

# Humour and Hidden Desires: A Critique of *Karikku*

Finitha Jose

## Abstract

Humour plays the role of a lubricant in most social relationships and its functions are manifold; it soothes bruised egos, covers up embarrassing situations and gives many the power to articulate the unsayable. With the growth of technology, its significance has increased rapidly. Social media platforms provide everyone with a stage to express their views and under the guise of jokes and trolls, humour has become a means to rebel against autocratic tendencies and injustices. The same medium has also been used to reassert the established social codes all the while giving out a sense of resistance. Keeping this in mind, this paper takes up *Karikku*, the Malayalam YouTube channel which has become a household name in Kerala with more than one billion views, and analyses how it rose to popularity through its comic videos based on real-life situations. From its first episode in 2017, *Karikku* garnered the interest of the Malayali audience by articulating their insecurities and repressed feelings under the protective label of humour which would have otherwise been censured in the public realm. Divided into two sections, this paper focuses on the role of humour in *Karikku* episodes and how it gives its viewers the illusion of resistance and liberation which in turn has made the channel a huge success.

**Keywords:** Digital Media; Hidden Desires; Humour; Illusion of Resistance; Migrant Workers; Subversive Discourse.

## Introduction

A sense of humour is considered to be an essential element in social interactions nowadays, to such an extent that it has been deemed as a desired character one looks for in partners, friends and even business associates. The conviction has been accentuated by most self-help books advertising it as the most effective method to relieve tension and to have a stress-

---

free and fulfilled life. This ideological positivism glosses over the negative impacts of humour disregarding the restraining capabilities it can implement by focusing only on the liberating aspect.

Laughter was not always looked upon as a favourable trait. For philosophers like Plato, it was “one of the pleasures to be tightly controlled, particularly the sort of impertinent laughter that mocks authority” (qtd. in Billig 41). Many following Plato shared his misgivings considering humour to be an impediment to serious discussions. Superiority theory further backs this up as it proposes that laughter is originated from demeaning those who are less fortunate. This makes the idea of humour rather subjective as the victims of ridicule may not share the delightful camaraderie that such remarks produce.

As a powerful form of discourse humour wields the power to control and also to resist. The clever use of wit can effectively tackle even the stringent social boundaries, a demonstration of which can be found in many children’s stories featuring Tenali Raman and Birbal. It can turn around embarrassing situations and be used as a corrective measure. From the carnivals of the medieval period, the diverse forms of humour have always been a means to contest authority without inviting any vengeful measures.

The controlling strategy humour exerts on maintaining social codes should be read along these lines. The power of ridicule derived from a fear of embarrassment ensures that members of a particular community comply with the customs and regulations prevalent in their society. Derogatory and racist remarks too can pass uncensored under the veneer of jokes as someone who is offended by it can always be accused of lacking a sense of humour or the offender can always make the excuse that ‘it’s just a joke’. The use of humour, in this way, gives one a platform to express repressed feelings and thoughts which might not have been possible in an ordinary situation.

The modern world with its advances in technology has taken this tradition to newer dimensions. Cyberspace has widened its scope from television debates to popular trolls on social media where it is accessed by millions. From the privacy of home, one can produce biting satires with minimum words and also without endangering one’s identity to public lynching. Online comedy shows and series have become a part and parcel of the Indian cultural milieu and Kerala is no different. This paper focuses on *Karikku*, one of these YouTube comedy channels, and argues that it

rose to popularity by voicing the hidden concerns that haunt most of the Keralites.

With 7.9 million subscribers and more than 80 videos, *Karikku* is one of the most popular Malayalam online channels on YouTube. Launched by Nikhil Prasad in 2017, the channel started by featuring short videos based on real-life humorous situations. It soon earned a huge fan following allowing the introduction of a web series titled “Thera Para”. The series became an immediate hit among youngsters making *Karikku* a household name. The dialogues have become a part of the popular vocabulary and are often seen displayed on the back of trucks and rickshaws in Kerala. The actors – Shabareesh Sajjin (Lolan), Anand Mathews (Shambu), Binoy John (Shibu), Arjun Ratan (Britto), Anu K. Aniyam (George) – have also been raised to the status of movie stars affirming its popularity further.

The comedy of *Karikku* is made out of real-life situations an ordinary Malayali can easily identify with. Topics ranging from the advertisements of telemarketing channels to valentine’s day celebrations find a place in the plot development. They tend to clear away from political and religious commentaries and instead focus on issues like social media addiction, unemployment etc., which troubles the young generation the most. Though the content was created by Nikhil, the show doesn’t follow a proper script. Actors are allowed to improvise on the spot which contributes much to the naturalness of the plot. In the words of Nikhil, “It works because the story telling is raw – there is no ‘artistic’ or artificial background, no make-up, the dialogues and the delivery are realistic. Any youngster can relate to it. What works is also that there is no double entendre or black humour, it appeals to every section of people” (Anand).

