Vol. 25(1), 2025, pp.55-78, ISSN: 2072-0394(Print), ISSN: 2663-8886(Online)

Representation of South Asian Women in Online Cartoons: Unfunny Realities

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Abstract

Online cartoons are a special form of satire that comments on social and political issues. However, gender bias in this form has not been discussed extensively. This paper examines how cartoonists from India and Pakistan portray the role of women in society, highlighting their use of cartoons to address gender biases in nuanced ways. The study analyses a specialized corpus of 80 cartoons (20 per cartoonist) with gender-related content sourced from platforms like Instagram and Facebook. The research examines these cartoons' verbal and visual components using the theoretical framework of humour linguistics. Findings reveal that South Asian cartoonists effectively employ visual literacy and cultural references to address social issues creating counter-narratives. These narratives use humour to challenge the objectification and oppression of women while drawing attention to societal expectations of gender roles. Humour thus becomes a medium to explore significant issues of gender inequality. Such *unfunny realities* insist on the audience's active understanding of the cultural norms that sustain and normalize inequality and indifference.

Keywords: Online Cartoons, South Asian Women, Gendered Discourse, Gender Norms, Humour Analysis, and Corpus-Based Analysis.

Introduction

Certain predominant social factors shape entrenched societal and cultural norms regarding gender roles. These norms have evolved due to political agendas, humanitarian concerns, religious interpretations, and societal customs (Galván & García-Peñalosa, 2021). Patriarchal sociocultural norms are linked to various gender-related outcomes, including men's disproportionate power over women (Boudet, 2013; Galván & García-Peñalosa, 2021; Heise, 1998; Weber et al., 2019). In male-dominated societies, male bias fosters gender-biased perspectives that cannot be universally applied. Such beliefs validate cultural gender views, perpetuating gender-based discrimination. South Asian societies are deeply influenced by gender norms (Bukhari, 2022). The satirical analysis of online cartoons in our study evaluates these norms to shed light on contemporary social attitudes marginalizing women. We examine the work of four South Asian cartoonists – two men and two women – who

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publish content on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. This study contributes to the discourse on gender discrimination and dynamics in the region.

Research shows that gender-based norms in South Asia influence health (Amir et al., 2018), professional interactions (Chakrapani et al., 2019; Heintz et al., 2018), and gender disparities (Hazel & Kleyman, 2020). Studies also reveal gender discrimination across media, including literature (Singhal, 2021), cinema (Kunsey, 2019), educational materials (Farnon et al., 2021), television (Qamar & Farrukh, 2021), and animated content (Jaggi, 2015; Omari, 2019; Rivas-Carmona, 2014; Sahi, 2022). Animated content has long reflected societal attitudes towards women, showcasing evolving gender roles and consumption patterns. Given this, our study explores how online cartoons use humour to establish gendered realities, revealing and challenging societal expectations. Thus, our study explores, how these cartoons visually and verbally portray sociocultural gender norms. Cartoons blend humour with bitter reality to highlight societal attitudes toward gender, serving as compelling multimodal genres that challenge and reflect on biases and norms (Ng & Cheung, 2022).

Cartoons are drawings or caricatures of individuals, events, or social situations presented satirically or as pictorial jokes in one or more panels. These visual representations address social or political issues, such as perceptions of women and men regarding cultural norms, roles, and societal status. While existing literature widely explores humour strategies and gender representation across multimodal genres (Bamgbose, 2019), including TV commercials (Rubio, 2018), movies (Olia & Sabbagh, 2022), and cooking shows (Matwick & Matwick, 2019), research on gendered cartoons, especially in South Asia, remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap, examining how cartoonists engage with and critique gender norms and analyzing how they articulate gender norms, through their work.

Although this study's theoretical framework follows Attardo's (2017) pioneering work, it acknowledges Tsakona's (2020) broader socio-cognitive context influencing the interpretation of cartoons. We use this framework to explore how deeply ingrained patriarchal norms are reinforced by media in male-dominated societies. These accepted beliefs shape the portrayal and interpretation of social issues like gender discrimination in cartoons, laying the foundation for a detailed GTVH analysis. Crawford (2003) identifies two levels of gender characterization: interactional and structural. These concepts influence social expectations and resource access, forming the basis for analyzing how four South Asian cartoonists critique and address gender issues. This study examines how gender expectations are depicted and challenged in South Asia through cartoons addressing corruption and women's rights. Furthermore, this paper analyzes the interaction between media representations and sociocultural norms to determine whether depictions reinforce or question traditional stereotypes. It also explores how these depictions deepen understanding of gender dynamics in the media. Despite extensive research on political cartooning and sexism

(Edwards & Chen, 2000; Sheikh, 2017), gender discrimination cartoons remain limited in societal discussions. These online cartoons play a significant role in depicting social and political issues across regions. By transforming into influential socio-political commentaries, they offer insights into gender-oriented discourse. In this study, we analyze how cartoonists depict gender and its societal impact, comparing male and female perspectives to identify gender stereotypes or innovative views.

