



The Gambler's Shadow: Addiction and Shadow Integration in *The Pig Flip*

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Abstract:

This paper examines Joshy Benedict's debut graphic novel, *The Pig Flip*, through Carl Jung's concept of the shadow, the repository of all the repressed and disowned aspects of the self. Through a close textual analysis of the psychological transformation of the protagonist Babycha, a gambling addict, the paper argues that his redemption is closely linked to the integration of the shadow. Situated within the cultural context of the Kerala Christian community, the story intertwines personal transformation with familial expectations and social and religious values. The study underscores the unique potential of sequential art to visualise complex psychological states and positions *The Pig Flip* as a valuable addition to the growing tradition of Indian graphic novels.

Keywords: *The Pig Flip*, Shadow, Jungian Psychology, Indian Graphic Novel.

Visual storytelling has a vibrant history that is as old as the history of human civilisation, with its roots stretching as far back as the cave paintings of the ancient era. From the picture stories for children to the graphic novels, which generate a unique space for critical dialogue and social transformation, this rich artistic tradition has something to offer to readers of all ages, backgrounds and genders. Graphic narratives are gradually evolving into a powerful artistic medium, offering an immersive reading experience for dopamine addicted brains, engaging their imagination as well as their intellect. Their recognition and academic prominence have steadily increased over the years as their seamless blending of text and image opens new vistas for critical discourse.

Though heavily influenced by Western comic traditions, India has carved out its own legacy in the evolution of sequential art. Beginning with the Hindi adaptations of famous American comics like Lee Falk's *Phantom*, the Indian comic industry gradually expanded its avenues with the creation of indigenous comics. Established in 1967, *Amar Chitra Katha* was at the forefront of this transformation with comics featuring Puranic heroes and freedom fighters. Anant Pai's comics garnered a lot of attention from parents and children due to the educational value they advocated ("Evolution of Indian Comics"). Others followed suit, and soon the Indian comic market was overflowing with indigenous characters like Pran's Chacha Chaudhary and Aabid Surti's Bahadur.

Contemporary Indian graphic narratives have further enriched this tradition with the emergence of varied graphic novels that engage in depth with complex social, cultural and political realities, incorporating indigenous artistic techniques. Works like *Bhimayana* where Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam use Parthan Gond art form to narrate the life story of B. R. Ambedkar, and Ayushi Rastogi and Varud Gupta's *Chhotu*, which uses anthropomorphic characters to relate the events ensuing the Partition, demonstrate the growing literary and

artistic sophistication of Indian graphic narratives. With new works being produced each year, Indian graphic novels undoubtedly add new dimensions to Indian Writing in English.

Joshy Benedict's debut graphic novel, *The Pig Flip* (2024), is a fresh addition to the genre, intricately portraying the ups and downs of a gambling addict named Babycha. The original novel, written in Malayalam, was self-published by Benedict in 2016 as *Pannimalath*. The story attained critical acclaim through an indie comic festival held in Kochi, and as the novel's popularity grew through social media, he was prompted to go for an English translation. With the help of K. K. Muralidharan, a production designer and graphic artist based in Mumbai, the translated graphic novel was published by Harper Collins in 2024 under the title *The Pig Flip* (Menon).

Spot flip is a popular card game in the villages of Kerala. It is "the king of all card games, like auction, pull, rummy and support. The game isn't an everyday affair. But once it starts, it becomes totally addictive" (Benedict 2). Benedict had watched men in his village losing their minds over it, wasting away their lives and money, which inspired him to envision his protagonist, Babycha, a gambling addict who loses everything to this game and is eventually reined in by his family to curb his ways. In the words of Ajay M.,

The portrayal of his experience with the extreme ups and downs of gambling addiction is depicted with a genuine openness that is both deeply moving and easy to identify with. It is a noteworthy contribution to modern graphic literature due to its culturally immersive backdrop, compelling narrative, and profound psychological analysis. (72)

The present paper explores the character of Babycha through a Jungian psychological framework. Drawing upon Carl Jung's idea of the shadow, the paper examines Babycha's obsessive gambling tendencies as a manifestation of his repressed shadow and argues that his failure to integrate these disowned personality traits only accentuates his self-destructive

behaviour. His gambling addiction, the resentment he feels toward his brother-in-law, whose competence evokes both admiration and envy and his frequent evasion of familial responsibilities all point to a fragmented psyche that refuses to confront its shadow impulses and is therefore haunted by inner demons. The study further contends that the protagonist's redemption at the end is made possible only through a reluctant acceptance of his shadow, leading to self-reconciliation.

