

The Intersection of Womanhood and Disability: A Feminist Perspective on Malayalam Cinema

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ABSTRACT:

The cinema is considered an instrument that can reflect the problems in society and comment on prevailing social attitudes. The Malayalam film industry is always ahead in including marginalised people in its cultural narrative, which shapes prevailing social attitudes. It is possible to conduct a critical analysis of bodies that do not meet normal standards through the intersection of feminist and disability theories. This research assumes that people with disabilities, particularly women in the Malayalam film industry, are marginalised socially and sexually. The study looks at how disabled women are depicted. Disability often appears through a pitiable character to evoke comedy, tragedy, or sympathy, which typically represents disability as a burden of misfortune. This research also shows that women with disabilities suffer from double marginalisation. Disability stories by men can, in some cases, demonstrate complexity and empowerment. However, when it comes to women with disabilities, the tendency is to place them in stereotypes. Such a portrayal becomes a part of the societal myth regarding gender and disability. In contrast to other disability movements with greater visibility, there have been no developments in Malayalam cinema. This is because such forms of art tend to support those cultural stereotypes that do not take into consideration the lives of disabled women. The purpose of the following research paper is to explore issues of gender and disability with a focus on the distinctive nature of Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Reduced Inequalities, Sustainable Cities and Communities, Disability, Malayalam Cinema, Feminist Disability Theory, Intersectionality

Introduction

The cinema is one such cultural reflection that shapes the societal perspective towards marginalised sections. The Malayalam film industry in India has earned a reputation for its socially conscious narrative and realistic portrayal of life. It often includes marginalised individuals in cultural discussions that affect public opinion. However, despite this

progressive image, the portrayal of disabled women in Malayalam cinema is still an issue. It continues to show harmful stereotypes, desexualisation, and double marginalisation, which stem from both patriarchal and ableist beliefs (C M, 2026).

The intersection of feminist and disability theories stems from the convergence of the two disciplines of gender and disability studies. It

aims to develop greater insight into the relationship between the two categories and their ability to subvert social norms. The theory challenges the dominant narratives on disability and femininity because they are culturally constructed rather than naturally inferior. By analysing the intricacies of identity, representation, and activism, the theory fosters collaboration between the two fields (Hall, 2011).

Disabled women in India suffer from what researchers refer to as 'double marginalisation.' This involves both forms of discrimination: gender and disability or ableism. These women remain outside the norms of societal beauty, being regarded as desexualised and characterised by helplessness and dependency. They also face problems in employment, education, and health care. In certain situations, society also questions their role as mothers and caregivers. The double marginalisation of disabled women can be noted in films, where the characters portrayed as disabled females are characterised by passivity and dependency (J & C, 2022)

This research article examines how disabled women are portrayed in Malayalam cinema through a feminist disability paradigm. The research specifically centres on three films: *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* (1999), *Uyare* (2019), and *Neru* (2023). Each film covers a specific period in the development of Malayalam cinema and represents various approaches to portraying disability. From the sentimental, pity-laden representations of the last years of the 1990s to the empowering narratives seen in recent movies, each of these films offers an interesting perspective on the evolution of how disability is represented in local cinema.

The significance of this work is in its contribution to the debates on media representation, social justice, and intersectional feminism. According to Jane Davis Garland-Thomson, incorporating disability into feminist theory transforms both feminist theory and

disability studies. It demonstrates how differences of bodies and their relationship to gender bring about a different form of subjugation and liberation. This study draws attention to such processes in Malayalam cinema. This allows for a new kind of storytelling that acknowledges the contributions of disabled women.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Disability Theory and Intersectionality

Feminist Disability Theory

Feminist disability theory disagrees with the standard medical view of disability. This perspective views disabilities as problems to fix or cure at the individual level. However, feminist disability theory says, instead, that disability happens because of how society treats or fails to accommodate people properly with impairments. As stated by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), a disability occurs when a social environment fails to accommodate people with impairments and therefore does not allow them to participate in common daily activities. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, a leading expert in feminist disability studies, disability is similar to gender, and both are constructs defined by the culture. She sees an analysis of disability in a feminist perspective as a way of emphasising the exclusion and marginalisation of disabled persons in society. Rather than treating differences as defects, she encourages valuing diversity and rejecting narrow definitions of normality. Her opinion is that variations of bodies are natural elements of human life (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Feminist disability studies also question how visual culture tends to disregard the varied sexualities of disabled individuals, mainly females. The commercial movie industry often represents disabled individuals as asexual and impotent. In doing so, they deprive these characters of their sexuality by emphasising only their physical states. This misrepresents the disabled as if they do not have any sexual desires

at all. This is because society considers disabled bodies as something which cannot be desirable or pleasurable (Menon N, 2022).