Theoretical Frameworks for Analysing Humour in Cartoons

General Theory of Verbal Humour and Cartoons (GTVH)

Attardo's (2017) GTVH, building on Raskin's (1984) Semantic-Script Theory of Humour, incorporates linguistic, narrative, and socio-cognitive elements, offering a detailed framework for analyzing humour in multimodal texts like cartoons. It identifies six knowledge resources:

i. **Language (LA)** covers all aspects of text verbalization. While synonyms or syntax changes can modify semantic content, pun-based humour relies on precise wording to exploit script opposition (SO), enhancing verbal and visual humour.

ii. **Narrative Strategy (NS)** defines the structural organization of humour. In cartoons, this includes single panels or sequential narratives blending dialogue, visual gags, or punchlines (Tsakona, 2020).

iii. **Target** focuses on the object of humour – individuals, groups, or societal norms – using incongruity and superiority theories to critique social aspects.

iv. **The Situation** provides context, setting, and characters for humour, often termed the "macroscript" (Attardo & Chabanne, 1992).

v. **Logical Mechanism (LM)** bridges conflicting scripts using juxtaposition, exaggeration, or absurd reasoning to create humour.

vi. **Script Opposition (SO)** is a fundamental element in humour, arising when conflicting scripts – e.g., reality vs expectation, normal vs absurd – are juxtaposed.

Tsakona's Theoretical Framework for Multimodal Humour

Tsakona (2020) expands traditional humour analysis frameworks (e.g., Attardo, 2017), incorporating sociocultural presuppositions and metapragmatic stereotypes,

demonstrating how cultural contexts shape humour comprehension. This framework highlights three critical aspects:

i. **Sociocultural Assumptions**: Humour relies on shared cultural knowledge. Willis (2005) argues that its effectiveness depends on immediate interactions and broader societal contexts, reflecting audience values and collective knowledge.
ii. **Genre**: Encompasses different humour formats – cartoons, stand-up comedy, and comical texts – each influencing audience engagement through established genre expectations (Tsakona, 2020).
iii. **Text**: Incorporates verbal and visual elements, including wordplay, tone, and cultural metaphors (El Refaie, 2011). These elements interact within sociocultural and political contexts to shape humour's meaning and impact.

Tsakona (2009) aligns with Brône and Feyaerts' (2003) cognitive frameworks, defining scripts as mental structures organizing knowledge about concepts, activities, or entities. Cartoonists blend visual and verbal cues to challenge traditional ways of thinking, using techniques like exaggeration, subtle omissions, or flipping expectations to create humour. More than just entertainment, humour becomes a powerful tool for social critique. Tsakona (2020) argues that humour in media is not just about making people laugh – it also questions societal norms. Examining the cultural assumptions embedded in text and genre helps us understand how cartoons purposely challenge accepted values and opens doors for discussions about social issues (Tsakona, 2009).

Categories of Cartoons in Multimodal Analysis

Cartoons blend text and imagery to communicate complex social issues, offering diverse interpretations. Samson and Huber (2007) classify cartoons based on the interaction between text and visuals:

i. **Verbal-Dominant**: The image serves primarily as a prop for the dialogue. Humour is derived from the text, while the image merely reinforces it.

ii. **Verbal-Visual Interplay**: The image enhances the text, contributing key details that strengthen the humour. The punchline emerges from the interaction between verbal and visual elements.

iii. **Visual-Dominant**: Humour is conveyed primarily through visual storytelling, with minimal or no text, relying on images alone to create meaning.

Samson and Huber's (2007) classification, combined with Tsakona's (2020) and Attardo's (2017), provides a robust framework for analysing how cartoons function as social commentary, particularly about gender norms in South Asia. This approach

highlights the role of audience interpretation in humour comprehension and demonstrates how cartoons critique societal issues while shaping perceptions of gender in the Indo-Subcontinent.

Our investigation is guided by the following research questions, which aim to elucidate the nuances of gender portrayal and the strategic use of humour in cartoons:

1. How do male and female cartoonists in the Indo-Subcontinent perceive and visually/textually represent societal perceptions regarding women's issues?

2. How effectively do these cartoonists employ humour, satire, and visual/verbal strategies to critique or reinforce gender norms in their work?

3. How can cartoons addressing gender norms in the Indo-Subcontinent be categorized using Samson and Huber's (2007) framework, and what gender-based differences emerge in their thematic and stylistic execution?

Review of the Literature

Humour and Multimodal Discourse in Cartoons

By analyzing humour in online cartoons, we explore how this discourse blends verbal wit with visual elements to engage readers and influence their perspectives. Cartoons often rely on established social or political contexts, using visuals to represent what is conveyed verbally. This practice engages readers' attention by applying "appropriate schemata, cultural knowledge, and stereotypes" (Chovanec, 2017, p. 151). Humour depends on the audience's sharing of sociocultural knowledge with cartoonists, recognizing certain beliefs, and understanding opposing underlying scripts (e.g., Tsakona, 2009).

