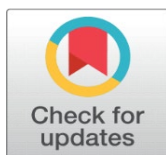
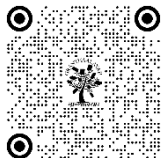


THE POLITICS OF CUISINE: PORTRAYAL OF FOOD CULTURE IN THE CARTOONS OF TOMS

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ABSTRACT

Culture is a way of living encoded in dress, food, religion, values, and more subjectively practised in a human society. As a medium of portraying the everyday cultural and social happenings in the society, cartoons serve as a subtle and satiric critique of the same. Cuisine is a multisensory experience, inevitable as a daily need but often undervalued in the semiotic signification it entails. Food defines communal as well as territorial or regional identity. It is a potent symbol of the dynamics of gender, space, and identity. The social, cultural, and economic aspects of a society influence the food the people eat. This aspect of food is evaluated in this paper as reflected in the cartoons of Cartoonist Toms. Toms covered a period of five decades in the cartoon sector of Kerala during the second half of the twentieth century with his social cartoon series, “Bobanum Moliyum”. Cooking is often presented either as a cumbersome task for women homemakers or as an essential part of the job of housemaids. The multitude of activities involved in the production of the final edible product has a direct association with the multi-layered politics within the society. The relevance of studying the culinary culture of a society is that food practices play a certain crucial role in understanding its culture in a varied perspective.

Keywords: Cartoons, Culinary Culture, Cultural Product, Politics of Food, Toms

1. INTRODUCTION

Cuisine is a multisensory experience inevitable as a daily need but often undervalued in the semiotic signification it entails because in reality, it “provides probably the richest source of symbol and metaphor in cultural expression” [Freeman \(2006\)](#). Vatika Sibal explains the relation between food and the culture of a society: “what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who’s at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is, it has a rich cultural base”. [Sibal \(2018\)](#) The multitude of activities involved in the production of the final edible product has direct association with the multi-layered politics within Society. The

social, cultural and economic aspects of a society influence the food the people eat. The relevance of studying the culinary culture of a society is that food practices play a certain crucial role in understanding its culture in a varied perspective.

It can be said that various social, communal, economic, and cultural aspects of a society can be interpreted by the cooking, serving and the tasting involved in the matter of food. Food is a potent symbol of the dynamics of gender, space, and identity. Food defines communal as well as territorial or regional identity. The discursive relationship of food and gender is overt as cooking and preparation of food used to be thought of as a feminine job, lesser in significance to the male folk of a society. Even though, on a professional basis, cooking has replaced this belief as gender neutral with men actively involved in culinary expertise, kitchens of several households still insist on being a feminine space.

This paper is an attempt to analyse the socio- cultural aspect of food and cuisine as portrayed in the cartoons of Toms. V. T. Thomas (1929-2016), popularly known as cartoonist Toms, is the most famous for his cartoon series “Bobanum Moliyum”. The series focuses on the activities of two children, especially their follies and tricks. The cartoons are set in a village named ‘Keezhkalam Thukku Panchayath’, meaning in Malayalam as a place where everything is upside down. “Bobanum Moliyum” achieved instantaneous popularity and prompted readers to start reading from the last page of the magazine Malayala Manorama weekly from 1957 to 1985. Later, the series was independently published as two collections in 2007 and 2013. New paragraph: use this style when you need to begin a new paragraph.

2. ANALYSIS

The venue for meals, in the presence and absence of guests in the homes of Keralam portrayed in the cartoons, is an interesting thing to consider. The use of dining table is reserved for men and guests. When the family members have their food in private, they squat on the floor (Toms (2013), 49; Figure 1). Guests are seated at the dining table, mostly accompanied by the father figure of the home (Toms (2013), 155; Figure 2). In the absence of guests, the mother and children eat their food in the kitchen. This also shows that the kitchen in the cartoons is gendered as a feminine space.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Toms (2013)

Figure 2



Figure 2 Toms (2013)

Cooking is often presented either as a cumbersome task for women homemakers or as an essential part of the job of housemaids. In contrast, cooking is treated as a hobby for the women of the upper class and serves as a yardstick for their social status.

According to Jane Dusselier, "... food is a system of communication, a language with rules not unlike grammar" (331). [Dusselier \(2009\)](#) The food culture of the society is mainly governed by religious taboos. The religious aspect of food can be seen in the cartoon series of Toms when the children are forced to pray before having their dinner. This rule is applied not in their home but also in the houses of their relatives when they go for visits or sleepovers. Prayer is well linked with food as part of the grooming of the children, probably as an imposed lesson to be grateful for the resources [Toms \(2007\)](#), 37. The general trend of fasting and abstinence from non-vegetarian food in the Advent weeks before Christmas and during Lent before Easter is shown as the part of Christian families in the cartoon series [Toms \(2007\)](#), 18.

It is true that ceremonious functions, especially weddings, are celebrated in Kerala with extravagant feasts serving an immense number of people and this is a common practice among all religious communities. The celebration of the harvest festival of Kerala, Onam, is portrayed in one of Toms' cartoons incorporating all the characters together in one frame, irrespective of their community and religion [Toms \(1969\)](#), 26.

