Unequal Laughter: Cartoons and Gender Stereotyping in Modern Kerala

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Abstract: The present study analyses different gender images in the cartoons and comic strips that appeared in magazines and newspapers of 20th century Kerala. The study explores the nature and depth of stereotypical and archetypical representations of women and men involved in cartoons. Stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power (Hall 258). Here power is directed against the subordinate group, women. Women are the main subject matter of laughter in cartoons, and women-specific humour/cartoons are overloaded with stereotypes. Women's craze for new dresses and ornaments, passion for fashion, imitations for western ideas and styles, images of women active in the club, women's pompousness, etc., are some aspects of stereotyping. Women and their character traits appear as a laughing matter in cartoons and comic strips. However, man is laughed at for being a 'henpecked' husband who fears his wife. Here too, a woman is the reason behind laughing at men. In most of the cartoons, women are seen as a product and taste factor for laughter. Such stereotypes are still continuing to play a powerful role in the popular perception of gender.

Keywords: Gender, Laughter, Stereotyping, Cartoon, and Misogyny

Introduction

A cartoon is a comical or satirical drawing; it is a powerful medium to perform various functions: to ridicule the unjust, to laugh at the new changes, to mould the opinions of the public,

to advertise the value of products, to take corrective measures, and to create humour sense (Billig; Duss 965-997). The development of cartoons as a comical art is associated with Italian brothers Annibale Carracci (1560- 1609) and Agostino Carracci (1557-1602). In 1590, they produced a series of drawings of baroque style which gradually led to the development of the words caricature and cartoon. Cartoon and caricature have emerged and more flourished with the development of pictorial journalism in India too (Mitter 120-172). In India, cartoons are adopted from *Punch* magazine of London which circulated with the advent of British power in India. Punch made a deeper impression in colonial India and gave way for the emergence of similar humorous publications in India. Modern innovations made urban India into a 'visual society' dominated by printed image. The earliest newspapers that carry political cartoons in India were the English-owned 'Bengal Hurkaru,' the Indian Gazette (the 1950s), etc. Early Magazines with cartoons are Delhi Sketch Book, Monus, the Indian Charivari, the Oudh Punch, the Delhi Punch, the Indian Punch, the Punjab Punch, Urdu Punch, Gujrati Punch, Hindi Punch, Basantak, the Avadh Punch, Parsi Punch, etc. The development of print and the access to literary products paved the way for the making of a new cultural taste and sensibility among the people.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards cartoons are incorporated in magazines and newspapers in India. In the context of Kerala, it was well-known satirists such as Sanjayan and E.V. Krishna Pilla who incorporated cartoons for the first time in their writings in the print media. Notable cartoonists during this time were M. Bhaskaran, Yesudasan, Aravindan, Sukumar, Toms, Gopikrishnan, and Soman. It is only recently that historians have started analyzing cartoons as a key to understand the cultural codes and sensibilities of the past. In Europe, from the eighteenth century onwards cartoons appeared in newspapers. But it was only in the early 20th century, the practice of using cartoons with strong political overtones became general in newspapers and magazines. Studies that appeared in India mainly focused on comic traditions in ancient Indian literature, the universality of laughter, transcultural trends in comic traditions, art history of nationalism and political movements in India, the practice of cartooning, etc. (Siegel; Mitter; Hans Harder et al.)