These cartoons use language strategically, employing wordplay, puns, or exaggeration to present serious issues in a lighter tone. Cartoonists also utilize verbal incongruities and visual metaphors to create a dynamic balance between text and imagery, which readers instantly grasp due to shared cultural knowledge (Tsakona, 2009). These techniques do not undermine the importance of the issues tackled rather they aim to subtly direct readers' attention toward such social concerns.

Cartoonists uniquely blend humour with social criticism, challenging sociocultural norms in a manner distinct from literature. Their ability to entertain while addressing complex issues makes them a powerful tool of public discourse (Tsakona, 2009).

Cartoons in Social and Cultural Contexts

Humour in these cartoons is intertwined with sharp societal and cultural norms critiques, appealing to a culturally aware audience. Research suggests that cartoons function as multimodal texts, relying on dual semiotic codes – visual humour and verbal commentary – where visual elements take precedence (Abdel-Raheem, 2023; Tsakona, 2009).

Within this (semiotic) domain, cartoonists purposely blend images, words, and symbols to create layered meanings that align with the social and cultural contexts of their audience (Tsakona, 2009). Cartoons act as intentional semiotic tools, encouraging readers to reflect on and discuss critical social issues.

Research Methodology

Here in the methodology section, we have detailed our approach to collecting and analyzing cartoons from the Indo-subcontinent, focusing on how they reflect and influence societal views on gender.

Sample Selection

This study selected twenty cartoons from each of four South Asian cartoonists – two male and two female – totalling eighty cartoons. These were sourced from publicly accessible platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. This study focuses on cartoons that address gender issues, enabling a targeted exploration of gender representation and aligning to understand how women are portrayed across artistic expressions.

Research Design

For the qualitative analysis, we applied Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humour (2001, 2017), adapted by Tsakona (2009, 2020), to analyze humour in multimodal media like cartoons. This framework guided the study of how cartoonists employ verbal (e.g., puns) and visual (e.g., metaphors) strategies to create humour (Declercq & El Khachab, 2021). The analysis also incorporated Samson and Huber's (2007) cartoon categories to compare how male and female cartoonists engage audiences and comment on gender issues. A combination of quantitative frequency assessments and qualitative evaluations examined the cumulative impact of verbal and visual elements on message delivery and audience reception. The study also examines how cartoonists highlight societal roles, point out challenges faced by women, and strategically employ text and images to align with their audiences' perceived interpretations.

Thematic Categorisation of Cartoons

The cartoons were categorized into four thematic areas, each reflecting societal attitudes towards women in South Asia. The themes explored here reveal how cartoonists use their art to either challenge or reinforce the marginalization of women:

i. **Gender Roles and Domestic Expectations:** Certain cartoons depict societal and familial expectations placed on women, particularly in their roles as caregivers and homemakers. Cartoonists showcase how domestic work in South Asia is undervalued because it is often perceived as a married woman's obligation rather than a personal choice. That is, selected cartoons contrast women in traditional domestic settings with those who have strong work-related objectives, shedding light on the difficulties of balancing household responsibilities with career ambitions. The thematic analysis uncovers how cultural narratives shape and restrict women's roles in both private and public spheres.

   For example, Figure 1 contrasts the gender roles of a married couple within a domestic setting, showing a woman managing household chores while the man appears relaxed. The interplay of text and imagery powerfully conveys the irony and inequality inherent in the division of domestic labour.

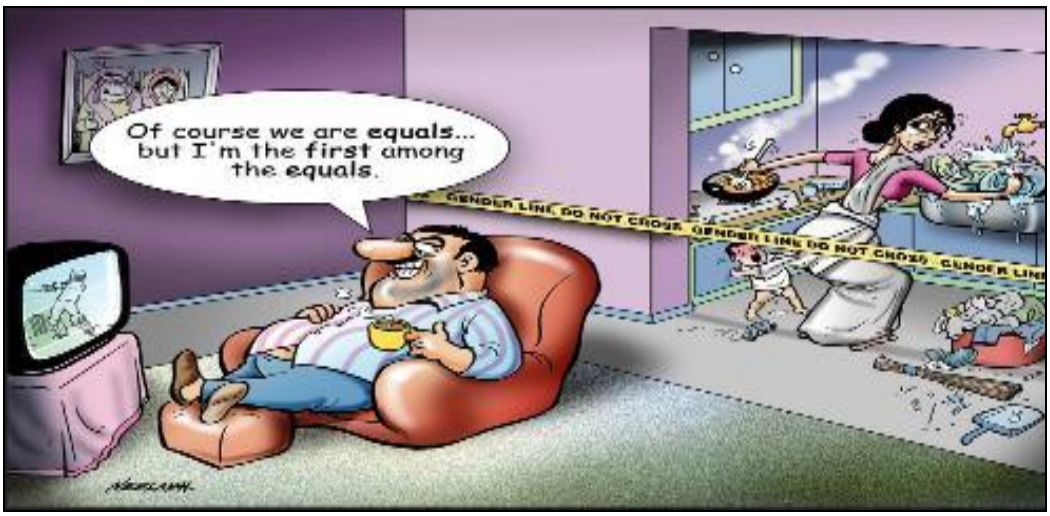


Figure 1 A cartoon by Banergee published on flicker.com
(Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/unwomenasiapacific/8579944238/in/photostream/)