Toms' cartoon series touches upon the marketing tactics in restaurant business, where there is a religious colour involved with names of the hotels. For instance, the same hotel keeps changing its name as 'Hotel Swami Saranam', 'Hotel Geevarghese' and 'Hotel Shajahan' in accordance with the changing festival seasons of Hindus, Christians, and Muslims respectively. The cartoonist makes the comment that 'Hotel Ayyankali' is also to be used to bring the feeling of secularism [Toms \(2007\)](#), 182; [Figure 3](#). The caste element in cuisine is portrayed in another cartoon which portrays an exclusive dining space for the upper caste people with a display board in front of the hotel showing 'Brahmanarkal Sappidum Sthalam' (the dining space for Brahmins) [Toms \(2007\)](#), 204; [Figure 4](#)). These incidents in particular show the intricate relationship between cuisine and religion.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Toms (2007)

Figure 4

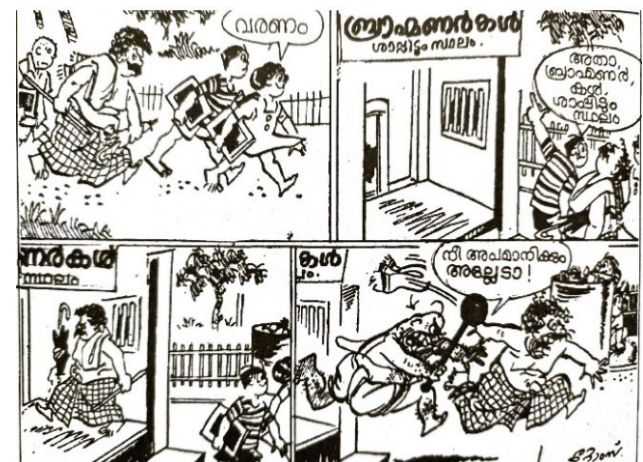


Figure 4 Toms (2007)

“Cooking”, according to Arjun Appadurai, “is the domain of the women and therefore indicates their general subordination to the men” (497). Appadurai (1981) He continues that “this is a generalized extension of the basic idea that cooking and sexual intercourse are appropriate and symbolically interconnected services performed by a wife for a husband” (497-498). Appadurai (1981) Apparently in cartoons, regardless of the financial or social status of the household, the image of kitchen gets complete only with the presence of women in it. In middle class and lower-class households, the women homemakers carry out the chores in the kitchen, while in upper class families, housemaids are hired to do the same. In any case, the chores in the kitchen are deemed feminine. In contrast, men are shown to be seated cosily on a sofa, reading the newspaper with a cup of tea.

In “Bobanum Moliyum”, Toms always places the mother in the kitchen. Every frame portraying any action occurring in the background of the kitchen has the perennial presence of the mother. All the domestic chores in the kitchen and the

house are assumed to be the responsibility of women and this is evident in the character of the girl, Moli. The cartoons present Moli as equal to Boban in every respect except cooking, for which only she is summoned to help the mother. For instance, Moli, instead of Boban, is made to serve tea to the guests keeping all the formality of a host [Toms \(1961\)](#), 24. This also indicates the significance of the role played by women in household chores as opposed to the passive presence of the men, who sit in the veranda of the house reading a daily. Women not only do the chores, but also audit the grocery, manage the monthly bills, and monitor the educational needs of the children. Further, all the households are portrayed with this typical image of the father figure who enjoy the freedom to consume liquor even in the living room, because as Arjun Appadurai states, “domestic food transactions express the superiority of men largely through their priority in being served food, the positions which they physically occupy, and their disengagement from the cooking process” (498). [Appadurai \(1981\)](#)

The practice of eating out is not a new phenomenon portrayed in recent cartoons because a cartoon of Toms that appeared in 1958 shows bakery/confectionary items sold on wheels [Toms \(1958\)](#), 26. The terms like ‘hotel’ and ‘restaurant’ are shown in Toms’ cartoons published in 1958 itself [Toms \(1958\)](#), 26. Later, his cartoons of the 1970s consistently criticise the quality of food provided in hotels. The culture of eating outside and the fashion of having food from high grade restaurants became a trend then [Toms \(1977\)](#), 32. It is to be noted that other cartoonists portray hotels and restaurants more as places for maintaining social status than merely having food because eating out is presented as the lifestyle of the upper class. Satirical comments on eating out from hotels or criticism on the quality of their food are missing in these cartoons, but Toms is an exception as he was sarcastic about the quality as well as the price tags of food offered in restaurants.

