

Drawing After: Cartoons, Partition and Women

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Abstract

This paper takes up the cartoons of British cartoonist Leslie Illingworth published in Daily Mail, particularly those which he did on the Indian context. Illingworth's cartoons recurrently show India as a lady vulnerable to violence, being surrounded by beasts like civil war, communal riots etc. The paper however, seeks to study the 'lady/woman' as a subject to the violence in these cartoons. How does Illingworth as a cartoonist bring up the image of a woman in his cartoons discussing violence/victim? What are the visual intricacies used in order to caricature women as a subject within the context of the highly intensive political situations? It would not be wrong to say that women – on both sides – were the worst victims of the partition riots. On the one hand they had to suffer at the hands of the rioters, who saw them as weak targets to tarnish the opposite community. While on the other hand they suffered from their own community, who would rather have their women dead, than having the honour of the community tarnished. Looking at these cartoons from such an angle, might add depth to the utilisation of woman as a symbol by the cartoonist. It would therefore be interesting to read those cartoons with such a dimension. An added emphasis would be placed on the ways in which the cartoonist used women's body as a symbol, provided the use of gender in cartoons later on became a technique.

Keywords: Cartoonists, women, violence, partition, propaganda, communal violence.

Introduction

Political humour seeks to find what is inappropriate in day-to-day political life and to critique it. Political cartoons then, form an important medium of political humour. That cartoons can easily take sides, be aggressive, taunting, and highly critical only add to their advantage when compared to other, more restrained forms of printed communication. In fact, political cartoons “can match any other media for invective” and are used widely as “as a weapon of propaganda” (Kemnitz, 1973:84). The details that a cartoon provides on deeper interpretation enable a historian to learn more than the cartoonist might have intend-

ed to say. According to Medhurst and Desousa, “political common-places, literary/cultural allusions, personal character traits and situational themes” (1981:199-200) form the database on which cartoonists depend to go about their business. On the one hand this fact underlines possibilities in reading and interpreting cartoons and on the other it reminds us of the challenges of doing so. El Refaie states that literacy of different kinds is required, “ranging from a familiarity with cartoon conventions and a broad knowledge of current events to the ability to draw analogies” (2009:182).

Cartoons are, by nature, subjective rather than objective. This subjectivity in a sense makes it more interesting for a historian; for it makes it easier to grasp the various perspectives that existed in a society by reading cartoons of a particular period of time in history.

This paper therefore, takes up the cartoons by British cartoonist Leslie Illingworth for *Daily Mail*, more so those he did on the Indian context. It seeks to study the ‘lady/woman’ as a subject to the violence in these cartoons. How does Illingworth as a cartoonist bring up the image of a woman in his cartoons discussing violence/victim? What are the visual intricacies used in order to caricature women as a subject within the context of the highly intensive political situations.

Reading Cartoons

Cartoons can be humorous, emotional, partial, extremely critical, taunting and teasing all at the same time; each of which are areas where editorials and other printed modes of communication cannot tread into. Not to forget that cartoons are quicker and pungent in getting their message across. This is why Johnson explains that a cartoonist is not a mere commentator anymore, but “...an editorial writer who produces a leading article in the form of a picture” (1937:44). Cartoonists use a set of tools and techniques distinct from that of not just oral rhetoric but also other means of printed communication. They use linguistic and non-linguistic techniques simultaneously, (Sani, Abdullah et.al, 2012:156) which are advantages in communicating its message successfully.

Medhurst and Desousa have given in a nut shell three basic paradigms that try to explain the content and effects of cartoons; psychoanalytic, sociological and communicative (1981). While psychoanalysis underlines the importance of symbolism in cartoons, it also says that condensation and displacement also play an important role in not

just the production, but also the interpretation of cartoons. The latter two approaches, namely sociological and communicative, focus on the culture that produces the cartoon or caricature and the symbols of that culture. It is however pointed out that all these paradigms fail in that none of these provide a structured frame of classifying and analyzing cartoons and caricatures, which they claim that they had done. What they attempt therefore is to look at the cartoon as a rhetorical form. Thus their focus does not merely limit itself to the analysis of cartoons; rather, it says that there should be a keen look at when and how the cartoon was made, or in other words, what went in, to the creation of each cartoon. A cartoonist uses a unique set of tools and techniques as distinct from other forms of communication; which include linguistic as well as non-linguistic ones.

