OPEN ACCESS

Scholars International Journal of Linguistics and Literature

Abbreviated Key Title: Sch Int J Linguist Lit
ISSN 2616-8677 (Print) |ISSN 2617-3468 (Online)
Scholars Middle East Publishers, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Journal homepage: https://saudijournals.com

Original Research Article

Sculpting Justice: A Study of Disability and Gendered Crime in *Neru*

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2025.v08i07.001 | **Received:** 18.05.2025 | **Accepted:** 23.06.2025 | **Published:** 07.07.2025

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Abstract

Crime narratives often reflect underlying power dynamics, with marginalised groups, particularly women and individuals with disabilities, frequently portrayed as voiceless or vulnerable. These depictions reinforce systemic injustices and cultural perceptions that can be critically examined through the intersection of disability, gender, and crime. Drawing on Jack A. Nelson's stereotype theory and a disability studies methodology, this paper analyses the Malayalam courtroom drama *Neru* (*The Truth*, 2023), focusing on its portrayal of disability within a legal and social context. The film centres on Sara Muhammed, a visually impaired sculptor and survivor of sexual assault, whose pursuit of justice, supported by public prosecutor Vijayamohan, reveals both entrenched ableist attitudes and moments of narrative empowerment. By positioning a disabled woman at the centre of a judicial narrative, *Neru* both reflects and challenges dominant media stereotypes outlined by Nelson, including the tropes of the pitiable victim, the burden, and the supercrip. Sara's character oscillates between being framed as a tragic figure and a resilient agent of change, thereby complicating traditional portrayals of disability in Indian cinema. Through close analysis of specific scenes and dialogues, this paper highlights how *Neru* critiques institutional and cultural ableism, especially in the context of credibility, trauma, and justice for disabled women. This paper places *Neru* within the broader context of Malayalam cinematic traditions, demonstrating how it addresses systemic inequities and stereotypes about disability. As such, *Neru* offers a meaningful intervention in contemporary criminal storytelling, redefining how disability, gender, and justice intersect in Indian cinema and echoing Nelson's call for more inclusive and authentic media representations.

Keywords: Disability, Gender, Crime, Malayalam Cinema, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the intersection of disability, gender and crime, demonstrating how it addresses systemic inequities and stereotypes about disability. It focuses on disabled women through critically analysing the Malayalam film *Neru* (*The Truth*, 2023), directed by Jeethu Joseph. Films are one of the most potent platforms for socially conscious screenplays. Along with being a significant source of entertainment for the general public, films have always played an essential role in communicating thoughts, issues and knowledge about society. In one way or another, representations of disability and the disabled have always appeared in literature and film. The Malayalam film industry was also not an exception regarding the theme of disability through various narratives. Drawing on Jack A. Nelson's stereotype theory and a disability studies methodology, this paper analyses the Malayalam courtroom drama *Neru*, focusing on its portrayal of disability within a legal and social context. Crime frequently emphasises power dynamics, depicting marginalised groups, particularly women and individuals with disabilities, as voiceless or vulnerable. These systemic injustices and cultural perceptions can be better understood through the lens of the intersection of disability, gender, and crime. The portrayal of Sara's character and her disability is a significant aspect of the film, offering both positive and negative dimensions in terms of representation. This analysis critically examines the film's handling of disability, focusing on Sara's character, and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of its portrayal. The paper argues that it is also important to highlight specific scenes and dialogues from *Neru* that illustrate both the ableist perspective and the positive empowering aspect of disabled women in modern crime narratives.

Disability, Gender and Crime: An Overview

Disability, gender and crime are key to understanding social inequalities and how unfair systems and attitudes affect the lives of marginalised people. Understanding the links between these related problems

is essential for building a more all-embracing and fair society. The intersection of disability, gender and crime, significantly in relation to sexual violence against women with disabilities in India, has received an important amount of growing attention lately, and this area of study is becoming increasingly more meaningful. In 2023, a 38-year-old woman with an intellectual disability was allegedly raped by eight men, some of whom were neighbours and distant relatives, in Malappuram, Kerala. Following the filing of a First Information Report (FIR), the accused remains at liberty. At the same time, the survivor's family has reported receiving many threats targeted at compelling them to retract their complaint (TNM Staff). An 80-year-old woman with a disability in Kollam, Kerala, was brutally sexually assaulted in October 2023. CCTV footage confirmed the accused's involvement, leading to his arrest; however, the victim's experience points out the critical issue of abuse affecting many vulnerable women (Press Trust of India). Many similar incidents reveal an important issue: women with disabilities, particularly those in marginalised communities, face overlapping vulnerabilities when experiencing sexual violence.

