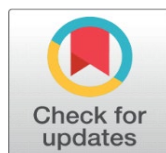
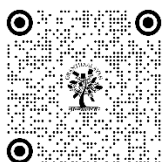


SCRIBBLING WITH MALE EGO: ANALYSING THE MALE GAZE IN THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN CARTOONS

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ABSTRACT

Male cartoonists dominated the cartoon industry of Kerala in the second half of the twentieth century. Women stereotypes are highlighted in the discourse of cartoons, probably like any other artform in the world. This paper is an attempt to analyse the representation of women folk in the cartoons of Kerala, during the post independent period of India. The cartoons of veteran male cartoonists namely Cartoonist Toms, Cartoonist Yesudasan and Cartoonist Thomas have been analysed for the study. The misrepresentation of women characters in their cartoons are analysed. The 'domineering wife' stereotype in the cartoons portraying the domestic setting and the household is not the fair representation of women of the time, given the patriarchal tradition. Women's empowerment is shown mainly as their physical empowerment in the cartoon series. The male gaze in the commodification of female body in the cartoons is analysed. The male ego in the nurturing of ideal woman characters by the male cartoonists is problematized in the paper. The images used in this paper are collected from archives and the sources of images, as it is mentioned in the bibliography, are old collections of magazines, which are fifty years or more old. These cartoons are retrieved from the archives compiled at Appan Thampuran Smaraka Library in Thrissur, Kerala.

Keywords: Cartoons, Kerala, Male Ego, Male Gaze, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of cartoons can be employed to critique the cultural forces and discourses existing in a period of time. This paper approaches cartoons as a cultural product, engaging with any given dominant discourse, its authority, and its subjects, through visual images often invoking laughter. Dominant discourses of patriarchy, for instance, utilise the construction of gendered stereotypes that marginalise women from crossing over or questioning the norms. The cartoon industry in Malayalam is obviously a male dominated sector and only a few women cartoonists

marked their presence, that too, even for a short period. It will be interesting, in that case, to analyse the representation of women folk in the cartoons of the second half of the twentieth century of Keralam, dominated by the veteran male cartoonists namely Cartoonist Toms, Cartoonist Yesudasan and Cartoonist Thomas.

V. T. Thomas (1929-2016), popularly known as Toms, was born in Kuttanad, in the district of Alappuzha. In 1957, Toms launched “Bobanum Moliyum” in the Malayala Manorama weekly with a focus on the activities of two children, especially their shenanigans. The cartoons are set in a village named ‘Keezhkakam Thookku Panchayath’, meaning in Malayalam as a place where everything is upside down. Originally silent cartoons, “Bobanum Moliyum” soon started using dialogues in the same year of its inception. The mischievous siblings are accompanied by their pet dog all through the years, and in course of time, many characters were introduced. Boban and Moli were intended by the cartoonist to remain as children perennially, in order to maintain the tempo of their adventures. Toms also used the cartoon series to express political criticism. In the cartoons portraying political issues, one can find that the children are sidelined as witnesses for political commentary. The cartoon series of Toms, “Bobanum Moliyum” achieved popularity and prompted readers to read the last page of the magazine *Malayala Manorama* weekly during 1957 to 1985. The series was independently published as two collections in 2007 and 2013.

Cartoonist Yesudasan (1938-2021) was born in a Christian family in Mavelikkara in Alappuzha district. Kambissery Karunakaran, the chief editor of Janayugam, appointed Yesudasan as their staff cartoonist in 1961, and it was the first daily to appoint a staff cartoonist in a publishing firm in Keralam. Yesudasan was the first cartoonist to create a pocket cartoon in a Malayalam daily, named on the central character, ‘Kittumman’, a public witness, and this happens to be the first box cartoon in Malayalam. The cartoon series of Yesudasan, “Mrs. Nair” was started in *Vanitha* magazine in January 1981. The character of Mrs. Nair is designed to portray the life of people from the upper-class society of Keralam who are obsessed with their social status and restlessly trying to maintain the same. The eponymous protagonist is an emancipated woman whose husband is a retired police officer. Their daughter is shown as interested in sports and their son is a non-resident Indian whose wife is a college lecturer. Like every affluent family, they also have a maid to do the household chores. The cartoon series occupied the last page of *Vanitha* magazine for three decades.

