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RESISTING SOCIAL REPRESSION: TINTUMON JOKES AND THE MALAYALEE MIDDLE CLASS

BETSY PAUL C PhD

Associate Professor in English  
St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur 680011  
Kerala, India



ABSTRACT

Multiple reasons can be attributed to the popularity of an imaginary figure in a cultural milieu. Either the imaginary figure might endorse the values propounded by the said society in a persuasive manner or s/he might resist the oppressive values generated by the society's power networks. The paper analyzes a dynamic set of jokes around an imaginary character called Tintumon which was extremely popular amidst Malayalees in the early years of twenty first century Kerala. The character and characteristics of Tintumon could be put alongside with the super stars of mainstream movies to make a study of how each occupy their place to serve their specific purposes. The research finds that Tintumon jokes, like folklores, bring about a relief to the growing middle class of Kerala by nullifying the sanctimonious tone towards many pressing concerns of middle class existence. Further, the jokes lessen the social anxieties engendered by a community whose real and imagined interferences demarcate the everyday experience of the Malayalee individual.

Key words: Tintumon Jokes, Middle Class- Kerala Society , Folk Lore, Popular Culture, Super Hero

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Folklore can serve as one of the means through which communities educate members to fabricate identities and mold selves within its fold. Such lore can also serve as tools through which given identities could be subverted and new survival strategies be learnt and disseminated. Societies impose various oppressions upon their individual members and selves need to evolve creative strategies to resist and defy such impositions to survive as individual entities. As William Bascom argued in his oft quoted article on the four functions of folklore, one of the functions of folklore is to reveal "man's frustrations" and to let people "escape in fantasy from repressions imposed upon .... [them] by society" (11).

In contemporary times, certain narratives with some of the characteristics of the folk lore, yet not having its complete form, are seen to get popular among communities. They are different from the urban legends of modern times which masquerade as truth. Some such tales take the form of jokes, which at times turn ethnic or communal in their tone and target. Some others, like the Tintumon jokes circulated among Keralites featuring the open source character, Tintumon can help us understand how social repressions could be subverted even through simple tales.

Living through text messages, Tintumon has been extant in the electronic media for many years, and had by 2009 reached the peak of his popularity as a pan Keralite hero. Though the character as such could be attributed to the cartoonist B. M. Gafoor, and some scholars trace the name back to Malayalam movies like *Ente Mamattikkuttiyammakku* (1983) or *Kalyanaraman* (2002), the jokes themselves are largely anonymous and keep on circulating in the electronic media. His popularity has prompted leading publishers to bring out collections of his jokes, and some of the popular Malayalam weeklies carry his jokes in regular columns. A popular TV channel brings out a regular show in his name. A simple search result in the internet will prove his popularity. Tintumon jokes differ from the typical Indian jocular anecdotes, which are mostly extracted out, in the words of social commentator Santhosh Desai, “of incongruous situations that underlined one’s superiority over the type of person who was being made fun of” (244), like the Sardarji jokes or Tamil Brahmin jokes. On the other hand, Tintumon is not made fun of, but is shown as a prodigious, down to earth, opportunistic sort of a hero.

The extreme popularity of Tintumon in the electronic media, especially, the SMS, could be seen as emerging from a new kind of Malayalee middle class. Further, they could be seen to actively participate in the formation of such a middle class, as electronic media can, according to Walter Ong, foster a “communal sense (136),” or what Marshal McLuhan called a “retribalization” (56).

The state of Kerala is known for its high adult literacy and political consciousness. In the second half of the twentieth century Kerala society was found to be, in the words of the poet Satchidanandan, “on the path of middle classing.” In his essay dealing with the evolution of society and literature in Kerala, he talks about this middle class as those who “found themselves left to float in an uncertain time–world where their identity was problematized and existence played out through alter-lives constructed in imagination” (49). And, according to him, this middle class could not identify themselves with peasants, tribals, etc. feeling hardly any necessity for social commitment.

This allegation against the middle class is hardly a unique Keralite phenomenon. In his popular study of Indian middle class, Pavan K. Varma comments that the “social insensitivity of the educated and privileged Indian is writ large on the face of India” (193). The petite bourgeoisie was hardly ever a complimentary term in contemporary history, though the present is bound to rewrite the past in more than one ways.

The virtual character, Tintumon, being the product, as well as the object of consumption of the middle class, may seem to embody the alleged a-historical “floating identity” of the said class. Yet, this paper argues that, by projecting an image of a practical and non-sentimental hero dallying with words, Tintumon seeks to subvert many clichéd images of Malayalee identity as represented in the mainstream media during the first two decades of the twenty first century.