On the basis of themes, cartoons are categorized into political cartoons, editorial cartoons, children's cartoons, social cartoons, gender-specific cartoons, etc. Cartoon drawings

are combined with texts mostly in speech balloons or as captions to communicate the message. Comic strips are a series of drawings inside boxes that tell a story. The broad categorization of cartoons, though the distinction does not work always, is made by some scholars based on cartoons of opinion and joke cartoons (Milton Kemnitz 81-93). Cartoons of opinion mostly appear on the editorial page while joke cartoons are identified as reflecting social attitudes. Editorial cartoons, usually consist of a single panel and mostly incorporates a caption or speech balloons. Compared to political cartoons, social cartoons are overloaded with stereotypes. The present study tries to understand the representations of different gender images in the cartoons of 20th century Kerala in the context of its social and cultural history. The study focuses on visual caricatures including comic strips and cartoon columns in Malayalam magazines. Stereotypes play a decisive role in constructing gender identities. Stereotypes reflect an oversimplified conception of the targeted group on the basis of the 'typical' traits generalized. Stereotypes are crucial for the effectiveness of cartoons. It carries popular visions of gendered subjects in everyday life.

Stereotypical traits and Gendered Images

Gender has been seen as a vital subject matter for stereotypes and it circulates in/through the various genres such as cartoons. Positive as well as negative traits involved in gendered cartoons are crucial elements in fashioning or disciplining the targeted subjects as well as in determining the 'natural' qualities and capabilities attached to womanhood and manhood. In other words, 'positive' and 'negative' traits constitute the decisive elements of cartoons in the conceptualization of manliness and womanliness. It is through these traits of 'ideal' and 'contrary' that images are caricatured in cartoons. Cartoons reflect different shades of gender-related characteristics. It has different functions and connotations in society. One main claim is that cartoonists project stereotypical images mainly to eliminate and exclude negative traits. But these stereotypical elements are very vital for creating humour sense. It can be seen that most of the stereotypical frameworks are still continuing to play a powerful role in the popular perception of gender.

Changing space of women and men, women's entry into the public sphere for education

and job, romantic love, women's movement for equal rights, the quarrel between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, dominating wife and henpecked husband, family planning, women's associations, and clubs, women's craze for fashions and ornaments, etc., are some of the major themes represented in the cartoons of 20th century Kerala. Women's craze for new fashions and ornaments are the center figure of caricature in gendered cartoons even today. As a way of lampooning, most of the cartoons represent a reversed role of man and woman different from the old order. The 'new' women in the home attain a state of workless leisure by giving over their domestic duties to the servant. Some other cartoons caricature a new woman as one who enjoys a new kind of workless leisure and depends on the husband for domestic work. On the other hand, 'new' man needs to learn cooking, should have good knowledge of women's dresses, new fashions and styles in their dressings. The emergence of a number of women's movements in Kerala was the general historical context in which gender issues were debated, contested, and caricatured. Women's movements and their massive propagandist measures were some of the issues caricatured in cartoons and comic strips. Caricaturing character 'traits' has become a central part of cartoons. Woman nurse, film actress, woman police, women in the club, westernized woman and man, woman lawyer, society lady, dominating wife and henpecked husband are fixed character figures in the language of laughter. Thus, cartoons play a central role in shaping and popularizing images of women and men. Cartoonists use aspects of women and women-specific themes as a crucial element for creating laughter which is a central tactic for marketing cartoons, comic strips, and women's magazines.

Figure I¹ illustrates the image of a small boy retorting back to his mother who is a film actress. The cartoon targets the immoral character of film actress. The boy says: 'Mammy, the new daddy you brought me yesterday is extremely bad... He beats me...' Cartoons even laugh at the woman as traffic police. In cartoon figure II², while a policewoman was on traffic duty, an accident took place due to her failure in giving proper direction to the drivers. One person explains the reason for the accident to another: 'accident took place when the attention of the traffic police was on a sari shop nearby.' Here the cartoonist aims to target women's craze for sari and caricatured it as very natural to womanliness. The indirect message in this cartoon is that a woman is not fit for such jobs as it requires an attitude of high seriousness.





Figure I Figure II

Cartoons reflect gender relations in a biased manner. Compared to men, cartoons target women for their traits, mannerisms, their craze for ornaments, dresses, passion for new fashions, pompousness, jealousy, etc. Though men too have their own traits and masculine nature, cartoons explore women as an object of laughter. Women appear as both objects as well as subjects of laughter.