K. P. Thomas (1938-2009), known as cartoonist Thomas, was born at Paravoor in Ernakulam district. He started his career as an illustrator for a manuscript magazine, *Poonilavu*, He got into the profession with a strip cartoon in the Sunday supplement of *Mathrubhumi* daily with the title “Kittendathu Kittiyappol”. Cartoonist Thomas, along with other cartoonists, took pains to start the Kerala Cartoon Academy, a consortium of cartoonists of Keralam. Cartoonist Thomas came to the limelight with the social cartoon series named “Veekshanavishesham” published in *Mathrubhumi* weekly. The complete collection of the series was published by *Mathrubhumi Books* in 2008, which is utilised for reference in this paper.

These cartoonists are selected for the analysis in the present study because they covered a longer period of Kerala history through their cartoons. Their social cartoons recorded the everyday life of Kerala. The cartoon images referred in this article have been included in the Appendix section with proper numbers and reference.

Throughout the history of art, representations of women, more than that of men, have been stereotyped and this is true of cartoons as well. As Sarah V. Corley notes, “women in the comics have generally fallen into four categories: the pretty, flirtatious young females of the girl strips; the sexy, salacious women of the adventure and soap-opera strips; the domineering wives of the domestic strips; and the man chasing spinsters of the humorous strips”. Corley (1982), 61. This ‘universal law’ is evident in the cartons produced during the second half of the twentieth century in Kerala, the southernmost state in India, whose mother tongue is Malayalam, spoken by 3.3 crores of Malayalees.

2. ANALYSIS

The representation of women in the cartoons of the select cartoonists of Kerala is done from a male perspective because the cartoonists are all male. The ‘domineering wife’ stereotype in the cartoons portraying the domestic setting and the household is not the fair representation of women of the time, given the patriarchal tradition. Also, the women are represented to be the decision makers and the voice of the family while actually it was the male authority which held the final word in all the activities of the Malayalee homes. Also, this icon of the domineering wife and decision maker given to the women in families, as for instance the eponymous character in “Mrs. Nair”, usually represented the upper-class families. Corley notes: “the relations between the sexes in the adventure and serious strips, with man as all powerful and woman as weak and submissive, undergoes a reversal in the typical domestic strip” Corley (1982), 66. This is true of the representation of women as domineering wives in the characterisation of Mrs. Nair in Yesudasan’s “Mrs. Nair” and Chettathi as well as the mother of Boban and Moli in “Bobanum Moliyum”. The conjugal relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Nair illustrates this idea because the wife is depicted as making decisions which the husband, the earning member of the family, is shown to comply with.

3. MOCKING AT WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In Toms’ cartoon series, Chettathi is shown so aggressive that she even physically abuses her husband and is depicted as a terror in the locality. Toms (1961), 24; Figure 1. There are several incidents in the series where women characters are shown physically dealing with the male folk. Toms (2007) , 293; Figure 2. Women’s empowerment is shown mainly as their physical empowerment in the cartoon series. This misrepresentation is suspicious because here again empowerment is rendered in a wrong and impractical way because a majority of the women in Kerala would not have done it, given the patriarchal attitudes and male dominated society of the state.

Women’s sphere of activity in Yesudasan’s cartoons is stressed through highlighting the liberal women at the public sphere. Homemaker, from the middle class or lower class, is shown confined to the interior space of the household while the emancipated woman who belongs to the upper class is active outside the home, through her association with the social capital in the form of women’s forums. Also, the feminine passion for self-dependence is severely mocked at in these cartoons. The association of financial independence with personal emancipation is also shattered in “Mrs. Nair”. Although not an earning member, she is the decision maker in the family, but she does not treat her educated and employed daughter in law with equal dignity. Obsessed with the social status of her family and herself, she tries to get it held high by hook or crook, but everything gets spoiled at the end of each

cartoon with the innocent and genuine words or deeds of her husband. [Yesudasan \(1982\)](#), 42.

Cartoonist Thomas, in his cartoons portraying the upper-class hypocrisy, focuses on the women associating with the social capital. The early women's association called 'Mahilasamajam' and its demand for women's equality was soon replaced by 'Ladies' Clubs' and its uproar for female dominance. Thomas satirises this in his cartoon where a meeting of the Ladies' Club is held, planning its agenda to stop male dominance. [Thomas \(2008\)](#), 15; [Figure 3](#).

