

Female Agency and Hybrid Identity of Beepathu in the Film Thallumala

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Abstract:

Films are not merely an entertainment medium but rather act as a conduit of cultural change in society. Malayalam films have witnessed many experimentations in style and theme. However, in depicting female characters, very few films conveyed constructive ideas. *Thallumala*, a film directed by Khalid Rahman, stands out as a symbol of deconstructive representation of gender roles and female agency. The female lead, Beepathu, stands as a symbol of transition in the Malayalam film industry. This paper positions Beepathu(Pathu) as a cultural agent who continuously negotiates the fixed identity of female characters, especially heroines in the backdrop of Mappila culture. The article tries to analyse how Pathu exercise female agency within a masculine narrative. It also analyses how she intervenes in the cultural economy of fame, fashion, conflict and identity.

Keywords: Cultural agent, cultural economy, female agency, fame, fashion, identity.

Article History: Submitted-31/12/2025, Revised-12/02/2026, Accepted-16/02/2026, Published-28/02/2026.

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Introduction

Women are often portrayed in stereotypical ways in performative spaces like film because patriarchal norms strongly shape societal attitudes and creative practices. Even during the experimentation with style and technique, Malayalam films failed to probe the potential of female characters. The female characters were confined to the filmmaker's perspective and often resulted in a disastrous depiction of female identity. The predictability of these female characters raises debates about the creative and public space that should be allotted to these characters. The towering influence of the heroic characters in the films constrained the narrative function and creative agency of female characters. Female-centred films usually succeed in depicting female identity through the creative space allotted to it. The centre of focus always ends up with the male, the dominant character within a normal commercial film. Sometimes, the limited screen and performative space shrink the female lead to a merely complementary role. *Thallumala*, a film directed by Khalid Rahman, was released in 2022. The film was a tremendous success, drawing a large audience to the theatre. The non-linear, fragmented narrative style and the visual extravagance marked *Thallumala* as an experimental film both in style and content. Tovino Thomas performed the male lead, and the role of heroine, Beepathu, was played by Kalyani Priyadarshan. Although the film is famous for its kinetic masculinity, viral aesthetics, and performative violence, the female lead character of Beepathu disrupts the masculine continuum by performing an alternative, global, hybrid identity. The character of Beepathu stands out as a female agency of fashion, cultural hybridity and alternative digital identity. Unlike the representation of the heroine in other Malayalam commercial films, the character uses the performative space to interrogate the film's sociocultural spaces. The character redefines the conceptual fantasy behind female heroines. This paper positions Beepathu (Pathu) as a cultural agent who continuously

negotiates the fixed identities of female characters, especially heroines, against the backdrop of Mappila culture. The article tries to analyse how Pathu exercise female agency within a masculine narrative. It also analyses how she intervenes in the cultural economy of fame, fashion, conflict and identity.

Female Agency and Hybrid Identity

The film *Thallumala*, directed by Khalid Rahman, stirred the Malayali audiences through stylistic and content experimentation. In this film, the filmmaker celebrates Muslim culture and identity in a unique way. The film discusses the contemporary transitional youth culture of the Muslim community of the Ponnani region. The celebrated masculine agency is skilfully reflected in this film. People of Malabar, particularly Muslims, became part of the changing global economy. The Gulf migration always invites global fashion and culture to the Malabar region. The protagonist is a young Muslim with a hybrid identity of local and global traits. He stands as a symbol of raging masculine figure, evoking tremendous applause from the audience. He symbolises the neo-digital global identity rather than a conservative regional face. The film carefully crafted the male characters as symbols of modern masculinity. The fight and rivalry showcase masculine identity within Muslim culture. The film centres around the different phases of the hero's life. The film depicted the influence of hip-hop culture on the community and how the younger generation reacts to changing global trends in a unique way. Even against the background of vigorous masculine depiction, the female protagonist, Beepathu, stands out as a symbol of dynamic female agency. The filmmaker differs from the usual depiction of the heroine as a complementary character and places her in the centre of the narrative.

In the film, Pathu appears as Wazim's lover, the male lead. Her introduction itself is an example of an unconventional depiction of her identity. She is not introduced through a romantic