Women's "Craze" for new attires and Ornaments

Activities of women in their exclusive associations and clubs, their fascination for new attires and ornaments, and the interest shown in selecting them, and their sense of fashion constitute a major subject in cartoons and comic strips even now. Women's passion for new attires and fashionable ornaments are a stereotypical theme that persistently caricatured in comic narrations. Figure III³ is the best example of such cartoons which appeared in *Sanjayan* magazine in 1938.



Figure-III

Shopping with her!

The Shop-Owner/salesman: "Amma! This is pure stuff. If you search the entire bazaar, you will not find a similar one. This pattern will rightly match with the blouse you have selected just now. It doesn't matter that the packing is over, I can pack it separately."

"Husband (soliloquy): "Why no one dares to thrash up that ass's head?! Hm! What did he say? 'I can pack it separately!'

In this cartoon, men are "helpless" when women become crazy about attires and ornaments. Women are portrayed as eagerly observing other women's ornaments, dresses, and fashion. Their "craze" for newly designed ornaments and dresses appear repeatedly in cartoons. Cartoons that appeared in the late 20th century also reflect similar images of women with different dimensions. Women are also caricatured for their

attempt to usurp men.

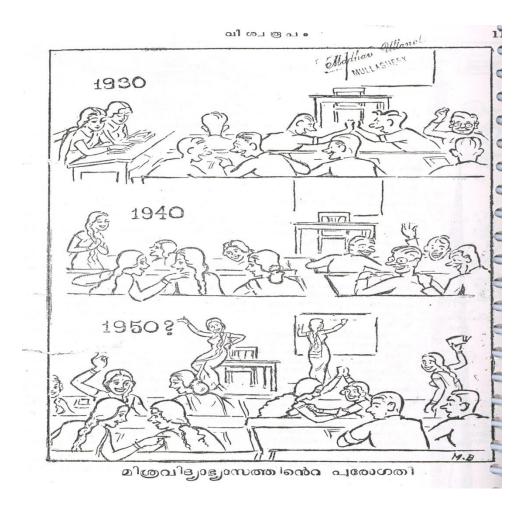


Figure IV Figure V

Cartoon figure IV⁴ and V⁵ caricature women for their craze in wearing men's dresses. Women wearing trousers and shirts were usual scenes of cartoons during the late 20th century. In both of these cartoons husband asks his wife to return his shirt and trousers as it is time for him to go to his office. There were discussions in women's magazines about the type of dresses women should wear in society. In 1986, *Grihalakshmi* magazine conducted a survey among the male youth with regard to the dress that women need to wear.⁶ All the members suggested a modest way of dressing while a minority among them said that if men are permitted to wear pants or jeans and shirt the same should be allowed for women too.

Caricaturing women's entry into the public space

Women's attempts to enter various institutions for education and job are targeted through cartoons. Humorous literature and cartoons caricature women like the ones who controls the home and husband and their entry into the public space gradually led them to dominate the public space too. Physical strength is not the quality of women rather their 'natural' qualities such as cleverness, influence, gentle power, etc., help them to control men at home and in society.



'The Progress of Mixed Education'

Figure VI

The cartoon Figure-VI⁷ warns about the future of mixed education. The cartoon appeared in *Viswaroopam* magazine in 1940. Cartoonist expresses his anxieties about women's entry into public institutions which he thinks gradually would lead women to dominate men in the public space too. Associating women with the domestic space became the central ideological conviction with which emergent reformism addressed various issues related to women. Women's entry into the public space for education and job was caricatured as an extension of women's domination over men from home to the public institutions. In this cartoon, women dominate over men even in the classrooms and men get sidelined as onlookers. The first column illustrates the situation in the 1930s, when few women are present in the classroom in the presence of men, and women are

portrayed as silent in a disciplined manner. Unlike women, men during this period are illustrated as delightful and talking to each other while sitting in their own seats. But by the 1940s the situation changes with the presence of about sixty percent women and forty percent men in the classroom where still men are happily commenting on women and talking among themselves. By the 1950s men's participation in education became marginalized into two percent and are represented as restrained observers of women's activities. Anxieties about the new changes are exaggerated through these cartoons. Even in this 21st century, we realize the fact that women's space in society is constrained in various ways, though their strong representation is witnessed in almost every sphere. Many of the cartoons have also shared anxieties about men's changing space, and 'henpecked' image of man. In a diverse manner, cartoons targeted women who breaks out of the confines of home.