The name 'Seelavathy' in Malayalam means 'the chaste woman'. In the portrayal of the 'Seelavathy Club', the members find a solution to the gender inequality by choosing to wear high heeled shoes, so as to go higher than men. [Thomas \(2008\)](#), 34; [Figure 4](#). In another cartoon, the name of the club is changed as 'Seelavathy Memorial Ladies' Club' to subtly portray that chastity is no more. The problem is intensified because the priority attributed to chastity by patriarchal values is evident in these cartoons produced by a male cartoonist. While the activities of women are mocked at, the male folk are conveniently avoided in the portrayal as the hypocrisy of only the upper-class women are the target of the sarcasm.

The undercurrents of male ego are visible in the depiction of the women's involvement in the clubs and associations, as seen in the noticeably scornful attitude and dialogues in Mr. Nair. For instance, when a friend asks for a lift in her car, Mrs. Nair asks her husband to move to the backseat, but his response is intimidating, as he takes a trolley attached to the car saying that it is better to sit in it rather than watching the hairstyle of the women. [Yesudasan \(1997\)](#), 82; [Figure 5](#).

4. GENDER GROOMING IN CARTOONS

In Toms' "Bobanum Moliyum", the boy and the girl, Boban and Moli, are portrayed equally everywhere, the only exception being household chores. When it comes to assistance in the kitchen, the mother always calls Moli. [Toms \(1958\)](#), 22. The mother has her own justifications for this and gives a detailed lecture on the 'necessity' of a girl child to learn the activities in a kitchen. The mother is concerned about the future 'work space' of her girl and insists her to learn the chores of the kitchen. The boy Boban, of her same age, is let free while the mother goes on targeting Moli for not helping her in the kitchen chores. Often, she is shown telling who will marry her if she is not able to cook. [Toms \(1964\)](#), 24. It is evident from the cartoon series that even in preteens, the girl child is being groomed for becoming an ideal wife at the house of in-laws in the distant future.

A similar incident can be discussed where a close reading of the cartoon series throws light to the orthodox conception of womanhood through the eyes of the cartoonist. Chettathi is shown asking Moli to take care of the kitchen affairs when both Boban and Moli are playing nearby. Boban, being a boy, is spared from 'kitchen affairs' where Moli is the target. The cartoon presents the defying attitude of Moli towards such recommendations. [Toms \(2007\)](#), 16.

In another cartoon, Moli occupies the easy chair in the verandah, which used to be reserved for the male member of the family, saying that she is the queen. At the same time, the mother asks her to clean the house and the surroundings as it is her responsibility. She insists Moli to do so because she believed that the girl child of the family should be an aide to the mother. [Toms \(2007\)](#), 70; [Figure 6](#).

It is evident in the cartoon that the mother nurtures herself as a 'homely' woman and tries to nurture her daughter in the same mould to be a dutiful woman in the family. This training given only to the girl child is evident in one of the

cartoons where Moli makes the statement that only women know the real situation of the kitchen. She says this statement because when they are visited by guests, only she is concerned about what to give them. [Toms \(2013\)](#) , 274. This would mean that the mother's training has finally succeeded because an otherwise carefree child is now concerned about the menu or food to be prepared for the guests. In these instances, it can be assumed that the cartoonists voiced the same conservative attitudes that were prevalent in the society at the time of their cartoons, thus choosing to propagate the domestic patriarchal discourses that girls were supposed to be trained to fit the ideal woman stereotype when they grow up.

5. THE MALE GAZE

It is a common feature of cartoons to employ exaggeration as a strategy of caricature, but often this causes that "in addition to being stereotypes, the young women in the comics have been exploited in the overemphasis of their feminine features to attract the attention of readers". [Corley \(1982\)](#) , 61. This can easily be seen in the voluptuous illustrations in "Bobanum Moliyum" showing the women or college going girls whom Appy Hippie flirts with. [Toms \(2007\)](#) , 171; [Figure 7](#).

