
Visual Ambiguity and Psychological Tension: A Comparative Study of Cinematic Technique in 'Rorschach' and 'Eko'

Dr. E. Justin Ruben

Assistant Professor (Sl. Gr.) – English

Department of Humanities

Coimbatore Institute of Technology, Coimbatore

Email: justinruben@cit.edu.in

Dr. A. Santha Devi

Assistant Professor (Sl. Gr.) – English

Department of Humanities

Coimbatore Institute of Technology, Coimbatore

Email: santhadevi@cit.edu.in

Abstract:

Cinema has always been more than entertainment - it is literature made visible. Where books ask readers to imagine, films show them worlds already built, emotions already rendered. For a generation that scrolls faster than it reads, movies have quietly taken over the work that novels once did: carrying ideas, moral questions, and the deep architecture of human experience from one mind to another. Malayalam cinema, in particular, has been doing something remarkable in recent years. It has stopped treating mental illness as a dramatic device - the "mad character" who exists to shock or to explain - and started treating the mind itself as the terrain where real stories unfold. Two recent films stand as clear evidence of this shift: **Rorschach** (2022), directed by Nisam Basheer and **Eko** (2025) directed by Dinjith Ayyathan. Both are psychological thrillers. Both are serious works of craft. But they arrive at their psychological depth from completely opposite directions, and that difference is worth examining closely.

Keywords: Psychological realism, Narrative ambiguity, Trauma response, Unreliable narrator, psychological projection, Contemporary Malayalam cinema, Character-driven drama, Emotional dissociation, Mental health depiction

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Introduction

Rorschach works from the outside in. It builds its psychological intensity through how others perceive its central character – through suspicion, projection, and the slow accumulation of dread in a community that cannot quite read the man in its midst. The mind being examined here is, in a sense, the audience's own. We are placed in the position of the Rorschach test itself: shown an ambiguous figure and asked what we see. Our answer reveals more about us than about him.

Eko, by contrast, works from the inside out. It places the viewer directly within a fractured consciousness, making interiority – memory, delusion, grief, perception – the primary landscape of the film. The horror here is not external threat but internal collapse, and the filmmaking reflects that: structure, sound, and visual logic all bend to mirror a mind under pressure.

What makes comparing these two films valuable is not merely their shared genre, but what their differences reveal about the possibilities of cinema as a critical and social art form. Together, they ask how we construct identity, how communities respond to those they cannot categorize, and how the line between sanity and instability is often drawn not by clinical fact but by social consensus. These are not just cinematic questions – they are deeply human ones, and Malayalam cinema, at its current best, is asking them with rare seriousness and skill.

In Malayalam cinema, the fear of public judgment often drives characters to self-destruction, but the comparison here shows two opposing ways directors handle this trauma. Both films tap into a specific Malayali psychological trope: “Naattukaar Enthi Parayum?” (What will the neighbours say?).

The Contrast in Social Gaze

Eko (The Cage of Silence): The “Social Gaze” acts as an invisible prison. The terror of community gossip forces isolation, turning a personal crisis into a quiet, suffocating tragedy.

Rorschach (The Weaponized Gaze): Luke Antony views the village gossip network not as a threat, but as a megaphone. By feeding the rumour mill, he lets the community's own imagination do his psychological dirty work.

The Structural Parallel in Eko, the villain is effectively the collective judgment of the *Naadu* (village/society). **In Rorschach**, the *Naadu* is just an instrument played by the villain (or anti-hero) to break his targets.

Psychological impact on the Viewer

In Eko, the sound design makes you want to **withdraw**. It triggers a “freeze” response, making you feel as isolated as the protagonist. **In Rorschach**, the sound design keeps you in a state of **anticipation**. It triggers a “fight” response, aligning your heartbeat with Luke's calculated aggression. The psychological weight of these films would be halved without their audio engineering. One uses sound to show a mind that has **lost its walls (Eko)**, while the other shows a mind that has **fortified them** into a fortress (**Rorschach**). Color psychology is where these two films truly diverge. While both are “dark” in subject matter, their visual

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palettes communicate two very different types of mental instability. In cinema, color is not just aesthetic; it's an **emotional anchor**. Here is how *Eko* and *Rorschach* use the visual spectrum to map the human mind.

Eko: The Palette of Depressive Realism

Eko leans into **Muted Tones** and **Shadow Play**. It uses a "Low-Key" lighting style that psychologically mirrors the state of **Anhedonia** (the inability to feel pleasure).

