, detached from corporeal contact. With graphic novels, the process of reading becomes spatial and bodily. Not only does one need to turn pages but also move through visual fields, determine where to center, and how long to stay. In *Pannimalathu*, this bodily engagement is particularly heightened because of Benedict's sophisticated page designs. He tends to warp the grid, blur images together, or let illustrations spill out into their margins. These practices short-circuit reflexive reading rhythms and require a more bodily, active type of attention. The reader must redirect their glance randomly, left to right, top to bottom, occasionally diagonally matching Babycha's splintered mental life. Such haptic quality of reading, normally neglected in literary research, is at the core of the affective force of the graphic novel. It locates emotional and interpretive labour not just in the mind but in the body, rendering the experience of the story sensorial and immersive.

Benedict's artistic choices extend beyond content to include questions of form and material. His use of watercolour is especially significant. Unlike digital illustration or clean-line drawing, watercolour resists total control. It bleeds, it pools, it dries unpredictably. This lends a raw, emotional immediacy to the pages that matches the instability of the characters' lives. There is a kind of vulnerability

inscribed in the very material of the book. Smudgy edges, untidy tones, and textured superimpositions resonate with the tale's preoccupation with imperfection, failure, and uncertainty. The material itself constitutes the message. Marshall McLuhan's well-known maxim that "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 7) is no cliché here but an apt account of the way in which *Pannimalathu* works. It would not be possible to tell the same story in any other format; the medium is not accidental but essential. Benedict's visual aesthetic is not an aesthetic preference but a moral approach to telling. It eschews polish in favour of affect. It eschews spectacle in favour of closeness. It exchanges clarity for complication.

The result of all these strategies is a reading experience that is engaging, affective, and profoundly reflexive. The graphic novel does not require haste but encourages slowness. Every page needs to be read, not glanced; every visual signal needs to be decoded. This rhythm shifts the temporal dynamic between reader and text. Unlike prose, which may be consumed quickly, comics need a rhythm of attention that marries the cognitive with the sensory. The reader becomes not only an interpreter but also a witness, traversing visual and emotional terrain that demands reflection. Panyarachun's rhythm tracks the psychological pace of its central character: hesitant, halting, repetitive. Time in the novel doesn't move toward resolution so much as loop around episodes of trauma, shame, and momentary optimism. The lack of a discernible narrative arc or cathartic resolution also sets it apart from conventional prose fiction, in which even confusing conclusions are located within some coherent narrative schema.

Further, the filmic correspondences intrinsic to the graphic novel medium introduce new narrative potential that prose cannot help but struggle to imitate. Prose can articulate a scene with elaborate detail, but it cannot bring about the instantaneity

of a visual cut, zoom, or montage. Benedict's transitional panels in *Pannimalathu* tend to imitate cinematic techniques like jump cuts, dissolves, and close-ups, establishing a pace and rhythm typical of film that speeds up or slows down narrative time. A series of swift-cut images, Babycha lighting a beedi, the flash of fire, the widening eyes, produces a psychological leap with an economy that prose would be hard-pressed to achieve without losing pace. Sometimes Benedict creates entire sequences with very little or no text, trusting to image montage to trigger memory, fantasy, or fear. These cinematic methods inject the story with a visual grammar more in line with screen-based narrative than with the traditional book, but no less intimate than the printed page. The outcome is a hybrid look, half literary, half filmic, all graphic, one that generates a new kind of narrative rhythm specific to the form.

This hybridity also affects intertextuality, a technique that the graphic novel genre is especially suited to because of its ability to quote, parody, or refer visually to other media. Benedict quietly weaves cultural allusions into *Pannimalathu* that would be imperceptible in a novel form. A wall calendar, a product logo on a discarded package, or a fleeting fragment of conversation from a TV set, all operate as intertextual nodes, connecting the world of the story to the broader social and media environment. These allusions strengthen the illusion of reality and place the story in a familiar cultural matrix. More importantly, illustrations permit Benedict to incorporate social commentary into the fabric of his illustrated world without the effort of exposition. For instance, the ubiquity of mass-produced devotional imagery in a scene of moral decay speaks volumes about religiosity and everyday life in Kerala in visual terms created by the juxtaposition. Such multilayered referencing too often gets watered down in words, which need to do more explanatory heavy lifting. In *Pannimalathu*, however, the image does the work of the footnote, instantiating

intertextuality as close, dense, and ironic.