Intersectionality and Double Marginalisation

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is very crucial. Intersectionality allows us to understand how different forms of discrimination add up. For instance, disabled women experience both sexual discrimination and ableist discrimination. There are various ways through which this happens in their lives, including lack of access to quality education, exclusion from employment opportunities, higher risk of violence, and societal exclusion (Singh, P., 2020).

Research shows that women and girls with disabilities have ten times greater likelihood of being subjected to gender-based violence compared to those without disabilities. They are also faced with systemic barriers in terms of justice when reporting gender-based violence. Indeed, the problem is compounded by negative stereotypes portraying women with disabilities as incompetent witnesses. This poses serious challenges in reporting abuse and handling legal issues for these women. Indeed, the Supreme Court of India addressed this matter in a landmark case involving the rape of a woman belonging to a Scheduled Caste who was blind. They stated that while all women have suffered the cruelty of rape, the experience is even more difficult for women with disabilities belonging to the Scheduled Castes. Therefore, this decision demonstrates the significance of the intersectional approach to combating sexual abuse of women with disabilities. Indeed, the suffering of these women is a result of the intersection of gender and disability biases (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Nelson's Stereotype Theory

In "When Stereotypes Tell the Story," Jack A. Nelson introduces a theory of stereotyping and gives examples of typical media portrayals of disabled people. Disabled individuals are always

represented in the media in a very negative light, either as objects of pity and compassion. It elicits sympathy from the audience but does not foster engagement or critical thinking. The next media depiction is the "supercrip" – a person with disabilities who has done wonders despite his or her condition. Regrettably, disability is also portrayed as nothing but a very heavy burden, causing suffering to other people, such as relatives and carers.

In some cases, disabled individuals are evil or sinister, indicating the moral issues caused by the condition. Some of them become laughable objects of entertainment and objectification. Finally, disabled people are portrayed as victims trapped in states of powerlessness and weakness. All of these depictions are completely off-target, since they fail to be even remotely honest or respectable. According to Nelson, such stereotypes simplify disabled individuals' lives, making them one-dimensional. Real people are reduced to shallow ideas supporting an unjust social hierarchy that devalues disability and supports social norms of non-disabled people (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory

The term "male gaze" was introduced by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975. The concept refers to the way films and any other form of visual media are structured according to the heterosexually male perspective that treats women as objects of desire. With respect to disability and women, the term "male gaze" implies that disabled women are subjected to double marginalisation in the sense that they are discriminated against not only due to their gender but also due to their impairment. The use of feminist theory alongside disability studies is essential in the analysis of the representation of deviant bodies in film. In Malayalam cinema, this pairing proves that disabled women continue to experience major problems such as social marginalisation and sexual neglect. The marginalisation and neglect continue to be

reaffirmed in the films that use traditional notions of gender and disability.

Early Representations: Pity, Tragedy, and Stereotypes

Malayalam cinema's history with disability representation is pretty complicated. Despite being known for real stories and films that speak up about social issues, the industry has not always handled disabled women well. In older Malayalam movies, disabilities were often used just to make audiences feel sorry or to suggest someone has a flawed character. Malayalam cinema's history with disability representation is pretty complicated. Despite being known for real stories and films that speak up about social issues, the industry has not always handled disabled women well. In older Malayalam movies, disabilities were often used just to make audiences feel sorry or to suggest someone has a flawed character.

A good old example is *Ashwamedham* from 1967. The film shows Sarojam, who, after getting cured of leprosy, still suffers from society's rejection and even from her love interest. This just reinforced how scary and reviled leprosy was back then. Then, in the '80s, *Ormakkayi* came out. It tells of Susanna, a rape survivor, portrayed mostly to tug at heartstrings and show how helpless disabled women are. In the '90s, *Yamanam* continued this trend with its portrayal of a disabled woman. In one scene, Ambili, who has a movement disability, turns down a marriage proposal. She believes it is motivated by pity. So, once again, the takeaway is that disabled women often feel undervalued or remain unwed because of people's attitudes (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

In *Mazhayethum Munpe*, a 1995 film by Kamal, one of the two female leads, who is disabled, feels like a burden to her lover. Shobhana plays Uma, whose confidence takes a hit due to negative comments from Sruthi, played by Annie. Sruthi represents the typical non-disabled society that stigmatises individuals with disabilities. She makes Uma feel like a second-

class citizen, unfit for happy marriages. As a result, Uma thinks she is not attractive enough for her non-disabled boyfriend. Therefore, she pulls away from him because she believes he has done all he can simply by loving her. The way she behaves is a reflection of her sense of inadequacy and the societal myth surrounding the idea that disabled women make poor wives.

