Literariness Journal
A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

A Literariness.org Project

Negotiating Faith and Agency: Rethinking Muslim Femininity in *Feminichi Fathima*

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Abstract: This paper examines the representation of Muslim femininity in *Feminichi Fathima* using the themes of faith and agency. It studies how the film depicts a Muslim woman's life as influenced by religion, family expectations, domestic space, and social pressure. Instead of considering the protagonist as simply oppressed or empowered, the paper argues that her identity is formed through constant negotiation between personal choice and religious values. Drawing on Saba Mahmood's concept of agency and piety, and applying feminist film theory, this paper reads the film as a complex portrayal of womanhood that challenges stereotypical images of Muslim women. The paper shows that Muslim femininity in the film is not fixed or one-dimensional, but dynamic, lived, and contextually shaped. In doing so, it re-examines the meaning of agency within faith-based life and presents a nuanced understanding of Muslim womanhood in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: *Muslim Femininity, Malayalam Cinema, Saba Mahmood, Feminist Film Theory, Islamic Feminism, Representation*

Introduction

Muslim women in cinema are frequently depicted through one-dimensional stereotypes, portrayed through limited and repetitive characteristics that ignore their complexity and individuality. They are often portrayed either as voiceless victims of patriarchal oppression or as successful rebels who reject tradition entirely. *Feminichi Fathima* (2024), directed by Fasil Muhammed and marked by Shamla Hamza's critically acclaimed performance, which won the Kerala State Film Award for Best Actress, provides a more nuanced portrayal. Set in the coastal town of Ponnani, North Kerala, the film portrays Fathima, a Muslim woman from a conservative Kerala community, as she manages marriage to a controlling religious husband, motherhood, religious expectations, and her quiet battle for financial independence within her household and religiously centred life. Rather than dramatic liberation, the narrative conveys subtle negotiations of domestic labour and personal dignity in a faith-shaped world. This Malayalam film thus critiques the simplistic representations of Muslim womanhood in Indian cinema. In this sense, the film shifts attention from remarkable revolt to the lived realities of ordinary Muslim women, highlighting the emotional and material pressures that shape their lives. By doing so, *Feminichi Fathima* challenges simplistic cinematic representations of Muslim femininity and opens space for a more grounded understanding of women's agency within religious and domestic settings.

Studies on Muslim women in Malayalam cinema often construct their representation through a binary lens, either as oppressed victims in need of external liberation or as fully autonomous agents who reject religious tradition altogether. This approach ignores the complex reality of how faith and agency coexist and negotiate within conservative Muslim sociocultural contexts. In many cases, such readings diminish the everyday experiences of women, reducing their identities to fixed categories rather than recognising them as socially and ethically lived positions. While studies of Malayalam cinema have explored gender dynamics and patriarchy, limited attention has been given to recent films like *Feminichi Fathima,* particularly in relation to Muslim femininity as a negotiated identity. Traditional feminist readings prioritise resistance as the sole marker of agency, yet real Muslim women often exercise choice through ethical, faith-based practices rather than overt rebellion (Mahmood 32). This makes it important to read the film not only as a story of domestic struggle but also as a text that re-examines what agency can look like in a religious setting. Such an analysis of *Feminichi Fathima* is timely and necessary to understand contemporary representations of Muslim womanhood.

To address this gap, this paper analyses *Feminichi Fathima* through Saba Mahmood's framework of agency and piety, which redefines women's autonomy as ethical practice within religious life rather than secular resistance (Mahmood 32). Mahmood's argument helps move beyond the

assumption that agency must always appear as opposition, confrontation, or escape. Instead, it allows the analysis to recognise that women may actively shape their lives through discipline, devotion, endurance, and everyday moral choices, even within restrictive social conditions. In *Feminichi Fathima*, this perspective is important because Fathima's struggle is not framed as a rejection of her faith but as a negotiation within it, where her actions reveal both restrictions and agency at once. Complementing this approach, feminist film theory explains how cinematic techniques like camera framing, mise-en-scene, and narrative structure construct Fathima's subjectivity (Mulvey 14). The film's visual attention to domestic interiors, bodily movement, and quiet moments of decision-making helps present her not as a passive figure but as a complex social subject. The central argument is that *Feminichi Fathima* reimagines Muslim femininity as a negotiated identity where faith enables rather than erases agency, challenging both Orientalist stereotypes and reductive feminist narratives. By examining key scenes of domestic negotiation and financial self-assertion, this study reveals the film's subtle critique of patriarchy from within conservative Muslim norms and demonstrates how small acts of choice can carry significant political and ethical meaning.