ii. **Gender-Based Violence and Victim Blaming**: This category includes cartoons portraying physical and psychological violence against women (e.g., rape, abusive interactions). Importantly, these cartoons address narratives on women's responsibility for the violence inflicted upon them (i.e., victim blaming). These cartoons reflect, perpetuate, or challenge societal attitudes toward gender-based

violence and the accountability of perpetrators versus victims. For instance, Figure 2 depicts a woman being harassed in an overcrowded public transport, surrounded by menacing male figures. This image critiques the societal notion that women are responsible for avoiding eve-teasing by choosing "appropriate" attire, rather than addressing the perpetrators' behaviour.



Figure 2 A cartoon by Banergee published on Flickr.com
(Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/unwomenasiapacific/8579943562)

iii. **Psychological and Verbal Abuse**: This category examines psychological harm (e.g., verbal threats, body shaming) directed at women. It analyses how such portrayals reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate norms that marginalize and devalue women. We selected cartoons based on dialogue or imagery depicting psychological aggression or belittlement, assessing their impact on public perceptions of gender relations.

Figure 3 depicts how women face insecurities and stereotypes related to appearance, qualifying as psychological and verbal abuse. It highlights how such abuse is casually normalized as humour, subtly reflecting deeper societal issues surrounding body image and self-esteem.



Figure 3 A cartoon by Nazar published in the Denver Post
(Source:https://www.denverpost.com/2009/10/16/muslim-cartoonist-tackles-social-and-political-issues/)

iv. **Structural and Economic Inequality**: includes cartoons alluding to structural and economic inequalities affecting women, such as wage disparities, the undervaluation of women's labour (both paid and unpaid), and barriers to achieving economic and social equality. The analysis explores how these biases shape public discourse on gender equality.

For instance, Figure 4 portrays economic disparities in inheritance practices. A woman receives only a portrait of her deceased father, while her brothers inherit assets (e.g., property). Thus, the gendered distribution of wealth and the perpetuation of economic inequalities deny women their fair share.



Figure 4 A cartoon by Banerjee on DT Next Bureau
(Source: https://www.dtnext.in/toons/2022/12/28/toon-of-the-day-404)

Following the thematic categorization, each cartoon was further classified according to the dominant mode of communication used to convey the message, based on the framework provided by Samson and Huber (2007). The cartoons were sorted into three categories:

i. Combination of Verbal and Visual
ii. Verbal Dominant
iii. Visual Dominant

We have conducted a quantitative analysis of our data using the categorization method developed by Samson and Huber (2007).

Analysis

Cartoonists' Perception of the Women's Issues

Table 1: Gender-oriented themes in South Asian cartoons

Themes	Female Cartoonists	%age	Male Cartoonists	%age
Gender roles and domestic expectations	26	65%	01	2.5%
Gender-based violence and victim-blaming	02	5%	15	37.5%
Psychological and verbal abuse	11	27%	05	12.5%
Structural and economic inequality	01	2.5%	19	47.5%
	40	**100%**	**40**	**100%**

Table 1 presents the thematic focus of two male and two female South Asian cartoonists addressing gender issues. The data highlight some distinct patterns in their artistic representations. Female cartoonists primarily focus on *gender roles* and *domestic expectations*, with 65% of their cartoons depicting societal and familial pressures on women. In contrast, only 2.5% of male cartoonists' work addresses this theme. Male cartoonists dedicate 37.5% of their cartoons to *gender-based violence* and *victim blaming*, compared to 5% by female cartoonists. This suggests that male cartoonists more explicitly highlight physical abuse and societal tendencies to blame women.

A key theme for female cartoonists is that of *psychological* and *verbal abuse* – addressed in 27% of their work, compared to 12.5% in male cartoonists' cartoons. This suggests a stronger female focus on the emotional aspects of gender discrimination. Meanwhile, male cartoonists, focus on *structural* and *economic inequality* – comprising 47.5% of their work, versus just 2.5% of female cartoonists' work. This indicates that for male cartoonists, systemic gender disparities are more critical issues.

These findings illustrate distinct perspectives on gender discrimination by male and female cartoonists. Thus, male cartoonists tend to depict tangible issues, such as women's vulnerability to physical and psychological abuse, often using graphic and explicit representations. Female cartoonists, in contrast, emphasize the causes and emotional effects, including women's internalization of blame, using a subtler approach to depict their struggles.

Building on these quantitative insights, we examine how gendered differences manifest in specific categories of cartoons through qualitative analysis, focusing on the interplay of text and imagery.

Verbal Dominant Cartoons

In both cartoons, language is the primary source of humour, with script opposition driven by text. While images provide context, the text delivers the punchline.