In a notable case, the Supreme Court of India examined the rape of a blind woman from a Scheduled Caste. The court focused on the compounded oppression faced by women with disabilities. It emphasised the importance of recognising the various layers of identity and oppression that affect the perception and impact of violence. The court stated, "The trauma and horror of rape affect any woman, irrespective of her social standing. However, the assault experiences differ for a woman from a Scheduled Caste with a disability" (Supreme Court of India). This decision underscores the necessity of an intersectional perspective in addressing sexual violence against women with disabilities, as their experiences are influenced by both gender and disability.

Research indicates that women and girls with disabilities face a significantly higher risk of gender-based violence, being up to ten times more likely to experience such violence compared to those without disabilities (Equality Now 2021). Systemic barriers to accessing justice exacerbate this increased risk. Harmful stereotypes often depict women with disabilities as unreliable witnesses and imperfect victims, complicating their ability to report abuse and navigate legal processes (Human Rights Watch). An accessible justice report highlights logistical challenges, such as inaccessible buildings, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and insufficient training for legal professionals on handling cases involving victims with disabilities (Equality Now 2021). Additionally, many legal systems lack the comprehensive support needed for these survivors, including accessible medical facilities and the availability of special educators and sign language interpreters.

Women with disabilities who survive sexual violence face significant challenges, not only in India but also across the world. They often experience multiple layers of discrimination, complicating their pursuit of justice. Lira Ismailova, National Coordinator of Human Rights at Movement Bir Duino-Kyrgyzstan, highlights that individuals with mental disabilities are particularly vulnerable. She notes that women with disabilities frequently suffer abuse, with perpetrators often acting with impunity (Equality Now 2023). This situation highlights the pressing need for justice systems that are both inclusive and accessible, tailored to the specific needs of women with disabilities.

Stigma and negative perceptions within the non-disabled community continue to constrain disability, a subject that has not been accorded the attention it deserves. Over time, the term 'disability' has undergone numerous redefinitions, each interpretation highlighting different medical and social perspectives. It does not have a universally accepted definition, as interpretations vary across cultures, historical periods, and legal frameworks. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of disabled individuals, it is essential to distinguish between the terms' disability, impairment, and handicap. Although these terms are commonly used interchangeably, they have specific meanings as defined by various scholars and organisations like the World Health Organisation (WHO). In 1976, the WHO developed a document on disability called the International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicap (ICIDH). This document defines each term. According to the ICIDH, Handicap is "a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal for that individual" (182), and impairment is defined as "any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function," which may be temporary or permanent (47). Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) defines impairment as "lacking part or all of a limb or having a defective limb, organ, or mechanism of the body" (qtd. in Hall 21). The third major category explored in depth is 'disability'. To begin with, the Oxford Dictionary of English defines disability as "a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities; a disadvantage or handicap, especially one imposed or recognised by the law" (497). According to ICIDH, disability refers to "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (28). Disability Studies challenges traditional concepts of disability, impairment, and handicap. The Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) also provides insight on the concept of disability, defining it as "the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have impairments and thus excludes them from

participation in the mainstream of social activities" (qtd. in Hall 21). The UPIAS definition is more accepted than the ICIDH definition because it recognises disability within the body while rejecting the idea that disability originates solely from physical impairment. UPIAS claims that disability arises purely from the interaction between disabled individuals and an unfriendly environment. Society disables individuals by creating barrier-filled infrastructure. Disability Studies critique these fixed definitions, promoting the view that disability is socially constructed and influenced by external barriers rather than physical impairments. It encourages a critical reflection on societal norms, allowing readers to reassess and modify those norms to embrace a broader, more inclusive human experience. This perspective emphasises celebrating differences rather than adhering to rigid standards of normality, which are seen as fluid and constantly evolving. Alice Hall contends that Disability Studies aim to confront the social exclusion and marginalisation faced by disabled individuals (4). Furthermore, Disability Studies offers new insights into literary criticism by examining how disabled characters are depicted in literature. It critically evaluates stereotypical portrayals in novels, plays, and poems, asserting that disability, much like gender and caste, is a socially constructed identity.