Analysis

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* offers a powerful way to understand Fathima's choices. She argues that agency doesn't always mean fighting patriarchy. Instead, women can show strength by living ethically within their faith—through prayer, modesty, or family duties. What looks like 'obedience' might actually be a deliberate choice to build moral character and protect personal dignity (Mahmood 32). This fits *Feminichi Fathima* perfectly, where the protagonist engages with religious expectations without rejecting Islam outright.

This ethical agency becomes clearest in Fathima's daily engagement with religious and domestic expectations, where apparent conformity masks strategic self-assertion. In contrast to cinematic heroines who reject hijab or tradition outright, Fathima wears her headscarf consistently, while her posture, like squared shoulders and steady gaze, signals inner resolve. Mahmood would recognise this as the capacity to inhabit norms deliberately, transforming potential subjugation into moral practice (Mahmood 32). When her husband invokes religious authority to limit her movements, Fathima responds not with argument but with accommodation intertwined with persistence: she agrees superficially while quietly pursuing her goals. This isn't weakness but nuanced negotiation aimed at preserving marital harmony while creating space for personal agency within faith's boundaries. The film presents this duality skilfully: what conservative audiences might praise as piety, progressive audiences recognise as quiet feminism. Fathima represents Muslim femininity as lived ethics, not abstract ideology.

The mattress conflict highlights Fathima's emerging agency within domestic constraints. When her son urinates on the bed and a dog further ruins it, Ashraf attributes the issue to Fathima's negligence, citing ritual impurity and refusing funds for replacement. Her mother-in-law repeats this criticism, refusing a thousand rupees despite repeated requests. Fathima's response shows Mahmood's concept of ethical agency: she explains her multiple responsibilities, such as cooking, childcare, and cleaning, while seeking financial assistance from her neighbour Suhara instead of directly confronting the situation (Mahmood 28). Even registering the new bed in Ashraf's name reflects a deliberate adjustment, preserving family harmony while addressing her physical suffering from sleepless nights. This negotiation transforms a trivial household item into a symbol of self-worth, as Fathima quietly claims that her comfort matters within religious boundaries.

Fathima's resistance gradually becomes more visible through small but significant acts of verbal pushback, building on the mattress negotiation. When the electricity bill arrives, Ashraf blames her phone usage and charging, yet Fathima gently challenges this. "Don't you charge your phone too?" This gentle questioning marks her shift from passive endurance to thoughtful resistance. Similarly, his repeated commands like "Switch on the fan", "Bring my sandals", and "Fetch the shawl" evoke her direct response: "Open your eyes and look for them yourself" (*Feminichi Fathima*). These exchanges disclose Ashraf's dependence on her labour while exposing the absurdity of his authority. By questioning everyday instructions rather than religious doctrine outright, Fathima practises what Mahmood calls 'tactical agency', which refers to subtle subversion that maintains household stability while asserting her dignity (Mahmood 33).

Fathima's striving for financial independence through the neighbourhood kuri system marks her most significant move towards economic agency. Understanding from neighbour Suhara about the instalment-based savings scheme, Fathima invests thousand rupees towards a new bed, despite both Ashraf's refusal and her mother-in-law's criticism. This initiative indicates Mahmood's concept of agency as "calculated persistence" within constraining structures that operate through women's community networks rather than direct marital confrontation (Mahmood 28). The kuri represents collective female economic solidarity, transforming religious domesticity into entrepreneurial possibility. By engaging in communal savings while maintaining household duties, Fathima represents Muslim femininity as pragmatic resourcefulness. Her quiet enrolment signifies not rebellion against faith but strategic expansion of autonomy within its cultural boundaries, turning economic necessity into moral practice.

The film's emotional climax arrives when Ashraf, irritated by Fathima's growing independence, labels her a "feminichi" in derogatory tones. Her calm reply "yes'' represents profound self-assertion, transforming an insult into identity reclamation. This moment intensifies when Ashraf later proposes another child, citing other ustads' larger families and assuring, "Allah will provide". Fathima's response moves beyond religious cliches: "Will Allah provide me a bed?" (*Feminichi Fathima*). This direct challenge brings economic reality with theological questioning, exposing how patriarchal authority uses faith as a tool to perpetuate women's suffering. Mahmood clarifies this as "critical consciousness within piety". Fathima accepts religious beliefs but demands their practical application to her living conditions (Mahmood 156). Her question challenges Ashraf's moral certainty, forcing confrontation with faith's material implications and marking her evolution from silent endurance to articulate agency.