- **The Dominance of Grey and Deep Blue:** These colors represent the "submerged" feeling of trauma. It's as if the protagonist is underwater. Blue, in this context, isn't calming; it's cold and isolating.
- **Shadows as a Second Skin:** In *Eko*, shadows aren't just lack of light; they represent the **Unconscious Mind**. The characters are often half-hidden in darkness, suggesting that they are only partially "present" in reality.
- **The "Liminal" Brown:** The use of earthy, muddy tones creates a sense of stagnation. It feels like a world that has stopped moving, reflecting a mind stuck in a loop of past events.

Rorschach: The Psychology of "Clinical White"

Rorschach flips the script. Instead of hiding in the dark, it uses **High-Contrast White** to create a sense of **Clinical Insanity**.

- **The Unfinished White House:** Typically, white symbolizes purity or peace. Here, it is **Sterile and Hostile**. It represents Luke Antony's cold, calculated detachment. It's the color of a hospital wing or a laboratory – devoid of warmth or humanity.
- **Black vs. White (The Inkblot):** The film constantly pits deep blacks against piercing whites. This visual "binary" represents **Splitting**, a psychological defense mechanism where things are seen as only good or only evil, with no room for grey.
- **Red as a Punctuation:** When red appears in *Rorschach* (blood, a taillight, a shirt), it hits with extreme violence because of the surrounding desaturation. It signals a "break" in Luke's cold exterior – a flash of pure, unadulterated rage.

The Core Philosophical Difference

- **Rorschach** is entirely **inward-looking**. It suggests that the deepest, most terrifying purgatory is the one humans construct inside their own minds when consumed by unhealed trauma.
- **Ekō** is **outward-looking**. It focuses on the hubris of human hierarchy, neatly summarized by its central thesis: "*Sometimes protection and restriction, they both look the same.*" It questions human dominance over nature and whether our efforts to "cage" threats actually end up trapping us instead.

Final Synthesis

If an ardent movie fan watches these two films back-to-back, they see a comprehensive picture of the human mind in crisis. *Eko* is the **internal experience** – the quiet, painful, and lonely reality of a mind that has lost its way. *Rorschach* is the **external manifestation** – the chaotic, brilliant, and terrifying way a mind can reshape the world around it to fit its own narrative.

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One film asks the audience to **empathize** with the victim; the other dares the viewers to **identify** with the monster. While *Eko* is a quiet, minimalist study of a mind folding in on itself, *Rorschach* is a loud, aggressive manifestation of psychological trauma through the lens of a “neo-noir” revenge saga.

Representation of Trauma: Passive vs. Active The most striking difference lies in how the protagonists handle their psychological scars:

- **In *Eko*:** Trauma is **implosive**. The character is paralyzed by their past. The film uses silence and stillness to show that the character is a victim of their own memory.
- **In *Rorschach*:** Trauma is **explosive**. Luke Antony (Mammootty) doesn’t just sit with his ghosts; he weaponizes them. The psychological “inkblot” (referencing the Rorschach test) is projected onto a whole village. Luke’s madness is proactive and calculated.

Narrative Structure: Linear VS. Abstract

Rorschach is a puzzle-box movie. It challenges the viewer to figure out what is real and what is a hallucination, utilizing a complex, non-linear timeline. *Eko*, conversely, is more of a “mood piece.” It isn’t trying to trick you with a plot twist as much as it is trying to make you *feel* the weight of the character’s mental state.

VISUAL LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLISM

Both films use their environments to reflect the protagonist’s psyche, but the execution differs:

- **The White Room vs. The Dark Shadow:** In *Rorschach*, the unfinished, stark white house represents Luke’s clinical, cold, and obsessive mind. It’s an externalization of his “Rorschach” test.
- **The Liminal Space in *Eko*:** *Eko* uses shadows and everyday claustrophobic settings. It suggests that the “haunting” isn’t in a specific house, but in the very air the character breathes.