Sanjukta Sunderason points out that a ‘satirical image...seeks to embody a synthesis of a culture of critique with a culture of humour’. She therefore underlines the existence of multiple layers within the ‘macro-frames of criticality and humour, which includes experience, identity, ideology etc. amongst others. A reader therefore is dealing with a ‘visual document’, when looking at such an image. This, while emphasizing the fact that such images could indeed narrate more than what they appear to do, also gives a hint as to what all needs to be looked for in a cartoon, or in other words what all could be found from them (2006:8).

The basic forms of dispositions, contrast, commentary and contradiction in a cartoon are made into a concrete structure by using elements of style. This includes the use of lines of various thicknesses, size of characters and objects, exaggeration of physical features, positioning of images and their correlation with the text – whether in balloon or caption – etc. (Medhurst and Desousa, 1981). But within these broader lines, there are more techniques that a cartoonist resorts to when bringing out his work that could be clearly seen when looked for. And these would have a lot more to say to a reader; indirectly if not otherwise.

The Political Background

The years of 1946-'47 being recognized as the crux of this work necessitates the clarification of the political background of this period so as to place the cartoons in context for the readers. The years following the Second World War saw the British government making

one attempt after the other to negotiate with the major political parties in India. The situation in India seemed to be slipping from their hands and therefore they wanted to leave while the going was good. In 1946, the government sent a three member delegation consisting of Stafford Cripps, a member of the British War Cabinet, Secretary of State Pethick Lawrence and another cabinet member Victor Alexander. They came into a situation where communal violence and famines were threatening to tear the society apart. The discussions therefore, went in the direction of forming an Indian government for the interim period by bringing in a coalition between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, to undertake decisive administrative measures as well as to oversee the transfer of power. In spite of various formulas being put up, such a move failed and the Viceroy left it to Congress, to form a government in the light of League non-cooperation. Thus on the 2nd of September, Congress formed the Interim Government. Attempts at negotiation were still on and at a later stage Muslim League came in as well. The frictions between both these sides were however too much to be softened so easily and this widened into one between two communities of the sub-continent that settled at nothing less than the partition of the country into two with riots and bloodshed accompanying it (Wolpert, 2006:9-11).

It would not be wrong to say that women – on both sides – were the worst victims of the partition riots. On the one hand they had to suffer at the hands of the rioters, who saw them as weak targets to tarnish the opposite community. While on the other hand they suffered from their own community, who would rather have their women dead, than having the honour of the community tarnished (Menon and Bhasin, 1993). Looking at these cartoons from such an angle, might add depth to the utilization of woman as a symbol by the cartoonist. It would therefore be interesting to read those cartoons with such a dimension. An added emphasis would be placed on the ways in which the cartoonist used women's body as a symbol, provided that the use of gender in cartoons later on became a technique.

Leslie Gilbert Illingworth

Leslie Gilbert Illingworth is regarded as someone who drew cartoons "...that were to lift Britain's morale during the Second World War, commenting on Churchill's leadership and Allied military victories" (llgc.org.uk). These cartoons reached the readers through *Daily Mail*, that was "...sympathetic to the fighting man..." during the war

time and had a strong hold in the market (Bryant, 2009:19). When *Daily Mail* therefore advertised for a political cartoonist, Illingworth apparently saw it as the chance to serve his country the best way he can. This however, was not the sole reason. The pay at *Daily Mail* was good and compared to his earlier stints as freelance illustrator, it was more stable and interesting for him. On his part, Illingworth thought that a cartoonist must have a pragmatic approach and thought of himself as “...very Venal” (Bryant, 2009:16). He has made it clear that he was never told what to do in his cartoons and also that the best of editors is someone who looks at the works and say that that’s just what he wanted. Underlying this statement however; is the fact that he kept his editor happy with the work he did. He also used to contribute to the government propaganda service for which he prepared cartoons, both signed and un-signed ones, to be used as leaflets for aerial propaganda. A few of his cartoons from *Daily Mail* were also used for this purpose.