The physicality of the graphic novel as an object also underpins its narrative effectiveness. While prose novels tend to be printed in standardized forms and fonts that erase the physical book, *Pannimalathu* celebrates the visual and tactile specificity of its format. Paper texture, watercolour saturation, and page layout are all part of the narrative. Some sequences appear on dark pages, others as if radiating with light, influencing mood and attention to the reader. All of this intentional material difference is in keeping with Johanna Drucker's thesis in *Graphesis* (2014), where she states that graphic forms are not merely vehicles for meaning but are meaningful themselves. Benedict's aesthetic choices are therefore not only stylistic but part of the narrative. Flipping through the pages of *Pannimalathu* itself becomes an exercise in the protagonist's process: slow, laboured, and rich with resistance. The graphic novel as a physical artifact imposes its own narrative tension upon the reader, reminding us that stories are not abstract concepts but activities based in material engagement.

Just as significant is the function of space as a narrative presence. In traditional fiction, space tends to be described belatedly; it is invoked by language and recreated in the imagination of the reader. Space is given directly through images in *Pannimalathu*, and thus it can be manipulated more abstractly or expressively. Benedict often distorts or condenses spatial dimensions to represent intensity of feeling. The room can suddenly stretch out into a *corridor* of darkness, or the street can become so narrow it looks like a trap. These distortions are not spatially real but psychologically real, an expression of Babycha's internal disorientation. Here, then, space is symbolic, fluid, and affective. The home, for instance, is not a fixed backdrop but a mobile entity, now a sanctuary, now a jail.

In one instance, literally, the walls close in on Babycha, the contracting panels adding to the feeling of claustrophobia. Such spatial dynamics are hard to replicate in prose form, in which symbolic space has to be laboriously described. The visual register in the graphic novel, however, makes for instant spatial metaphors that add depth to the story. Furthermore, word-image relationship in *Pannimalathu* is not additive but dialogic. The two channels do not merely repeat one another; they usually produce tension, irony, or ambiguity. Sometimes the text says something, but the image quietly contradicts or complicates that. A character might say they are 'fine' but the image depicts a slouching posture, a wavering bulb, or an obstructed door behind them. This conflict between the verbal and visual establishes a polyphony of signification that requires the active negotiation of the reader. The double semiotic system of comics, text and image thus allows for a more dense, multi-layered mode of telling that cannot be reduced to either register in isolation. As Charles Hatfield suggests in *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2005), this "double vision" is one of the most characteristic features of the form. Benedict uses it expertly, building meaning not toward resolution but through resonance and dissonance. That dissonance is then a sophisticated political tool, enabling the narrative to refer to systemic critique without explicit polemics. The breakdown of the panels, the pauses in- between, and the symbolic overload of the images themselves all mirror the social and psychological breakdown of life at the margins. *Pannimalathu* subverts the caste-class binary, surveillance of masculinity, and load of filial piety not through assertions but through arrangement. The pig, ubiquitous, is a ghost of inherited labour and inherited shame. The field of vision is full of fractured objects, rusted implements, tattered garments, cracked walls, each one a silent signifier of neglect and precarity. This vista of brokenness is a visual discourse on poverty and social abandonment. In

fiction, such criticism could risk being too explicit or sentimental. In the graphic novel, it builds as background hum, ambient and inescapable, defining the narrative's moral and emotional horizon.

In addition, the open form of the graphic novel resists narrative closure in a manner that reflects the unfinishedness of life itself. Prose novels, no matter how ambiguous, tend to move toward thematic resolution or character growth. In *Panimalathu*, resolution is delayed, muddled, or evaded completely. The story does not lead toward change but suspends in the realm of reiteration and standstill. Panels circle back on previous motifs, visual reminders resurface, and emotional registers are left unreconciled. This avoidance of closure is not a misstep but a deliberate design decision, one which mirrors the cyclical nature of trauma, addiction, and social stalemate. The medium of the graphic novel and its ability to provide visual repetition, elliptical narrative, and spatial iteration allows for this form of story. It enables Benedict to narrate a story of survival rather than redemption, of obscurity rather than clarity. It is here, in this refusal to reassure, that *Panimalathu* gains its quiet radicalism.