4. Comparison Table: At a Glance

| Feature | <i>Eko</i> (2024) | <i>Rorschach</i> (2022) |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Tone | Melancholic, quiet, and stagnant. | Gritty, stylish, and high-tension. |
| Protagonist | A survivor struggling to exist. | A vigilante consumed by a ghost. |
| Soundscape | Ambient noise, whispers, and literal echoes. | A pulsating, Western-inspired score. |
| Conflict | Internal (Man vs. Self). | Externalized (Man vs. Village/Ghost). |
| Pacing | Slow burn (requires patience). | Steady build-up with bursts of violence. |

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The Contrasts (Where They Diverge)

The core mechanics of their screenplays, pacing, and philosophical messages are entirely distinct.

| Attribute | Rorschach (2022) | Ekō (2025) |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Genre Subversion | Post-Mortem Revenge Noir. It completely flips the revenge thriller by focusing on a protagonist trying to exact vengeance <i>after</i> the killer is already dead. | Eco-Mystery Narrative. It functions as a slow-burn, historical-environmental puzzle – using timelines that shift over decades to unravel a biological conspiracy. |
| The Role of the “Beast” | Metaphorical. The title refers to psychological inkblots; the “monster” is entirely a projection of human trauma, grief, and unhinged malice. | Literal & Integral. As the finale of the <i>Animal Trilogy</i> , the rare breed of exotic Malaysian guardian dogs drives the actual plot. The line between human control and animal dominance is central. |
| Protagonist Motivation | Hyper-Aggressive & Active. Luke Antony (Mammootty) enters the village to aggressively disrupt, manipulate, and dismantle an entire family out of pure spite. | Observant & Reactive. Peyoos (Sandeep Pradeep) and the old matriarch Mlaathi are low-key cogs in a larger system, reacting to and trying to survive the wave of outsiders hunting for the truth. |
| Sonic Palette | Jarring, Westernized Stylization. Uses English indie-rock and modern electronic tracks to create an intentional disconnect with its rural setting. | Atmospheric & Earthy. Relies on Mujeeb Majeed’s haunting, naturalistic orchestration mixed with ambient jungle noises to build an organic sense of dread. |

The social psychology of Eko and Rorschach offers a biting critique of how small-town Kerala – often romanticized for its “community feel” – actually reacts to mental instability. Both films portray the community not as a support system, but as a **source of friction or judgment.**

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“Social Mirror” in Both Narratives

1. Eko: The Stigma of Silence

In Eko, the social psychology is defined by **Aversion**.

- **The “Invisible” Man:** The community in *Eko* doesn’t necessarily attack the protagonist; they simply don’t know what to do with him. This reflects the real-world **Social Isolation** of those with deep depression or PTSD.
- **The Burden of Normalcy:** There is a subtle pressure on the character to “just be okay.” The film captures the awkwardness of neighbours and acquaintances who offer platitudes because they are uncomfortable with the “weight” of someone else’s trauma.
- **Micro-Aggressions:** The film shows how “care” can often feel like an intrusion. In a small-town setting, privacy is a luxury, and for a character trying to process internal echoes, the “watchful eye” of the village feels like a spotlight.

2. Rorschach: The Psychology of the “Outsider”

In Rorschach, the social dynamics are **Antagonistic**. The village of Kanni is a closed ecosystem, and Luke Antony is a foreign body.

- **Collective Guilt:** The village is hiding its own rot (the history of Dilawar). Luke’s arrival forces them to look at their own reflections. Psychologically, the villagers’ hostility toward Luke is a **Projection** of their own guilt.
- **The “Madman” Label:** The community quickly labels Luke as “crazy” or “weird” to delegitimize him. By calling him mad, they don’t have to take his actions or his presence seriously.
- **Power Dynamics:** Unlike *Eko*, where the protagonist is passive, Luke uses the village’s social structures (the police, the local tea shop gossip, family hierarchies) to dismantle them. He understands the “Social IQ” of the village and uses it as a weapon.

3. Comparison of Social Interaction

| Social Element | Eko | Rorschach |
|------------------|---|--|
| Community Role | The Observer: Watching from a distance with pity or confusion. | The Participant: Actively trying to expel or exploit the protagonist. |
| Type of Conflict | Avoidance: People turn away because “sadness” is contagious. | Confrontation: People lean in because “madness” is threatening. |
| | | |
| The “Gaze” | The protagonist feels judged for being broken. | The protagonist makes the village feel judged for their sins. |

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4. 1. The Eko Protagonist: The Weight of “Complex PTSD”

The individual depicted in Eko demonstrates behavioural patterns consistent with the “freeze” defense mechanism, a primary survival strategy associated with Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)..