The choice of Illingworth as the focus of this study, over his contemporary David Low, who is regarded by many as one of the best political cartoonists ever, is in no way a coincidence. It is indeed with definite reasons that this has been done. In fact, there has already been a prediction that the former would fare better than the latter in the long run. This was made by a former editor of *Punch*, in his obituary for Illingworth in *Guardian*, with the explanation that “... Low’s cartoons usually relate to some immediate situation which soon gets forgotten, whereas Illingworth’s go deeper, becoming at their best, satire in the grand style rather than mischievous quips; strategic rather than practical” (Bryant, 2009:13).

The differences between these two cartoonists does not, however, cease at that; they do seem to represent two distinct styles of cartooning, if not two schools altogether. This is not to allude to any kind of theoretical debate, but rather the point here is that there were differences in the ways in which both these men approached and drew cartoons; so much so that it is evident for an ordinary reader.

To begin with, Illingworth was keen on details. He seldom leaves a space blank in his works. The images are full – literally and metaphorically. The figures are sharp, clear and of realistic anatomy rather than crooked, non-detailed or those with minimal lines. Similarly, the space allotted is used to the full, with shades and images; so much so that one might take it for a sketch rather than a cartoon (Bryant, 2009:25). However, this is not the case with David Low, who does his characters with minimal lines.

Secondly, looking at the cartoons of both these cartoonists a little closely, it could be understood that Low does not give much importance to where he sets his cartoon and its characters. Landscapes, cricket ground, household, etc. all become his background and quite often, it is left blank too. On the other hand, Illingworth gives much importance to the background. They do have a bearing on the characters and the message conveyed in the cartoons. And they are drawn with utmost details. With varying shades of black as well as strokes of different thickness, he makes it vivid, detailed and 'colourful', even though they are all black and white illustrations. A third reason is their position on the Indian political scenario. Though Low has indeed done several cartoons on the Indian situation, most of them are mere comments. There is not much of a satire. While Illingworth's cartoons are no less than sharp swipes as far as satire goes.

All this has been said not to judge the cartoonist that David Low was; and there would be no point in trying to do so with one of the best political cartoonists ever. The point here was to prove how useful his cartoons would be to a historian. What he/she looks for in a cartoon is not merely the message that the cartoonist intended the cartoon to convey. Rather, the attempt would be, to unravel the cartoon and through that, the cartoonist as well as the political scenario. In fact a historian refuses to be satisfied with what is given at the surface and digs in for more. Looking at Illingworth and Low in such angle, it is obvious that Illingworth by far gives more food for thought for a social scientist, when compared to Low.

These facts therefore make it furthermore important to study his cartoons. To be more to the point and specific in the narration those cartoons in which the image of a woman/lady have been utilised, are taken up for analysis here. Adopting a set of cartoons as a whole, with a covert thread connecting them into becoming a story is what is attempted here.

Illingworth and the Indian Woman

The first amongst these was published in *Daily Mail* on 13th of March 1942 titled *New Policy for India* and it was a comment on the Cripps mission (Figure.1).



Figure.1 (*Daily Mail*, 13 March 1942; Courtesy: www.cartoons.ac.uk)

Situations in South Asia and the closing in of war on India had started troubling the British by this time and they badly needed the support of Indian public as well as the leaders, which the latter were not willing to give. The fact that their support was taken for granted and the way they were treated at the end of the First World War, in spite of their giving full support in that case, were the reasons. It was in this light that Cripps persuaded the British War Cabinet to a draft declaration that promised India Dominion Status once the war ended (Sarkar, 1983:385-386). The cartoon therefore has Cripps running in hard to a building which is ablaze (presumably the British Empire) of which a good part i.e. up to Burma is already burnt down. The next in the line of a fast spreading fire is Ceylon and then India. These two are drawn as ladies visibly frightened and apparently awaiting a saviour. The plan that Cripps is coming with however, is exclusively for India; alluding thereby that when compared to Ceylon, it is India, that the British can ill afford to let go and that the same is whom they need on their side.