The Vinayan Era: Sentimentalisation and Commodification

The director Vinayan made several films in the late 1990s and early 2000s that focused on disability but were widely criticised for their problematic nature. These include Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum (1999), Karumadikuttan (2001), Oomappenninu Uriyadappayyan (2002), and Meerayude Dukham. In the director's films on disability, a recurring theme was the portrayal of the disabled character as a curse. There will be another character speaking about them, with sad music playing in the background. Such characters were portrayed as needing help from others and dealing with internalised ableism.

Internalised ableism is a condition where a disabled individual feels that he/she does not deserve anything nice or do not have the right to nice things because of his/her perception of himself/herself, which he/she has internalized. This is because they feel controlled by dominant groups that impose their thoughts or actions on them. They feel out of place and tend to mistreat themselves. They may not realise they are oppressing themselves with such thoughts. (J & C, 2022). Vinayan's films are criticised for exploiting the vulnerability of the disabled individual in order to win audience sympathy. Such movies instil the idea that the life of a disabled person is one of misery. Disability is equated with pity, which reinforces the stereotype of the disabled person as a case for pity.

The Problem of "Crippling Up"

A big problem in Malayalam cinema is the practice of "cripping up," where non-disabled

actors play disabled characters. This is not just misleading; it ignores real people's cultural history and identity. We really need to look at who gets to represent whom on screen. It is debatable whether the lack of visible disability roles results from trying to keep opportunities open for talented folks in the industry. Either way, it is an issue that deserves more scrutiny. Actor Jayasurya has added fuel to the fire with his recent statements, saying he will refuse to play disabled characters. He says he is getting too many offers, which frustrates activists because it appears they are simply grabbing at any non-disabled actor for these parts. (J & C, 2022)

Thirike, released in 2021, sets a good example in that matter. The directors of this film are George Kora and Sam Xavier; the movie raises the issue of casting non-disabled actors in roles with disabilities. "In this movie, Gopi Krishnan plays Sebu, who is an actor with Down syndrome and probably the first person with a leading role in Malayalam movies." This method not only results in good films but also respects one's identity (J & C, 2022)

Contemporary Shifts: Bangalore Days, Uyare, and Beyond

Despite its flawed past, recent films have sought to challenge stereotypes and present more complex views of disabled women. Anjali Menon's *Bangalore Days* (2014) marks a shift in how people with disabilities are portrayed. Parvathy Thiruvothu is one of the three main female characters and uses a wheelchair, yet she never mentions her disability while talking on air. There are plenty of opportunities for her to use it to 'inspire' bored listeners, but she does not. Her character keeps her disability hidden until the first meeting with another guy in the movie. She is shown as smart and independent, proud of who she is despite her limitations. The movie counters stereotypes further by showing Parvathy's relationship with a bike rider; they are not married, but he admires and respects her. This all contributes to pushing away those

harmful preconceptions about disabled women. (J & C, 2022)

Uyare (2019) showcases Pallavi, an acid attack survivor, as a resilient and career-driven woman, moving her story from victimhood to empowerment. It analyses how movies depict acid attack victims using feminist and disability theories, such as Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, Freud's psychoanalysis, and other disability studies, to really dig into these issues (Menon U, 2025)

Despite fresh interpretations of the characters, Malayalam films struggle to break from age-old stereotypes that confine the representation of disabled women. There is an effort to depict these varied individuals as autonomous beings, even as the film industry repeatedly fails to do so, driven by a desire to appropriate the disability experience (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Film Analysis I: Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum (1999)

Context and Narrative Overview

In 1999, Vinayan directed the drama *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum*, which explores themes of love, sacrifice, and respect. It describes how people with disability face the harshness of life. The film stars Ramu, a blind man, played by Kalabhavan Mani. He falls in love with a mute girl. Ramu's father is portrayed as a bedridden person who frequently abuses Ramu. Ramu and his entire family depend on a landowner in their locality for alms to survive. (J & C, 2022)

Critical Analysis: Pity, Internalised Ableism, and Desexualisation

In *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum*, the character of Ramu (Kalabhavan Mani) is used to evoke pity from the audience. This film fits well with the notion of Nelson's pitiable and pathetic stereotype, depicting people with disabilities as pitiful rather than profound characters. The plot reduces Ramu's entire life to a single long tragedy, rendering it tragic rather than complex or multifaceted. (J & C, 2022)