As a YouTube channel, its very structure and means of production rupture the modes of conventional filmmaking practices which demand a huge amount of money and manpower. Moreover, catering to school and college going audiences, it gives prime importance to showcasing their undue burdens and worries largely owing to the expectations of their parents and society. In the following two sections, this paper explores the various means by which this YouTube channel endeared itself to the Malayali audience.

### **The Outlet of Repressed Thoughts**

Sigmund Freud in his seminal work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, finds common elements between dream work and the production

of jokes. Despite their obvious dissimilarities – a dream is an “asocial mental product” (Freud 190) while jokes play a central role in human interactions – both aim to transgress the boundaries of conscious thought with methods of displacement and condensation. In Freud’s words,

There is no doubt that the regression of the train of thought to perception is absent in jokes. But the other two stages of dream formation, the sinking of a preconscious thought into the unconscious and its unconscious revision, if they could be supposed to occur in joke-formation, would present the precise outcome that we can observe in jokes. (175)

Freud categorises jokes into two groups, innocent and tendentious jokes, putting all jokes which have an ulterior motive into the latter category. They resort to brevity and wordplay to convey meanings that cannot be expressed directly due to the social restrictions in place. Dreams function in a similar mode absorbing the residues of the conscious mind to create images that might be considered irrelevant at first glance.

Comic series like *Karikku* which avoids complex wordplays employ a light-hearted tone and body language to attain this innocence in the dialogues used in it. This light-heartedness circumvents the social censorship that might have otherwise prevented its articulation in the public domain. Taking Freud’s theory in the context of *Karikku*, one can see how it embodies some of the discontents that are repressed by a major population in Kerala. The number of subscribers and the millions of likes each episode receives attest to the fact that many share the same views the channel articulates. This section takes up one of these concerns that Keralites are forced to grapple with in their everyday lives, to elaborate on this point.

The role played by migrant workers can be cited as a prime example in this sense. The lack of respect associated with blue-collar jobs and the large number of Keralites migrating to the Gulf and other foreign countries for employment has created an increased demand for unskilled labourers. Recent years have witnessed a surge in the number of migrant workers in Kerala. Most of them were employed in construction and plantation sites earlier, but now they find opportunities also in other sectors like restaurants and petrol pumps making them an inevitable part of the Kerala economy.

This growing number has also created a social unrest among the native population. “As most of these migrants are from socially and economical-

ly lower strata of Indian society, the local public has a very low opinion about them and see them as a threat to public hygiene, security and law and order” (Martin 3). The increased number of crimes involving migrant labourers contributes much to this rising xenophobia among many. The attention garnered by Jisha rape and murder case is an instance (Koshy). As an economy that relies heavily on the contribution of Malayalis working abroad and outside Kerala, neither the state nor the citizens can publicly condemn the process of migration. This dilemma and distrust are expressed through explicit means of social exclusion and minimal contact with the migrant workers.

*Karikku* episodes capture this growing insecurity perfectly by portraying the migrant worker as a comic figure prone to idiocies. In the initial episodes, the migrant worker is showcased as someone with a lot of money to spend reflecting a changing scenario in Kerala where the unemployment rate of educated Keralites is on the rise. While B. Tech graduates like George in “Thera Para” are left jobless without any means to survive, the migrant worker is shown to be thriving. This economic divide is clearly visible in the episode titled “Types of Mobile Buyers” which features the different types of customers in a mobile shop. While Keralites belonging to different age groups try to pay through instalments or attempt bargaining, the Bengali migrant comes declaring that money is not an issue. He is ready to buy any mobile with a good music player. But even with this improved economic status his ignorance and diminutive stature are intended to arouse laughter among the viewers.

The special episode made for valentines’ day in 2019 – “Valentine’s Gift” – refers to another paranoia among Keralites. Higher wages and good accommodation facilities offered by Kerala have tempted many of the migrant labourers to settle in with their families (Shibu). Their children also make use of the educational facilities attaining high grades and ranks in university exams (Krishnakumar). This creates an ambivalence in the general population as on the one hand this is a testament to the superior living conditions achieved by the state but on the other, there is the growing fear that the migrant workers may eventually get better than the natives.