The situation however went from bad to worse, when the Cripps Mission failed. The British were at their wits end and so were the Indian leaders, though for two very different reasons. This is evident from Gandhi's asking the British to leave India to God or anarchy; he said he would rather prefer pushing India to "...complete lawlessness..." than to stay within the orderly disciplined anarchy of the British rule. Thus on the 8th August 1942 Congress passed the Quit India resolution and

followed it by a call for a mass-struggle. If the leaders were arrested, each Indian was to act as his own guide in how to carry the movement forward. 'Do or Die' was the call given by Gandhi, to his followers. However, even before the movement could spark off, the top-notch leaders were arrested and removed on the morning of 9th of August (Sarkar, 1983:389-390).

The problems in India were fast getting out of hand for the British and therefore the government sent a Cabinet Mission to reach a settlement between the parties involved about the future of the sub-continent (B. Metcalf and T. Metcalf, 2001:215). The Viceroy in fact was not very favorable to this idea as he did not believe that a few weeks of discussion would help in settling the scores (Wavell and Moon, 1973:206). In spite of the second Simla conference, the two major parties in India, the Congress and the League did not find themselves getting any closer. In fact they had grown further apart from each other, though both parties were quick to explain that they had gone to great lengths but the other party would not budge and thereby causing the failure of the talks (Wavell and Moon, 1973:267). On the 14th of May, was published a cartoon under the title, *Civil War and famine threaten India*, depicting the tug-off for power between the Indian leaders (figure.2).



Figure.2 (*Daily Mail* 14 May 1946; Courtesy: www.cartoons.ac.uk)

Here the lady –India – is visibly scared of the approaching tiger and wolf, which are civil war and famine respectively. The ‘men’ in the cartoon are Gandhi, Jinnah and Cripps (safely sitting atop a tree), of which the first two are locked in conflict over the new constitution while the lady is in a deep predicament, vulnerable to attacks from wild animals. It is a critique of the Indian leaders, who according to the cartoonist are safe from the threats in the jungle. Thus, he effectively releases the colonial government off the hook with regards to these two tragedies. Ironically, Wavell himself admitted that it was in the provinces ‘best administered’ by the colonial government that the famine struck harder, thereby underlining the failure on the part of the colonial government (Wavell and Moon, 1973:202). It will, thus, have to be assumed that the cartoonist chose to conveniently overlook this fact.

After several rounds of talks and conciliatory attempts between the Congress and the Jinnah-led Muslim League, the Congress was setting up an interim government, following the rejection of the latest Cabinet Mission proposal by Jinnah and his Working Committee. This was due to the fact that the formula that League demanded (with parity of Muslim and Hindu members and several other issues) was not accepted. League passed a resolution saying that it was ‘Congress intransigence’ and the breach of Muslim trust by the British government that led to their rejection of the proposal. They also resolved that it was time to get down to Direct Action to achieve Pakistan and therefore called on the followers to be ready for any kind of sacrifice towards this end (Mansergh and Moon, 1979:135-139). However, even Jinnah was not sure as to what Direct Action actually meant other than it was going to be a mass unconstitutional movement, and a Muslim hartal was going to be observed on the 16th of August and there would be mass meetings in every town and village. The government feared that this would lead to friction, (Mansergh and Moon, 1979:174) which proved to be right as the hartal resulted in widespread riots and clashes in Calcutta (Mansergh and Moon, 1979:239-240). Following League rejection of proposals, the Viceroy invited Nehru to form an Interim Government (Mansergh and Moon, 1979:188). After a few further deliberations finally, an Interim Government led by Congress came into power on the 2nd of September 1946 (Sarkar and Bhattacharya, 2007:297-298). On the 2nd of September therefore, a government under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru was sworn in (Sarkar, 1983:431).

The cartoon that was published on the same day with the caption *Nehru rides the Indian elephant*, therefore shows Archibald Wavell,

the then Viceroy, waving off Nehru as he prepares for the ride on the elephant titled India (Figure.3). A woman, apparently representing the people is sitting in the cabin behind him and her frightened gaze takes our attention to what Jinnah is doing. He is lighting explosives tied to the tail of the elephant in an attempt at endangering the riders atop the elephant. The implication being that through efforts like direct action, Jinnah and his party were trying to sabotage the new government in office.

