

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/PP/2026.v8n1.11>

Grids of Hegemonic Control: The Coloniality of Power and Ecological Extraction in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema: A Study of *Eko*

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Abstract

This study explores the intersections of postcolonial power dynamics, human subjugation, and environmental degradation as portrayed in the contemporary Malayalam film *Eko* by Dinjith Ayyathan. It sets the film within broader discourses of coloniality of power, describing how colonial hierarchies persist in postcolonial societies and postcolonial ecocriticism, which explores how power works on both human and non-human nature. The analysis focuses on three primary levels: the systemic marginalization of indigenous or rural subjects by a hegemonic elite, the psychological internalized coloniality within the protagonists, and the objectification of nature as a resource-rich "other" ripe for extraction. Analysing plot, character arcs, setting, and symbolic elements, this study proposes that *Eko* foregrounds the interplay of domination and resistance at interpersonal, social, and ecological levels. It reveals how relationships of control, whether between human characters or between humans and animals, reflect structural continuities from colonial domination into contemporary new world power structures. The film's engagement with ecology, especially its use of the hill landscape and dogs, serves as a metaphor for resistance to hierarchical domination and offers insight into how contemporary Malayalam cinema negotiates postcolonial themes of authority, subjugation, and ecological ethics.

Keywords: hegemony, power, ecology, identity, postcolonialism, coloniality of power, postcolonial ecocriticism

Introduction

"Hegemony operates not through coercion alone but through the manufacture of consent, wherein the dominated come to view their subjugation as natural, until the fissures of resistance reveal its constructed fragility" (Gramsci 161).

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The evolution of Malayalam cinema has increasingly turned towards New Wave aesthetics that prioritize socio-political realism and ecological consciousness. The contemporary movies that explore the stories of the human beings, human society, nature and state often throw light on the lingering effects of the colonial past or rather, its ghost. While the formal structures of British colonialism have long since dissolved, the “coloniality of power”, a term coined by Anibal Quijano to describe the legacy of colonialism in social hierarchies and knowledge production remains deeply embedded in the contemporary socio-economic fabric (Quijano 533). In *Eko*, the depiction of power is not merely a vertical hierarchy of ruler and ruled or coloniser and the colonised; it is a horizontal, suffocating grid that encompasses the physical terrain, the psychological interiority of its characters and the nature and non-human beings as victims and marginalised. On its surface, *Eko* is a mystery thriller set in the forests and hills of Kerala’s Kaattukunnu and the rural areas of Malaysia during the World War II and post-world war periods, revolving around the disappearance of a legendary dog breeder, Kuriachan, and the powerful individuals and elite groups while in quest for him, reveals his infamous yet apparently intrepid and legendary saga. The plot unravels the traumatic past of Kuriachan’s Malaysian wife, Mlaathi’s (Soyi) and cycles of control enforced by men in her life using fierce Malaysian dogs. Beneath this narrative exists the themes of control, protection, and subjugation -concepts core to postcolonial critique. Moreover, the film’s imagery and narrative of nature and animals open up the possibility an ecological reading that intersects with postcolonial concerns, revealing how domination extends beyond human hierarchies into the ecological realm. Thus, *Eko* becomes an apt subject for a postcolonial ecocritical reading that reveals the persistence of hegemonic structures across social and natural domains.

This study aims to employ postcolonial and ecocritical theories to unpack subjugation at interpersonal, gendered, caste-political, species, and ecological levels. *Eko* is examined through three intersecting dimensions: (1) power and control in human relations, focusing on how authority is exercised and resisted among characters; (2) subjugation and agency, especially regarding marginalized or subordinate figures within the narrative; and (3) human–nature relations, observing how the film’s treatment of animals and environment critiques or reproduces hierarchical ontologies. By weaving these threads together, this study intent to show how *Eko*, beyond genre conventions, reflects the enduring coloniality of power embedded in contemporary social and political structure as well as the relationship between human beings and nature.