“Valentine’s Gift” visualises such a scenario where three Malayali boys wallow in despair due to the lack of a date on Valentine’s day, while a migrant worker is on his way to meet his Malayali girlfriend. The alarmed boys accuse him of not focusing on his assigned tasks and chase him off by throwing twigs and leaves from a nearby tree. Though the entire part is taken humorously, the underlying meaning is evident. The way the mi-

grant worker describes his girlfriend, "I have set up a Malayali girl for me" (my trans.; 00:04:13-16), itself shows the prearranged nature of his love, a part of his elaborate plan to infiltrate the native community. One of the enraged boys points out that the same guy has refused to come to his home for work the previous day, another indication of the rising insolence among migrant workers.

Later episodes build upon this by portraying the migrant worker as the other. His foolishness and lack of comprehension become a major source of comedy and the role of Babu played by Anu K. Aniyam turned out to be a huge hit that he has become an inevitable part of many episodes. When the migrant labourers made headlines during the lockdown process at the onset of Covid-19, *Karikku* immediately took up this issue as a means to convey the better condition offered to the labourers in Kerala. We find an innocent and ignorant Babu being briefed on lockdown protocols by his Malayali employer in "Babu and Mothalali Phone Call". The ever benevolent Malayali boss even offers to pay his salary during the lockdown period. "Doosra", a mini web series produced shortly after this, continues the patronising attitude. Babu adores his fatherly employer so much that he refuses to go back home on the arranged special train and continues serving him creating more and more ridiculous or otherwise comic scenarios for the entertainment of the viewers.

The character of Babu serves a dual purpose. By showing him prone to stupidities, the series establishes the superiority of the Malayali Mothalali who with his rational mind and intuitiveness exposes the ghost prank. Babu is shown to be childlike and is constantly in need of the guidance of his employer. It lulls the Malayali audience into a false sense of security and also provides a platform to give vent to their hidden fears under the protective label of humour.

### **The Illusion of Resistance**

From office jokes to late-night comedy shows, humour plays a major part in soothing the bruised egos of many with its power "to say the unsayable, to confront hypocrisy, to kick the pricks" (Ferguson). By partaking in the mirth these humorous programmes produce through subversive activities and dialogues, the spectators get to experience a feeling of rebelliousness that they were not able to satisfy on their own. The comedian voices their repressed feelings and by admiring and identifying with the character, the spectators become a part of this act too. With the clever plot twists favouring the rise of the underdog and its criticism of the age-old practices

in academia and office environments, *Karikku* episodes play a similar role in providing the illusion of resistance to its viewers.

The episode titled “+2 Free Period” is taken here to showcase the way the channel delivers a sense of liberation and satisfaction as it lashes against the autocratic policies in the classrooms which demoralise and devalue children. Released on 14 April 2019, this independent episode of *Karikku* features a regular day in a higher secondary classroom. With more than forty-five million views, the episode garnered so much interest that a short web series “+2 Class” was produced developing the storyline.

Just like an ordinary classroom, here also one can find various friendship groups – the bullying backbenchers, the not-so-good middle benchers, the nerdy frontbenchers and a quarrelling couple. Though it’s a science batch, not many are happy about the choice of their subject reflecting a common tendency in Kerala’s cultural milieu which expects all its youngsters to be doctors or engineers. Hence comes the huge demand for science groups, a matter of prestige and honour to most Malayali parents. Many students coerced this way by their parents end up spending two miserable years among equations and experiments they cannot make sense of.

The episode captures this scenario quite humorously with the students complaining about the truckload of work they are forced to tackle. There are records to be drawn and the ominous atmosphere of coming exams looms throughout. But the tense situation is given a comic makeover by the *Karikku* team exposing the ridiculousness of the repressive measures practised in school classrooms. The whole episode embodies the idea of one of the popular quotes circulated widely on social media which is attributed to Albert Einstein: “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid” (Rogers). Similarly, the students in the classroom consider themselves to be stupid as they couldn’t even survive a confrontation with a maths equation or a chemistry experiment without breaking the beaker.

Unlike western countries where sportsmen and cheerleaders take prime spots, in the Indian academic environment nerds reign supreme and a student’s capability is judged by the marks he/she scored. A similar situation occurs here when a much anticipated free period arrives as a solace to everyone except for the topper. He requests a substitution much to the dismay of his classmates but his timely intervention is appreciated by the maths teacher. What “+2 Free Period” offers here is a mockery of one of the recurrent scenes in school classrooms.

Though overzealous people like these are given much attention by teachers and society, they are alienated and hated by their fellow classmates. The favourable comments and likes poured on the episode further prove that there are many who share the same sentiment even though they could never utter these thoughts publicly. What *Karikku* offers is an outlet for these repressed feelings and by supporting the video the viewers get the satisfaction of fighting against some of the conventional norms which give undue importance to academic excellence.

