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# The Stories We Become: Narrative Becoming and Fluid Identity in *Balan: The Boy*

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**Abstract:** This article analyses Chidambaram's Malayalam movie *Balan: The Boy* (2026) and interprets it as an exploration of fluidity within identity. The mother and five-year-old boy continually relocate, adopting new names that are justified through accounts of their family, religion and background. Whilst it does not seek to establish which of these identities is authentic, it investigates how narratives can form part of someone's identity. It then explores how these narratives can be integrated into a child's identity. Drawing on theories of narrative identity (Paul Ricoeur), identity as becoming (Stuart Hall), and performativity (Judith Butler), this article suggests that 'narrative becoming' provides an effective framework for analysing the film. After a detailed consideration of five significant scenes, this article contends that identity in the film is not only narrated but also enacted, acknowledged, suppressed, and transformed. Finally, the unheard whisper that closes the film affirms this interpretation. As the story concludes, a new one commences**.**

**Keywords:** *Balan: The Boy; fluid identity; narrative identity; becoming; performativity; Malayalam cinema; narrative becoming.*

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## Introduction

Identity is often thought of as consisting of things such as someone's name, family, background, and biography. Recently, narrative theory and cultural studies have challenged these views. Rather than a static entity, they consider identity to be constructed by narratives; both in the ways people understand themselves and in how they are understood by others. Film is a highly relevant medium for analysing identity, as it shapes both the narratives about characters and the information viewers receive about them, and when they receive it.

Chidambaram's *Balan: The Boy* (2026) is based around a nomadic mother and son. In different settings, the mother goes by the names Indu and Mary Luca, and the boy is called Abijith Kumar and Benny Luca, respectively. At school, he is known as Vasudev. Alongside each name is a narrative detailing the character's family, faith, and background so that those around them accept the identity. Unlike mere false fronts, these are active identities that are embraced and then discarded in favour of another when there is cause for concern again. Whilst early responses to Balan: The Boy have correctly emphasised the importance of its multiple identities, these have largely been analysed in relation to the film's mystery, life-threatening storyline and discussion of motherhood (Acharya; Das; Shrikrishna). However, this article takes a different angle. Rather than focusing on which of Balan's identities is authentic, it explores how narratives construct identity. It also investigates the impact of inhabiting several narratives simultaneously throughout childhood.

This article contends that Balan: The Boy portrays identity as fluid and continually narrative-based: being narrated, enacted, acknowledged, concealed and altered. Ricoeur describes how narratives construct an individual's identity and how this develops over time. Hall demonstrates that this process is never conclusive. Meanwhile, Butler analyses how identity is constructed via continual enactment. These three viewpoints, analysed alongside five key scenes in the film, show that rather than concluding with the identification of an authentic self, the film ends with the imminent start of a new narrative.

## Review of Literature

It has been widely theorised that identity is developed and defined via stories. Paul Ricoeur's 'Oneself as Another' proposed that stories are central to creating a continuous sense of self (147–48). Jerome Bruner continued this line of thought, emphasising that humans predominantly define and recall experiences through narrative (4). Therefore, beyond reflecting our identity, stories play a key role in its constitution. Cultural studies has further developed this area. Contrary to the notion that people can develop a stable central narrative, Stuart Hall highlights that cultural identity is essentially constituted through 'becoming', not just 'being' (225). It is therefore seen as fluid and situational, shaped by factors including history, representation, and difference (Hall 225). Likewise, Judith Butler's theory of performativity in 'Gender Trouble' denies that identity is pre-existent and instead locates it within socially accepted behaviour which is continually performed (25). Overall then, analysis of identity has shifted away from defining it towards analysing its constitution. Within film studies, David Bordwell's research has revealed that films construct meaning by selectively disclosing information (49). Viewers subsequently synthesise information to comprehend and interpret a film's narrative (Bordwell 49). Consequently, a character's identity within a film is influenced not just by what is explicitly stated, but also by the information which is allowed to be accessed.