The Coloniality of Power

At the heart, *Eko* is a mystery story set on Kuriachan’s isolated estate, where characters’ movements and motivations are shaped by power relations grounded in authority and control. A vast, foreboding landscape is presented where visitors, ranging from police investigators to former associates of Kuriachan arrive seeking him, confronting both physical and psychological obstacles (Times of India). The estate functions as an enclosed domain where hierarchies are exists and contest, reflecting of how colonial governance structured power in colonised lands. Kuriachan as a traveller and trader, has settled down at Kaattukunnu, a hilly

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area, typical landscape seen often in the colonial settlement in Kerala. He has built his empire there establishing his autonomy at financial, social and even natural, controlling nature to his advantage. He established an image of a tyrant among the natives even without exercising physical power. This hegemonical authority established by him portrays the existence of practices of colonial power that did not disappear with the end of formal colonial rule. The similar exercise of power can be seen by the first husband of Soyi, Yosiah on her. Both the men exercised hegemonical power to establish domination over Soyi as well as their surroundings.

Power in *Eko* operates through intersecting grids of caste, class, and politics, allegorizing Kerala's postcolonial social fabric. Kuriyachan, coded as elite, wields control over "dogs" as masses, rural, expendable labourers and positions Mlaathi and Peeyoos as subalterns within this hierarchy. His importation of Malaysian dogs symbolizes elite appropriation of "exotic" resources, displacing indigenous pariah breeds, much like caste elites historically monopolized land post-independence. Peeyoos, the caretaker with lower caste and working-class undertones, internalizes subservience, guarding the estate like a postcolonial subject mimicking colonial overseers, yet awakens to his entrapment.

Eko's narration represents a Marxist perspective; particularly, Gramsci's concept of hegemony in which the ruling class gains consent of the people through ideological apparatuses that make the notion of domination natural. In a sense, Kuriyachan's training methods are a parody of that; by disciplining the dogs (proletariat), he "mobilizes" them with what resembles a welfare-like system, fed, sheltered, conditioned but secures their docking for the sake of the elite, that is, he takes what is the base of the dog (its labour power) and reconstitutes it into the superstructure that will enforce the control of the elite over that dog. Furthermore, within a protective narrative, the act of restriction is masked or obscured as an act of benevolence; therefore, the oppressed learn to internalise their own oppression through false consciousness. Mlaathi's subversion inverts the dialectic of Marxism. She, as a migrant subaltern, assumes control of the the dogs; she has won—her victory is a cautionary tale regarding the recursive, inversions/wrongs of populism: the vanguard proletariat turns on its trainers, exposing the fragility of hegemony. The subalterns change positions (dominant/dominated) and in doing so demonstrate the ambivalence of class struggle, there is no telos of liberation, only endless networks of coercion disguised as emancipation. *Eko* thus demystifies power as relational extraction and the dialectic of base-superstructure becomes hybridised into "neocolonial cycles."

The sense of boundary and empire have been projected throughout the movie using plot, narration as well as cinematography. The characters of Yosiah and Kuriachan emphasises their boundaries both by words and the geographic terrain they choose to built their empire in. The film's cinematography emphasizes the imposition of Euclidean geometry - straight lines, fences, and square structures upon the fluid, curved landscapes of the forest. This spatial grid is a form of physical domination which breaks the continuity of the ecosystem, isolating species and humans alike. The first husband, Yosiah had built his home, his empire in an inland island, surrounded by water body on all the sides. Similarly, Kuriachan built his empire on an isolated

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hill. This apparent isolation contributes to their autonomy and ease of establishing control. They both isolated the character of Soyi from “potentially hostile society” to establish hegemonical power over her which mirrors with the divide and rule policy employed by the colonisers.

The film demonstrates how characters enforce boundaries, whether physical (the estate, cages, or forests) or psychological (loyalty, obedience) in ways that mirror the inner structures of dominance. Yosiah, a middle-aged man married Soyi, a young girl apparently out of love. His sense of possessiveness disguised as love and protection, entraps Soyi into believing that she is in a happy marriage until she realises the Malaysian fierce dogs that she believed were for her protection while her husband was away with business turned out to be the slaves of her husband, adhering to the training they received. They were not reluctant to harm Soyi to fulfil their duty entrusted on them by their master. The subjugation of Soyi by Yosiah without evidently imposing power, act as a vivid symbol of hegemony. She is again subjugated by Kuriachan when he makes her realise the domination imposed by Yosiah and tricks her to believing that it was her choice to break free and elope with her saviour, Kuriachan when in reality, it was his plan all along. Thus, the character of Soyi is dominated by men in her life. In *Eko*, power is not merely applied by a central colonizer figure; rather, it manifests as power distributed across characters and their relations. The hesitancy to confront authority or acceptance of domination disguised as “protection” reveals the internalization of hierarchical norms central to postcolonial conditions.

