

Appy Hippie: The Unsung Hero Battered by the Bigotry of Mainstream Culture

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Abstract: Cartoonist Toms' mischievous characters Boban and Molly are two domestic names in the households of Keralam for over 50 years, chiefly through the pages of the *Malayala Manorama Weekly*. He introduced the character Appy Hippie for the first time in "Bobanum Mollyum" in the *Malayala Manorama Weekly* in 1971. Appy Hippie is a village hippie portrayed as a jobless youth who is quite obsessed with the 'company of women'. Hippies distinguish themselves in their appearance from social etiquettes of attire and grooming. Consequently, a binary opposition is created between the hippie and the mainstream society. Toms portrays Appy Hippie by keeping the norms of moralism intact and projects him as a laughing stock. This portrayal is problematic because as a hippie, he is reduced to a womanizer, pickpocket and kidnapper. This paper attempts to claim that in the trajectory of Toms' cartoons, Appy Hippie is the scapegoat of mainstream bigotry and usually considered as a person with no more significance than as a comic character. As such, it attempts to see the character from the perspective of a liberal minded one-man army standing against the norms of an orthodox society.

Keywords: *Bobanum Mollyum*, Bigotry, Body shaming, Counterculture, Dominant culture, Hippie

Cartoonist Toms' mischievous characters Boban and Molly are two domestic names in the households of Keralam for over 50 years, chiefly through the pages of the *Malayala Manorama Weekly*. The cartoon characters were named eponymously after two children in his neighbourhood, Boban and Molly, who asked him one day to draw their picture. When he left *Malayala Manorama*, Toms commenced publishing *Bobanum Mollyum* in *Kalakaumudi*, to which *Malayala Manorama* objected legally. After a controversial legal battle between *Malayala Manorama* and Toms, *Bobanum Mollyum* began to appear as a comic magazine called *Tom's Magazine*.



The character, Appy Hippie, appeared for the first time in “Bobanum Mollyyum” in the *Malayala Manorama Weekly* in 1971. Appy, a hippie, is introduced as the son of a village verger (‘Kapyar’ in Malayalam) named Thomachettan of Marappil Family. On returning to his native village Keezhkamthooku Panchayath from Bangalore after his studies, he claimed that he is not Appy, but ‘Hippie’. When the villagers say that he is the son of ‘Kapyar Thomachettan’, he corrects them that it is not ‘Kapyar’ but ‘Hipyar’. Appy Hippie is a village hippie portrayed as a jobless youth who is quite obsessed with the ‘company of women’. The portrayal, however, consummates the nature of a typical womanizer. Apparently, his ‘hippieness’ happens to be a license to lead a bohemian life free from all sorts of worldly bondages. Appy Hippie, who is ‘twice removed’ from real hippie, brings to light the idea of the original Hippie culture.



Hippie culture is almost a counterculture, particularly a youth movement which has its origin in mid twentieth century America. The etymology of the word brings nuances of meaning from the African American slang as "sophisticated; currently fashionable; fully up-to-date". When the so-called "sophisticated; currently fashionable; fully up-to-date" found its real manifestation, it challenged the orthodox way of thinking and being. Hippies created their own communities, listened to psychedelic music, embraced the sexual revolution, and used drugs such as cannabis, LSD, and psilocybin mushrooms to explore altered states of consciousness.

1970s in the west witnessed the decline of Hippie Culture, but cartoonist Toms started celebrating the hippie culture in Keralam through his cartoons in the 1970s.

According to Malcolm X's 1964 autobiography, the word 'hippie' in 1940s Harlem had been used to describe a specific type of white man who "acted more Negro than Negroes". It brings the notion of what hippies ought to be. The concept of 'other' makes it clear that a hippie is someone who doesn't have the polished qualities of a white man. This binary opposition catches the attention of the mass public. The concept of 'outlaw' emerges here. The grotesque appearance of our village hippie, Appy Hippie makes it clear that Toms followed the ideology of Malcom X. The society tamed and groomed by the unwritten rules and laws treat him as an alien and attributes the ill-names of 'rapist' and 'pickpocket', and Appy Hippie becomes a victim just because of his appearance.



Hippies sought to free themselves from societal restrictions, choose their own way, and find new meaning in life. An expression of hippie independence from societal norms was found in their standard of dress and grooming, which made hippies instantly recognizable to one another, and served as a visual symbol of their respect for individual rights. Through their appearance, hippies declared their willingness to question authority, and distanced themselves from the 'straight' and 'square' (i.e., conformist) segments of society. Appy Hippie deliberately chooses the attire of a nomad, and keeps himself away from the rest of the village. This unorthodox dressing style and appearance makes him a prey to the moralistic and duplicitous society. Once he tries to save an abandoned kid, and he gets the reward from its mother in the form of slaps and verbal abuse as she mistook him as a kidnapper because of his appearance.



