

Bold Strokes and Comical Faces: Cartoons in Malayalam Magazines

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Summary: Malayali cartoonists have been an integral part of its journey as a medium of protest and dissent in pre- and post-independence India. A close look into the evolution of the field and its impact on Malayali imagination.

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“Cartooning requires audacity and a political vision beyond accepted middle-class norms. The political vocabulary to criticise in Kerala has been provided by Marxism, here essentially an anti-status quoist ideology.”¹

- Venkatachalapathy on Sahapedia, 2017

Satire is an expression of discontent, a form of protest against the state of life. It is a way of fighting oppression while at the same time getting some fun out of it. Satire cuts down the mighty; it seeks to raise the lowly.

Political satire, which mocks every aspect of the political process, is offensive, sarcastic, and disrespectful.² Its practitioners especially relish aiming their pens and brushes at the politically dominant. One mode of political satire is cartoons in which sarcasm, irony, humour, and wit are all essential ingredients.



Figure 1. America's plans to financially exploit India as it entered a period of rapid industrialisation during the 2nd Five Year Plan. Image: Sarasan, 1956

¹ Sahapedia. "A.R. Venkatachalapathy on Cartooning | Sahapedia," n.d. <https://www.sahapedia.org/ar-venkatachalapathy-cartooning>.

² Freedman, Leonard. "Wit as a Political Weapon: Satirists and Censors." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 79, no. 1 (March 2012): 87–112. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2012.0051>.

Evolution of Political Cartoons in India

The modern political cartoon entered the Indian scenario during the British Raj. The London-based comic-satiric periodical *Punch* (1841–1992) greatly inspired political cartooning in colonial India. The main objective of the *Punch* cartoons was to point out the faults and ill policies of British politicians to Indian readers in a comical way.

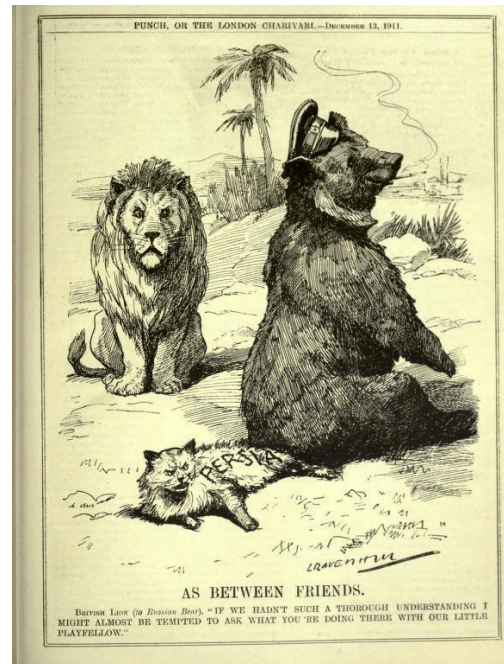


Figure 2: The British Lion watches as the Russian Bear sits on the Persian Cat. Image: *Punch*, 13 December 1911

Tamil poet C. Subramania Bharati was the first to introduce cartoons in South India. The educated class of Indians who were in the minority and could read and write English became addicted to this magazine. *Punch* became a household name and a synonym for humour. Even those who could not understand the captions could understand the humour in drawings of characters with exaggerated ears and elongated noses, obese women at the seaside, and bean-pole-like men. For the educated, humour in this visual form was a novel experience. The common reader had

a bit of relief from the dreary written columns by looking at cartoons that presented his/her humdrum life and human miseries from a funny angle.

Development of Satire in Kerala

The satirical tradition has a long history in Malayalam literature. Kunchan Nambiar (1705-1770) is Kerala's most noted satirical writer and is behind the creation of the satirical temple artform *Thullal* where the audience was mocked using references from the Hindu mythology. A major factor behind the rise of cartooning was the volatile, binary, and combusive nature of politics in Kerala.³ In the seven years of its democratic existence, the tumultuous erstwhile Travancore-Cochin state had five chief ministers. After just three years of Left rule from 1956, led by EMS Namboodiripad, Kerala has largely been led by complex and rocky coalitions helmed either by a separatist Congress or the Left. This has guaranteed Malayali cartoonists a perpetual source of daily inspiration—factionalism, party hopping, double-dealing, and never-ending scandals.