The continuous criticism of Ramu's bedridden father for his blindness intensifies the cycle of internalised ableism. The fact is that the disability is presented as a problem of an individual but also of the whole family, which is considered cursed by Nelson, becoming a "burden". Such depictions in the mass media imply that the disability is depicted as a disgraceful way of living for the disabled person as well as for the surrounding people (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

The mute lover of the protagonist becomes a victim of rape in order to elicit sympathy from readers and to create an alarming message that disabled women, specifically those who are deaf or mute, are vulnerable to becoming victims of sexual assault. There are several problems with this situation. The first issue is that it creates the stereotype that all disabled women are automatically victims who cannot do anything for themselves. The film tackles disability through the lens of charity, fueling that pity-driven discourse. It showcases a protagonist relying on a local landlord for aid, alongside his family. This emphasises how society sees disabled folks as dependent on others for basic survival needs. Such storytelling backs the medical model of disability, seeing disabled individuals as those in need of care, not as self-reliant people. So, it misses the opportunity to show their ability to lead independently. (J & C, 2022)

Feminist Disability Critique: Double Marginalisation and Desexualisation

In terms of the intersectionality of feminism and disability, Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum depicts the marginalisation of women with disabilities further. The protagonist, who does not speak, suffers discrimination twice, first due to her being a woman in the patriarchal system and then for being a disabled person in an ableist society. Rather than examining the problem from the point of view of the causes of gender-based violence among women with disabilities, this movie just resorts to the rape of

that woman for sympathy (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

This film depicts the way in which disabled bodies lack their sexuality. This woman, who cannot speak, is not depicted as having her own desires or as controlling them; she seems to exist only to evoke sympathy. In this way, the film draws attention away from the person themselves and focuses on their body. It may even lead the viewers to the belief that disabled people do not have any such wishes, which is wrong. The camera angles and background music in the film are not meant to depict the disabled characters as dynamic characters. They serve only to depict them in a monotonous way. When a character is presented from the shadows, you should feel uncomfortable about what is going on. Likewise, when disabled characters are presented in the film, sombre music plays. (J & C, 2022)

Conclusion: Limited Progress and Entrenched Stereotypes

"Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum" is definitely one of the earliest Malayalam films to include individuals with disabilities. Nevertheless, this movie is quite problematic when it comes to its portrayal of disability because it supports some quite disturbing stereotypes associated with disability in terms of pity/tragedy. This movie supports some quite negative and offensive stereotypes associated with women with disabilities: their sexualization, vulnerability to being abused, and dependence on others without any disabilities. Compared to broader feminist disability advocacy for more visibility and intersectional representation, the film shows little progress, reflecting deep-seated cultural norms that ignore these women's experiences and identities. (J & C, 2022)

Film Analysis II: Uyare (2019)

Context and Narrative Overview

The movie Uyare, produced by Manu Ashokan, is a good film that supports feminism. The movie is about Pallavi, an acid attack victim who

fighters to reclaim her autonomy. The movie revolves around Pallavi's struggle from being in a bad relationship to getting attacked by acid and then struggling to get back her autonomy. The movie is very significant in the world of Malayalam films as it reflects the reality of life as an acid attack victim and as a disabled person. Acid attacks on women are very common in India. Women who are attacked with acid suffer from very painful injuries, lose senses such as vision and smell, and even become disabled for a lifetime.

However, Indian films have a rather poor history in terms of portraying disabled women because they generally add to their suffering, owing to the existence of patriarchy in the country. Nevertheless, indie films generally present a much more insightful portrayal than commercial films. Therefore, *Uyare* is exceptional in this sense. (Menon U, 2025).

Critical Analysis: From Victimhood to Empowerment

This paper takes a critical look at how acid attack victims are shown in the movies *Uyare* and *Chhapaak*, using feminist and disability theories. The authors focus on Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, Freud's psychoanalysis, and some frameworks from disability studies. Unlike older films that made disabled women seem helpless and pitiful, *Uyare* shows Pallavi as strong and career-focused, moving past the victimhood narrative toward empowerment. (Menon U, 2025).

The story of Pallavi is one of self-realisation and empowerment. In the face of an acid attack, Pallavi does not fall into despair and dependency. Rather, Pallavi reconstructs herself, receives an education, and starts her own venture. Thus, the victim archetype is transcended, and a disabled woman who is in control of her destiny is presented. However, the film also addresses the issue of toxic masculinity in the form of violence inflicted by patriarchy upon women who rebel against gender norms. The attacker of Pallavi, who is

also her boyfriend, throws acid on her eyes to blind her after she refused to comply with his demands.