The common stereotype on the issues of love and sex had it that the hippies were licentious, having wild sex orgies, seducing innocent teenagers and exhibiting every manner of sexual perversion. The hippie movement appeared concurrently in the midst of a rising Sexual Revolution, in which many views of the status quo on this subject were being challenged. When Toms brought this idea to the microcosmic level of a village, he moulded Appy Hippie as a village cupid, a universal sarcasm on voyeurism. The recreational or 'fun' side of sexual behavior is celebrated here within the cartoon column. The orthodox society couldn't digest the idea of free sex and they force Appy Hippie to settle with a marriage. They bring marriage proposals for him to domesticate him to the traditional setting of a family. The character is so broad minded that he gives consent to those proposals. The moral policing of the society becomes the villain in every marriage proposal.



The hippies inherited various countercultural views and practices regarding sex and love from the Beat Generation which encouraged spontaneous sexual activity and experimentation like group sex, public sex and homosexuality. So open relationship became an accepted part of the hippy lifestyle and its metamorphosis can be seen in the contemporary concept of 'living together'. Following this, the village Casanova in question here tries not to involve in a permanent relationship. For instance, the experimental life of Appy Hippie urges him to commit to an inter-caste marriage. The marriage, however, is short-lived because of his sincere revelation to the bride that he had actually committed to the inter-caste marriage for the benefit of a reward of thousand rupees.



The hippies were heirs to a long line of bohemians that includes William Blake, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Hesse, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde, Aldous Huxley et al. For the historian of the anarchist movement Ronald Creagh, the hippie movement could be considered as the spectacular revival of utopian socialism. Toms, it is true, skillfully created a 'nowhere land' in the background of Keralam and placed a hippie in connection with all the social and political confrontations occurring in the milieu.

The creation of Appy Hippie laughs at the so-called counterculture and adds colour to the evergreen mischievous siblings, Boban and Molly. Yet, the character also demands the theoretical framework for the erudite group to go for a detailed pedantic analysis. Existentialism might have made the village hippie to live in the present and worry about nothing other than being amidst female folk, ie., as a soft womanizer. Like the Epicureans, he eats, drinks, and is merry; for tomorrow, he knows, he will die. The close connection of music and hippie culture as that of Beats and Blues is obvious in the portrayal of Appy Hippie with a guitar and Tabla. But as in the case of every slapstick comedy, it serves the purpose of a weapon for others to 'beat' the hippie and bring 'blues'.



The dominant mainstream culture in the cartoons, represented by the village community, is hostile to the counterculture, represented in deeds and appearance by Appy Hippie. This hostility is visible in the public campaigning organized by the villagers against the hippie culture with banners. Youngsters with long hair and outgrown beards are all haunted by the orthodox public, who go to the extreme of hunting them down and shaving their heads.



It is a global tendency in every mainstream society to silence any voice that counters its norms and regulations. The situation is no different in the case of Keezhkamthooku Panchayath as well. The good deeds of Appy Hippie is not addressed by the mainstream culture just because he is a hippie and the law dictating dominant culture provides no space for this counter culture. Whenever Appy offers help to people, particularly ladies, his offer is seen as transgressive and hence rejected. The reason is that he is a hippie and a representative of free thinking and free living. His sexual potency, openness in the matter of sex and love is met with suspicion and suppressed by the morality of the prevailing culture.



Appy Hippie ought to be read also as a victim of aggressive body shaming. The Malayalee norms about masculinity do not consider him even as a human being, lest as a man. Such instances occur in several of *Bobanum Mollyyum* cartoons. The author, the characters and the readers collectively laugh upon Appy Hippie. The only person who is at the receiving end is Appy hippie, on whom the malicious laughter on body shaming is built upon.



An instance of body shaming Appy is subjected to is the heartbreaking reply he receives regarding a photograph sent for a marriage proposal. The response of the bride's party is an enquiry about his 'species'. Such belittling incidents should not be ticked off as comic but they are pointers to the ways in which the hostile villagers, the representatives of the dominant culture, use their muscle power to dominate the divergent thoughts of liberal minded people like Appy. The act of the public forcefully catching him and shaving his head is the clear example for intolerance to his queer appearance which cannot be accommodated by the moralistic mass culture. On closer analysis of the cartoons featuring Appy Hippy, it can be seen that the physical abuse and the entailing mental torture never stops. Even Boban and Molly, the apparently 'naïve' little children, get an upper hand to lead the prank on the young man because they are backed by the support of the mass conscience.



Slowly, as Appy Hippy becomes concerned about his physique, the intentions of the mainstream culture represented by the cartoonist himself, the characters and the reading public materialize the goal of making him a victim of body shaming. He, a human being with emotions and feelings, asks others whether he is acceptable to others because of his thin physique. This diffidence and inferiority imposed on Appy warns, in a humorous but brutal manner, any liberal minded reader to confine his counter cultural traits for fear of facing a similar destiny.



In a nutshell, it can be said that Appy Hippie ought to be given more focus than as a hippie but as a revolutionary character in constant conflict with the dominating moralistic and orthodox culture of the 1970s Keralam. As a liberal countercultural, his lifestyle and ways of presenting himself was not accommodated in the mainstream culture. He should be appreciated as a one man army against the prevailing norms. This paper attempted to claim that in the trajectory of Toms' cartoons, he was slowly 'becoming' the scapegoat of mainstream bigotry and was used as a warning for those who attempt to lead a life of freewill and joy. As such, he deserves special attention more than as a comic character, but as an unsung hero battered by the intolerance of the highly orthodox mainstream culture.

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