The primary text under consideration, Joshy Benedict's *The Pig Flip*, offers a glimpse of the gambling practices in a rural Kerala village, along with the psychological portrait of a gambling addict. The author's masterful deployment of the panel sequences, symbolic use of the colour palette, and recurrent strips of close-up panels vividly capture the inner turmoil of Babycha, who craves recognition from his family but is nonetheless unable to resist his attraction to spot flip.

The paper proceeds in four stages. It first establishes the theoretical framework by explaining Jung's concept of the shadow and then continues with an analysis of the visual grammar of the graphic narrative, focusing on panel arrangement and colour composition. The third part of the analysis traces Babycha's confrontation with the shadow through the symbolic role of the pigs, his projections onto Tommy and his agitated response to the casual remark of Paulikutty. Finally, the paper examines Babycha's individuation process, where he tentatively accepts his shadow, a process that culminates in the baptismal bathing ritual at the end of the narrative. The reading positions *The Pig Flip* as a significant contribution to Indian graphic literature by demonstrating the capability of the graphic medium to render complex psychological experiences.

What is Shadow?

The concept of shadow is a central idea in Carl Jung's theory of analytical psychology. Jung describes the shadow as the personification of "everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly – for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies" (par. 513). Just like there is no light without shadows, the shadow is part and parcel of human psyche; it "is that part of us we fail to see or know" (Johnson 3). A person typically forms his shadow once he has been institutionalised into the societal framework that demands a certain code of conduct with clear demarcation of what is acceptable and what is not. The shadow "contains all the parts of ourselves that we have tried to hide or deny. It contains those dark aspects that we believe are not acceptable to our family, friends and most importantly, ourselves. The dark side is stuffed deeply within our consciousness, hidden from ourselves and others" (Ford 21).

Shadow is like a large baggage that a person drags throughout his life, with a part of him hidden inside. While it may embody the dark and destructive sides of our personalities that we are ashamed to face, the shadow also constitutes the positive and creative potential of an individual. In the words of Debbie Ford, "When we suppress any feeling or impulse, we are also suppressing its polar opposite. . . If we deny our fear, we minimize our courage. If we deny our greed, we also reduce our generosity" (25). So opening this baggage and accepting all the parts of ourselves is a fundamental part of individuation, the process to make oneself whole by assimilating the shadow aspects into the conscious self. "It results in a revelation of the deep meaning of existence, helping the initiate assume the responsibility of being truly human, and participating fully in society by bringing back new values" (Sarafidou 18).

A repressed shadow, the shadow that is denied recognition, can manifest in different ways. The feelings that are closeted to achieve the appearance of perfection in front of the

public eye do not just disappear. “The more cut off and unconscious we are of our personal shadows, the more vulnerable we are to having those shadows break out” (Schoen 55), affecting an individual’s psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships. Shadow aspects are often manifested as psychological projections, leading to misconceptions and distorted perceptions or as self-sabotaging behaviours like addiction, which reveals a person’s yearning for wholeness as well as the shadow’s relentless persistence to be accepted.

Gambling addiction can be interpreted as the eruption of the shadow, where the thrill of danger and unpredictability gives one the illusion of being truly alive and whole. For the gambling addict, the gambling table becomes a symbolic arena to invoke his repressed impulses like greed, selfishness and recklessness. Benedict’s protagonist, Babycha, is an embodiment of the archetypal gambling addict, lured by the fleeting pleasures of the popular card game, spot flip. His gambling habits are not merely an expression of his desire for financial success, but an escape from the inner numbness arising from his refusal to accept his shadow.