Feminist Disability Critique: Challenging the Male Gaze and Asserting Agency

In *Uyare*, director Urmila Unni defies the notion of the male gaze presented by Laura Mulvey by treating Pallavi as the subject of the camera's gaze instead of as an object of the gaze. Unlike many films that depict characters who have been disfigured in ways that evoke pity from their audiences, the film treats her scarred body as a space of resistance. The movie also does not allow the desexualisation of disabled women. Although the disfigurement of Pallavi impacts her view on the societal concept of beauty, she is never shown to be asexual or unappealing. On the contrary, the movie accepts her sexual yearnings and challenges the belief that beauty is essential for romance (Menon U, 2025).

However, then again, *Uyare* has received some criticism from certain academics who believe the movie still falls under the "supercrip" stereotype, portraying Pallavi as someone who can overcome impossible circumstances. According to Nelson, such stereotypes, although positive, do set unrealistic expectations and create the idea that an individual's worth depends on how well he or she performs. Furthermore, the movie also focuses on the casting of a non-disabled actor (Parvathy Thiruvothu) in a disabled role. Casting a non-disabled actor in a disabled role may create a misconception among the audience that disability is just a costume one can put on and take off (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Intersectional Analysis: Class, Gender, and Disability

Moreover, *Uyare* also explores the interconnections among class, gender, and disability. Pallavi belongs to the lower-class community, and her acid attack is related to her ambitions to establish connections among explorers towards education and social advancement. Here, the interplay between class

and disability in creating different forms of discrimination has been brought to light. Women belonging to lower-class communities and who are also disabled find it difficult to get educated, employment, and healthcare.

Another way in which the movie exposes the weakness of the justice system is through its inability to defend victims of acid attacks, as well as prosecute the criminals. Pallavi's quest for justice is not only a personal issue but also a political one. This is because her case exposes the weaknesses of the justice system, which is unable to take women's issues seriously. Her case relates to feminist disability activism, in which justice systems should be accessible and inclusive (Menon U, 2025).

Conclusion: A Significant Step Forward with Limitations

The film *Uyare* is a step forward in how Malayalam cinema represents disabled women. By featuring a disabled woman as the main character, *Uyare* moves away from the stereotypical portrayal of disability as a victim to one of empowerment. The film employs some conventional tropes, such as the "supercrip" trope and the use of non-disabled actors. *Uyare* is a big step forward from *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum* in the portrayal of disabled women in Malayalam films. However, in relation to the larger feminist disability movement, which advocates for the representation and casting of disabled people in roles that reflect their own experiences, *Uyare* is not far ahead (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Film Analysis III: *Neru* (2023)

Context and Narrative Overview

"*Neru*" (2023), a movie by director Jeethu Joseph, is a legal thriller about Sara Mohammed (Anaswara Rajan), a blind sculptor who has been raped. The story centres around a blind woman who was raped at her house, thereby presenting a difficult case for justice. In view of the tough opposition, the film makes one wonder whether

there will be an attorney who can fight for their case and ensure justice for the blind victim.

Mohanlal plays Advocate Vijayamohan, a public prosecutor who represents Sara and her family. After taking a long break from his legal career, the film reveals how well this lawyer will sail through the trial. Another important point made in the movie is that the legal system ultimately delivers justice to those who can prove themselves. There is a powerful story in *Neru* about trauma, resilience, and justice as seen in Sara's experiences of being a blind rape victim. The film starts with Sara Mohammed in a state of trouble as she copes with the impact of the rape. Eventually, she can gain back control of herself through the creation of her rapist's sculpture with the help of her heightened sense of touch (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Critical Analysis: Institutional Ableism and the Question of Credibility

This research paper examines the relationship between disabilities, gender, and crime through an exploration of *Neru*, who can tackle the issues of discrimination against people with disabilities. The study draws on Jack A. Nelson's stereotype theory and a disability studies framework to examine the representation of disability in *Neru*. In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of *Neru* is its critique of ableist institutions. Sara's blindness is repeatedly cited as a reason she cannot win her case. In the words of her lawyer Vijayamohan, "If at least one eyewitness had been there, we could have proven it [the case]" (02:04:02). This statement unwittingly brings up a prejudice in which eyesight is synonymous with truth and credibility. Such a need for visual proof and eyewitnesses is an institution that does not cater to the needs of disabled people (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