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*Balan: The Boy* has predominantly attracted journalistic commentary. It has generally been analysed as a mother-and-son story presented through the thriller genre (Acharya); as a meticulously constructed narrative depicting two individuals concealing themselves from society (Das); and as a film comprising numerous twists and surprises (Shrikrishna). Additionally, it has been labelled as an inconsistently affecting survival story (Mathews; Srinivasan). Although these analyses acknowledge the film's fluid identities, they primarily consider them as narrative and/or tension-related. To date, however, no in-depth analysis has examined how story functions to constitute identity within Balan: The Boy. Nor has there been examination of how a child integrates and ultimately deals with various inherited stories. This article addresses these issues.

**Theoretical Framework**

This framework incorporates three theories that emphasise that identity must be constructed. They address distinct issues pertinent to the film.

**Ricoeur**: 'identity as story'. Ricoeur (in Oneself as Another) distinguishes identity as sameness (idem) from identity as selfhood (ipse). Stories matter because they let people weave disparate events into a coherent tale. As such, "the narrative constructs the identity of the character" (147-8). Someone's identity is thus formed by the story their life takes.

**Hall:** 'identity as becoming'. Stuart Hall claims that, in addition to being, cultural identities also involve becoming (225). Rather than being derived from some fundamental core, identities are "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (225). Consequently, identity is constantly changing and is always relative to one's and others' position.

**Butler:** 'identity as performance'. Judith Butler's theory of performativity (set out in Gender Trouble) suggests that identity does not exist behind its performances. Rather, it is produced by the very acts that seem to express it. Although Butler concentrates on gender, this can be applied to any identity that must be performed to be acknowledged. A name, for instance, only gains authenticity through being responded to, echoed and endorsed.

| Theorist | Key idea | Question it answers in the film | Where it is most visible |
|---|---|---|---|
| Paul Ricoeur | Narrative identity: a story shapes a self across time | How does each new name become a believable life? | The mother's invented family histories; Balan's memory of them. |
| Stuart Hall | Identity as becoming: positioned, provisional, unfinished | Why does no identity in the film become final? | The constant moves; the unheard final whisper |
| Judith Butler | Performativity: identity is produced by being enacted | How does a name become socially real? | Answering to Indu, Mary Luca or Vasudev before others |

Combining these three areas yields the model this article calls narrative becoming: Ricoeur explains how a story gives the self coherence. Butler then demonstrates how a narrative is enacted. Lastly, Hall describes the reason why this process does not end. The film introduces an extra aspect that the theories suggest but do not illustrate: a child receiving stories before being able to create his own.

**Method**

Five specific sections of the film are analysed using a qualitative method. These sections were selected because each represents a different phase of identity construction, interrogation, and/or maintenance. Throughout the analysis, attention is directed towards the spoken word, labelling, and items (particularly the school uniform). Furthermore, consideration is given to non-verbal communication and the pacing of information provision to the audience.

| No. | Scene | What happens | Stage of narrative becoming |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | The shop | The mother takes the name Indu; the boy becomes Abijith Kumar | Narration: a name is given a story |
| 2 | The stranger | A man recalls "some Hindu name"; the mother insists she is Mary Luca, and the boy confirms it. | Performance and recognition |
| 3 | The school | "Only we need to know who we are"; asked his mother's name, the boy stays silent as many names crowd his mind. | Collision of inherited stories |
| 4 | The police | Left alone, the boy hides his uniform and bag and refuses to speak | Withholding as agency |
| 5 | The reunion | The boy asks his name and his story; the mother whispers, unheard by the audience. | Open becoming |

**Analysis**

**'Names':**

After their release from prison, the first concept of 'liquid identity' is encountered through Indu and Abijith Kumar. Again, it is not so important whether these are real names; rather, they are effective. Both can adopt these names and occupy certain roles, including employee and neighbour, and can even offer some history. Hall clearly puts across the concept of identity. If identities are considered labels for our place in stories, then the mother does not have an underlying authentic identity she is disguising. Rather,

she is repositioning herself and, in doing so, has to construct an appropriate story for each role. This is consistently illustrated throughout the film. As someone moves into a new role, they must also adopt a new name. Alongside this, they must create a new story about themselves in terms of family, religion and background.