It should be added here that even in instances where no sexist remarks are explicitly mentioned in these, the illustrations objectify the female body, and the male gaze is at work. For example, the erotic presentation of housemaids in Toms' cartoons is done from the male gaze and aims to capture the attention of the male readers. [Toms \(2007\)](#), 335; [Figure 8](#).

Such narratives would aid only for a continued prejudice towards women working hard to earn some money for the family. Similarly, the commodification of the female body has been there in Toms' cartoon series across the ages. There are instances where the tutorial colleges run by private parties and religious institutions tried to attain publicity to attract male students by using the female body as a marketing technique. [Toms \(2007\)](#), 380; [Figure 9](#).

The male moustache is portrayed as a symbol of power, domination, and authority in the cartoons. Yesudasan's "Mrs. Nair" spanning the decades of 1980s, 1990s and 2000s attributed authority to this phallic symbol. As a retired police officer, Mr. Nair wears an imperial moustache ('komban meesha') typical of the early policemen of Keralam. The moustache is an inevitable feature of Malayalee male community as it is equated with masculinity, or manliness and is looked upon as the symbol of male authority. For instance, when Mr. Nair fails to buy flowers for his wife on her request, she asks him to pluck off his moustache. [Yesudasan \(1995\)](#) , 82. In another cartoon, Mr. Nair's birthday is celebrated with a cake designed in his image and Mrs. Nair asks him to cut the moustache portion first. [Yesudasan \(2005\)](#), 82. Both the instances show Mrs. Nair's admiration and attribution of authority to the moustache. When Mr. Nair feels that Mrs. Nair is bossy and dominating over him in the family, he presents a dummy moustache to his wife, a symbolic gesture to signify that she is asserting authority over him. [Yesudasan \(1996\)](#), 102; [Figure 10](#).

Similarly, the housemaid in Yesudasan's "Mrs. Nair" is garbed in a deep neck blouse with visible cleavage and not covering the upper body. [Yesudasan \(1996\)](#) , 106; [Figure 11](#).

This image is sufficient to create the picture of a woman with loose morals and it is emphasised with the illustration of Mrs. Nair's suspicion on her husband's presence in and around the kitchen. In this way, the cartoonist creates the prejudiced image that housemaids are perverse and that upper class women and feminists are hollow, and cartoons as popular media reach the readers, successfully

getting this poisonous bias injected in them. Cartoonist Toms also repeatedly brings the notion of attributing loose morals to the housemaids in his cartoons. Housemaids and women having illicit relationships frequently appear in the cartoons, for instance in a cartoon, the husband, whose wife is working abroad, comments that the housemaid is for 'everything'. Toms (2013), 350. The fact that such illustrations appear in magazines with a majority of female readers indicates that the male psyche is normalised and tolerated by women.

Women doing manual labour is generally portrayed as having suspicious morals in Toms' cartoons. For instance, he incorporates the passing dialogue of two women labourers in a construction site where one of them tells the other about the reason for her absence last day that they had a site inspection by the engineer and hence she had the 'other duty'. The passing comment of the passing character is not accidental as there are repeated references about the women folk throughout the cartoon series. Toms (2007), 32. Such generalised representations distort the image of women who are breadwinners of their families, by doing the hard work of housemaids for a decent living.

6. COMMODIFICATION OF FEMALE BODY

Mekkolla N. Parameswaranpillai, in his book *Hasyadarshanam* explains that humour, 'hasya', is well knit with eroticism, 'sringara'. He quotes the statement from Bharata stating 'hasya' is generated from 'sringara'. Parameswaranpillai (1969), 26. The erotic female image was abundantly used by the cartoonists to invoke humour. Vulgar presentation of the female body accompanied by derogatory comments frequently appear in the later cartoons of Toms' cartoon series, where humour is generated at the expense of extramarital relationships and passing lustful comments on the character of women. There are cartoons surrounding plots on illicit relationships and vulgar dialogues. The emancipated woman concept is interpreted through the male eyes where the cartoonist portrays the husband of an emancipated woman, an activist, finding solace in the company of their maid. The liberation of womanhood is undermined as the cartoonist's double standards, criticising women for their extramarital relationships while taking sides with men in the same situation.