The dynamics between surface and depth also change dramatically in the graphic novel medium. In fiction prose, depth is usually created by way of psychological interiority, narration of thought, memory, and introspection. Depth in *Panimalathu* is created visually, through layering, shading, and controlled deployment of detail. A character's inner state may be signalled not by monologue, but by the texture of the space they are in or the density of colour around them. This externalization of interiority subverts the classical Cartesian partition between mind and world on which so much prose fiction depends. Benedict presents, rather, a phenomenological narrative style, in which affect is ambient, spatial, and sensory. A

broken window, a tilted painting, or a sagging curtain are expressive indicators of mood. The surface of the image, instead of being an ornament, becomes an emotionally and narratively dense site. In this manner, the graphic novel eschews the surface/depth binary so common in literary criticism, instead claiming that visual surface can be incredibly deep.

The concept of rhythm is even redefined in the graphic novel, not only through narrative but through design. Page turns, panel sizes, and visual pacing all add up to a narrative rhythm that is felt in the body. A spread page works like a stop, a breath; fast little panels work like panic or fragmentation. Benedict employs these formal means in order to manage affect. To illustrate, when showing states of anxiety or claustrophobia, he constricts space close panels, small margins, choking layouts. Conversely, scenes of fleeting relief or contemplation expand larger panels, more white space, muted colours. This rhythm modulation permits the reader to feel emotion not only through content but also through form itself. It performs a sort of formal empathy, coordinating the reader's perceptual rhythm with the affective state of the character. This sort of embodied reading experience is unusual in prose, which typically modulates rhythm by sentence structure and punctuation alone.

Graphic novels are generally thought to be more readable than prose, more accessible because of their visual nature, but they also require a different literacy—one that is visual, symbolic, and interpretive. *Panimalathu* asks readers not just to track a plot but to interpret an atmosphere, to read between the panels, to navigate disorientation by feeling their way through. This readerly imperative diverges from the linear clarity typical of a great deal of conventional prose. It implies a redescription of who literature is for and how it can be accessed. Benedict's work is therefore not merely an art experiment but an educative gesture a call to a new sort of

reader who will be able to see as well as read, to feel as well as break down.

In its decision to present this tale as a graphic novel, Benedict also subverts the literary hierarchies that have traditionally informed Malayalam literature. The graphic novel has too often been written off as a less serious form, appropriate only for children, hobbyists, or a specialized interest. *Pannimalathu* defies such a presupposition. It is a serious book, but seriousness does not arise from linguistic heaviness or formal conventionality; it arises from its emotional integrity, aesthetic experimentation, and cultural grounding. In this way, Benedict not only raises the form in the Malayalam literary community but also allows future storytellers entry into exploring hybrid forms. The success of *Pannimalathu* therefore represents a milestone, not only in the history of Indian graphic novels but in the history of regional storytelling.

Lastly, *Pannimalathu* is not just any story to be told using the medium of the graphic novel. It is a story that can only be told thus, this combination of visual metaphor, narrative fragmentation, and emotional access. This transition from prose to graphic novel is not experimental or decorative; it is structural. It changes the stakes of the story, the shape of the characters, and the rhythms of the reader. It redescribes what is literature, and who can write stories, and how. Thus, Benedict's work is both a work of art and a cultural intervention. The graphic novel is a place where form and content meet and create something new, something that does not simply want to be read but wants to be seen, felt, and remembered.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

The journey of the graphic novel from a marginal, often misunderstood form of entertainment to a globally recognized medium of serious storytelling is both complex and transformative. From its roots in 19th-century caricature and sequential art, through early 20th-century wordless novels and pulp adaptations, to the groundbreaking achievements of Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, and Alan Moore, the graphic novel has continually redefined the boundaries of literature and visual art. This evolution has not been confined to the West alone; in India too, the graphic novel has grown from mythological retellings to bold, experimental narratives that interrogate society, identity, and politics. The contributions of Indian artists such as Orijit Sen, Amruta Patil, Sarnath Banerjee, and others have positioned the Indian graphic novel as a space for critical engagement and cultural introspection.

Within this expanding landscape, Joshy Benedict's *Pannimalathu* emerges as a significant intervention in Malayalam literature, both for its thematic depth and for its formal innovation. By weaving together the psychological unraveling of addiction, the social texture of rural Kerala, and a stark visual style that resists romanticism, Benedict demonstrates how the graphic novel can transcend its comic book ancestry to reflect contemporary realities with emotional precision and cultural specificity. As such, *Pannimalathu* not only affirms the potential of the graphic novel as a literary form but also opens up new pathways for vernacular storytelling in India. The increasing relevance of such works in both academic and popular spaces marks a decisive shift in the understanding of literature itself, where text and image coexist to

convey the complexities of human experience in ways traditional prose alone cannot.