Another more logical reason for how the cartoonists of Kerala were appreciated is because they found the raw material for their work in the daily social scenario of the state.⁴ The concentration of source was not limited to politics in the state and the country; social situations and the functioning of various institutions including education and employment also became resources for the Malayalam cartoonists. The state not only produced cartoonists but were star draws in Malayalam newspapers and magazines and sent out geniuses to national and international publications. One such dearly loved creator,

P.K.S. Kutty, was even employed as a cartoonist in the Bengali periodical *Anandabazar Patrika*.

*“Neither Kerala’s politicians nor its cartoonists have had any rest since the birth of the state,” E.P. Unny in Bhashaposhini.*⁵



Figure 3: P.K.S Kutty, in this cartoon, showcases the need to decentralise power between the state and the centre. Image: *Bhashaposhini*, 1957

The growing prosperity of Kerala in recent years has not impeded the production of cartoons. While poverty is disappearing, discontent flourishes as ideology is on the wane and conflicts and controversies abound. These are reflected in the drawings in the major newspapers and hundreds of periodicals since the advent of political cartooning, some of which specialise in humour. According to E.P. Unny, Kerala owes its success in the cartooning industry to Ayyankali and Sree Narayana Guru, the two of the greatest early twentieth-century social reformers.

*“They gave the common man and the lower castes, who couldn’t even use words like salt in public, the courage to join public conversations. The teashop became the site of verbal humour, a lot of it political, and that translated easily into the visual humour of cartoons. That is where cartooning in Kerala acquired its intensity.”*⁶

– Malini Nair, 2018

³ Nair, Malini. “Satire and the Malayali: Why India’s Best Cartoonists Almost Always Come from Kerala.” *Scroll.in*, December 10, 2018. <https://scroll.in/magazine/903768/the-best-indian-cartoonists-usually-come-from-kerala-but-why>.

⁴ Thomas, Basil. “A Visual Representation of The Education System of Keralam Through Cartoons.” *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 2, no. 2 (November 29, 2021): 133–41. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v2.i2.2021.44>.

⁵ Nair, 2018.

⁶ Nair, 2018.

Advent of Cartooning in Kerala



Figure 4. *Mahakshamadevatha*, 1919

The first cartoon to be published was “Kshamadevatha” in a journal named *Vidooshakan* in 1919 and was edited by P.S. Neelakanta Pillai. Published in the aftermath of the First World War, “Mahakshamadevatha” or “The Great Famine Goddess”), depicts famine as a demon that kills people while a few other people are shown running away from the demon in fright. Amidst all this, stands a British officer, fully clad in uniform, hat, and boots. The officer does not seem to be of much help, as he is a mere spectator. However, a tapioca plant is depicted in an anthropomorphic form, carrying and thereby saving, a frightened person from the demon of famine—suggesting that the only option for commoners was tapiocas

and other tuber crops.⁷ Thus, the scenes of the cartoon brilliantly express a powerful view that stands against colonialism and war.

*“It was the end of World War I, many parts of Kerala were facing famine because of rice shortages. The Travancore king had introduced tapioca cultivation to keep off a crisis—you can see the plant in the margins. The Englishman, likely a policeman or an army man and a representative of colonial powers, is blessing the durdevatha or malevolent god, and the destruction he was causing.”*⁸

– Bony Thomas, 2019

The 1930s and '40s saw an explosion of humour magazines in Kerala, such as *Sarasan*, *Vikadakesari*, *Narmada*, and *Naradan*. Between 1935 and 1942, literary critic, lecturer, and humourist M.R. Nair, known by his pen name Sanjayan, started editing two satire weeklies from Kozhikode: *Sanjayan* and *Viswaroopam*. They also raised “cartoon awareness and readership in Kerala,” Unny said in his chronicling of the state’s cartooning history in *Seminar* magazine.⁹ His writings are infused with lessons from the Mahabharata war, Bhagavat Gita, and Gandhian principles. Sanjayan relates himself with the divine spectator ‘Sanjayan’ of the Mahabharata war, narrating the story to Dhritrashtra.