This is well depicted through the dismissal of Sara's case by the defence attorney Rajashekar as an "ordinary" one (0:14:49). The use of such a statement is demeaning not only because of the severity of the crime committed but also

because of the experiences of the disabled people. Through Nelson's theory, we can explain how ableism is entrenched in institutions through language and reasoning, where the pain of disabled people is normalised. In addition, the movie also brings to light the negative stereotyping of women who have disabilities by showing them as unreliable witnesses and incomplete victims. In the case of Sara, her blindness is constantly used by the defence for discrediting her testimony, which shows bias in the form of belief in cognitive inefficiency or unreliability due to blindness (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Feminist Disability Critique: Double Marginalisation and Resistance

The case of Sara as a girl with a disability, who at the same time has been sexually assaulted, reflects on the interaction between disability and gender. Individuals with disabilities are more vulnerable to being subjected to acts of violence. However, their cases are often disregarded or trivialised. The movie presents Sara as someone vulnerable because of her disability and due to how society treats women. The former wife's comment that Sara's rape is a punishment for the family's sins reflects a gendered dimension of ableism, which places the burden of shame and stigma on women and girls. This double marginalisation—of being both disabled and female—makes it even more difficult for Sara to assert her agency and seek justice. Sara's voice acts as a form of resistance against the oppressive forces. She declares, "I am only physically blind, not mentally" (0:29:56), and thus defies the epistemological paradigm that associates physical disability with mental incapability. At this juncture, Sara's declaration plays an important role in breaking the stereotypes associated with intellectual disability, which have always been attached to disabled individuals in the media. As per Nelson, it is very important to move beyond such stereotypical images. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Nelsonian Analysis: Pity, Burden, and the Supercrip

Sara's disability is revealed through the words of her neighbours as "the girl who cannot see" (0:04:03). Such an introduction works as a "heads-up" for the viewers, presenting Sara as a stereotypical pitiable disabled person right from the start through the lens of disability being the major component of her identity. While her neighbours' words do not seem outright hostile, there is a trace of pity and othering, typical of ableism. As noted by Nelson, the representation in question highlights a lack and evokes pity toward the disabled character (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

An example of discrimination in religion and culture against people with disabilities further emphasises it. Specifically, Sara's father's ex-wife claims that Sara is blinded as well as raped because of her family's sins, according to God. It is based on the societal stereotype identified by Nelson. According to this stereotype, disability is the result of sinning in either life or before birth, and therefore, it is associated with the stereotype of the tragic victim. The "burden" stereotype of Nelson is vividly seen when the brothers of Sara say that the family will "suffer with this blind girl by walking through the verandas of court" (0:12:51). The disability of Sara, thus, becomes not her individual struggle, but rather a burden which brings bad consequences for those surrounding her. Media portrayal of disabled people as a burden makes their lives an embarrassment and trouble (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

On the other hand, Neru also plays with the "supercrip" trope, especially in its depiction of the courtroom sculpture scene featuring Sara. Being visually impaired, her capacity to carve a perfect likeness of Rajashekar in real time serves as definitive evidence of her credentials. This event is both empowering and dangerous. On the one hand, it shows that Sara is a competent, intelligent woman; on the other hand, it may be interpreted as the way the movie supports the

supercrip myth, as she needs to prove herself through something exceptional to be respected (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025).

Resisting Stereotypes and Asserting Agency

While the film contains a few instances that fit the Nelson stereotype, Neru effectively goes against the grain by focusing on Sara's resourcefulness and strength of character. Her choice to create a sculpture based on the face of her assailant, her determination in a flawed legal system, and her choice not to remain an anonymous figure all point away from helplessness and towards empowerment. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

Intersectional Analysis: Gender, Disability, and Crime

Neru points out that rape is a problem that affects disabled women and repositions the discussion on gender and justice within law. The narrative of criminality usually embodies power relations within society where marginalised groups, such as women and those with disabilities, are usually presented as voiceless and vulnerable groups. Research shows that disabled women and girls have an increased probability of gender-based violence by up to ten times more than non-disabled women and girls. Inaccessibility to the judicial process further intensifies this increased risk. The issues are highlighted in *Neru*, where the quest for justice by a disabled woman amid an inadequate judicial process is at the centre. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

The movie also sheds light on the issue of unaccessibility within legal institutions. For instance, Sara experiences problems such as inaccessible building facilities, inadequate reporting systems, and poor training of legal personnel to handle cases involving disabled individuals. Such problems are structural and are inherent in the design of an institutional system that does not cater to the needs of disabled persons. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

Conclusion: A Meaningful Intervention with Remaining Gaps

Jeethu Joseph's *Neru* marks a significant and worthwhile step forward in the portrayal of disability in Malayalam cinema through the character of Sara. This is achieved through the focus of the movie on a disabled main character in a conventional courtroom drama rather than adhering to the usual trend of relegating disabled people to minor roles or even mocking their conditions. However, it also shows the continuing need for the proper casting of these characters. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