| Name(s) | Setting | Story it carries | What it makes possible |
|---|---|---|---|
| Indu / Abijith Kumar | The shop, after release from prison | A plausible working-class mother and son | Work, shelter, a new start |
| Mary Luca / Benny Luca | A later locality | A Christian family identity | Escape from a stranger's recognition |
| Vasudev | The school | A Hindu boy's name for official records | Entry into an institution |
| Farzana, Kavitha, Nisha, Shirley and others | Earlier and later moves | Muslim, Hindu and Christian identities | Survival across many communities |

Ricoeur suggests that each name is a micro-narrative, offering a version of someone's life. Film then introduces rapidity and multiplicity. As previously stated, narratives are produced in the present in order to respond to current threats. They are subsequently abandoned when danger returns. Unlike a person's history, narrative is utilitarian and used to inform future action.

**Performing Names – Recognition and Its Constraints**

Though a narrative is required, it must also be performed and recognised. The stranger scene demonstrates how performance and recollection interact. When the mother presents herself as Mary Luca and her son as Benny Luca, a man who previously knew her recalls that she once had "some Hindu name." He feels that by recognising the mother he can connect with the 'real' woman. Although the mother does not accept this, she re-performs her narrative. Her son affirms this. Therefore, as Butler indicates, recognition is achieved when two individuals co-perform a narrative in the presence of an observer. However, this scene also reveals the fallibility of recognition. Although the stranger identifies a 'real' name for the mother, this is but a previous narrative. Because narratives can supersede one another, recognition cannot definitively establish a person's identity. All it can do is recognise which narrative was performed most recently. The child's performance in this scene is highly accurate, emphasising just how deeply the mother's narratives have been absorbed. Nevertheless, rather than drawing on his own recollection, he merely echoes information given to him about his and his mother's identities. Thus his identity is already being shaped by, and constructed from, previously received narratives.

**Multiplicities in the Child's Narratives – Silence in School**

Before attending school, the mother advises her son that while only 'we' know their real identity, he should present himself at school as Vasudev. Again, the text contrasts the personal, restricted 'we' who understand the reality of the situation with the façade one is expected to maintain within society. As the teacher asks for the child's mother's name, he recalls all the names his mother has used: Indu, Mary, Farzana, Kavitha, Nisha and Shirley. Yet he does not answer. This is not because he has lost his memory; in fact, he is all too well informed. Although the school seeks specific information, the child has various stories tied to different family, religious, and historical backgrounds. This is the film's most visually arresting depiction of the difficulties of having more than one identity. Ricoeur's theory of narrative selfhood suggests that people are able to construct a unifying story out of their life. Regrettably, for Balan, his stories relate to entirely different and at times opposing realms. Usually, Hall's theory of becoming is considered to be fluid and frequently liberating. Nevertheless, in this instance, it proves restrictive for a five-year-old. Despite this, the scene effectively demonstrates both the costs and the necessity of having several identities.

**Suppression as Creation – Silence in Front of Police**

After not hearing from his mother, Balan is located and brought to the police station. Despite continuous interrogation, he remains silent. Police search his clothing for information, but he has already taken off his school uniform and placed it in a bag, which he has then concealed. A school uniform indicates institutional affiliation. It therefore connects an individual to a school, list and address, as well as to a name. In taking off his uniform, Balan has effectively suppressed the channel through which he might be analysed. Foucault's comment that "visibility is a trap" (200) aptly summarises the peril that Balan has recognised. Furthermore, he no longer relies on his mother to advise him on which narrative to perform. He has grasped the underlying principle common to all her narratives: identity is contingent on what is permitted to be known about an individual.

| | Silence at school | Silence before the police |
|---|---|---|
| Cause | Too many stories, none can be chosen | A deliberate choice to give no story |
| Relation to identity | Overwhelmed by inherited narratives | In control of what can be known |
| Role of the child | Receiver of his mother's stories | Author of his own concealment |
| Theoretical reading | Ricoeur's coherent story breaks down | Butler's performance becomes strategic refusal |

Although both silences appear similar, they contrast semantically. Together, they illustrate Balan's shift from passive receiver to active controller in relation to the story.