The character of Soyi, who migrated to Kerala in hope of a better life is a representative of postcolonial migration and the hybridity, identity crisis and diaspora that follows. The character is called Mlaathi in Kaattukunnu which essentially mean, a lady from Malaya or Malaysia. This shows the stark reality of identity crisis, losing even her name. The diaspora is evident as she recalls her past in Malaysia with a sense of longingness and nostalgia. The film’s plot arc, overthrows initial power dynamics by gradually positioning Mlaathi as a figure who challenges hierarchical control over both human and non-human characters (Indian Express). The way Mlaathi learns the existing hegemonical power domination over her, she chooses to take the control, dominating the dominant using the same medium she was subjugated with. This reversal underscores the film’s critical engagement with hegemonic domination, showing how subaltern voices can reshape power relations. Her choice of not to tame and cage dogs and instead treat them as individuals portray her wish to break free the psychological and mental cage she is in. These narrative choices resonate with postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who emphasize the need to uncover how subaltern figures navigate power relations that attempt to silence them, and how their voices, when asserted, challenge hegemonic frameworks. The use of binocular to keep Kuriachan under surveillance and the reveal of the same at the end of the movie provide a colonial gaze, keeping track of the colonised.

Homi Bhabha's idea of ambivalence shapes *Eko*'s ending. Mlaathi's rise from a woman trapped three times to the powerful "dog queen" mixes control and resistance, making true

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freedom unclear. She copies Kuriyachan's harsh rule but adds her own fierce twist: now she uses binoculars to watch enemies, and dogs guard her new order. This depicts the state of political and social conditions of postcolonial countries, merely reflecting the old form of colonialism in new colours and shades. This blurs lines between victim and ruler. Peeyoos stares at the snarling dogs, wondering if her revenge just creates a fresh form of oppression, a mere new master. There's no clean rebellion, power structures linger, twisted by her imitation that scares yet echoes the old ways. The foggy climax, filled with dog howls, captures postcolonial hybridity: cycles of control continue, cracked open by wild nature.

Animals, Environment, and Anthropocentric Domination

In *Eko*, Dinjith Ayyathan employs animals and the environment not merely as backdrops, but as active participants those challenge traditional narrative hierarchies. From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, human–nature relations in *Eko* illustrate how domination extends beyond interpersonal dynamics into ecological realms. Postcolonial ecocriticism, as an emerging interdisciplinary approach, explores how colonial exploitation of land and non-human Others intersects with political and cultural domination, challenging anthropocentric assumptions that humans inherently control or own nature (Ecocritical Studies). A defining feature of the film is the intricate man - dog relationship, which critics note effectively blurs the line between human intention and animal agency. This shift moves away from viewing animals as passive tools, instead granting them a form of "silent" authority that influences the story's trajectory. The apparent authority is however a veil behind which the actual master, the puppeteer is controlling them. The dogs were used as tools to establish power and protect the empire built by the masters. Hence, the hegemonic subjugation can be witnessed even in the case of animals. The dogs in *Eko* are not mere pets or narrative props; they symbolize loyalty, territoriality, and resistance - qualities that complicate easy binaries, human authority and animal obedience.

The movie subverts the traditional master-slave dynamic often found in cinema, opting instead to explore the complexities of coexistence and ethical engagement with the natural world. A pivotal example of this is found in the character of Malathi; her refusal to cage her dogs and her unconventional approach to training them directly challenge hierarchical domination. By rejecting physical and psychological confinement, her actions suggest an ecological ethic that actively resists anthropocentric control, the idea that humans are the sole centre of importance. This narrative choice aligns deeply with the core tenets of postcolonial ecocriticism. This framework critiques the lingering colonial and capitalist logics that view nature primarily as a "resource" to be subdued, managed, and extracted for human profit. In *Eko*, the dogs are not mere extensions of human will but are granted a level of autonomy that disrupts the drive for total mastery. By portraying these relationships through a lens of mutual respect rather than ownership, the film exposes the flaws in exploitative power structures. Ultimately, the story suggests that true ecological harmony requires a departure from colonial era subjugation, advocating for a world where human and non-human agency are intertwined rather than opposed. Thus, *Eko*'s narrative offers a new perspective which demands attention

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to how environmental agency and animal presence interrogate structures of dominion central to colonial epistemologies.