Recurring Image of "obedient" Husbands

Husband's obedient and weak nature is a theme that repeatedly appear in many cartoons. On the contrary, wives are represented as dominating husbands with their 'natural' qualities. In many comic traditions, a woman (goddess Kali) is represented as a fierce virago and termagant (Siegel 94-144). Henpecked man is caricatured as one who never dared to contradict his wife. They are controlled by their wife. One interesting dimension of such cartoons is women are used as instruments to laugh at men. At the same time, women too are targeted for their nagging and overbearing attitude. Many of these cartoons depict women as the real masters and men as someone who really is in fear of one's wife. But in public, they proudly say that everything is decided by men. Cartoons, as well as comic writings, focus on men's lack of freedom, particularly after marriage. Cartoons pose interesting dimensions of men's fear of their wives. Here the cartoon exaggerates how the presence of the wife evokes fear and racing of heartbeats amongst husbands. In one such cartoon, Cartoonist illustrates men who always seek their wife's opinion for doing anything in life. For instance, a dialogue between the employer and the worker goes like this:

• Worker: "Boss, my wife forces me to plead with you for increasing my salary.

 Boss: Let me ask my wife whether it's possible to increase your salary and let you know tomorrow.⁸



Figure VII

Cartoon VII⁹ depicts one such comic story of men who are afraid of their wives. "Samajam Sarojam" by Gopikrishnan is a cartoon column that appeared in *Grihalakshmi*, a popular women's magazine in the late twentieth-century Kerala. In this story, a group of men gathered along with Mrs. Sarojam's husband at their home. Mrs. Sarojam, the main protagonist in this story is a society lady known among friends and neighbors for her dominating presence in the family. In a gathering in their house, her husband told other men that some men shiver at the mention of their wife. The cartoon shows all other men murmuring in soliloquy, "that is told about me." Mrs. Sarojam's husband continues his heroic boasting about his manly power

laughing at the effeminate behavior of some men. He says: "some men used to get beaten up by their wife. What a shame it is? But it's not at all possible in this house. If I am angry, Sarojam won't be even approaching me." Listening to these words Sarojam screamed at him: "Hey, just repeat that..." Only at that moment, her husband could realize that she was there at the home. His soliloquy: "...I thought Sarojam is not here". Hiding under the chair he faced the situation in a tricky manner replying that he didn't say anything.

The changing nature of the relationship between husband and wife during their life is depicted in various ways. The cartoon illustrates their emotional attachment in the initial period and the development of a sense of detachment in their relationship during the later stages. In a cartoon, the elaboration for the term 'wife' is caricatured two senses. The cartoon figure VIII gives an elaboration of the term 'wife' in the two columns differently on the basis of the experience before and after the marriage. Elaboration given before the marriage for the term 'wife' is 'Wonderful Instrument for Enjoyment.' But after the marriage husband made a correction saying that the term 'wife' means 'Worries Invited for Ever.' ¹⁰