The existence of gender discrimination within the context of disability forms a layered oppression, especially for disabled women. Excluded from societal ideals of beauty, desexualised, or stereotyped as dependent and helpless, disabled women experience and face 'double burdens' of sexism and ableism. Disabled women encounter barriers to employment, education or healthcare. Sometimes, they query the capability of disabled women to be mothers or even caregivers at all. On the other hand, disabled males have to cope with societal expectations of masculinity being rooted in physical strength and independence, creating an experience of inadequacy and exclusion.

Crime is any act that harms individuals, groups, or society and is punishable by law, varying based on legal, societal, and moral norms (Encyclopaedia Britannica; Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). Rape, though a universally condemned crime, has diverse legal definitions. Historically, laws required evidence of force, but modern frameworks emphasize consent, including coercion and marital rape. The UN defines rape as "non-consensual vaginal, anal, or oral penetration… through physical violence or by placing the victim in a situation where they cannot refuse" (16). Sociologically, rape enforces patriarchal control, reinforced by rape culture and victim-blaming. Criminological theories link it to social inequality (strain theory), learned behaviours (social learning theory), and situational factors (routine activity theory). Survivors face PTSD, depression, and societal stigma. Despite legal progress, underreporting, low conviction rates, and rape as a weapon of war persist.

Tandon and Luthra (2016) critique India's focus on chastity in rape laws, arguing for recognition of dignity and autonomy. They note that the Indian Penal Code's definition, requiring "penetration of the vagina by the penis," excludes other sexual violence (1–3). The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (2023) expands the definition but still excludes marital rape (23). Rape reinforces male dominance, as Brownmiller states, "a process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (15). Films silence victims, aligning with Spivak's subaltern concept (28) and Mulvey's male gaze theory (11). *Neru* highlights disabled women's vulnerability to rape, shifting discourse on gender and legal justice.

Disability, Gender and Crime in Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam films have a history of realistic storytelling and socially conscious narratives. It includes engaging social issues like disability and gender. Often, such films grappled with representing disability and gender in their films. Stereotypical roles were offered to disabled women to reinforce societal biases. Disabled female characters are often found as passive or dependent or as tragic figures, and disabilities are presented as metaphors of suffering and morality. Much of these representations are often shaped by ableist and patriarchal norms, which often result in such negative representations of a disabled woman to deny her autonomy and agency in society. The industry has produced a number of films attempting to engage with these themes. However, representations of disabled women, particularly within the framework of crime, are often blighted by stereotypes and reductive tropes. This intersection of disability and crime within Malayalam films tends to reveal the vulnerability of disabled women and make them a ready-made victim of exploitation and violence. However, such stories are mostly dramatised and focus more on the crime than on the survivor's agency or the system that hinders them.

Malayalam cinema has long depicted women with disabilities through a lens of stereotypes, reinforcing notions of helplessness, victimhood, and inferiority. In *Ashwamedham* (1967), Sarojam, a leprosy-cured woman, faces rejection from society and her love interest, reinforcing the stigma surrounding leprosy. The 1980s continued this trend with *Ormakkayi* (1982), where Susanna, a rape survivor, is shown in a tragic light, reinforcing the vulnerability of disabled women. *Yamanam* (1991) presents Ambili, a woman with a locomotor disability, who rejects a marriage proposal upon realising it is based on sympathy, emphasising the trope that disabled women are either undesirable or to be pitied. In *Mazhayethum Munpe* (1995), Uma internalises ableist notions and withdraws from love, reinforcing the stereotype that disabled women are unworthy of romantic relationships. The 2000s saw films like *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* (2003), *Vasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum* (1999), *Kunjikoonan* (2002), *Makalakku* (2005),