From a representation standpoint, *Neru* represents an advancement within Malayalam films. Through her character, Sara, the film provokes the audience to reconsider their beliefs and appreciate the dignity, richness, and power of disabled people, not as symbols of pity or inspiration, but as people with rich personalities of their own. Ultimately, *Neru* proves to the viewer that erasing ableism from movies goes beyond simply not reinforcing stereotypes and must be an active act of promoting the disabled community. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

Comparative Analysis: Evolution of Disability Representation across Three Eras Thematic Comparison

Aspect	<i>Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum</i> (1999)	<i>Uyare</i> (2019)	<i>Neru</i> (2023)
Disability Type	Blindness (male protagonist), muteness (female)	Acid attack/disfigurement (female)	Visual impairment (female)

Primary Stereotype	Pitiable victim, burden (J & C, 2022)	Supercrip, empowered survivor (Menon U, 2025).	Mix of pitiable victim, burden, and supercrip (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)
Agency	Limited; dependent on charity (J & C, 2022)	High; entrepreneur, self-determined	High; artist, justice-seeker (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)
Sexuality	Desexualised; mute woman as rape victim (J & C, 2022)	Acknowledged; desire for love depicted (Menon U, 2025).	Not central; focused on justice (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)
Casting	Non-disabled actor (Kalabhavan Mani) (J & C, 2022)	Non-disabled actor (Parvathy) (J & C, 2022)	Non-disabled actor (Anaswara Rajan) (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)
Narrative Focus	Tragedy, pity, dependency (J & C, 2022)	Empowerment, resilience, and career	Justice, credibility, institutional ableism (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)
Feminist Critique	Reinforces patriarchal and ableist ideologies (J & C, 2022)	Challenges, but still uses supercrip trope (Menon U, 2025).	Critiques institutional ableism, asserts agency (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

Evolution of Representation

The journey from Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum to Uyare to Neru reflects the evolving portrayal of people living with disabilities in Malayalam cinema. In the 1990s, the portrayal of disability in movies was mainly within the paradigms of pity, tragedy, and dependency. However, by 2019, movies like Uyare started taking a shift towards empowering stories but still using the stereotype of the "supercrip." With time, by 2023, Neru took on a critical stance towards ableism, but at the same time, focusing on the independence of a disabled woman. (Menon U, 2025).

However, some common themes persist in all three movies. One of the common themes is that of "cripping up", where non-disabled people portray disabled characters, thus perpetuating the notion that being disabled is just an act and not a reality. Furthermore, all three movies use some of the stereotypes developed by Nelson in different ways, such as

being a pitiable victim, a burden, or a supercrip. (J & C, 2022)

What Has Changed and What Has Not

Things that have changed:

- Disabled women are increasingly being shown as makers of their own destiny, not as mere victims.
- Films now critique institutional ableism and systemic barriers rather than simply portraying disability as an individual tragedy (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)
- There is greater visibility of disabled women in mainstream narratives, moving away from marginal or comic roles (J & C, 2022)

What has not changed?

- Non-disabled actors continue to play disabled roles, limiting authentic representation (J & C, 2022)
- Stereotypes persist, particularly the "supercrip" narrative that suggests disabled people must be extraordinary to be worthy (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

- Desexualisation of disabled women remains a problem, though *Uyare* makes some progress (Menon U, 2025).
- Disabled women are still often framed through their relationship to non-disabled characters (caregivers, advocates, family) rather than as fully independent subjects (J & C, 2022)

Discussion: Toward More Inclusive and Intersectional Representation

The Need for Authentic Casting

One of the most significant gaps in Malayalam cinema's representation of disabled women is the persistent use of non-disabled actors in disabled roles. Thirike (2021), directed by George Kora and Sam Xavier, is a revolutionary work that questions this practice by casting Gopi Krishnan, an actor with Down syndrome, in the lead role. Guaranteeing self-representation is an essential requirement in making cinema, as it concerns the identity of a particular group. (J & C, 2022)

Having non-disabled actors portray characters with disabilities can also inadvertently contribute to the notion that having a disability is just like playing dress-up, and that one can put on the "costume" of being disabled and take it off whenever he or she wants. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

Beyond the Supercrip: Embracing Ordinary Disability

Feminist disability theory requires portrayals where disability is recognised as a natural part of human diversity as opposed to something to be conquered. The 'supercrip' myth, although seemingly positive, does not set realistic expectations and instead implies that one must prove one is worth through extraordinary abilities rather than dignity. Movies such as *Bangalore Days* (2014) provide a counterexample of a portrayal of a disabled character that uses a wheelchair but has a disability that does not define them.