soft lens, but through a spectacle, energetic and rhythmic frame that mirrors the kinetic grammar of the fight sequence in film. Here, she becomes a sharp contrast to the highly romanticised portrayals of heroines in Malayalam films. In *Thattathin Marayath*, a film directed by Vineeth Sreenivasan, the heroine was introduced as an epitome of beauty and aesthetics. She has been described as an ethereal beauty and shown wearing traditional attire. Even her body language is restricted to soft, subtle movements. “I walked through the corridor of Payyannur college with Ayesha..... Every time we stepped from shadow into light, she became more and more beautiful.” (Thattathin Marayath 00:41:53-00:42:13) The heroine was subjected to male gaze by depicting her as the *monjathy* (pretty girl). In *Thallumala*, Pathu presented as a bold and independent woman. Her introduction is presented with high-tempo editing and music-video aesthetic. The camera movement does not linger to objectify the female body but frames her as a force of cultural expression within the cinematic space. The film remoulds the usual scene of objectification into a performative space in which Pathu emerges as a person who declares her own boundaries. When questioned by Wazim, she replies with a hand gesture indicating that it is her personal territory and authority. She dauntlessly shares her experience on social media. “I was little scared. But presence of mind is very important in such circumstances. My buddy Nahas and I bravely chased that jerk away.” (Thallumala 00:37:56-00:38:07) She has a clear idea of what she has to do to deal with such circumstances. The filmmaker backdropped the scene against a chasing sequence music that departs from the conventional soundscape of Malayalam films. The narrative typically introduces heroines with soft, melodious and romantic ambient music and songs. Pathu is not depicted as a heroine seeking a hero’s attention; instead, she is engaged in her own digital space, which serves as her primary performative ground. She is so immersed in her own world that

the presence of Wazim seems to be unnoticed by her. When Wazim chases her, she sets a trap with her accomplices. Here, Pathu navigates the same chaotic public space as the masculine counterpart.

Malayalam film generally portrays the female characters in a submissive, stereotypical and romanticised manner. They act as tools to impose male dominance and authority. Through dialogues, description and the male gaze, the female body is objectified. The female characters shrink into the mould of stereotypical, traditional societal frameworks. When it comes to the Muslim female depiction, the filmmakers failed disastrously since they cannot carry out the socio-cultural changes happening in the community. The educated and sophisticated cultural nuances in the Muslim community often find no place on the screen. Instead, the films are eager to depict the religiously conservative outlook of the community. In this context, *Thallumala* is an exception, as it represents the evolving cultural spaces of Malabar Muslims. The name of the female lead resonates with a long-lived cultural tradition among Muslim. The name Beepathu is an old-fashioned name that has gone into oblivion when Western trends enter into the community. However, the revival of tradition in the name itself shows the cultural rootedness in the hybrid space. The name carries traditional, religious and nostalgic cultural memory for the community. This name is often associated with docility and obedience. However, the film deconstructs the idea of submissive features that must be aligned with the name. It rewrites the notion of female Muslim identity that goes with traditional names.

The digital identity of the female protagonist acts as an alternative space for her performativity. Her face is introduced through live streaming on the digital platform. She carries the name Beevi in the virtual space. She is depicted as a vlogger, named Beepathu, with many followers. She utilises the virtual space as an extension of her identity. Her Instagram presence is stylish, confident and modern. She is represented as a Musically, YouTube, and Instagram

sensation. Her content goes viral immediately after uploading. The sensational value of her identity in the digital world gives her a privilege. That is why Wazim senses it to be a threat when it comes to the content of his chasing. She had already established a space in the virtual world where she could influence a large audience. She can control her followers' opinions with her content and videos. She has full authority over her decisions. It is in this space that she created her alternative identity, which wields more power than her offline self. Through the digital world, she asserts her social presence, in contrast to the confinement in domestic spaces. She maintains her own social circles in the virtual world. She has full authority in this digital platform where she can frame her own representations. She uses the space to question gendered hierarchies.

“Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance.” (Butler 45) She establishes her identity through the repeated styling of her body through digital actions. She continuously uploads content that reinforces her identity. Her global hybrid identity has a unique appearance in the film. She becomes who she is through ongoing digital performances. She becomes a fashion-cultural agent through her appearance. She prefers a modern, trendy outlook. Her digital world is filled with the trend-setting appearance of herself. She repeatedly reinforces her identity through her hijab styling, gestures, attitude and mobility in public spaces. She continuously elevates her presence through vigorous and assertive movement. Her relationship with Wazim exemplifies her authoritative and independent perspective. A major portion of their relationship develops through profile-based impressions and digital flirting. Wazim was really impressed by her online appearance. His rage and anger against the unknown chaser changed when he realised Pathu's true identity. He was impressed by her and decided to follow and like her on Instagram. “Look at me, my love! My style, my swag. My desires and aspirations are not for you

to judge.” (Thallumala 00:39:03-00:39:10) These lines clearly state her attitude. She was ruled by her own rules and ideologies. She carries the hybrid identity of Kerala and Dubai. As Wazim states, “this means, it’s an international love story’ (Thallumala 00:38:27-00:38:29). She represents both the Kerala Muslim and Middle Eastern culture. Pathu has greater agency online than Wazim, and she has more power over the viewers. She is very fluent in online communication, which give her more power and dominance in the digital space.