In the later cartoons of "Bobanum Moliyum", there was a shift in the focus from the mischiefs and tricks of the eponymous characters to puns and word plays with sexual connotations. The justification that the sexualised portrayal of women was used to criticise the general trends in literature cannot be viewed as a naïve approach. The cartoonist presents the nude image of women as part of 'criticism'. The male gaze of the cartoonist towards female politicians is evident in the portrayal where the body features of the woman are enhanced 'as part of the caricaturing'. Toms (2013), 269; Figure 12. This cartoon portrays the female politician of Kerala who happened to be the chairperson of Kerala Tourist Development Corporation.

Sexuality in Malayalam movies was a common theme of discussion during the time and it is no different in various cartoons covering the periods of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The beauty of the female body is shown to have been valued over the beauty of the face or the actor's talent, hinting the practice of 'casting couch' in the film industry. Commercial success of films depended on certain formula, the chief ingredients being plots dealing with revenge, display of the female body as in bathing scenes or cabarets, fashionable clothing, nudity and intimate scenes, extravagant dances and so on. Here again, items in the above mentioned formula are wrapped in the movies to suit the audience, for instance a family friendly movie

targets the family audience, or scenes on nudity or display of the female body served as crowd-pullers, target the male folk. Cartoonist Thomas attacked this pseudo artistic creation through his cartoons by portraying the parents of the heroine bathing naked in the bathtub. The producer/ distributor named 'Kalkandam Distributors' is shown evaluating the shooting of the 'family' scene for the film titled 'Kulikkum Thankamma' (Bathing Thankamma). [Thomas \(2008\)](#), 1 ; [Figure 13](#).

The moral decadence among the competing actors in the film industry is mocked at by Thomas in another cartoon by utilising the clothing culture and the scope of nudity in films along with the cold war among female actors. It portrays one of the female actors complaining to the director that she has nothing more to display her 'talent' as the other actor is wearing a two-piece bikini. [Thomas \(2008\)](#) , 42; [Figure 14](#).

In the frame is seen a bath tub, the necessary ingredient of a masala movie and interestingly, the movie is titled 'Ini Avar Kulikkatte' (Let them Bathe). Again, this competition among actors in the film industry is depicted through women and not men. This act of forcefully bringing women into the picture and sparing men can be considered as the result of the male bias of the cartoonist.

Evidently enough, the conservative society of Keralam has protested against the display of sexuality in movies where bathing scenes abound, and cartoonist Thomas comes up with a remedy for the same. A movie is shown being shot with the heroine lying on a table in an operation theatre with legs exposed, where the director comments that although they have been forced to delete the bathing scenes from the movie, they could replace them with the scene of the surgery on the upper thigh of the woman, leading to the same effect. The film is titled 'Aa Kalukal Kadha Parayunnu' (Those Legs Tell a Story), unlike other movies which are titled with the bathing scenes. [Thomas \(2008\)](#), 49; [Figure 15](#).

It is interesting to note that the producer/ distributor is shown with the same face in all such cartoons, the only change being in the costume, implying that irrespective of his personality, the attitude of the male producer remains the same. It is rather interesting to note that the decadence of the values of art, particularly movies of the period, is represented only through the portrayal of women, while the male actors are spared with. This cannot be interpreted as a naïve approach from the cartoonists.

7. CONCLUSION

The consumerist aspect and the commodification of the female body, even in the presentation of images within the cartoon frames can be seen in their 'sarcastic' creation of the 'male' cartoonists. Even with an abundance of topics to bring for discussion, cartoonists always seem to be interested in targeting the follies and foibles of women in the society. In their exaggerations, derogatory comments, and overtly misogynist portrayals, they not only illustrate how women should appear and behave, but how they should not as well. This shows the patriarchal agenda of creating the image of the degraded woman in order to reinforce the image of the 'ideal woman'. This is the power of creativity that can exert influence in creating, perpetuating and sustaining biased attitudes and social practices that turn out to be detrimental to the targeted social factions. In the cartoon series of Yesudasan, Mrs. Nair's incessant advices to her daughter regarding how she should behave after marriage and intolerance towards the daughter's male friends demonstrate the 'do nots' required to be vigilant of, for an ideal woman. The same thought is embedded in Toms' cartoons where Moli's mother's attitude towards forcing the girl child to

involve in the household chores so as to mould her as an ideal woman in the distant future. This biased predisposition can only be termed as patriarchal, rooted in the male cartoonist's view, because such a conservative outlook could not spring from an essentially empowered woman character.