and *Karuthapakshikal* (2006), which primarily used disability as a sentimental tool to evoke sympathy. *Rakshasa Rajavu* (2001) features a disabled child whose character primarily reiterates the notion that disabled individuals are unworthy of inclusion in mainstream society or even of aspiring to better futures, as underscored by the song she sings, "*Swapnam thyajichal swargam labhikkum*" ("If you renounce dreams, you will attain heaven"), which reinforces the idea that surrender and self-denial—not aspiration—are the paths available to the disabled. *Oomappenninu Uriyadappayyan* (2002) and *Punjabi House* (1998) turn disability into a source of humour, mocking sign language and disabled characters' communication struggles. However, recent films attempt to challenge stereotypes. *Bangalore Days* (2014) portrays a paraplegic woman as independent and confident, without making her disability a defining trait. *Uyare* (2019) presents Pallavi, an acid attack survivor, as a resilient and career-driven woman, shifting the narrative from victimhood to empowerment. *Athiran* (2019) depicts Nithya, a woman with autism and trauma-related conditions, critiquing institutional abuse but relying heavily on thriller tropes and twists that undermine a more realistic portrayal of disability. Despite such novel portrayals, Malayalam cinema still struggles to move beyond outdated tropes and fully embrace the diversity and agency of disabled women.

METHODOLOGY

This study provides an analysis of *Neru* through the use of qualitative research methods. Narrative analysis is used to understand the story's development, character arc, and major themes. Film analysis is used to study the ways in which cinematic methods like cinematography and sound are employed to portray the character's experience. And by thematic analysis, the study looks at how the film deals with disability and what it means for society and culture as a whole. To provide a thorough analysis of the film's depiction of disability, the framework integrates theories on disability with Nelson's preconceptions.

The film itself serves as the primary source of information for this investigation, while secondary sources of information consist of scholarly papers, reviews, and theoretical works on the concept of disability portrayal in the media. The utilisation of this multi-pronged technique guarantees a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of *Neru*.

Disability Stereotypes: A Nelsonian Analysis of Ableism in *Neru*

In the landscape of media and film, representations of disability often fall prey to reductive stereotypes that distort the lived experiences of disabled individuals. This article adopts a disability studies framework to analyse the representation of disability in the Malayalam film *Neru*, with particular attention to how media narratives perpetuate or resist ableist stereotypes. Central to this methodology is Jack A. Nelson's theory of media stereotypes, articulated in his influential article "When Stereotypes Tell the Story" (2003). Nelson identifies recurring portrayals of disabled individuals in the media, such as the "pitiable and pathetic," the "super-crip," the "burden," and the "unable to live a successful life", which, he argues, shape public perception and reinforce marginalisation. These reductive images, often embedded unconsciously in journalistic and cinematic storytelling, contribute to a culture that sees disability as tragedy or inspiration rather than as a natural aspect of human diversity. By using Nelson's categorisation as an analytical lens, this article interrogates how *Neru* constructs its blind protagonist, Sara, and whether her representation affirms agency or recycles dominant stereotypes. This methodology enables a critical exploration of the intersection between disability, gender, and crime in contemporary Indian cinema.

Understanding Nelson's Stereotype Theory

Jack A. Nelson, in his seminal text, identifies multiple recurring stereotypes of disabled individuals perpetuated in mainstream media. These stereotypes, though seemingly sympathetic or celebratory at times, reinforce ableist ideologies that frame disability as a deficit or tragedy, often positioning disabled characters as either victims or inspirational figures meant to uplift the able-bodied audience. Nelson outlines stereotypes such as:

1. **The Pitiable and Pathetic:** Disabled individuals are portrayed as objects of pity, evoking emotional responses rather than intellectual or social engagement.
2. **The Supercrip:** A disabled character is shown overcoming extraordinary odds, performing superhuman feats, thus reinforcing unrealistic expectations of ability and resilience.
3. **The Burden:** Disability is framed as a source of suffering for others, especially caregivers and family members.
4. **Evil or Sinister:** Some portrayals use disability to symbolise moral depravity or inner brokenness.
5. **The Object of Ridicule:** Characters with disabilities are presented as comic relief, further dehumanising them.
6. **The Victim:** Disabled individuals are shown as perpetual victims, reinforcing passivity and helplessness.

Nelson's critique underscores how such representations obscure the complexities of disabled lives and reduce their identities to simplistic tropes. These stereotypes function ideologically to maintain social hierarchies by devaluing disability and perpetuating able-bodied norms.