Sanjayan’s impact was such that “the laid-back port town of Kozhikode in the late 1930s came to acquire subscribers for the

⁷ Ali, Nassif. “Remembering ‘Vidooshakan’, the Journal That Published the First Malayalam Cartoon 100 Years Ago.” Scroll.in, November 16, 2019. <https://scroll.in/article/943155/remembering-vidooshakan-the-journal-that-published-the-first-malayalam-cartoon-100-years-ago>.

⁸ Sarkar, Urbee. “Sketching, Politics And The South: Tracing Political Cartooning In South India.” VoxSpace, January 10, 2019. <https://www.voxspace.in/2019/01/10/voxspace-life-cartooning-in-south-india/>.

⁹ Nair, 2018.

Punch magazine in unlikely numbers.”

- E.P. Unny¹⁰



Figure 5. Travancore Diwan C.P. Ramaswamy Naiker was mocked for his tyrannical ways by Sanjayan in his magazine *Viswaroopam*. Image: *Viswaroopam*

Around the same time, another strand of Kerala's cartooning history was unfurling in Delhi. At the centre of it was a gifted artist from Kayamkulam—Shankar Pillai, the man who was famously commanded by cartoon connoisseur Nehru with the words “Don't spare me, Shankar.” And who went on to obey Nehru by lampooning him in 4,000 cartoons.¹¹ Shankar, who started cartooning in 1939, was one of the prominent cartoonists from southern India and is considered the father of political cartooning in India.

His cartoons were initially published in *The Free Press Journal* and the *Bombay Chronicle*. Later, in 1932, he joined as a staff cartoonist at the *Hindustan Times* and continued till 1946. He also went to London to learn advanced cartooning techniques. In 1948, he founded *Shankar's Weekly* which was considered equivalent to the *Punch* magazine of Britain. Shankar was hired as the first editorial cartoonist by editor

¹⁰ Unny, E. P. “Cartooning Chartbusters.” Seminar India, 2012.

https://www.india-seminar.com/2012/637/637_e_p_unny.html.

¹¹ Nair, 2018.

Pothen Joseph. He documented the nation's march to freedom and political self-determination. Not only was he prodigiously talented but he also generously mentored some of the most brilliant talents from the state: O.V. Vijayan, Abu Abraham, P.K.S. Kutty, T. Samuel, Kerala Varma, B.M. Gafoor and Yesudasan.



Figure 6. Shankar's cartoon, post the Second World War, where there was stiff competition between the nuclear world powers. Image: Shankar Memorial National Cartoon Museum and Art Gallery

Language of Cartooning: Themes and Imagery Used

Pre-Independence

The cartoons became the language of Indian nationalism. Editors realised that cartoons were instruments for fighting the national cause and circulation builds if the cartoonist was talented. The political cartoonist worked under restricted conditions to ensure the survival of his paper. Thus, the ideas represented were broad symbols so as not to annoy any

person or question any policy. Hence, the cartoons abounded with monsters, angels, tigers, lions, snakes, jackals, and elephants. Some of the examples were the celebrated bulldog and the lion to represent the British rulers and a dove-eyed suffering angel that symbolised mother India, also known as Bharat Mata. The other creatures in the cartoonist's menagerie defined violence, injustice, want, famine, and pestilence according to the needs of the hour. The cartoons were more in line with propaganda posters than significant satirical commentary.¹²

They portrayed raging patriotism and ridiculed the alien dictator, but in a vague and impersonal way within the safe limit set by the system. The theme of the cartoons was always the same but presented in innumerable variations: Bharat Mata, the mother of the nation, in the chains of imperialism. The cartoonists borrowed heavily from Hindu mythology's numerous ready-made incidents and anecdotes and dressed them to fit the irony in current political events¹³. Nevertheless, they made a great impression on the people who were illiterate or semi-literate. They could comprehend the political content in a cartoon because it was presented to them in a familiar manner, and they could relate it to the prevailing situation. Real people, the imperial representatives, viceroys, governors, collectors, and commissioners, were making their grotesque appearance in these cartoons. Besides being a great leader of men, Mahatma Gandhi was a favourite of cartoonists. His whole appearance, with his puckish, toothless smile, unique attire, and other factors about him, made him the delight of the caricaturists.¹⁴



Figure 7. A cartoon from Sanjayan's eponymous magazine depicting the conflict of opinion between Jinnah and Subhash Chandra Bose being resolved by Mother India. The saintly representation of Mother India as a concept and deity was a common phenomenon in pre-Independence cartoons. Image: Vishwaroopam, 1941

Post-Independence

Within a decade of India gaining independence, the tribe of cartoonists proliferated. New dailies, weeklies, fortnightlies, and many other magazines emerged all over the country which were in English and almost every written language in the country. The cartoonists did not aim their attack only at administrators, they also satirised the commoner's predicament and attacked the public's mindless frenzy.