Fathima's economic empowerment is reinforced through hands-on work helping neighbour Suhara prepare kozhiiyada (a snack) for Gulf orders, marking her transition from domestic isolation to community participation. This labour helps Fathima to generate income and develop informal female support networks. Notably, Ashraf's inability to open a pressure cooker lid during her absence reveals his dependence on her domestic responsibilities, undermining patriarchal authority through everyday incompetence. Mahmood frames this as "performative contradiction": Ashraf demands submission while relying on Fathima's competence for household survival (Mahmood 33). Her dual role as pious wife and wage-earning worker highlights Muslim femininity as multifaceted capability. The film uses these contrasts to demonstrate how economic agency emerges organically from necessity rather than ideology. It also shows how faith-mediated domesticity is transformed into sustainable autonomy while still maintaining religious respectability.

Fathima's negotiations extend to her mother-in-law's relentless food criticisms, where pathiri (a dish) quality and spice levels become sites for household authority. Continuous blaming of "poor quality" and "wrong taste" positions Fathima as a culinary failure despite shouldering multiple responsibilities. However, when Ashraf complains about the food smell and the children support her cooking, familial allegiance gradually shifts in her favour. This moment reveals what Kerala Muslim feminist discourses identify as 'domestic patriarchy's internal contradictions', where male authority is undermined by children's recognition of maternal labour (Hameed 45). Fathima's continued cooking, though criticised, transforms undervalued work into ethical persistence, aligning with Mahmood's framework of agency through lived practice rather than verbal confrontation (Mahmood 28). These kitchen conflicts demonstrate how Muslim femininity negotiates multiple power layers like husbands, elders and children while maintaining religious respectability through persistent domestic competence.

Fathima's relationship with her mother-in-law further reveals the layered tensions of domestic life within the household. The mother-in-law repeatedly criticises her for cooking, bathing late, neglecting the bed, and failing to manage domestic responsibilities in the expected manner, thereby turning ordinary household routines into sites of surveillance and judgement. Yet Fathima does not answer these remarks through open confrontation. Instead, she responds in a calm and restrained manner, trying to explain her circumstances while continuing to fulfil her duties. This interaction shows how domestic authority is exercised through constant correction and how a woman's labour is repeatedly evaluated within family space. At the same time, Fathima's composed response reflects a form of agency grounded in patience, self-regulation, and moral steadiness rather than visible defiance. The film thus presents the household as a space where emotional labour, everyday discipline, and quiet negotiation become central to the making of women's autonomy.

The silent exchange between Fathima and the scrap-collector woman represents one of the film's most powerful moments of unspoken female recognition. When Fathima gives away the ruined mattress for free, defying Ashraf's later anger over her "authority", the collector's knowing eye contact communicates shared experiences of hardship and constrained agency across class divisions. This wordless interaction illustrates what Kerala Muslim women's discourses describe as "horizontal solidarity", where women recognise each other's struggles without verbal articulation (Shabnam 72). Compared to explicit feminist organising, this organic connection emerges from lived necessity, transforming economic transactions into mutual validation. Fathima's decision, though met with Ashraf's outrage, reflects Mahmood's ethical agency operating through relational networks rather than individual confrontation (Mahmood 28). The scene powerfully demonstrates Muslim femininity's communal dimension, where faith and domesticity foster resilience through quiet, shared understanding.

Ashraf's reaction to the educated architect woman giving construction orders reveals his rigid gender ideology, which becomes evident when he questions another ustad about whether "a feminist can wear purdah". This external critique mirrors Fathima's internal journey, emphasising the film's wider engagement on Islamic feminism's complexities within Kerala Muslim communities. Ashraf's confusion with equating feminism with secular unveiling exposes patriarchal Islam's defensive posture against women's public authority, but Fathima represents the very synthesis he rejects: pious dress coexisting with economic agency. Mahmood identifies this as "piety's internal critique", where faithful women expand religious norms through lived practice rather than doctrinal reform (Mahmood 156). The architect's professional competence, irritating Ashraf's sensibilities, validates Fathima's progression from domestic resilience to confident self-assertion. This juxtaposition challenges viewers

to reconsider Muslim femininity's boundaries, upholding autonomy that aligns with faith rather than imported ideological contests.