Malayalam cinema needs to portray disabled women as normal individuals who lead complicated lives filled with emotions and ambitions rather than presenting them in an inspirational light by reducing them to mere objects of pity or compassion. Disabled women must be seen in romantic relationships, working to earn a living, and raising their own families. (J & C, 2022)

Intersectional Approaches to Disability Representation

Feminist disability theory emphasises the importance of intersectionality—recognising how disability intersects with gender, caste, class, race, sexuality, and other axes of identity to produce unique forms of oppression and privilege. *Uyare* makes some progress in this regard by addressing the intersection of class, gender, and disability. However, some common themes persist in all three movies. One of the common themes is that of "cripping up", where non-disabled people portray disabled characters, thus perpetuating the notion that being disabled is just an act and not a reality. Furthermore, all three movies use some of the stereotypes developed by Nelson in different ways, such as being a pitiable victim, a burden, or a supercrip. (J & C, 2022)

Challenging Ableist Structures, Not Just Individual Attitudes

The film *Neru* is a worthy criticism of institutional ableism through its depiction of the injustices done to disabled victims within the legal system. But there needs to be more films made about the institutional oppression that exists for disabled individuals in other areas such as education, employment, health care, and society at large (J & C, 2022). Also, films ought to reject the idea of the disabled needing to be "fixed" or "cured." Rather, films should instil the belief that society needs to change to accommodate diverse bodily experiences. This view aligns with the social model of disability, which holds that disability arises from the body and the environment.

The Role of Feminist Disability Advocacy

The feminist disability movement demands increased visibility of disabled women in the media through representation and intersectional analysis. In contrast to the feminist movement, the portrayal of disabled women in Malayalam cinema has seen minimal progress, as it reflects deeply rooted cultural practices that ignore their realities.

To align with feminist disability advocacy, Malayalam cinema should:

1. Cast disabled actors in disabled roles to ensure authentic representation(J & C, 2022)
2. Move beyond stereotypes (pitable victim, burden, supercrip) to portray disabled women as complex, multifaceted individuals(Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)
3. Address the desexualisation of disabled women and depict their desires and relationships(Menon U, 2025).
4. Highlight intersectional experiences of disability, including caste, class, religion, and sexuality
5. Critique structural ableism rather than simply portraying disability as an individual tragedy
6. Centre disabled women's voices in the storytelling process, including writers, directors, and producers(J & C, 2022)

CONCLUSION

A critical examination of disabled women in Malayalam cinema has been conducted from a feminist disability perspective, with special reference to three path-breaking films – Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum (1999), Uyare (2019), and Neru (2023). It is found that while there has been significant development in the portrayal of disabled women in Malayalam cinema, much remains to be achieved.

Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njaanum is a film that attempts to highlight the lives of disabled individuals, albeit through a flawed

approach that relies on pity, tragedy, and dependency. Stereotypes associated with disabled women, such as desexualisation and their vulnerability to violence, have been reinforced in the movie (J & C, 2022)

Uyare represents progress in that it moves away from victimisation towards empowering Pallavi as a strong, career-oriented woman. Nevertheless, this movie falls back into using the "supercrip" stereotype as well as non-disabled actors. (J & C, 2022)

Neru offers a substantial step forward by centring a disabled protagonist in a mainstream courtroom drama and critiquing institutional ableism. Through Sara's character, the film challenges viewers to recognise the dignity, complexity, and strength of disabled individuals. However, the film also flirts with the supercrip trope and continues the practice of casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles. (Basheer & Najeeb, 2025)

In comparison to feminist disability activism, which seeks greater visibility and intersectionality, the portrayals of disabilities in Malayalam films lack advancement and tend to reflect the existing social norms that ignore the lives of disabled women altogether. The film industry needs to move past stereotypes, adopt proper casting, and incorporate the voices of the disabled women themselves. (J & C, 2022)

Gender and Disability: A Study of Cinema Dynamics examines gender and disability, with an emphasis on Malayalam cinema. Thus, by applying feminist disability theories, Nelson's stereotype theory, and intersectionality, the paper contributes to academic discussions of gendered portrayals of disabled women in cinema. However, ending ableist tropes in media requires more than just being free from harmful tropes; it means creating opportunities to include disabled voices, perspectives, and leadership in their storytelling. That is where the Malayalam movie makers can score, considering the social orientation of the films. By applying the theories of feminist disability studies, the

film industry can produce socially justifiable entertainment.

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