The wedding scene of Wazim and Beepathu is a violent, masculine projection. However, Pathu’s reaction after the calling off of the wedding is notable. She is not behaving as if she were shattered by the commotion. However, she has her own decision over her life and moved to Dubai. Although the incident affected Pathu, she decided to leave Wazim and find her own personal space rather than brooding over the relationship. Her refusal to negotiate the terms of their relationship positions her as an agent of change in Wazim’s self-perception. Here, Pathu becomes a contrast to Wazim’s spontaneous, aggressive, masculine figure. She becomes a personality with stable emotional accountability. The song, which acts as a narrative interaction between them, clearly shows the authenticity of her demands. “Oh, my dear. If you’re done, listen to me now, boy! You don’t really know this Pathu, boy! I’m an oil field, boy. A historical war zone, boy! What you’ve got ain’t enough, boy! I got more demands, boy!” (*Thallumala* 01:10:20-01:11:45) She is stating her intentions and is not ready for any compromise in the name of love. She is not sacrificing her personality and states her space very clearly. In this context, her character becomes a contrast to the conventional depiction of the female lead in Malayalam films. Even female-centred films failed to depict these characters' authoritative cultural agency. They were limited to the traditional perspectives that prevailed in the society.

Her opinions stand out as a note of voicing her own self. Her decision to stay in Kerala instead of going to Dubai, her father's native place, is a remarkable decision. She is not ready to change her decision, even for her love. She fully respects her freedom and space. Here, she becomes a symbol of self-respect. In a society where women are marginalised and suppressed in many contexts, Pathu's character becomes a representative of an independent self. The film manages a balance in depicting both the male and female leads, even though the narrative focuses on the hero. Pathu has an influence on Wazim's life. She influences Wazim's thoughts and perspective. Her opinions and decisions are rooted in her self-respect. She has a clear idea of her public and private identity. While Wazim shows little concern for his public identity, even being a social media influencer, Pathu gives utmost care in matters that go viral. That is the primary reason for her decision to leave Kerala after the wedding fight. She does not want to make their private life a reason for everyone's mockery. Here, she clearly presents herself as an individual who demands privacy and space. She is opposed to the voyeuristic celebrity culture. She has a clear picture of what to post on social media. She does not want the paparazzi-style attention on her life. She rejects the idea of automatic entitlement of authority of man over woman in the name of love, marriage and other relationships. It is very clear in the early instance of showing a hand gesture to Wazim. In the later section, she explicitly tells Wazim that she is beyond his understanding.

Interestingly, not only her loud presence but also her absence amplifies the significance of her cultural role. The silence and absence of Pathu affected Wazim's life more than any conflict he has in his life. He distracts himself with fights. He becomes restless and less tolerant in public spaces. While Pathu states her resistance through strong silence and invisibility, Wazim compensates his emotional instability through aggression. Pathu's withdrawal and silence become a politically charged act, not a personal response to the incidents. Pathu deconstructs the

conventional framework of accommodating into the expected role of females. She refuses to take the role of emotional caregiver to a man. Instead, she moves to her own world and leaves the disturbed space. She is not ready to adjust and fit in with the commotion made by men. Her silence operates as a disruption, revealing the fragility of masculine identity when it is no longer mirrored or affirmed by a female subject. Picturising Wazim's acts as more aggressive creates an excessive hollow in Pathu's absence. Her decision to withdraw from the scene and to find her own space acts as a refusal to play victimhood. This act of withdrawal is not an emotional passivity but rather a politically charged resistance, which is a conscious act. She is not depicted as an emotionally available, forgiving and explanatory character. But she elevates her identity into a resistance against the emotional damage caused by the masculine violence. Her character reconceptualises agency not only through confrontations but also through disengagement. She engages her postmodern identity through silence, absence and non-participation with the constructed expectations of society.

Conclusion

The film *Thallumala* is successful in its style and technique, as well as in its thematic experimentation. It is not a mere entertainment film that intends to amuse the audience. It draws attention to the cultural nuances of society. It celebrates culture, youth, fashion, music and virtual world. The film's narrative world centres on Wazim, the protagonist. However, the filmmaker takes effort to frame the female lead as a symbol of power and cultural agency. Instead of cornering as a stereotypical character, the filmmaker uplifts the role of Pathu to an agent who speaks powerfully to the audience about the cultural shift happening in the world. She represents both the real and virtual world around us. She reinforces the political agencies of change and establishes an alternative outlook of female identity. Her fashion choices, which comprise vibrant colours and

layered street wear, construct her as a person who transgresses all the conventional Malayalam heroine codes. She becomes a layered personality reflecting multiple identities. Her cultural roots are visible in her fashion choices. The fragmented nonlinear narrative structure of the film suits with the postmodern subjectivity of Pathu's character. Her agency challenges linear gender roles and stable identity constructs of patriarchal society. The character serves as a delineation from the usual traditional picturisation of the female protagonist in Malayalam film. Usually, the filmmakers frame the heroine as a complementary character to the male lead, or they picturise them as stereotypical. However, Pathu asserts the role of an agent of transition. She carries a layered, complex identity, which gives the audience space for revamping what has been injected over the ages. She becomes a cultural agent of change and resistance. She embodies a postmodern hybrid identity articulated through the nonlinear structure of the film. In conclusion, the character of Beepathu works as a female cultural agent by offering a cultural alternative in curating identity and emotional autonomy. Her presence questions the existing system of gender roles and power structures in our society and demands reconsideration of agency in Malayalam film.

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