Figure 5 A cartoon by Tailang published on Facebook
(**Source:** https://tinyurl.com/3xzf6p3v)



Figure 6 A cartoon by Qamar published on Instagram
(**Source:** https://www.instagram.com/hatecopy/?hl=en)

In Figure 5 (male cartoonist), two women express their urgent need for safety, stating, "What we urgently need is a sanctuary for women!". The ironic twist in women's dialogues is in *opposition* to the text in a newspaper on women's need for protection with the government's focus on tiger sanctuaries. The *textual contrast* critiques misplaced priorities, reflecting societal discourses on women's vulnerability.

In Figure 6 (female cartoonist), a woman reacts with *exaggerated* distress to spilling eggnog on her Christmas saree, highlighting societal pressure on women to maintain a flawless appearance. The bold font and punctuation in her speech bubble emphasize her panic, underscoring the absurdity of cultural expectations that judge women based on looks.

Although these cartoons use humour to challenge societal priorities, their themes differ: Figure 5 critiques government negligence regarding women's safety; Figure 6 highlights the unrealistic pressures on women's appearance. Both invite readers to question how societal values shape perceptions of worth.

Textual and *visual* elements reinforce these messages differently: Figure 5 has simple yet urgent and sarcastic dialogue; Figure 6 applies bold fonts and punctuation to emphasize panic. Contrastively, both cartoons are similar in exposing contradictions in societal aims versus fundamental needs to urge audiences to reconsider ingrained assumptions.

Cartoonists rely on *sociocultural context*, in these cartoons, as a key role in delivering these critiques. Figure 5 uses a newspaper as a *narrative* device to draw parallels between government inaction and media discourse. In contrast, Figure 6 focuses on the unseen psychological toll of beauty standards, an issue less reported but deeply embedded in everyday life. The female cartoonist uses *hyperbole* to stress the lasting psychological effects of societal expectations.

Both cartoons effectively use humour and hyperbole to critique distinct social issues: Figure 5 highlights the government's failure to prioritize women's safety, while Figure 6 exposes the undue emphasis on women's appearance and its long-term psychological consequences.

Table 2 Comparative analysis of GTVH Knowledge Resources in verbal dominant cartoons by male and female cartoonists

KRs	Female Cartoonist	Male Cartoonist	Comparison
Script Opposition (SO)	Contrasts societal expectations of festive perfection with the emotional overreaction to a minor wardrobe mishap, stressing the undue pressures placed on women to maintain a flawless appearance.	Highlights the ironic discrepancy between the perceived safety for wildlife and the lack of safety for women, pointing out the societal neglect of women's rights to safety and autonomy.	Cartoonists use script opposition (SO) to critique society's norms and expectations about gender roles. Every cartoon focuses on the discrepancy between how people are supposed to be and what happens daily to people, especially women.
Logical Mechanism	Employs hyperbole to dramatize the impact of a small accident, suggesting that such minor issues can disproportionately affect a woman's social value.	Uses irony to juxtapose the idea of sanctuaries for animals with the need for safe spaces for women, underscoring the absurdity of current societal priorities.	The male cartoonist SO ensures macro-level societal neglect of physical threats against women. On the other hand, the female cartoonist emphasizes the psychological effect of beauty standards expected of women obliquely in a woman's reaction to an accidental imperfection.

Situation	A personal crisis moment, exaggerated to critique broader societal expectations of women's appearance.	A rural setting that could metaphorically represent any region in South Asia, discussing a serious societal issue in a conversational tone.	Both cartoonists exaggerate to emphasize their points; the male uses an extreme amount of irony regarding society's priorities, while the female exaggerates the emotionality of the reaction to a spill on a saree.
Target	Societal beauty standards and their impact on women's self-esteem and social perceptions.	Societal attitudes and policies that prioritize animal protection over women's safety.	The male cartoonist uses irony to subtly criticize the priorities society puts on it by setting up the contrast between regarding animals as protected and women as having no safe spaces. Finally, this approach highlights the absurdities of unequal safety and protection provided for different people. The female cartoonist emphasizes the irrational worry shown by the woman over a minor spill who thinks she would be labeled as lacking beauty standards. Cartoonists use hyperbole to point out the difference between self-perception and social perception.
Narrative Strategy	Utilizes a vibrant, graphic art style common in modern digital media to attract attention and emphasize the emotional weight of societal expectations.	Uses a straightforward, almost minimalistic style to deliver a powerful social critique, employing dialogue as the primary narrative vehicle.	Each uses narrative strategies that align with traditional forms in their respective mediums (online webpage for the male and social media for

			the female), tailored to effectively communicate their messages. The male cartoonist employs a direct and minimalistic narrative strategy, often incorporating a newspaper within the cartoon to create an analogy and deliver a potent social critique. In contrast, the female cartoonist uses a colourful, detailed pop art style to emotionally engage the audience.
Language	Exaggerated dialogue highlights the absurdity of linking personal worth to physical appearance, using vivid language to enhance emotional resonance.	The phrase "What we urgently need is a sanctuary for women!" is direct and potent, forming a sharp contrast to the newspaper caption "UP's 3rd Tiger sanctuary" encapsulating the entire argument in a single statement.	Both utilize succinct, impactful language to deliver the punchline or key message effectively. The language in the male cartoonist's work uses stark contrast between what women want and societal actions, while the female cartoonist's language is vibrant and emotionally charged.