Compared to other genres of literature, the representation of women artists in Malayalam cartoons is null. According to Cartoonist Sudheernath, the dearth of women cartoonists is not because of the lack of skill in art or reticence in passing cynical comments, because in his opinion, women are better in laughing at others than men. [Sudheernath \(2018\)](#), 30. He quotes the comment of M. Leelavathy about the inhibition of women to do the same publicly might be the reason for women for not becoming cartoonists (*ibid*). There are some women in Kerala who came as cartoonists but left the field all on a sudden, like Smitha Somanathan, Kavitha Balakrishnan and Rachana. The male monopoly in politics and cartoons go hand in hand. Regarding the rarity of women cartoonists. like any other male dominated profession, women are lagging behind in cartoons as well. Irrespective of gender, there are so many challenges for a cartoonist, no matter male or female, to reach heights. Several bureaus and editions may exist for a single publication as well as several reporters and editors, but the number of cartoonists usually remains as only a single one and it is naturally highly competitive to be 'the one'. The active participation of the upper class women in the social capital, via memberships and connections with clubs and forums was mocked at by the male cartoonists. Wives as portrayed as domineering. Empowerment of women is manifested in the cartoons as physical attack on their male counterparts. This problematizes the representation of woman in cartoons. It is quite interesting to discuss the absence of women cartoonists in the cartoon genre of Kerala to counter the apparition attributed to women in the cartoons by the male Malayalee cartoonists. The absence of vulgar portrayal of male body is perhaps because of the absence of a counter narrative from the perspective of a female cartoonist.

A close analysis of this area bring into the attention of the budding researchers who are interested in the cultural aspects of the visual media of cartoons. The portrayal and misrepresentation of women in this cynical artform generates the question of gender sensitization. Recommendation is made regarding future scope of research in this particular area of Malayalam cartons. There are several unexplored areas like pre- independent cartoons of Kerala, post twentieth century Malayalam cartoons, cartoons, and cyber space etc. Another recommendation from the part of the researcher is the need of digitalizing the archives and preserving the old volumes of magazines for future readers and scholars.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1