Fathima's defining assertion that "my faith is between me and Allah" (*Feminichi Fathima*) captures the film's negotiation of personal devotion in contrast to imposed religious authority.In response to Ashraf's repeated invocation of Islamic duty to justify control, she reclaims interpretive autonomy, reflecting Kerala Muslim women's discourses that distinguish personal belief from patriarchal mediation (Hameed 52). This declaration synthesises her journey: from mattress desperation through kuri economics to verbal self-defence, Fathima transforms from reactive carer to reflective agent. Mahmood's framework reveals this evolution where faith becomes not an oppressive cage but an ethical resource enabling dignity amid constraint (Mahmood 32). The film masterfully portrays Muslim femininity as a dynamic negotiation: Ashraf's traditionalism persists, yet Fathima's persistent agency reshapes household power relations. Her evolution from silent endurance to "Yes, feminichi" affirms the compatibility of piety with autonomy, challenging reductive stereotypes while honouring lived religious complexity.

The film's close-up camerawork strengthens Fathima's quiet agency through sustained attention to domestic spaces and body language. Close attention to her movements during cooking and cleaning transforms routine labour into purposeful moral practice. When preparing kozhiyada with Suhara and negotiating the mattress issue, Fathima occupies the narrative centre. Her steady gaze and composed posture signal growing confidence. This visual emphasis aligns with Mulvey's analysis of cinematic subjectivity, positioning Fathima as an active moral agent rather than a passive object (Mulvey 6). Ashraf's repeated commands contrast with her increasing physical presence, visually reflecting changing household dynamics. Such representation challenges stereotypes of Muslim women's invisibility, asserting faith-mediated autonomy through embodied presence (Mahmood 28).

In the scenes where Fathima takes her child to preschool, this visual emphasis becomes even more meaningful, as her parda and modest clothing are presented not as indicators of passivity but as expressions of her lived religious identity. As she moves through public space in this attire, the film captures her presence with calmness and clarity, treating her visibility as ordinary rather than unusual. A similar effect is visible in the scene where she buys fish; her fully covered body appears within a routine public interaction and piety is woven into everyday social life rather than marked as withdrawal from it. The film further highlights her presence in moments of walking through open spaces, where her movement conveys endurance, discipline, and quiet self-assurance. Through these scenes, dress, mobility, and piety come together as forms of agency grounded in faith, while Fathima's

body emerges as a space where domestic responsibility, maternal care, and religious commitment meet. In this way, the film presents Muslim femininity as visible, disciplined, and socially significant.

Conclusion

Feminichi Fathima's major intervention in the reworking of Muslim womanhood in Malayalam cinema is to detach it from its rigid and overused representational binaries. The film does not depict its protagonist as a helpless victim of patriarchy or as a figure who escapes to freedom by renouncing religion and tradition; instead, it constructs Fathima as a woman whose selfhood unfolds through everyday negotiation. Her life is made up of domestic work, motherhood, marital tension, economic pressure and religious devotion and the film is meticulous in showing how these forces come together in her daily life. It thus contends that Muslim femininity cannot be fully understood through categories that dichotomise faith and autonomy or tradition and self-assertion. The film, rather, highlights a form of agency that is subdued, gradual, and thoroughly inscribed in ordinary life.

This reading becomes clearer when the film is approached through Saba Mahmood's understanding of agency, which challenges the assumption that resistance must always take the form of open defiance or visible rebellion (Mahmood 32). Fathima's actions in the film, whether they are about pressure at home, being subjected to constant correction at home, or the kuri system as a form of financial self-assertion, point to the fact that agency can take root through perseverance, discipline, and ethical choices within limiting social structures. Her choices are not a rejection of faith but an investigation into how autonomy can be negotiated within religious and cultural contexts. In this way, the film provides an important corrective to secular feminist readings that recognise women's freedom only when it is expressed as rupture or departure. Fathima's character suggests that accommodation, patience and strategic action can also function as meaningful forms of self-making.

The film's visual language advances this understanding by representing Fathima as a fully realised subject and not a passive object to be looked at. Its use of close framing, attention to bodily movement, and emphasis on domestic and public routines encourages the viewer to engage with her interiority and social presence in complex ways, which resonates with feminist discussions of cinematic subjectivity and visual positioning (Mulvey 14). Scenes of cooking, cleaning, childcare, walking through public space, performing ordinary tasks in modest dress all add up to a visual grammar in which piety, labour and dignity remain linked. By depicting her body as visible, disciplined, and socially active, the film challenges stereotypical assumptions that religious Muslim women are either silent or absent from meaningful public life. Feminichi Fathima thus emerges as an important cinematic text for understanding Muslim femininity as negotiated, embodied and ethically

grounded and contributes meaningfully to broader discussions on gender, religion and representation in contemporary Indian cinema.

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