The mainstream media of Kerala presents the typical Malayalee through certain clichés. For example, newspapers, magazines, TV, and the cinema feed on to the assumption of the Malayalee as a highly literate person. Yet, the cost of this literacy, and its visualized outcome of an upward economic mobility is an arena fraught with tensions. Education, that is, the formal education of children to equip them for the so called secure white collar jobs is one of the most important concerns that define the Malayalee middle class existence. It is a site where immediate gratification in the form of physical desires contest with the pleasures offered by delayed gratification. The mainstream cinema often deals with this issue in sober tones. For example, in the 1995 film *Sphatikam*, by the famed director Bharathan, the hero (acted by superhero Mohanlal) is a son whose innate artistic talents are suppressed by a strict father who wants him to excel in Mathematics, finally leading him to become a rebel. In the 2009 film, *Makante Achan*, we find a father who obsessively chases his son into an entrance race for getting an engineering admission. Here, but, tensions are resolved in the end through the dues ex machine of a reality show, in which the son wins a large amount of money to save the family through his singing talents. And money erases his stigma for having failed in the entrance exam. Yet, both these movies deal with the issue of education in a very reverential tone, and it is this reverential tone that is made to topsy-turvy in the school jokes of Tintumon.

For example, here is a typical Tintumon joke which was accessed from an online forum BizHat which itself might have been copied and repeated from somewhere else:

Meenu: "How should I convey the news to my father that I've failed?" Tintumon: "You just send a telegram: Result declared, past year's performance repeated."

Here, Tintumon, the practical prodigy resolves a highly combustible situation between a parent and a child in middle class Indian families. The survival strategy exhibited here is entirely different from the outcome of the two films. This strategy could be seen in many of the other Tintumon jokes too. For example, in another joke:

Tintumon: Dad , there is a small PTA meeting at my school tomorrow .....

Dad: Tintu , What do you mean by a small PTA meeting ???

Tintumon : It is ..... Just You , me and The Principal (*Tintu Aara Mon* 30)

Other sites where the mainstream cinema projects its reverential aura, like those of love, politics, etc., too are amusingly subverted by Tintumon's pragmatic observations. For example, consider this joke of Tintumon with Dundumol, his sweetheart.

Dundumol: I don't have cars or a posh house like Annakkutty, but I love you...

Tintumon: I love you too....but tell me more about Annakkutty!" (*I Love You Tintu* 15) .

The culmination of this irreverence is seen in Tintu's relations with his own parents. This is again a delicate site where mainstream media and the so called Malayalee public opinion as voiced out through newspapers, weeklies, and reality shows, have feared to tread the ground realities and kept on repeating hypocritical and sentimental views. But Tintumon minces no words or emotions for stating the ruthless realities. For example:

Father : No, no, enough is enough. Both of us cannot live together in this house

Tintu: Don't say like that, father

Father: No more excuses

Tintu: Don't say that. Where will an old man like you go? (*Tintu Aaraa Mon* 76)

The question here concerns the function of Tintumon stories. What purpose do they serve? According to Julius Lester, "folk tales are stories that give people a way of communicating with each other about each – their fears, their hopes, their dreams, their fantasies, giving their explanations of why the world is the way it is" (vii). Rather than act as guidelines with a role model, jokes which are part of a community's folklore, tell its members how to situate their selves in the difficult terrain of contemporary existence. That is, for the consumers of these tales, the question is not, - to be or not to be Tintumon. Instead, Tintumon, for Malayalees, acts as one extreme pole of the two poles, the other extreme pole being the superstars of mainstream cinema.

The superstars have been shown to be solidifications of wish fulfillment by film critics like Radhika Chopra, Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella. They act as the very unreal, unrealizable, external public figures of idealistic wish gratifications. Their larger than life figures in the public space of the cinema theatre indicate their iconic stature. As Osella et. al. observes, stars are "particular nodes" within "a modern arena analogous to myth, a form for collective fantasy." They function as "dense points of transfer of desire, belief, self-affirmation or transformation and so on" (2).

On the other hand, Tintumon serves to present an extremely practical, too very real voice within the private space of our cell phone. Between these two extreme poles, the reader/listener/viewer of the Tintumon jokes (who are also the reader/listener/viewer of the superstars, directly or indirectly) learn to locate his/her subject position and find a balance. A balance between his/her larger-than-life idealistic desires (to be a socially emulated figure like that projected by a superstar), and, his/her downer-than-earth, very practical oriented insecurities (making him/her as antisocial as Tintumon). In this context, it would also be interesting to note that the Tintumon jokes had their peak popularity at a time when Malayalam film industry was churning out super macho heroic figures. Thus the quick-witted, rational, and, liberal views of Tintumon with his absolute disregard

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for others could be seen to give Malayalee middleclass individual a means of resistance to confront the imagined sociality that demarcate his everyday existence.

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