Cartoons and caricatures continued their effectiveness in social and political media in post-independence India. The theme of cartoons remained the same; just their target of attack had changed to Indian politicians and other celebrities.

Most of the political cartoonists of post-independence drew their cartoons to uphold democratic values, raise developmental issues, and stir socio-political morality including issues about the common people. In both the following cartoons, we can see blatant and hilarious criticism of government corruption.

¹² Laxman. "Freedom to Cartoon, Freedom to Speak." *Daedalus*, 118, no. 4 (1989): 68–91. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20025265>.

¹³ Laxman, 1989.

¹⁴ Laxman, 1989.



Figure 8. Corruption in the country. Image: *Vikadakesari* 1958



Figure 9. The situation of corruption in the country. Image: *Vikadakesari*, 1958

In figure 8, the cartoonist is imagining the situation behind the anti-corruption agenda where even the politicians vouching for the same for the sake of their political image, collect bribes. In the second cartoon (figure 9), the cartoonist is criticising the shifting of funds for the development of space centres while there is a rise in food grain prices. The farmer stares helplessly at the rising satellite which represents the price rise.

The topics covered were not confined to governmental politics but also uncovered the existing politics in other sectors, including the entertainment industry.



Figure 10. The Confused Director. Image: *Film* magazine, December 1949



Figure 11. This cartoon depicts the discrimination against Malayalam cinema by the National Film Board. Image: *Sarasan*, 1960

A prominent instance was the dominance of Tamil over the nascent Malayalam film industry where directors were compelled to release a Tamil version of Malayalam movies to be released in Madras and even centre their stories around Tamil imagination. In the cartoon issued in *Film* magazine (figure 10), we can see a

Post-independence cartoonists did not have the fear that their predecessors had under the British government and chose lewd ways to mock their targets.



Meanwhile, Kerala's cartoonists treated politics as a routine chore, staying clear of combative debate. Not for want of aggression, cartoons ranged from harsh criticism to infantilising and emasculation of the politicians. While the existing style of representation through animals existed, the cartoonists took the opportunity of limited censorship to exercise their full potential. These representations were not only confined to the magazines, it also reflected on the magazine covers which

The place did have its combatants and chose to lead the battle into the bedroom. In the 1960s and early '70s, a recurring metaphor in the Kerala cartoon was the double bed. The state was experimenting, as was its wont, with shifty coalition politics which lent itself to visualising in terms of marital infidelity. Such cartoons were largely featured by eveningers and periodicals that sought and created a tabloidish readership, a far cry from the literary journalism of *Sanjayan*.

While political cartooning remains the mainstay in Malayalam cartooning, the one

wildly popular series, adored by children and adults alike, was *Bobanum Molliyum* (Bob and Molly) which began in 1962. It mapped the little world of two impish children, a small dog at their feet, and their adventures in a quintessential Kerala village.¹⁵ It had some staple characters—a village politician, a bohemian man named Appi, a harassed mother and a lawyer father with a gentle humour that landed spot-on nevertheless. Created by cartoonist V.T. Thomas (better known as Toms) for the *Malayala Manorama*, it appeared every week on the last page of the magazine, and for devoted fans, the last page was always the first page they turned to when the magazine arrived. The children's antics were the heart of the story but alongside, there was a lot of gentle social and political satire in a world where rallies, slogans, and village conspiracies were consistently common.



Figure 14: Boban and Molly with their dog. Image: Wikimedia Commons

In the first year of its inception, the series presented the space of action as the familial space that the twins inhabited with their parents, neighbours, and house guests. The stories revolved around children and how they tackled their everyday lives and outsmarted those who tried to make them work or study. By the mid-1960s 'Bobanum Molliyum' had become a space to showcase the public-private concerns of the common people.