The Interplay of Verbal and Visual Modes in Cartoons

In the balanced interaction between text and imagery category, humour requires both verbal and visual elements for complete comprehension (Samson & Huber, 2007). This balance between verbal and visual features underscores broader societal issues, making the situations depicted in the cartoons more universally understandable even if there isn't any shared cultural knowledge.

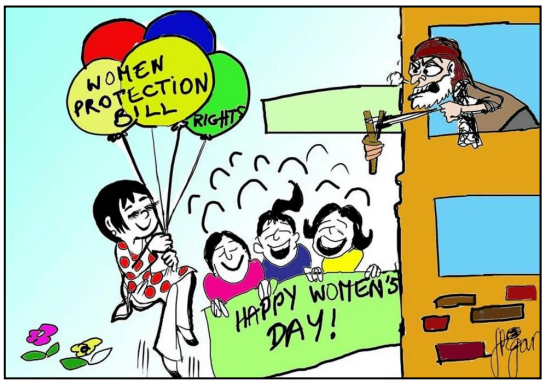


Figure 7 A cartoon by Nazar published on BBC News. (**Source:** https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/976/cpsprodpb/D51D /production/_89375545_gogi8.jpg.webp)



Figure 8 A cartoon by Banergee published on Junglekey (**Source:**https://farm9.staticflickr.com/8112/8579918480_e67ebb73e2_z.jpg)

Figure 7 (female cartoonist) intertwines verbal and visual elements to critique the vulnerability of women's rights in Pakistan. The balloons labeled "Women Protection Bill Rights" serve as metaphors for fragile legislative gains, floating in celebration yet threatened by a conservative figure with a slingshot. This *script opposition* (SO) in the text and image underscores the fragility of women's (newly revised) rights despite the governmental and judicial efforts to enforce change. The aggressive stance of the male figure in Figure 7, highlights the ongoing resistance by fundamentalists to progressive reforms, symbolizing the tension between tradition and modernity.

Figure 8 (male cartoonist) challenges misconceptions surrounding HIV transmission and the stigma attached to women. The husband's *exaggerated* reaction – "Wow, HIV positive...? From where did she get it?!" – acts as both a punchline and a critique of societal biases. The cartoon exposes the gendered blame that assumes women contract HIV through morally questionable means while men remain blameless. This *situation* highlights the damaging stereotypes common in South Asian societies, delivering a sharp critique of misinformation and prejudice surrounding the burden of responsibility.

Both cartoons build multilayered narratives by employing *sociocultural presuppositions*, *exaggeration*, and *contradiction*. The humour in Figure 7 contrasts progress and conservatism through the interplay between balloons and the slingshot, while Figure 8 uses figure-ground reversal to amplify the absurdity of the husband's accusation.

Exaggeration is key to both. The female cartoonist heightens the threat to women's rights through the dramatic imagery of balloons under attack whereas, the male cartoonist magnifies the husband's ignorance to expose misconceptions about HIV and mock society's tendency to stigmatize the infected. Both cartoons critique their respective situations in different ways because the female cartoonist employs a symbolic narrative,

while the male cartoonist delivers his critique through direct dialogue. *Language* reinforces their arguments in both, seamlessly integrating verbal and visual components.

Contradiction and *exaggeration* serve as central techniques: the slingshot aimed at balloons in Figure 7 emphasizes the fragility of women's rights whereas, the clinical setting contrasts sharply with the husband's overreaction, illustrating the societal stigma against HIV in Figure 8. Similarly, in Figure 7 the cultural conflict between progress and conservatism is captured whereas, Figure 8 highlights the gap between expected professionalism and public ignorance regarding women's health.

Sociocultural presuppositions anchor both cartoons. Figure 7 juxtaposes celebration with threat, illustrating the ongoing struggle for women's rights. Figure 8 highlights societal bias by exaggerating the husband's ignorance, revealing misplaced blame's unfair and often laughable nature. By utilizing these techniques, both cartoonists create humorous yet critical reflections on societal issues, making their work powerful tools for social commentary – their use of *contradiction, exaggeration,* and *symbolism* crafts multilayered narratives that challenge societal norms and biases.