Operationalising Nelson's Framework to *Neru*

Neru offers a compelling narrative of trauma, resilience, and justice through Sara's journey as a blind

rape survivor. The film begins with Sara Mohammed (Anaswara Rajan) in distress, grappling with the aftermath of her assault. Over time, she regains control by using her enhanced sense of touch to sculpt her attacker's likeness. This sculpture becomes key evidence, symbolising her resolve to pursue justice. The police arrest Michael (Shankar Induchoodan), the son of a wealthy businessman, based on the sculpture's resemblance. His influential parents hire Advocate Rajashekar (Siddiq), who manipulates the legal system to secure Michael's bail. Undeterred, Sara's family, with CI Paul Varghese's (Ganesh Kumar) advice, seeks help from Vijayamohan (Mohanlal), a former lawyer debarred due to Rajashekar's misconduct. Initially reluctant, Vijayamohan agrees to take the case after meeting Sara. During the trial, Rajashekar tries to discredit Sara and her family, even manipulating CCTV footage to support Michael's alibi and attacking the character of Sara and her mother. Vijayamohan, however, exposes these fabrications and reveals Michael's history of unpunished assaults. To counter doubts about Sara's abilities, she sculpts a likeness in court, astonishing everyone with an exact replica of Rajashekar. This decisive evidence leads to Michael's conviction and life imprisonment. The film ends with Sara confidently leaving the court, rejecting anonymity. While the film offers an empowering arc, it also grapples with multiple societal and institutional attitudes toward disability, many of which align with Nelson's identified stereotypes.

The Unseen: Framing Through Pity and Tragedy

The film introduces Sara's disability through the voices of her neighbours, who refer to her as "the girl who cannot see" (0:04:03). This introduction serves as a 'heads-up' to the audience, framing Sara's identity primarily through her disability and immediately situates her within the stereotype of the pitiable disabled person. The neighbours' tone, while not overtly malicious, carries an undertone of pity and othering, which is a hallmark of ableist attitudes. As Nelson observes, such portrayals emphasise lack and evoke sympathy, reducing the disabled character to their impairment. This framing sidelines Sara's personal agency, achievements, and complexity by emphasising her blindness before any other character trait is revealed. This reductive perspective perpetuates stereotypes and marginalises disabled individuals, making it difficult for them to be seen as whole, complex human beings.

This is compounded by a striking instance of ableist religious and cultural stigma: Sara's father's ex-wife declares that Sara's blindness and rape are a divine punishment for the family's sins. This statement reflects a broader cultural stereotype Nelson identifies, wherein disability is viewed as a moral failing or cosmic retribution. Such notions align with the stereotype of the tragic victim, whose disability is seen as part of a grand narrative of suffering rather than as a neutral human condition. These beliefs not only dehumanise Sara but also impose shame and guilt upon her family, reinforcing stigma and exclusion.

The Burden and the "Supercrip"

Nelson's "burden" stereotype is powerfully illustrated when Sara's brothers comment that the family will "suffer with this blind girl by walking through the verandas of court" (0:12:51). This comment also positions Sara's disability not as an individual experience but as an affliction that negatively impacts those around her. By portraying disabled people as burdens, media narratives reinforce the idea that their existence is a source of shame and inconvenience.

Conversely, *Neru* also flirts with the "supercrip" stereotype, particularly in its portrayal of Sara's courtroom sculpture scene. As a blind individual, her ability to sculpt an accurate likeness of Rajashekar in real time serves as climactic proof of her credibility. This moment is both powerful and problematic. While it underscores Sara's agency and intelligence, it risks feeding into the supercrip narrative by implying that disabled people must demonstrate extraordinary abilities to gain legitimacy and respect. Nelson warns that such portrayals, though seemingly positive, set unrealistic standards and suggest that value is contingent on exceptional performance rather than inherent dignity.

Institutional Ableism and the Question of Credibility

One of the most compelling aspects of *Neru* is its critique of institutional ableism. Sara's blindness is repeatedly invoked as an obstacle to her legal claims. When her advocate Vijayamohan laments, "if there was at least one eyewitness, we could prove [the case]" (02:04:02), he inadvertently echoes a systemic bias that equates sight with truth and credibility. The reliance on visual evidence and eyewitness testimony reflects a system that is not designed to accommodate the needs of disabled individuals, effectively excluding them from accessing justice. As Nelson argues, this aligns with the stereotype of the disabled victim as inherently unreliable or incapable.