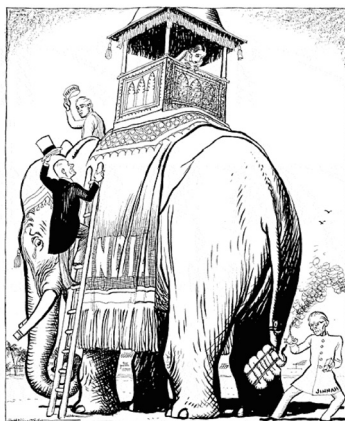


Figure.3 (*Daily Mail*, 2 September 1946; Courtesy: www.cartoons.ac.uk)



Figure.4 (*Daily Mail*, 17 December 1946; Courtesy: www.cartoons.ac.uk)

The last months of the year 1946 found the sub-continent falling steeply into the grasp of riots and massacres. Bengal, Punjab, United Provinces, Bihar etc. were affected by violence which showed no signs of subsiding (Sarkar, 1983:432-433). On the 17th of December a cartoon was published a cartoon with its caption asking, *But can they?* This question however, is a jibe which is clear when we look at the

cartoon (Figure.4). It shows an open cage out of which a ferocious tiger – Civil War- emerges. Nehru, representing Congress, is depicted as opening the cage and out of cowardice lying atop it. Lying there at a safe distance, Nehru asks the British to leave India, and claims that they can do without them. The cartoonist is thereby taking a dig at the Congress leadership, accusing them of being at least partly responsible for letting violence and civil war happen and their inability to face it and put an end to it. A soldier representing the British however places himself valiantly between the beast and the vulnerable lady (Indian people) who is carrying a baby this time shown with another kid – who is again, a girl. The question raised by the caption therefore could be elaborated into - what could the Indian leaders do without the help of courageous and able British officers?



Figure.5 (*Daily Mail*, 20 May 1947; Courtesy: www.cartoons.ac.uk)

The political situation kept deteriorating early in 1947 as well (Sarkar, 1983:432-433). The cartoon published on the 20th of May 1947 with the caption *Free India* (Figure.5), therefore tries to raise an irony that even when faced by the mass-scale riots and killings, Gandhi, Congress, U.S. sympathizers and the Liquidators of the British empire (meaning thereby the British leaders who stood for putting an end to the colonial rule in India) still thought of the British to be the biggest problem in India.

Once again there is a lady depicted as holding a child close to her, timid and afraid - as if to refer to the people – of what is going on

around. What has to be noted in particular is the way Gandhi has been depicted. With all the killings and riots going on around him, he is shown as calmly spinning the Charkha, as if to denote Nero's fiddling while Rome was on fire. This is yet another case of the cartoonist Illingworth playing into the hands of the British government by choosing to avoid the facts. Gandhi, tired of the unending negotiations and hurt by the spreading violence, had left for riot affected villages like Noakhali and later moved between the similarly torn slum areas of Calcutta, Bihar and Delhi. He often travelled on foot through these places, starting in January 1947 and worked amongst the suffering masses through the days of independence and partition (Mahajan, 2000:238-253). Depicting Gandhi as an idle old man sitting back and spinning in a cartoon published in May 1947 suggests that either the cartoonist got his facts wrong or that he chose to overlook them. It would thus seem that he was going out of his way to posit himself with the British conservatives who scoffed at the imminent disbanding of the empire's hold in India (B.Metcalf and T.Metcalf, 2006:218).

The cartoon on the 28th of August is titled *Race hatred* (Figure.6). It shows a woman named the Minorities on her knees crying for help.

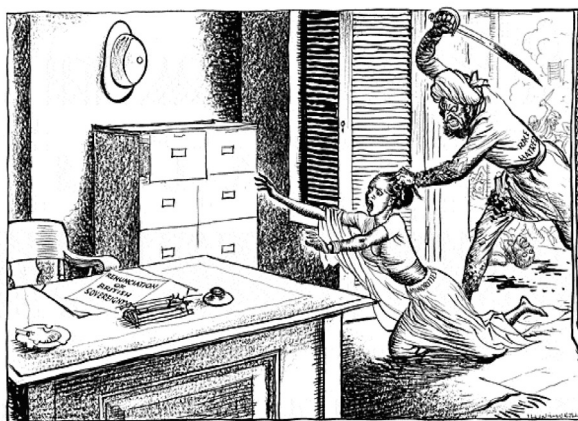


Figure.6 (*Daily Mail*, 28 August 1947; Courtesy: www.cartoons.ac.uk)