The shadow operates not only at the individual level but at the collective level as well. Jung calls it the collective shadow – an amalgamation of the darker impulses suppressed by the entire community and culture. In *The Pig Flip*, collective shadow is displayed through the cultural practices of the Kerala Catholic community. Brought up in a Christian household, Babycha’s formative years were likely influenced by the Catholic doctrines that emphasise humility and identify greed as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Although ambition, desire and risk-taking are the cornerstones of human progress, Babycha is compelled to hide these natural impulses behind a respected veneer as his community puts great importance on financial prudence and self-restraint. Gambling gives an outlet to these repressed feelings, which constitute his shadow aspects. The forsaken island of Pillachan, which functions as the gambling den of the villagers, is not just Babycha’s opportunity to win money; it becomes a

space where he can indulge his recklessness and momentarily embrace those aspects of himself which are frowned upon by his family and community.

Visualising the Shadow

Joshy Benedict's expert hands have skilfully used the visual medium to map the psychological transformation of Babycha, capturing the tension and conflicts that lurk within. Opting for borderless panels while retaining the gutter space gives the author ample freedom to represent Babycha's inner conflicts visually. While most of the story of *The Pig Flip* is narrated through panels with clearly defined gutters, mimicking the balance and control Babycha has on his actions and choices, Benedict chooses to fluidly merge the panels in times of great inner conflict, like in the gambling sequences. This blurring of the boundaries symbolically represents how the shadow overpowers, disintegrating egoistic control in the euphoria of gambling. The borderless, yet well-defined, gutters are suggestive of the fragmented soul seeking wholeness. Consequently, the last page of the graphic novel disintegrates panels altogether, visually expressing the shadow integration and the new man about to come forth.

Benedict showcases the manifestation of the shadow through a range of symbolic devices scattered throughout the narrative. Even the gambling cards are used to represent Babycha's hidden desire for power and wealth. While the opening page of the graphic novel establishes the gambling den, the second page gives the first glimpse of Babycha's gambling practices, with a fan of playing cards dominating the page, linking the surrounding panels that portray his gambling routine. The panel shows a standard court card design, all featuring the King of Spades, where the stoic face of the King is replaced by Babycha's own face, suggesting how deeply gambling has permeated his existence, completely entrapping him.

Though the graphic novel does not deal with Babycha's formation as an adult, his recollection of courting days with Paulikutty gives ample evidence that he is the black sheep of the family. His father has written him off as a prodigal son spoiled by his mother. Spot flip is Babycha's way of winning back the respect and dignity denied by his family. It is also telling that the author uses the King of Spades to represent Babycha's entrapment, as the card is generally associated with King David, the Biblical King who arose from the position of a simple shepherd to one of the most revered kings of Israel. By linking Babycha's face with this figure, the narrative subtly points to his longing for recognition and social ascendancy.

The gambling environment itself constitutes a shadow realm. Babychan's secret gambling den is an abandoned island that once belonged to Pillachan, and now, after his disappearance, the wilderness has taken claim to it. "As if it's a piece of land that has drifted away from their world" (Benedict 5). The island's isolated location, away from civilisation, serves as a physical manifestation of Babycha's shadow space. Removed from the rules and regulations of the community, the island functions as a liminal space where he can act on his hidden impulses. The island's overgrown landscape, where wild animals roam fearlessly, combined with the cover of darkness, constitutes a shadow realm away from the grips of rational order and conscious restraint. "The sounds of the flowing river always resonate through the island. As the game gets intense, you stop hearing anything and smelling anything" (Benedict 7). Cut off from external reality, the ego's restraining power slowly begins to dissolve as Babycha crosses the knee-deep water and hops over the jutting rocks surrounding the island.

The physical act of card play itself is a ritualistic dance with the shadow. Each shuffle of the deck represents an attempt to control destiny, and Babycha's eyes glint in the candlelight once the cards are taken out. His deepest desires and hidden fears all find meaning in the instant

the cards are revealed. Cards have become an irreplaceable part of his life. Even to confess his love to Paulikutty, he relies on the ace of hearts. They are his salvation and his demise.

The colour palette employed in *The Pig Flip* also traces Babycha's psychological journey. Early pages of the graphic novel are suffused with warm sepia and ochre tones, the colour of dull domesticity, an adequate visualisation of Babycha's directionless existence, where he finds occasional happiness in the moments spent with Paulikutty. The muted earthly tones reflect the barrenness he feels within and show how he drifts through this monotonous space with restless dissatisfaction. The gambling environment, however, is dominated by darker colours, the deep blues symbolising the shadow realm. The shift in palette mirrors Babycha's obsession with gambling and his descent into darkness. As the story progresses, and Babycha attempts to turn over a new leaf with the newly built pig farm, the colours shift to olive green, showing growth and stability. Unlike the darker tones of the gambling den, the green suggests regeneration, a new beginning that arises out of the confrontation with the shadow.