This is further illustrated when the defence lawyer Rajashekar dismisses Sara's case as "ordinary" (0:14:49). Such a remark devalues not only the gravity of the crime but also the lived experiences of disabled individuals. Nelson's theory helps us understand how ableism is embedded in institutional language and logic, whereby the suffering of disabled persons is normalised or rendered invisible. This devaluation reflects a broader social narrative that fails to take crimes against disabled women seriously, especially in patriarchal contexts.

Gender, Disability, and the Intersectional Experience

Sara's experience as a blind girl who is also a victim of sexual assault highlights the intersection of disability and gender. Disabled women and girls are often at a higher risk of experiencing violence, yet their experiences are frequently overlooked or minimised.

The film portrays Sara's vulnerability not only as a result of her disability but also as a consequence of societal attitudes that devalue and objectify 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 is a site of resistance. When she asserts, "I'm only physically blind, not mentally" (0:29:56), she challenges not just her attackers but the entire epistemology that links physical impairment with cognitive deficiency. This moment is crucial in dismantling stereotypes of intellectual incapacity often assigned to disabled individuals in the media. Nelson emphasises the need to move beyond such portrayals by validating disabled people's intelligence, autonomy, and personhood.

Resisting Stereotypes and Asserting Agency

Despite moments that echo Nelsonian stereotypes, *Neru* ultimately subverts many of them by centring Sara's resilience and agency. Her decision to sculpt her attacker's face, her persistence through a flawed legal system, and her refusal to remain anonymous all signal a departure from victimhood toward empowerment. The film's ending—where Sara walks out of the courtroom with confidence—challenges the assumption that disabled individuals are passive or helpless.

Moreover, by foregrounding Sara's artistic talent, the film affirms the value of disabled lives beyond conventional metrics. This approach aligns with Nelson's call for richer, more humane representations that reflect the complexity of disabled existence. The courtroom climax, where Vijayamohan frames the case as a story of "courage, resilience, and justice" (02:05:30), signals a narrative that, while flirting with the supercrip trope, ultimately affirms the necessity of justice and dignity for all.

CONCLUSION

Neru by Jeethu Joseph offers a substantial and respectable step forward in portraying disability through Sara's character in Malayalam films. Jack A. Nelson's stereotype theory offers a compelling lens through which to analyse the representation of disability in media, and *Neru* stands as a significant example of how Indian cinema is beginning to engage with such portrayals more critically. Nelson argues that the media often relies on recurring stereotypes, such as the pitiable victim, the burden, or the inspirational "supercrip", when depicting disabled individuals. These tropes, whether explicit or subtly embedded, contribute to the social construction of disability not as a neutral condition but as a deviation from the norm. In *Neru*, we encounter moments where these stereotypes appear, yet the film also resists and complicates them in ways that merit recognition.

In terms of cinematic representation, *Neru* marks a notable progression in Malayalam cinema. By centring a disabled protagonist in a mainstream courtroom drama, the film breaks from traditional patterns that often marginalise such characters to secondary roles or caricatured portrayals. Yet, the film also highlights an ongoing need for authentic casting, an area where Malayalam cinema, and Indian cinema at large, has room for growth. Casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles can unintentionally reinforce the idea that disability is a costume, something that can be performed and then removed, rather than a lived experience. Greater inclusion of disabled actors and intersectional perspectives would further enrich the realism and depth of such narratives.

In conclusion, *Neru* is both a powerful narrative of justice and a critical commentary on how society treats disabled individuals. It exemplifies how media can serve as a site for both the reinforcement and disruption of disability stereotypes. Through Sara's character, the film challenges viewers to re-evaluate their assumptions and to recognise the dignity, complexity, and strength of disabled individuals, not as figures of pity or inspiration alone, but as full, autonomous people. Nelson's stereotype theory thus proves to be an essential analytical tool, helping to dissect these representations and to push for more ethical, inclusive, and accurate portrayals. Ultimately, *Neru* reminds us that dismantling ableism in media is not just about avoiding negative stereotypes; it is about actively creating space for disabled voices, experiences, and leadership in the stories we tell.

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