For example, the cartoons that appeared in Toms' 'Bobanum Molliyum' in the 1950s and

1960s illustrated the disciplined classrooms under the direct control of an aged male teacher who always held a cane to discipline the children. Due to the cane, the students are shown as being frightened in the presence of the teacher.

Around the same time, G. Aravindan, who was also a filmmaker, was pulling readers into the world of Ramu, a common man observing the world around him, in his cartoon series *Cheriya Manushyarum Valiya Lokavum*, which appeared in *Mathrubhumi* from 1961 to 1973.



Figure 15. Ramu's appointment as a contract teacher and his nervousness on teaching a mischievous and disobedient class. Image: *Cheriya Manushyarum Valiya Lokavum*, 1996

The series was episodic, portraying the life of an educated but unemployed youngster named Ramu, published in *Mathrubhumi* weekly. The struggle of a graduate to find a job in Kerala during the time of the 1960s is portrayed in the series. As the cartoon series progresses, Ramu becomes the teacher at a vocational college, which

¹⁵ Thomas, 2021.

happened to be a regular picture in Kerala during the period under the names: 'Tutorial College' and 'Parallel College'. The inefficiency of higher education in helping graduates secure jobs is shown in the journey of Ramu himself. Typewriting and stenography are shown as courses with high demand at the time which shows the shift of the economic condition from the agrarian and industrial sector to that of the service sector which soon became the backbone of the Kerala economy in its progress to the 'Kerala Model'. Literacy among women is also highlighted in the cartoon series through the character of Leela. Leela, who was once Ramu's student in the tutorial college, gains a job and advances in her career while Ramu remains jobless.¹⁶ The advancement of female folk due to the spread of education is exemplified through the character of Leela.

Cartoonist Thomas (1938-2009) maintained his social commentary through the cartoon series, *Veekshanavishesham* which was a collection of cartoons originally published in *Mathrubhumi* weekly. 'Veekshanavishesham' covered the period of the 1970s in Kerala where the changing face of the state was portrayed as a result of overseas migration and Gulf remittance. Cartoons show how the demand for new courses as part of overseas job opportunities was cashed by private institutions. The campus and the premise became a venue for the youngsters to roam around and real teaching-learning scenes are not shown in the cartoons of the later cartoonists. The strict education by the public sector shown in the early cartoons of Toms is replaced by the self-financing private education system of English medium schools run by religious minority communities.¹⁷

Stereotyping and Misrepresentation of Women in Cartoons

The only hole, and a large gaping one, is that this wonderful world of lines has been dominated entirely by men and thus is

corrupted by the male gaze.¹⁸ It is evident that the cartoonists have perpetuated and sometimes even created stereotypes, especially when depicting women. Compared to men, cartoons target women for their traits, mannerisms, craze for ornaments, and passion for new fashion, and even though, men too have their own traits and quirks, cartoons explore women as an object of laughter. Women nurses, actresses, socialites, westernised women and men, dominating wives, and henpecked husbands were fixed character figures in the language of laughter. Women's passion for new attires and fashionable ornaments is a stereotypical theme that is persistently caricatured in comic narrations.



Figure 16. This cartoon mocks women's fashion of tying the hair up in a big bun. The caption indicates the man's assumption that the lady has used a coconut shell to get the shape of the bun. Image: Sarasan, 1966

Women's attempts to enter various institutions for education and jobs are targeted through cartoons, to the extent that they were even sexualised for occupying public spaces. Nurses were mostly targeted in this scenario as they were portrayed as an object of desire and a distraction as shown in the following

¹⁶ Thomas, 2021.

¹⁷ Thomas, 2021.

¹⁸ Nair, 2018.

cartoon.



Figure 17. This mocks the perverse nature of a corrupt minister at the expense of objectifying a nurse. This theme is common-to-date among cartoonists. Image: *Vikadakesari*, 1975

Humorous literature and cartoons that caricature women as the ones who control 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 but their ‘natural’ qualities help them to control men at home and in society. Educated women acquired such traits due to their exposure to the so-called ‘modern education’ and the influences of Western culture. It should be noted that these traits are mostly exhibited by those women who appear in the cartoons with books in hand. They are alleged to be immoral, in that they flirt with their lovers even within their household and are also quite cunning and astute in luring men home, covering up and finding excuses for their actions, without even flinching. They also lack respect and modesty when approached by elders and/or strangers. The outcome of imparting modern education to women was to make them immodest, arrogant, cunning and immoral, as per these cartoons and magazines. These, therefore, largely reflect male anxieties and anguish regarding the empowerment of women, following their education. Khanduri notes that according to these texts, “The modern woman presents herself as the object of desire,

she makes voyeurism possible.”¹⁹ For, as Khanduri has cited, the emancipated women were found responsible for the shifts in gender equations and changing men too.