Confronting the Shadow

The shadow, the dumping ground of all that is repulsive and debased in human nature, is also a treasure trove that contains an individual's hidden potential and talents. Thus, facing the shadow and integrating it into the conscious self is a necessary part of individuation, a path to making oneself whole. Jung describes this as a descent to hell, a sort of initiation, implying that "there is something that needs to be retrieved and reclaimed as an integral part of the personality (Sarafidou 17). Even though shadow is constituted by all the distasteful traits the conscious mind refuses to acknowledge, it finds its way through the ego's barriers, most commonly through psychological projections, visions or dreams.

In *The Pig Flip*, Babycha's first encounter with his shadow self comes in the form of an unsettling experience he had on his way to the gambling den. One night, he was on his way to the island for another round of card play. "The moon was out, but there was something else... Something shining bright and sliding slowly down the bamboo branch. It wasn't a firefly either. It was bigger. It paused for a moment, then dropped from the tip of the bamboo and disappeared" (Benedict 27-28). This mysterious vision is never completely explained, and this ambiguity in the narrative can be considered as an external manifestation of his inner turmoil. Babycha wakes up from his ethereal experience when he sees people running from the island, warning him to avoid the place. The whole sequence functions as a foreshadowing of the ominous fate awaiting Babycha. As the light dwindles slowly in the gambling den, his luck fades along with it. He not only ends up losing all his money that day but also comes to owe a huge debt to the loan shark, Money-Thommi. He pawns and later sells his wife's ornaments to continue gambling and loses them all. Once this precarious situation is known to the rest of the family, he is packed off to Paulikutty's home, where brother-in-law Tommy offers his help in setting up a pig farm.

The pigs play an important symbolic role in the narrative, representing the psychological framework of Babycha. His association with the animals is shaped by his late father's derogatory comparison of him "as the sort that belonged to a pigsty" (Benedict 21). In a Christian household like Babycha's, the father's reference assumes a Biblical significance, alluding to the parable of the prodigal son, indicating his son's wasteful behaviour. The comparison seems to have a lasting impact on him, as even the stench of the pig farm at Paulikutty's home feels nauseating to him. He finds himself mirrored in the pigs, and thus comes the extreme revulsion.

His decision to start a pig farm despite his aversion to pigs represents the beginnings of his psychological journey toward self-reconciliation and empowerment. Still, trouble looms on

the horizon as Babycha is more and more dissatisfied with his brother-in-law Tommy, who helps him in the running of the pig farm. "He did almost everything. He brought the piglets. He brought the feed for them. When they were prime meat, he himself carted them off to sell. I could see Paulikutty reverently regarding her brother's love. Mom too" (Benedict 51-52). Babycha's envious reaction to Tommy's presence and the respect he commands from Paulikutty and his mother is a clear instance of projection.

The jealousy that he feels towards Tommy's reliability serves as a catalyst for revealing Babycha's shadow elements, the positive aspects he allowed to be buried. Later Jungian scholars like Robert A. Johnson call this submerged greatness the golden shadow. These unrecognised positive attributes, when projected onto others, can result in extreme admiration or jealousy. The veneration that Babycha's mother and wife express towards Tommy represents their recognition of his abilities that Babycha lacks. Tommy is responsible and wise, and he creates stability in their lives, which stands in stark contrast to Babycha's impulsiveness and inability to manage household affairs. Their reverent regard for Tommy is particularly painful to him, as this comes from the two women whose approval he craves the most. Yet rather than recognising the qualities that he himself possesses, Tommy's presence becomes a source of resentment for Babycha.

All these repressed resentments come pouring forth one day when Paulikutty cracks a joke at the expense of his previous gambling practices. The remark strikes a nerve, and as his long-suppressed frustrations and insecurities erupt to the surface, the stench of the pigsty, the dirty water and the incessant squealing of the pigs – all the things he had tolerated these days – threaten to overwhelm him, turning the surroundings oppressive. The humiliating image of the pigs fuses with the laughing face of Paulikutty in his mind; "If she were a pig, she would have been carted off to be hacked after the third delivery. Would have been sold as packaged

meat” (Benedict 56). As he feels the shadow’s growing hold in his consciousness, he flees the pigsty in panic.