Ecological Symbolism and Resistance

The film's landscape, characterized by misty hills where silence and observation prevail, creates an atmosphere that is simultaneously breathtaking and unsettling. By positioning the landscape and dogs as central elements, *Eko* develops a sense of ecological unease. The fog-shrouded hills of Kaattukunnu transcend mere backdrop, functioning as a potent metaphor for postcolonial landscapes where the scars of extraction and the quest for identity intersect. Director Dinjith Ayyathan elevates the environment to the status of a living character, utilizing the terrain to cultivate narrative tension and emotional depth. This approach moves beyond aesthetic beauty, positioning the landscape as an active participant that dictates the rhythm of the story. This cinematic strategy mirrors critical insights from postcolonial ecocriticism, which posits that landscapes in formerly colonized regions are never "neutral." Instead, they embody layers of historical trauma, representing both the sites of past ecological exploitation and the current stages for human resistance. By allowing the misty hills to dominate the frame and influence character behaviour, the film highlights the tension between human attempts at control and the untameable agency of the natural world. The water body, secluded island and the mist that surrounds it as set in the Malaysian setting also serves the same feeling of eerie, contributing to the misty, unknown truth hidden behind. Ultimately, the setting serves as a silent witness to the ongoing power struggles of the region, reminding the viewer that the land itself carries the memory of both subjugation and the enduring spirit of survival.

These narrative techniques allow for a more expansive postcolonial critique, moving beyond human-centric social structures to include our interactions with the non-human "Other." By putting these relationships under focus, the film challenges the colonial legacy of commodification, where nature is viewed strictly as a resource to be exploited. The island in Malaysia and hills of Kaattukunnu which literally translates to hill covered with forest is used as an empire and a place of refuge. The terrain highly contributes to the ease of colonising the lands. Kuriachan and Yosiah act as the Crusoe's of their respective lands in possession vividly portraying the anthropocentric mindset of the postcolonial society. *Eko* also portrays the environment as a site of memory and resistance, highlighting how the marginalization of nature is inextricably linked to the subjugation of people.

Western Ghats's misty terrain and dense rainforest are not mere backdrops in the movie but active agents resisting human domination, embodying postcolonial ecocriticism's critique of ecological imperialism. The pervasive fog obfuscates visibility, mirroring how colonized landscapes evade the colonizer's extractive gaze, much like Edward Said's notion of the Orient as an elusive "Other" constructed for control. Kuriyachan's estate functions as a modern plantation-grid, methodically carving training grounds from the wilderness, paralleling British colonial plantations in Kerala and Malaya that extracted rubber, spices, and labour while subjugating indigenous ecologies. This anthropocentric ideology treats nature as a passive

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resource, domesticated for human ends, dogs are trained into weapons, hills cleared for enclosures and shelters. Yet, the film's cinematography foregrounds nature's agency, the mist that conceals Soyi's aka Mlaathi's movements, the rain-slicked paths that trap intruders, disrupting the hegemonic grid of surveillance and control.

Eko is not just an ordinary mystery-thriller; it is rich with commentary on issues like power, domination, and ecological relations which demonstrate the continuance of the established colonial way of control in contemporary world. It shows through the interaction of human and non-human elements, how hegemony functions through interpersonal relationships, social structures, and environmental relationships, and has long outlasted most of the former colonial regimes. Human characters in the movie negotiate authority, subjugation, and resistance, while the film's ecological imagery challenges anthropocentric domination by emphasising non-human agency. The film thereby portrays broader postcolonial and postcolonial ecocritical concerns about the intersections of social and ecological injustices. By tracing these layers, *Eko* contributes to a growing body of Malayalam cinema that engages deeply with themes of authority, subjugation, and ecological ethics, offering audiences a culturally specific yet universally resonant reflection on how structures of power persist in shaping both human lives and the natural world.

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