A prejudiced attitude named ‘food shaming’ requires a special attention in this context because it finds representation in Toms’ “Bobanum Moliyum” from 1957 itself, as a humorous topic often taken lightly. Food shaming is the practice of commenting on people regarding their choice of food or food habits. It is different from fat shaming or body shaming in the sense that it is not the body, but the choice or amount of food that is questioned or criticised. In “Bobanum Moliyum”, the character of Thimman Chettan, a distant relative of the household, is usually laughed at on account of the threat he poses to Boban and Moli because his overnight stay at their home would leave all the food containers in the kitchen empty. The character of Thimman Chettan is moulded and designed to laugh at the amount of food intake by people. The element of laughter is generated as part of the surfeited amount of food he consumes [Toms \(2013\)](#), 71. There are cartoons in which the children are playing tricks on this character because of his gluttony [Toms \(2007\)](#), 243.

Apparently naïve, this issue is not so simplistic because of two reasons. First and foremost, his original name is something else and ‘Thimman’ is the nickname used by the family of Boban and Moli. The word for word translation for ‘Thimman’ in Malayalam is ‘eater’ or simply, a foodie. However, the cultural nuances of the term indicate a more serious implication that the person is a foodaholic, obsessed with uncontrollable food cravings. Even though they treat him well superficially because of the Malayalee tradition of hospitality, the real indignation they feel towards Thimman is evident in the name because he casually eats away everything in their household. The second implication is the economic crisis of the family because, in spite of the breadwinner being a lawyer, often they find it difficult to make both ends meet and with the arrival of Thimman Chettan, their budget is thrown overboard. In addition, the children are afraid of losing their share of food on account of which

they play tricks to flee him away. In fact, after he leaves at the end of the cartoons portraying Thimman Chettan, a fight begins at the home wondering how he is related to the family! [Toms \(2013\), 71](#).

Alcoholism has a significant representation in Malayalam cartoons as the life of Malayalees is well connected with the sale and consumption of liquor. The revenue received from the liquor policies of the government catered to the needs of the state. Even in the celebration of 'Kerala Model', the role of liquor has its relevance. The consumption of alcohol as portrayed in the cartoons primarily indicates the cultural and economic dichotomy between the upper classes and the lower classes. Consuming alcohol is a part of the social gatherings of rich and the upper-class people and serves as a status symbol. On the other hand, it is a social evil for the poor because it results in the destruction of one's dignity and family atmosphere. The drinking male member of the family of lower class is treated as a terror by other family members unlike the upper-class families.

In a cartoon published in the series, "Bobanum Moliyum" in 1958, Boban and Moli are shown talking to a group of people who enquire the route to a nearby arrack shop. Arrack and toddy were the popular substances of liquor at the time [Toms \(1958\), 22](#). The cartoons in the early 1960s of "Bobanum Moliyum" portray the campaigns against the use of liquor. The humour involved in the cartoon is the irony that the remuneration given to the people participating in the campaign is a bottle of liquor [Toms \(1962\), 24](#). The same theme gets repeated in the cartoon series for decades [Toms \(1977\), 36](#).

A regular drunkard named 'Ashudha Mathai' dressed in shabby clothes is shown in the cartoon series of [Toms \(2013\), 166](#). Here, the Christian church is shown in the cartoon as making statements against alcoholism while the name of the drunkard is a Christian name. In another cartoon, a Christian priest is shown having liquor as part of the meeting with a soldier where the priest expects the favour of the soldier in terms of his 'military quota'. This 'liquor feast' happens during the time of fasting during Christmas [Toms \(2013\), 209](#). The availability of toddy, a local liquor, is shown in another cartoon as background and happens to be a part of the social life of Keralam [Toms \(2007\), 128](#). Toms' approach to the campaign against alcoholism is evidently sarcastic as portrayed in the cartoon series. He highlights the futility of such campaigns against liquor in his cartoons [Toms \(2013\), 105](#).

The tea-shops and toddy-shops served as a platform for all type of discussions and debate which can be inferred as the fuel for journey of Keralam to reach the 'Kerala Model'. As the social status elevated as according to the economic status of the people in the state, the tea-shops turned restaurants and the toddy-shop turned bars became a sophisticated and disciplined space for the gentle-men to roam around. The practice of consuming liquor is often portrayed in such a way that there is a clear distinction between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The treatment of the theme is different for the rich and the poor, implying the increasing gap of economic inequality. The rich are portrayed as mildly enjoying liquor in booze parties while the poor drunkards are illustrated with shabby, unbuttoned shirts and quivering legs.

3. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the analysis of the culinary culture in the cartoons of Toms shows that a visible religious element could be observed in not just the food per se for instance non-vegetarian food, but in the customary practices as well, for instance

saying prayers before dinner, abstinence from certain non-vegetarian food items during the fasting associated with Lent or Advent. Toms, right from the 1950s till the 2000s, especially criticises the inferior quality of the food served in hotels. The aspect of food shaming was dominantly visible in his portrayal of the character, Thimman Chettan. Again, the cartoons could be seen as gender biased in this aspect because it views cooking as a feminine duty and no men were seen in the kitchen even as time progressed. It can be concluded that even soft and subtle humour that centres around food strongly suggest interpretations on the politics of the gendered, communal, and socio-economic undercurrents prevalent in the society at the time of the production of the cartoons.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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