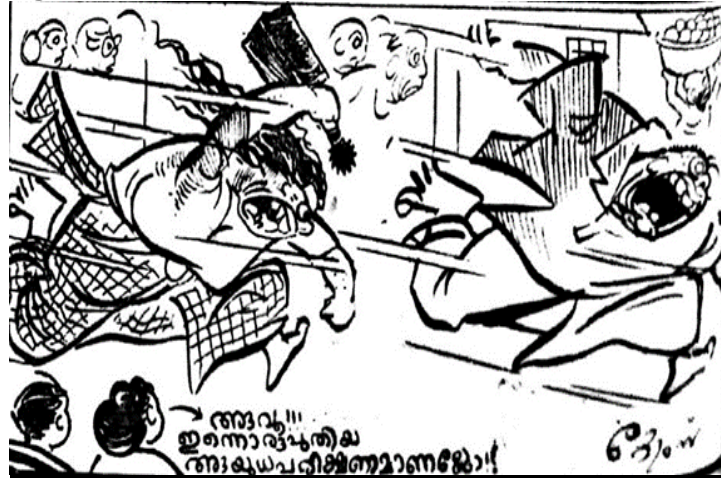


Figure 1 Toms (1961) , 24

Figure 2

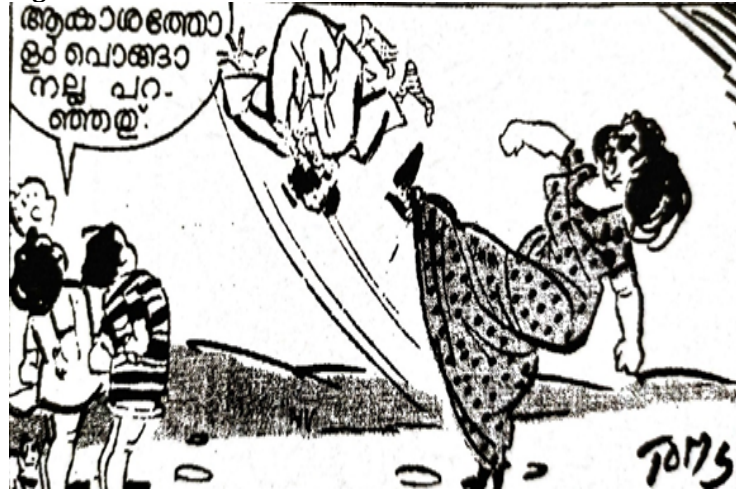


Figure 2 Toms (2007) , 293

Figure 3



Figure 3 Thomas (2008), 15

Figure 4



Figure 4 Thomas (2008), 34

Figure 5

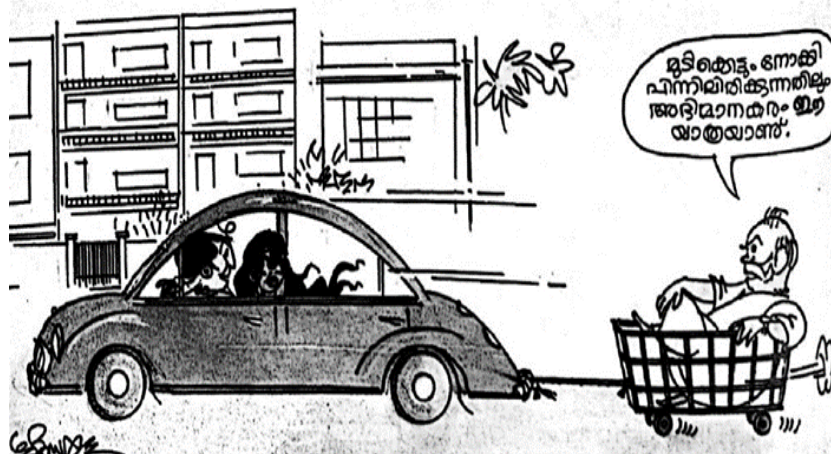


Figure 5 Yesudas (1997), 82

Figure 6



Figure 6 Toms (2007), 70

Figure 7



Figure 7 Toms (2007), 171

Figure 8



Figure 8 Toms (2007), 335

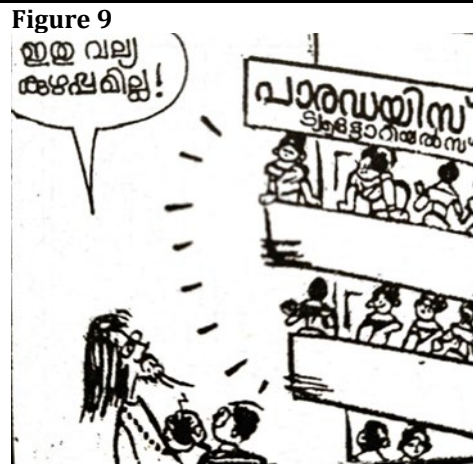


Figure 9 Toms (2007), 380



Figure 10 Yesudasan (1996), 102



Figure 11 Yesudasan (1996), 106

Figure 12

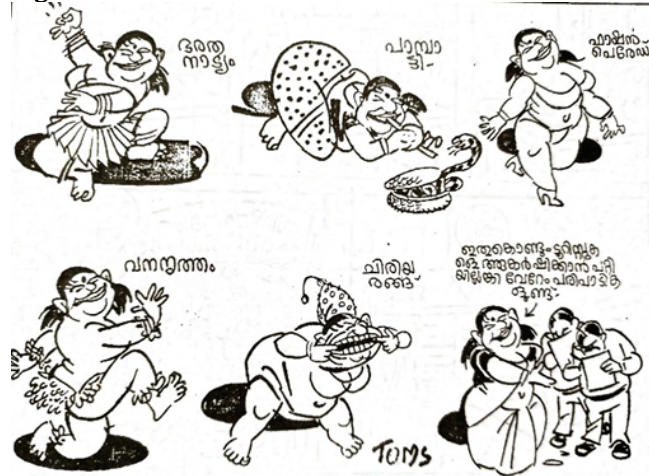


Figure 12 Toms (2013), 269

Figure 13



Figure 13 Thomas (2008), 31

Figure 14



Figure 14 Thomas (2008), 42

Figure 15



Figure 15 Thomas (2008), 49