But even with all these sarcastic remarks, the video doesn't advocate any drastic change in the existing educational system. As with their usual practice, the creators end the story with a sudden twist of events favouring the underdog. While John, the topper, fails to solve the mathematical problem, his twin brother, a permanent backbencher, steals his limelight by finding the solution successfully. It must be noted that the easy-going brother achieves recognition here not through any extra-curricular activities. Thus the video even with all its mockery against present educational practices still asks the students to follow the dictums of the system as it considers academic excellence as the only sure means to fame. What it offers is just a false sense of resistance.

## Conclusion

Comic displays have always enjoyed the freedom to flirt with authority giving their viewers the satisfaction of dismembering it with provocative words and deeds. By living vicariously through the characters on the screen we get to experience "the world we want - the best of all impossible worlds" (Bevis 21). It fulfils the impossible through unexpected outcomes and externalises the desires and vulnerabilities that need to be concealed in the public domain. This paper has attempted to prove that *Karikku's* articulation of the unvoiced thoughts secretly shared by many in the society and the dose of rebelliousness they provide, even in its negligible amounts, satisfies and comforts its viewers by giving them the feeling of partaking in a resistant activity.

The popularity of the channel can be partly attributed to these. It doesn't advocate the taking up of arms or public demonstrations of dissatisfaction, but instead, it soothes the rebellious streak making us accept the way things are being done. In Michael Billig's words, "Without the possibility of laughter, serious social life could not be sustained" (5). *Karikku* works in a similar way. It gives a short escape from reality and inculcates the tolerance to live through it.



**Works Cited:**

- Anand, Shilpa Nair. "Meet the Creator of YouTube's Viral 'Karikku' Team." *The Hindu*, 2 Aug.2019, [www.thehindu.com/entertainment/as-karikku-tops-the-list-of-malayalam-content-creation-on-youtube-founder-nikhil-prasad-talks-about-reasons-that-makes-it-click/article28793720.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/as-karikku-tops-the-list-of-malayalam-content-creation-on-youtube-founder-nikhil-prasad-talks-about-reasons-that-makes-it-click/article28793720.ece).
- Bevis, Matthew. *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2013.
- Billig, Michael. *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. Sage, 2005.
- Ferguson, K. "Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance". *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 18, 2019, pp. 247-50, doi.org/10.1057/s41296-018-0243-2.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1963.
- Koshi, Sneha Mary. "In Kerala Law Student Rape and Murder, Migrant Worker Sentenced to Death". *NDTV*, 14 Dec. 2017, [www.ndtv.com/kerala-news/kerala-law-students-rape-murder-convict-gets-death-sentence-1787646](http://www.ndtv.com/kerala-news/kerala-law-students-rape-murder-convict-gets-death-sentence-1787646).
- Krishnakumar, G. "Daughter of Migrant Worker from Bihar Wins First Rank in Mahatma Gandhi University Exam." *The Hindu*, 20 Aug. 2020, [www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/daughter-of-migrant-worker-from-bihar-wins-first-rank-in-mahatma-gandhi-university-exam/article32407620.ece](http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/daughter-of-migrant-worker-from-bihar-wins-first-rank-in-mahatma-gandhi-university-exam/article32407620.ece).
- Martin, P. O. "A Study of Human Rights Violations of Migrant Workers in Kerala (2011-2014)." *PESQUIISA*, vol. 2, no. 2, May 2010, pp. 1-7, [pesquisaonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Pesquisaonline.net-PO-Martin-HR-Violations-1.pdf](http://pesquisaonline.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Pesquisaonline.net-PO-Martin-HR-Violations-1.pdf).
- Prasad, Nikhil, director. "Valentine's Gift." *Karikku*, 13 Feb. 2019. *YouTube*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPpno7UE8ho](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPpno7UE8ho).
- Rogers, Shelby. "13 Inspiring Einstein Quotes Never Actually Said by Einstein." *Interesting Engineering*, 26 Apr. 2017, [interestingengineering.com/13-inspiring-einstein-quotes-never-actually-said-by-einstein](http://interestingengineering.com/13-inspiring-einstein-quotes-never-actually-said-by-einstein).
- Shibu, B. S. "Kerala Like Home, Not All Migrant Workers are in a Hurry to Leave." *The New Indian Express*, 13 May 2020, [www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2020/may/13/kerala-like-home-not-all-migrant-workers-are-in-a-hurry-to-leave-2142582.html](http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2020/may/13/kerala-like-home-not-all-migrant-workers-are-in-a-hurry-to-leave-2142582.html).