A ghastly looking man in typical North Indian attire, titled *Race Hatred*, is grabbing her by the hair and is about to kill her with his sword. With the whole street filled with similar scenes, the lady has rushed into what seems to be the office of a British officer (as is evident from the hat hanging on the wall). He has just left the office, leaving his cigarette to burn out. The reason for his leaving seems to be the letter

on the table that reads 'Renunciation of British Sovereignty'. The use of the term 'Race' is however, problematic considering the fact that the riots were communal, not racial in their nature.

Another point to note in the light of this cartoon is the notion of void that is left behind by the British. It is as if to suggest that Indian leaders who have already been tagged cowardly (figure.4) and idle (figure.5) are inept as well. Looking at the cartoons that way also suggests that throughout these cartoons, the existence of a national movement of any sorts have been ignored. All through it has been the valiant British coming to save lady India from the troubles posed by the leaders as well as the society here.

These six cartoons that mostly had the Indian situation in their focus have a lot more to say than is overtly visible for an ordinary reader. The depiction of India, its society, the social situation and its parties show a hidden thread of sorts that connects them with each other. Firstly, Illingworth's use of animals in the frames is worth noting. Tropical animals like elephant and tiger appear now and then. While it is India and the Indian National Congress that are depicted as elephants, the tiger is used to depict the civil war in two of them. Famine is depicted in a cartoon as a hungry jackal. This personification could actually be reread, in that Illingworth uses a wild jungle, a riot scene or fire and rising smoke in most cases as the background for his cartoons on India, which implies an attribution of a wild and uncivilized nature to the Indian society; a society, where wild beasts like tigers, jackals and elephants belong.

Next, and more importantly as much as this paper is concerned, comes the depiction of women. Frightened and vulnerable, they are tagged as India in two situations; apparently represent its people in three of them and the minorities in one. Such repeated depiction cannot be coincidental; what then could have led him to draw so? One explanation could be that he must have been alluding to the reality where the women were, in most cases, at the receiving end of the communal violence and riots. However, as has been already stated, none of the cartoons cited here use the image of a woman to represent women; rather the woman in these cartoons represent India, its people and the minority section of the society. The expressions of these women, on the other hand show nothing but fear, weakness, helplessness etc. Add to this the fact that these characters require immediate help against the looming threat and then, the ploy becomes clear. The technique of depicting women by drawing upon gender stereotypes is very much visible in

political cartoons. Wickham, in her study of cartoons on German unification, has explained the depiction of women and the stereotypes and sexism that cartoonists stuck to (Wickham, 1998:156). Illingworth's ploy therefore could be traced along the same lines whereby India is in general shown as a frail being that requires immediate help. And that, is where the valiant British soldier (figure.4) comes in, facing the tiger in order to save the lady. In fact it is the same courageous soldier who makes a point in the last cartoon (figure.6) with his absence.

Underlying these depictions is also an attempt to look down on India and its society as weak, vulnerable and afraid of the threats like famine, civil war, communal riots (at the same time being responsible for it all) and a self-proclamation of the British as the savior. Also, the repeated use of the image of the elephant denotes a jab at its stubbornness – another way of reading the persistent waves of national movement. Elephant, it must be remembered is an animal, which in spite of its massive strength and size, can be tamed by a human being, because of the power that he wields. This therefore lays bare the British outlook on the Indians. There is an undeniable way of looking at the sub-continent through the glass provided by Orientalists (Said, 1978:54-57). Edward Said says that, this practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space as "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" as "theirs" is entirely arbitrary. He goes on to say that the "...two aspects of the orient that set it off from the West... will remain essential motifs of European imaginative geography... Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant", whereby Asia becomes, a "...silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries". And that reflects in Illingworth's drawings too, though when taking into consideration the audience that he catered to, the daily newspaper that he worked for and the sources of news that he had access to, this is of no surprise at all.

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