Table 3 Comparative analysis of GTVH Knowledge Resources in verbal-visual interplay cartoons by male and female cartoonists

KRs	Female Cartoonist	Male Cartoonist	Comparison
Script Opposition (SO)	Utilises script opposition by contrasting the celebration of Women's Rights with the actual threat to those rights, depicted through the visual metaphor of balloons being targeted.	Script opposition illustrates societal tendencies to stigmatize and blame women for health issues like HIV, portraying a dissonance between blame and actual causality.	Both cartoonists leverage script opposition to reveal societal discrepancies – how women are blamed or perceived versus the underlying realities. The male cartoonist focuses on health and stigma, while the female cartoonist focuses on the fragility of women's rights against societal threats.
Logical Mechanism	Employs *exaggeration* and *visual metaphor* (balloons) to dramatize the vulnerability of women's rights.	Uses *faulty reasoning* to create humour, reflecting the absurdity of the husband's ignorance about HIV transmission, pointing to broader societal ignorance and stigma.	Both use logical mechanisms to enhance the impact of their critique. The male cartoonist's faulty reasoning spotlights denial and misinformation, whereas the female cartoonist's exaggeration underscores the precarious state of women's rights.

Situation	A public celebration, which visually and contextually sets up a contrast between public festivities and private fears.	A medical clinic is a common setting for revealing personal and societal health issues, which situates the narrative in a relatable and realistic scenario.	Each artist situates their cartoons in settings that amplify their thematic concerns: healthcare for the male cartoonist and public spaces for the female cartoonist, highlighting different aspects of societal interaction with gender issues.
Target	Focuses on *societal forces* that threaten women's rights, using the image of a threatening figure as a symbol for these forces.	Targets *societal attitudes* and *stigmas* surrounding HIV, particularly focusing on the unfair burden placed on women.	Both target societal misconceptions but from different angles; one looks at health stigmas, while the other critiques the security of legally obtained rights.
Narrative Strategy	Uses a symbolic narrative, where the celebration and the threat are depicted simultaneously to emphasize conflict.	Deploys a direct, narrative-based strategy that uses the characters' interaction to expose societal faults.	Narrative strategies differ in directness; the male cartoonist uses a more straightforward narrative, while the female cartoonist employs symbolism to convey her message.
Language	The use of vibrant, symbolic language through visual elements (balloons, banners) to represent women's rights under threat.	The dialogue serves as both narrative and punchline, emphasizing the ignorance and denial prevalent in societal attitudes towards HIV.	Both utilize language effectively to deliver their messages; however, the male cartoonist focuses on spoken language's impact, while the female cartoonist integrates text with visual symbols for a broader communicative effect.

Visual Dominant Cartoons

Typically, the third type of cartoon relies solely on images, with no accompanying text. Cartoonists depend on readers' cultural and shared knowledge to interpret these cartoons. However, our data shows that it is rare for cartoonists to use only images to convey their messages; there is almost always some text involved. Only one female cartoonist has two cartoons, including an animated panel, that is clear without text. Among male cartoonists, cartoons such as Figure 2 or Figure 9 come closest to this clarity, though, strictly speaking, they may be placed in the second category. For instance, Figure 9 exemplifies how, without

text, the context of most cartoons can remain unclear. While the image shows men eating heartily and women serving in the background, the explicit commentary provided by the text clarifies the unequal treatment and societal critique, which might otherwise be ambiguous. As the message in these images is not clear without the supportive context (at least for the broader audience) provided by the accompanying text, it would not be appropriate to label these cartoons as visual-dominant cartoons.



Figure 9 A cartoon by Banergee published on Flickr.com
(**Source:** https://www.flickr.com/photos/unwomenasiapacific/8578820653/in/photostream/)

We refer to this as the visually dominant category, where visuals alone can effectively convey the intended meaning due to the audience's ability to interpret the message through the images.

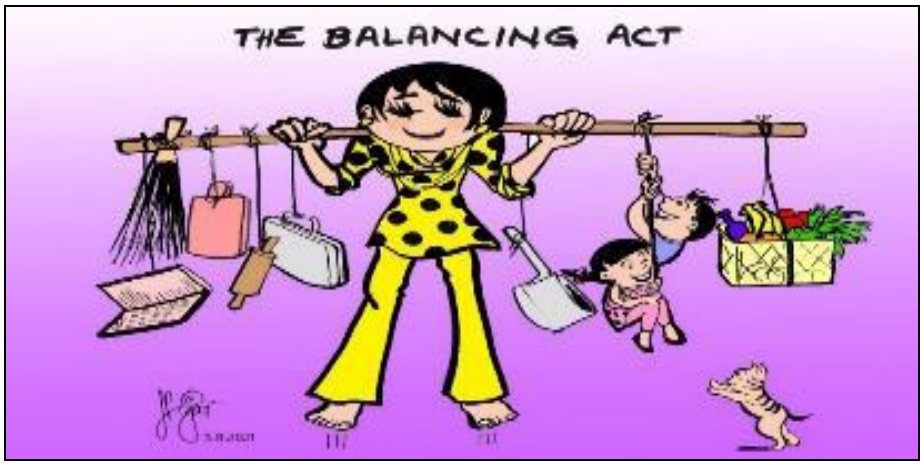


Figure 10 A cartoon by Nazar published on Facebook.
(**Source:** https://www.facebook.com/GogiStudiosOfficial)

The only visual-dominant cartoon (Figure 10) by the female cartoonist intricately portrays the challenges faced by South Asian working women through the visual metaphor of a woman balancing various responsibilities. The image vividly shows a young urban woman balancing items related to both home and work, symbolizing the dual expectations placed upon her.