Pannimalathu emerges as an aesthetically rigorous, thematically ambitious, and emotionally resonant work that redefines the potential of the graphic novel within the Indian and particularly the Malayalam literary tradition. It is not merely the subject matter, addiction, masculinity, rural life, class anxiety, emotional collapse, that makes this work so significant, but the way Benedict orchestrates these themes through a deeply considered interplay of text and image. The novel refuses to conform to the familiar arcs of triumph over adversity or neat moral judgment. Instead, it dwells in uncertainty, in repetition, in pain that does not resolve into clarity. This marks a deliberate departure from the didacticism often found in both conventional novels and popular comics, suggesting that true literary merit in the graphic form lies in its capacity to embrace ambiguity and complexity.

Benedict's approach to narrative dislocation - through non-linear storytelling, elliptical flashbacks, fragmented timelines, and jarring transitions - offers a psychological realism that captures the experience of trauma with far greater precision than conventional narrative forms. Rather than relying on exposition or overt psychological analysis, Benedict builds Babycha's fractured consciousness visually and temporally, creating a subjective world in which memory invades present reality and selfhood becomes a site of conflict. This mode of storytelling, enabled uniquely by the grammar of the graphic novel, asks the reader to actively inhabit disorientation and to engage with discomfort rather than retreat from it. The formal structure of the novel mirrors its thematic concerns: addiction as cyclical, trauma as repetitive, memory as contaminant, and time as non-linear.

Moreover, the visual aesthetic of *Pannimalathu* is not decorative or

supplementary but constitutive of its meaning. The jagged lines, uneven paneling, grimy inkwork, and emotionally charged visual metaphors do not merely illustrate the story - they are the story. The graphic textures function as an extension of Babycha's internal world, expressing anguish, alienation, and despair in a way that textual description alone could never achieve. The materiality of the image, its roughness, asymmetry, and tactile imperfection - conveys the disorder of emotional life in its rawest form. In this way, the very fabric of the novel performs the breakdown it seeks to depict, making form and content inseparable.

Furthermore, *Pannimalathu*'s use of language, colloquial Malayalam rich with regional idioms, gestures, and tonal inflections, grounds the novel in a cultural specificity that resists homogenization. Its refusal to code-switch or sanitize language for a broader, urban, Anglophone readership is a political act as much as an artistic one. It asserts the validity of vernacular voices in high literary form, contributing to the decolonization of aesthetic hierarchies in Indian literature. Even the unsaid, those pauses, those absences in speech, carry cultural meaning, revealing a society where emotional expression is often encoded, buried, or deferred.

What ultimately distinguishes *Pannimalathu* is its commitment to truthfulness, not in a documentary sense, but in its fidelity to emotional complexity, moral ambiguity, and narrative inconclusiveness. Benedict does not offer resolution, redemption, or reconciliation, and this refusal is central to the novel's ethical vision. Pain is not instrumentalized for the sake of character development or plot advancement; instead, it is presented as a lived, ongoing reality that may never be fully understood or overcome. The graphic novel becomes not a vehicle for moral instruction, but a space for witnessing, a quiet but insistent call to acknowledge suffering without exploiting or resolving it.

By crafting a novel that resists closure, embraces formal experimentation, and situates deeply personal suffering within a richly textured socio-cultural landscape, Joshy Benedict has expanded the scope of what Malayalam graphic literature can achieve. *Pannimalathu* is not just a story, it is an experience, a confrontation, a lament, and above all, a testimony. It positions the graphic novel not as a derivative or hybrid form, but as a unique and powerful medium capable of delivering narrative, emotion, and critique in a way that is immersive, embodied, and profoundly human. As such, it deserves to be read not only as a work of literary innovation but as a cultural artifact of enduring significance in the evolving landscape of Indian literature.

The transformation from a conventional prose novel to a graphic novel is not a mere formal deviation, nor a stylistic novelty, it is a fundamental reconstitution of the narrative act itself. The shift demands a recalibration of how stories are imagined, articulated, received, and internalized. In traditional literary fiction, meaning is constructed through language, time unfolds sequentially, and interiority is built through exposition and psychological depth rendered by words. In the graphic novel, these processes are radically reimagined. Narrative emerges through a visual-textual dialectic where image and word are not just supportive of one another but mutually generative, and often, in productive tension. Joshy Benedict's *Pannimalathu* stands as a powerful exemplar of this narrative transformation, showing how form is not simply a vessel for content, but in fact its most critical architect.