**The Final Whisper - Open Identity**

Having been apart for some time, Balan goes back to where his mother instructed him to. Here they can come back together. Unlike before, Balan does not ask for his real name, nor does he ask her to stop changing it. He wants to know his name, the right story, and where they will go. His mother replies in Balan's ear, but the audience cannot hear her. This can be read as the film's denouement. Had his actual name been disclosed, then all the previous names would merely have been masks for the same core self. By deciding not to, the film subverts this idea. Moreover, the private 'we' recognised by Balan's mother before the school environment is enacted. Knowing the narrative, she shares this with Balan. Yet still the audience is shut out. Finally, much emphasis is placed on Balan's growth. Earlier, he froze in silence when asked for a single name. However, he now calmly asks his mother for the following narrative. Rather than identity dominating his life as it once did, Balan looks forward to jointly developing his sense of self with his mother. Therefore, using Hall's words, this film finishes on a note of becoming rather than being.

**Discussion - Narrative Becoming Model**

It appears that Balan: The Boy's identity operates in an ongoing cycle rather than reaching definitive conclusions. Below is an outline of this process, including details of the relevant theory and the film sequence that demonstrates it.

| Stage | What happens to identity | Theoretical lens | Scene |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Narration | A name is given a story of family, faith and origin | Ricoeur | The shop (Indu / Abijith Kumar) |
| 2. Performance | The story is enacted before others | Butler | The stranger (Mary Luca / Benny Luca) |
| 3. Recognition | Others accept or challenge the performed identity | Butler, Hall | The stranger's "some Hindu name" |
| 4. Inheritance | The child absorbs many stories as memory | Ricoeur | The school silence |
| 5. Withholding | The child controls what can be known | Hall, Butler | The police and the hidden uniform |
| 6. Renewal | A new story begins; nothing is closed | Hall | The final whisper |

There are three key points to note.

Though people often think identity consists only of real and false components, a name someone uses, responds to, and recalls may also be real, regardless of whether it appears on a birth certificate. This idea highlights the difference between real and perceived identity. As the film shows, these do not have to match.

Although the mother's identity fluidity is a positive and allows her to survive, it is also a negative for the child. Initially, it is burdensome, and later becomes a talent. The film neither praises nor criticises identity fluidity. Rather, it portrays the demands those experiencing it must meet.

Identity is also social. Although mother and son co-construct their narratives, third parties and various establishments then receive and assess them. Finally, they share them confidentially, so the audience is not present. Within the phrase 'Only we need to know who we are', 'we' represents the actual possessor of identity within Balan: The Boy. Narrative becoming is thus a collective experience.

## Conclusion

*Balan: The Boy* encourages audiences to reject the idea that a deeper authentic self lies beneath various personas. Identity is spoken about, performed and even reconstructed. Through storytelling, the mother supports herself and the son is shaped by such stories. As Ricoeur highlights, stories effectively structure life. Butler identifies that stories become real through their communication with others. As mentioned earlier, Hall notes that no stories can ever be conclusive. Furthermore, unlike other films, the child is central to *Balan: The Boy*. Initially, he passively absorbs his mother's stories. However, he is soon overwhelmed by them. He then utilises his silence to create personal safety. Finally, he serenely asks his mother for another story. It highlights the communal nature of identity, co-owned by both mother and child. Therefore, in *Balan: The Boy*, identity is not a conclusive story but rather is constantly retold. Further research could explore contemporary Indian films that similarly concern pseudonyms and states of exile. Moreover, it may investigate how different language-market audiences respond to the film's shifting associations with Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam.

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