Paulikutty’s intervention here, in the form of the casual joke, serves as the crucial turning point in Babycha’s psychological journey. Her role in the narrative, to a certain extent, can be interpreted as the Soul Image or the Anima projection of Babycha. Their courting days, where Babycha confesses his love using an ace of hearts, and the playful memories after marriage show that Paulikutty has always occupied an idealised position in his heart. But when he sells her ornaments to pay off his gambling debts, that trust is broken. Taking into account the cultural context of Kerala, a woman’s ornaments are markers of her social dignity and financial security, and by stripping those away from Paulikutty, he violates their bond to each other. Paulikutty’s joke shatters all his illusory barriers, and Babycha is finally forced to confront his inadequacies: the child who did not live up to his parents’ expectations and a husband who now relies on his wife’s family to survive.

Owning the Shadow

It is only through the integration of the shadow or the disowned self that one can unearth the buried potentials hidden within the unconscious. Coming face-to-face with the shadow, which often occurs when one finds oneself at the bottom of the abyss, goes by many familiar names in myths as well as in real life: “meeting our demons, wrestling with the devil, descent to the underworld, dark night of the soul, midlife crisis” (Zweig and Abrams 39). Termed as shadow work, this individuation process requires self-acceptance and reconciliation even with those traits dubbed evil or unsavoury by society. As Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams observe, “Only those who knew their capacity for lust, greed, rage, gluttony, and for all things excessive – who have understood and accepted their own potential for inappropriate extremes – can choose to regulate and humanize their actions” (31).

For Babycha, this tipping point comes when he accidentally slips into the pigsty trying to escape from the clutches of brother-in-law Tommy and his assistant, Friday. "I was lying down at the epicentre of the nauseating stench" (Benedict 99). Tommy throws his cards down and there, among the pigs, the animals he despised the most, he is finally forced to face his vulnerabilities – his addiction, false pride and the resentment he feels toward others. Instead of feeling disgusted by the squealing pigs around him, he tenderly caresses the pig who is hurt by his fall into the pigsty. Feeling the movement of the unborn piglets inside, Babycha is overcome with humiliation at how he failed his pregnant wife.

Benedict chooses to visualise this moment of self-realisation with a series of close-ups of Babycha's hand and face; he stares at his mud-covered palm, and a moment of stillness follows. The moment marks his emerging awareness, and he no longer distances himself from the filth surrounding him. He stacks up the cards that are scattered around and watches silently as the muddy water soaks through them, marking the final dissolution of his identity as a gambler. Later, Tommy and Friday fish him out of the dirt and clean him by directly pouring water from a bucket. This bathing ritual, reminiscent of baptism, represents the beginnings of a new life for Babycha. The series of colourless panels that followed, featuring the pigs roaming freely and lazily lying around, further emphasises this psychological transformation. His perception of the pigs as loathsome animals, shaped by his father's derogatory remarks, has shifted as his perception of himself has changed. "The burning holes healed up and the pig flip freed itself from meanings" (Benedict 113). The author opts for an open-ended conclusion with the image of Babycha standing motionless under the falling water. His eyes are closed in complete surrender, and the absence of panel division mirrors the integration of his fragmented psyche. The open-ended nature of the conclusion is particularly significant here as "none of us can really contain the whole, at least in a conscious way. We cannot be aware of everything at all times. Fragmentation is built into our way of knowing" (Abrams 558). The novel does not

present Babycha's transformation as complete; instead, it presents shadow integration as an ongoing process.

With its multi-layered construction of a gambling addict's psychological transformation, Joshy Benedict's debut graphic novel has marked a significant milestone in contemporary Indian graphic literature. The novel stands out as a glorious example of the capacity of the sequential art form to explore the nuances of the unconscious, through the panel composition, colour palette and evocative images. By showcasing the story of Babycha, a gambling addict who tentatively comes to accept his shadow aspects, the novel transforms an ordinary story of addiction and redemption into an exploration of psychic fragmentation and self-discovery.

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