Figure VIII

Women's entry into the public space for jobs and other activities posed a serious threat to manly power and qualities. Cartoons and comic strips reflect anxiety about the 'modern' transformations of home. Women's jobs and activities outside the home demanded men's care and involvement in domestic duties and management. This aspect is exaggerated in cartoons

using the technique of role reversal where women's role mainly changed into society lady/club women who dominate husband by giving instructions and commands. Cartoons exhibit a new role for husbands which is similar to the 'traditional'/subservient role of women who accomplish all domestic duties. In twentieth-century Kerala, one can find many cartoons and comic strips drawn by men in women's magazines which mainly targeted women who were involved in club activities and associations. "Mrs. Nair" by Yesudasan is a most popular comic strip published in *Vanitha* magazine. A popular women's magazine called *Grihalakshmi* consists of a comic strip called "Samajam Sarojam" by Gopikrishnan. Thikkodi and *Mahila Chandrika*'s "President Kunjamma" by Sageer are examples of women-centered comic strips. Apart from this most of these women's magazines contain cartoons targeting women drawn by men.



Figure IX

Figure IX¹¹ shows the image of a dialogue between two women while the man is involved in cooking.

- Visitor: 'Your servant looks handsome. Where did you get him from?'
- Wife: 'Keep your voice down. He is my husband!'

The above cartoon is drawn to target women who treat their husbands like a servant. New conceptualizations of gender and new family forms naturally led to blurring the gender roles at home too. Cartoonists are interested to target any kind of deviation from the traditional social

system. Middle class or lower middle-class women's entry into the public space for club activities or women-specific activities and jobs gradually demanded men's support and involvement in domestic duties. This situation evoked widespread discontent and anxiety among male cartoonists, leading them to caricature these new trends in an exaggerated way. These cartoons caricature husbands doing domestic duties and becoming homemakers when the wife is more engaged in club activities and associations. Media and news about the feminist redefinition of gender and women's initiatives in public space too influenced male cartoonists to caricature these themes.

In Vanitha magazine cartoonist Yesudasan has given an autobiographical sketch on the context in which the comic strip "Mrs. Nair" was created in 1981. He mainly targeted club women and society ladies in this series and the main male character is simple-minded one who obeys his wife. Mrs. Nair represents a clever woman who takes decisions, mostly quicktempered and smart and has a craze for fashion, make-up, hospitality, etc. 12 Cartoonist Yesudasan shares his experience and two inspiring incidents for introducing the popular cartoon strip in Vanitha magazine. The story goes like this: "It is about an incident that happened before 12 years. Along with a film producer friend I went to meet a film actress at her home in Chennai to invite her for an art programme. While we were talking to the actress and her mother, we saw an old man passing many times to Kitchen carrying water in a bucket from the downside well. As her mother might have found it inconvenient, passing in front of them dropping water on the floor, she told him, 'Now wait for some time. Take water from the well after sometime.'... After talking about the inauguration date and the deficiency of drinking water we came out and got into the car. While we return my friend explained: 'Did you know the person who carried the water from the downside.' I said no. My friend said 'he is the father of the film actress.' 13 This is one incident that influenced characters such as Mr. Nair and Mrs. Nair.

Along with this, another incident is also narrated by him: "After some years into this incident, I met one business person in Delhi. His wife is an IAS officer who works somewhere in Uttar Pradesh. But every week she comes to Delhi and they used to take food from outside. Wife and husband belong to two different states. It was the present Indian high commissioner B. A. C. Nair who introduced them to me. One day they invited us to the hotel for having food with them.

When we just finished our soup, disagreements arose between them. The reason was their four year old child had started crying. ... With a crying voice wife complained, 'My husband does not take care of the child. I never saw him utter a word even to the child lovingly. ... Sarcastically she asked me, I know my husband is from your native place. You tell me is there anything wrong in what I said.' As a solution for this issue, her husband silently left the place with the baby. ... While coming out after having food, we saw the father and the child playing inside their car." Yesudasan's autobiographical sketch explains that these two incidents made him create the comic image of a dominant wife and homemaker husband and that was the beginning of a new comic strip 'Mrs. Nair' in *Vanitha* magazine. But the interesting dimension is that such incidents play a dominant role in conceiving stereotypical images of gendered groups and redeploying those images. Husband's involvement in domestic duties is targeted as 'deviating' from norms and reflected in and through cartoons and comic literature. Such cartoons even target men for losing their manly power after becoming "henpecked" husbands. One may not find any comic elements or cartoons which target husbands' overrule and violence against his wife.

