

# The Interconnection of Gender and Nature in *Eko* (2025): An Ecofeminist Reading of Surveillance, Space, and Resistance in Malayalam Cinema

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**Abstract:** *This article develops an ecofeminist interpretation of the Malayalam film Eko (2025), directed by Dinjith Ayyathan, and places it within broader scholarly discussions on gender, ecology, and visual culture in Indian cinema. Although the film initially appears to be a psychological mystery centred on the disappearance of Kuriachan, it gradually unfolds as a critique of patriarchal systems that regulate both women's bodies and ecological spaces. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Carol J. Adams, the study examines how narrative design, spatial organisation, and animal symbolism collectively construct "protection" as a subtle technology of control. Rather than treating Eko as an isolated text, the paper situates it within Malayalam cinema's recurring tendency to associate female agency with trauma. In contrast, Eko reimagines resistance as emerging through ecological alignment rather than victimhood. The study argues that the film reworks the familiar "female avenger" narrative by shifting violence from an emotional reaction to a structurally embedded form of resistance. This reading contributes to ongoing debates in film and cultural studies on gendered power relations and environmental imagination.*

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism; Malayalam Cinema; Gendered Space; Surveillance; Female Agency; Environmental Humanities; Visual Culture

## 1. Introduction

Cinema functions as a powerful ideological system that shapes cultural understandings of gender, space, and nature. Within Malayalam cinema, realism has often been combined with psychological and moral complexity, producing narratives that subtly engage with structures of power. *Eko* (2025), directed by Dinjith Ayyathan, initially presents itself as a mystery centred on a missing person. However, beneath this narrative framework lies a sustained engagement with surveillance, containment, and resistance.

This study reads *Eko* through ecofeminism, a critical framework that highlights the structural links between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. Rather than explicitly stating these connections, the film encodes them through spatial restriction, visual metaphors, and relational dynamics between characters and environment.

The paper further positions *Eko* within Malayalam cinema's dominant representational pattern, where female agency is often enabled only through experiences of violence. In contrast, *Eko* disrupts this logic by proposing a form of resistance that is not dependent on trauma but emerges through spatial awareness and ecological connectedness.

## 2. Literature Review

Ecofeminist scholarship argues that patriarchal ideology operates through binary hierarchies such as culture/nature and male/female. Vandana Shiva critiques developmental narratives that justify ecological destruction and gendered control under the rhetoric of progress. Maria Mies similarly demonstrates how women and natural resources are constructed as passive entities available for extraction and regulation.

In feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze explains how cinema traditionally positions women as objects of visual control rather than autonomous subjects.

Carol J. Adams extends this critique through the idea of the "absent referent," which reveals how violence against women and animals is structurally linked but culturally obscured.

In Indian film studies, Jyotika Viridi observes that female agency is frequently constructed through suffering, particularly sexual violence. While such narratives expose patriarchal brutality, they also limit the representation of women as independent agents. This paper builds on these frameworks to argue that *Eko* offers an alternative model of agency rooted in ecological relationality rather than trauma.

## 3. Methodology

The study employs qualitative textual analysis of *Eko* (2025), focusing on narrative structure, spatial organisation, and symbolic representation. The film is examined through close reading of cinematic form, with attention to how meaning is constructed through visual and spatial strategies.

A comparative approach is also adopted to situate *Eko* within broader Malayalam cinematic traditions. This enables the analysis to move beyond description and engage with theoretical questions concerning gender, ecology, and cinematic representation.

## 4. Analysis

### 1) Protection as a Mechanism of Control

A key thematic concern in *Eko* is the gradual transformation of protection into restriction. Kuriachan's actions are initially presented as protective care, yet they increasingly function to limit Mlaathi's autonomy. The film reveals how authority often operates through emotional language that normalises control under the guise of safety.

This logic is mirrored in environmental discourse, where regulation of nature is justified through conservation narratives. Forests are enclosed, animals are managed, and ecosystems are controlled in the name of protection. The film

draws a parallel between these systems, showing how both women and nature are governed through similar ideological structures.

## 2) Spatial Organisation and Surveillance

The spatial structure of *Eko* plays a central role in constructing its thematic concerns. The domestic environment is designed as a space of confinement, marked by narrow corridors, limited visibility, and restricted movement. These spatial constraints reinforce Mlaathi's lack of autonomy.

Cinematically, she is frequently framed behind doors, windows, or reflective surfaces, suggesting that her subjectivity is always mediated and controlled. This extends Mulvey's concept of the gaze into spatial terms, where architecture itself becomes a system of surveillance.

The external landscape does not offer liberation. Instead, it mirrors similar mechanisms of control through fencing, isolation, and restricted access. By collapsing the distinction between interior and exterior space, the film presents control as a continuous spatial condition rather than a confined domestic structure.

## 3) Animals, Discipline, and Disruption

Animals, particularly dogs, function as symbolic extensions of authority in *Eko*. Initially, they are portrayed as disciplined and obedient, reflecting systems of control imposed by male authority. Their training parallels the behavioural regulation of Mlaathi, reinforcing the connection between animal control and gendered domination.

However, this hierarchy is destabilised in the climax. The dogs transition from instruments of control to agents of disruption. Mlaathi's alignment with them marks a shift in power relations, where resistance emerges through collaboration with non-human entities.

This transformation aligns with Carol J. Adams' concept of the "absent referent," making visible the hidden connections between different forms of domination and opening up possibilities for relational resistance.

## 4) *Eko* within Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam cinema has repeatedly constructed female agency through narratives of trauma. Films such as *22 Female Kottayam* (Aashiq Abu), *Puthiya Niyamam* (A. K. Sajan), and *Lilli* (Prasobh Vijayan) depict women whose agency emerges only after experiencing extreme violence.

While these films critique patriarchy, they also reinforce a structural limitation by linking empowerment to suffering. *Eko* diverges from this pattern by presenting resistance that is not solely reactive. Instead, agency emerges through spatial awareness and ecological engagement.

This shift broadens the representational possibilities of female subjectivity in regional cinema.

## 5) Rethinking Resistance

The climax of *Eko* redefines resistance as a relational and structural process rather than an individual act of revenge.

Mlaathi's actions disrupt hierarchical oppositions such as human/non-human and control/freedom, challenging the foundations of patriarchal authority.

The film thus suggests that liberation cannot be achieved within existing systems of domination. Instead, it requires a reconfiguration of relationships between bodies, spaces, and ecological systems.

## 5. Conclusion

Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, *Eko* emerges as a significant intervention in Malayalam cinema. It reveals how protection can function as a subtle form of control while simultaneously imagining resistance through ecological and spatial reconfiguration.

By moving beyond trauma-centred narratives of female agency, the film contributes to a broader rethinking of gender, power, and environmental relations in visual culture. It offers a vision of resistance that is relational, ecological, and structurally embedded.

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