Employing the *script opposition,* the cartoon highlights the conflict between personal and professional life, emphasizing the unrealistic societal expectation that women can effortlessly balance both. This contrast is visually represented by the woman's calm and composed demeanour in the face of an overwhelming array of tasks. The *exaggerated* depiction of her balancing act serves as a *logical mechanism,* illustrating the intense pressures and unrealistic standards imposed on women.

The visual alone suffices to convey the societal pressures without the need for accompanying text, illustrating the *situation* clearly. The woman balancing multiple tasks and performing multifaceted roles is depicted as a successful acrobat in a circus, seamlessly managing her duties with a smile. This exaggerated portrayal underscores the *contradiction* between the appearance of ease and the underlying difficulty, emphasizing the societal illusion that women can flawlessly juggle numerous responsibilities without strain.

This imagery illustrates the multifaceted roles women are expected to navigate in society. It specifically addresses South Asian working women, spanning all ages, classes, races, and ethnicities, who often shoulder the dual burden of household and professional duties. The cartoon challenges the societal norms that impose these demanding roles on women, critiquing the expectation of seamlessly managing both domains.

Even without the caption "The Balancing Act", the image effectively conveys it, assuming the viewers are familiar with the cultural norm in South Asia that expects women to balance home and work. This mirrors a wider societal view that positions men as primary earners, with women supporting their families, often at the expense of their careers. Chandra (2012, p. 1045) observes that it is typical for South Asian women to accept these dual roles, with societal pressures often dictating that family responsibilities take precedence over personal career growth.

The cartoon exaggerates the woman's ability to manage all her responsibilities effortlessly, smiling, thus critiquing the unrealistic and unachievable standards imposed on women. The meticulous integration of textual and visual elements, including punctual hyper-determination, powerfully amplifies the message, effectively conveying the societal pressures and expectations women face.

Table 4 GTVH Knowledge Resources in Visual Dominant Cartoon

KRs	Female cartoonist
Script Opposition (SO)	The cartoon contrasts the importance of personal life versus professional life, showing a woman balancing various responsibilities. Female cartoonist highlights the unrealistic expectation that women can balance both seamlessly.
Logical Mechanism	Employing faulty reasoning, the cartoon suggests that a woman can perfectly balance all her duties, highlighting the unrealistic expectations placed on her.
Situation	A visual metaphor of a woman balancing all her duties and jobs, representing the multifaceted roles women are expected to perform in society.
Target	The target is South Asian working women who are expected to manage both household and professional responsibilities seamlessly.
Narrative Strategy	Using visual symbolism to portray the woman balancing various items, highlighting her multiple roles.
Language	The caption "THE BALANCING ACT" adds wordplay, reinforcing the visual metaphor. The image itself conveys the message even without the text.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how male and female cartoonists from the Indo-subcontinent portray women's issues through cartoons, drawing on the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) by Attardo (1992; 2017) and its extensions into multimodal discourse by Tsakona (2009; 2020). The analysis focused on humour strategies such as *script opposition, logical mechanisms,* and *narrative strategies* to understand how these artists comment on gender norms and societal expectations.

The cartoons are categorized into three categories using Samson and Huber's (2007) framework, including *verbal dominant, verbal-visual interplay,* and *visual dominant*; of the three categories, verbal-visual interplay, representational of the reliance on both textual and visual elements for societal critique, is the most common. Visual metaphors in gender roles and psychological pressures are often examined by female cartoonists (e.g., balloons as a symbol of the fragility of women's rights). While this might not be the case with many male cartoonists, they tend to talk about the more significant social problems, such as the government ignoring women's safety and using their subjects in current affairs to make their point.

The use of *narrative strategies* by male and female cartoonists is entirely different. Female cartoonists use bright, emotive styles to point out the ridiculousness of how society expects you to be, while male cartoonists rely on analogies and turn

newspapers with appropriate captions into imagery with stark, direct dialogue that it is a system's failure. Both genders adapt their linguistic strategies to enhance satire: Male cartoonists preferably use direct quotes from newspapers to create impactful commentary, and female cartoonists address their work's emotional and cultural nuance. These different ways highlight the importance of their sociocultural relevance (which Tsakona observed in the relation of genre and text with a *humour reception*).

In brief, these cartoons are not trivialized as just means of entertainment but are ideal models for criticism in society and culture. They demonstrate how men and women cartoonists deal differently with the theme of gender and describe how each gender uses a multitude of humorously inspired strategies shaped by the two points of view and observation of the social reality. These cartoons reveal the depth and intricacy of cartoons as media for challenging norms of society and fomenting public discourse regarding gender bias in South Asia through an interplay of visual and verbal elements, analyzed using the GTVH framework. Cartoonists generate thought through these nuanced depictions, provide reflection, and encourage dialogue on the deeply embedded societal norms that determine gender dynamics.

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