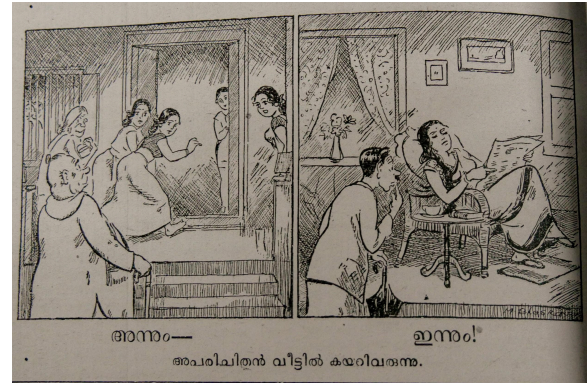


Figure 18. This shows a degrading comparison of women owning the private space they live in without fearing men. The cartoonist Sanjayan depicts this act as a loss of morality in society as the woman is shown as pompous for taking a stand. Image: *Sanjayan*, 1931

Thus, the Westernised and modern gentlemen were also being lampooned repeatedly in these cartoons, across magazines. This pattern draws a parallel with Ritu Khanduri’s view of cartoons in the *Indian Charivari*. She notes that they lampooned the Westernised Indian as foolish, venal, and crass. His mannerisms, attire and so on were also ridiculed. Similarly, Partha Mitter also notes such attacks on the Westernised elite, including their dressing style, in *Basantak*.

The educated middle-class Malayali was being quite hypocritical. For, while on the one hand, they welcomed the emergence of various new trends in society as well as in the media, on the other, they exhibited a regressive tendency towards educating and uplifting all sections of society.²⁰ Their

¹⁹ Ali, Nassif Muhammed. “The Lady and the Gentleman: Changing Gender Relations and Anxieties in Early Malayalam Cartoons.” *Indian Historical Review* 49, no. 1 (May 30, 2022): 26–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03769836221096231>.

²⁰ Ali, Nassif Muhammed. “The Lady and the Gentleman: Changing Gender Relations and Anxieties in Early Malayalam Cartoons.” *Indian Historical Review*

patriarchal sensibilities prevented them from seeing the larger picture in that sense. It worried them that an empowered woman would assert herself and her likes and dislikes in private spaces like families as well as public spaces like a classroom. This, they feared, would mean the weakening and emasculation of men in societal spaces. This kind of misogyny was evident in objectifying women and joking at the expense of their struggles. Another instance is when male politicians, in particular, are emasculated and even depicted as women to showcase their moral absence and lack of pride.²¹

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 Kerala. Yesudasan was the first cartoonist to create a pocket cartoon in a Malayalam daily, named after 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 the *Vanitha* magazine in January 1981. The character of Mrs Nair is designed to portray the life of people from the upper-class society of Kerala who are obsessed with their social status and restlessly trying to maintain the same.

Conclusion

While cartooning was a colonial export, it was imbibed in the Indian imagination and utilised as a mode of protest, before and after independence. The cartoonist wielded his pen and brush to voice public opinion and distrust towards the government and other public forces. In the case of Kerala, where humour has had a longstanding history, cartooning ranged from a form of public protest to tabloidish gimmicks, encouraging different kinds of humour. These pictures and lines even shaped the public imagination of the readers to an extent. Additionally, it became an expression of their frustration towards the changing times and notions. These actions targeted women, often making misogynistic remarks. These are caused by the prevalence of the male gaze which shapes the perception of women and their lives.

49, no. 1 (May 30, 2022): 26–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03769836221096231>.

²¹ Thomas, Basil, and Gem Cherian. “Scribbling with Male Ego: Analysing the Male Gaze in the Portrayal of Women in Cartoons.” *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts* 4, no. 2 (September 8, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.602>.

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