In *Pannimalathu*, Benedict deliberately resists the linear and linguistic tendencies of prose and instead deploys the graphic medium to portray affective truths, those emotional, psychological, and social experiences that exceed the capacities of verbal narration. The protagonist Babycha's descent into addiction, his family's silent disintegration, and the ambient trauma of caste, labour, and

masculinity are not described as much as they are embodied through visual metaphor and formal experimentation. The bleeding watercolours, the fractured page designs, the distortion of space, and the repetitions of haunting motifs such as the pig or flickering light, do not function as illustrations; they are the narrative language. They constitute a symbolic grammar that is legible only through the visual form, a grammar of instability, claustrophobia, shame, and fragmentation.

Graphic storytelling, unlike prose, mobilizes silence, absence, and spatial distortion as active carriers of meaning. Where a prose novel must articulate, a graphic novel can withhold, and this withholding becomes meaningful. Moments of visual pause, of empty speech bubbles, of characters averting their gaze or melting into the background, convey affective states like guilt, repression, or loss with an immediacy that prose often labours to reach through elaboration. The panel-to-panel structure of comics demands that readers engage in “closure”, an act of inferential, participatory meaning-making between images. This gives rise to a narrative intimacy that prose, with its authorial control over syntax and progression, tends to mediate or regulate. Benedict masterfully utilizes this feature in *Pannimalathu*, creating a fractured visual rhythm that mirrors Babycha’s splintered psyche, calling upon the reader to fill in the emotional and narrative blanks.

The materiality of the book itself, its paper texture, its use of water color, its design layout, also contributes to the narrative in ways unavailable to prose. Benedict's choice to paint with watercolour introduces an instability and imperfection into every page. Colours bleed into each other, edges blur, and panels often overflow their borders. This is not an incidental style but a deeply intentional method of storytelling. As Marshall McLuhan has famously asserted, “the medium is the message,” (McLuhan 7) and in *Pannimalathu*, the material form is as much a

statement as the content. The unpredictability of watercolour echoes the emotional volatility of the characters, and the book's refusal to follow rigid grid structures or clean lines mirrors the chaotic inner world it seeks to portray.

Graphic novel not only tells different stories than prose, it tells stories differently. Time in *Pannimalathu* is not linear; it is recursive, layered, and visually embodied. Memories intrude into present scenes, trauma refuses chronological order, and emotional moments are extended through panel pacing rather than word count. Similarly, space is elastic and affective: rooms stretch or compress depending on Babycha's emotional state, the home becomes a site of both refuge and confinement, and open streets can suddenly collapse into traps. These manipulations of visual space produce a psychological depth that prose would take paragraphs to build, and yet here, it is rendered almost instantly. The home is not merely described; it is felt, its mood bleeding through the image.

Pannimalathu is not a story that happens to be told as a graphic novel. It is a story that can only be told as a graphic novel. Every narrative beat, every emotional turn, is inseparable from its visual form. The affective impact of the story, its sense of disorientation, despair, entrapment, and muted resistance, depends not just on what is being said, but on how it is said. Benedict does not use the graphic novel medium as a gimmick; he uses it as a narrative necessity. And in doing so, he redefines what counts as serious literature in Malayalam. He subverts entrenched hierarchies that have long privileged prose fiction as the sole space of literary merit and makes space for hybrid, experimental, and image-based storytelling to claim equal legitimacy.

Furthermore, Benedict's work invites a new kind of reader: one who must see as much as read, interpret as much as imagine, and feel not just the characters' emotions but the form of the story itself. The graphic novel, as Benedict presents it, is

not simply a book but an event, a space where text, image, design, and emotion converge. In this convergence, *Pannimalathu* models the future of regional storytelling, where content is not divorced from form, and where the visual is not subordinate to the verbal but stands as its equal. Ultimately, graphic novel is not a diluted version of the novel. It is a fully formed literary architecture of its own, capable of bearing emotional weight, social critique, cultural texture, and psychological complexity. *Pannimalathu* proves that graphic storytelling is not simply an alternative to the prose narrative but a radical rethinking of it. It reminds us that not all stories can be told with words alone. Some must be seen. Some must be felt. And some, like *Pannimalathu*, must be lived across the space of a page, in silence and colour, in fragmentation and rhythm. This is not simply narrative innovation; it is narrative evolution.

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