Women in Cartoons and the Question of Humour Sense

In 1982, *Grihalakshmi*, a popular women's magazine in Kerala initiated a discussion on 'woman in cartoons and humour.' 15 Cartoonist Yesudasan and Sukumar were involved in the discussion along with a group of women who work in different fields of society. They included Rathnakala S. Menon, T. Devi, Vijaya Ramachandran, Padmaja Menon (Vice-chairman, Kerala University Union), Padmini, and Jameela Ibrahim. Almost all members pointed out the corrective aim behind cartoons. However, as mentioned by cartoonists, women become the main subject matter of cartoons due to the high market value and demand for such themes in the market. Well- known comic Yesudasan says: 'Humour sense of this world itself is surrounding the women. It is not possible to write or draw cartoons about men's high heeled slippers, cookery class, etc. ... Women are commodities that are easily available for cartooning...I don't think that such cartoons obstruct the development of women. It is women who first enjoy these cartoons which appear in these magazines. ... Cartoons on men are rejected by editors while womenspecific cartoons are easily acceptable to publish in 70 mm page even.' The final solution which Yesudasan suggested for this problem is the emergence of woman cartoonists and their

cartoons against the misogynistic cartoons of men. The whole discussion proves a point that women in these cartoons become an object of laughter or commodity to create laughter for the purpose of raising the market value of the magazine. Women are very much related to consumerism and cosmetic culture. They are a vital component and become a 'taste' factor for increasing the taste of laughter.

Another issue very much related to this is an allegation that 'women had no place in the creation of humour' because they 'lack a sense of humour compared to men' (Walker). According to Walker, a sense of humour requires intelligence and understanding a situation before one can see the humour in it. Famous Malayalam Satirist Sanjayan has also evoked sarcasm against the lack of woman humorists. Why do we have very few women cartoonists and humorists? Why were women rarer in the cartoon field or comic narrations? American cartoonist Betty Swords raises this question in her article and completely disagrees with the point that women lack a sense of humour (65-84). She identifies two main reasons behind the scarcity of women in this area. Discrimination women face in society is one main factor. Another possible reason is, as women- specific themes are having more market value in cartooning, she argues that women need to have very low self-esteem to come up with cartoon drawings that are so hateful and hostile to women. According to her, it would be difficult for a woman cartoonist to follow these ugly stereotypes of women. In other words, she puts it: "Women don't make the jokes because they are the joke." Here one can see that stereotypes play a very important role in humour and cartoons. In such a situation woman cartoonists' existence itself is based on how far one utilizes self-deprecating humour in their cartoons and humour. As a woman cartoonist, she discusses the difficulties one faces to develop an alternative cartoon style avoiding misogynic stereotypes.

Conclusion

New changes and discontents brought about by colonial modernity, women's craze for fashions, new dresses and ornaments, new initiatives to organize women's associations and clubs evoked serious criticism among the cartoonists. There emerged many comic strips and cartoon columns in magazines targeting women for their initiatives and character traits in a misogynistic

manner. All of these cartoons and comic strips were drawn by male groups. Changing roles of women and men are caricatured in these cartoons with stereotypical images and redeploying of those images. The traditional homemaker role of women was redeployed into men and thereby cartoons evoked laughter. Women active in clubs and associations are laughed at for their vain, glorious and pompous talks. They are caricatured as dominating and at the same time dependent women who need the help of husbands as well as servants in various ways. At the same time, a good number of cartoons target women for overruling their husbands at home. Many of these cartoons caricature women for treating their husbands as servants at home. Cartoonists use women as objects of laughter and a crucial component to create the taste factor in laughter. Cartoons even commodify women for laughter and play a major role in popularizing such images of women.

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