- Symptom: Dissociation. The film’s slow pacing and muted colors represent the character’s detachment from the physical world. He is physically present but mentally “elsewhere,” replaying the trauma.
- Symptom: Hyper-vigilance. The amplified sounds (the dripping tap, the ticking clock) are auditory representations of a nervous system that cannot “filter” environmental stimuli. Every sound is a potential threat or a memory trigger.
- The Narrative Arc: It is a Internalized Struggle. The “plot” isn’t about defeating a villain; it’s about the exhausting effort of simply waking up and existing in a world that feels too loud and too heavy.

4. 2. Luke Antony (Rorschach): The “Schizoid” & “Antisocial” Hybrid

Luke Antony is a far more complex clinical study. He displays traits of Schizoid Personality mixed with High-Functioning Sociopathy (Antisocial Personality traits), triggered by a singular traumatic loss.

- Symptom: Emotional Blunting. Luke shows almost no genuine “warm” emotion. His smiles are performative; his anger is cold and calculated. This “flat affect” is a hallmark of someone who has shut down their emotional core to survive.
- Symptom: Magical Thinking / Hallucination. Luke talks to the dead (Dilawar). This isn’t necessarily schizophrenia; it’s a Grief-Induced Psychosis. He chooses to see the ghost because it gives his life a singular, obsessive purpose: Revenge.
- The Narrative Arc: It is an Externalized Projection. Luke takes his internal chaos and forces the entire village to live inside it. He is the architect of his own “Rorschach” test, and the villagers are the ink.

1. The Narrative Backbone: The Ghost of the Absent Patriarch

Structurally, neither movie would exist without the heavy, suffocating shadow of a man who isn’t actually there. This is the structural spine that holds all the narrative tension together.

- **In Rorschach:** The entire spine of the plot is **Dilshod** (Asif Ali). He is dead before the movie even finds its footing. Yet, his actions, his past malice, his half-built house, and his family’s fierce loyalty to his memory dictate every single move Luke Antony makes. Luke is literally warring with a ghost.
- **In Ekō:** The entire spine is **Kuriachan**. He has been missing for five years. Yet, his decades-long history, his eccentric blueprints, his sprawling estate, and his terrifying breed of guardian dogs form the entire foundation of the mystery. The characters are merely walking through a maze that an absent patriarch built for them.

2. The Psychological Backbone: Grief and Hubris Warped into Madness

If the narrative spine is an absent man, the emotional spine is the fatal flaw of human nature – specifically, our desperate need to exercise absolute control over things we cannot change.

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- **Luke’s Obsession (Control Over the Past):** The backbone of Rorschach is a study of **pathological grief**. Luke cannot accept that the man who destroyed his life got away by simply dying. His obsession is to force accountability onto a dead man. It forces us to ask: When does the pursuit of justice simply become a mirror image of the evil that started it?
- **Kuriachan’s Obsession (Control Over Nature):** The backbone of Ekō is a study of **toxic hubris**. Kuriachan’s obsession was breeding, controlling, and weaponizing a rare, exotic animal force. The film’s structural anchor is the terrifying realization that human dominance is an illusion. As the film’s defining thesis states, “Protection and restriction, they both look the same.” The cages humans build to protect their power ultimately become their own tombs.

3. The Cinematic Backbone: The “Inkblot” Approach to Filmmaking

Beyond the characters, the creative backbone of both films is a total reliance on **Atmospheric Ambiguity**.

Neither director relies on the traditional commercial backbone of clear heroes, neat moral lessons, or loud, expository dialogues. Instead, they use the environment – the suffocating village walls in Rorschach and the oppressive, misty jungles of Kaattukunnu in Ekō – to make the setting a living, breathing antagonist.

They don’t spoon-feed you the answers. The backbone of the viewing experience is that **the audience must do the heavy lifting**, forcing you to look into the dark corners of the screen and decide for yourself what is real, what is madness, and who the real monster is.

| Film | The Social Mirror | The Core Warning |
|-----------|---------------------|---|
| Rorschach | The Internal Mirror | Beware of how you handle trauma. If you feed your demons instead of healing your grief, you will destroy everyone around you and build your own mental prison. |
| Ekō | The External Mirror | Beware of your own arrogance. Human authority over nature and other people is an illusion. The tighter you try to squeeze your grip on control, the faster it will turn on you. |

When viewed through the lens of **human nature**, Rorschach and Ekō serve as profound, deeply clinical case studies. They strip away the romanticized idea that humans are inherently

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noble, instead exposing the raw, primal, and often dark evolutionary instincts that drive our behavior when we are pushed to the brink.

1. Rorschach and Human Nature: The Malicious Depth of the Ego

Rorschach explores the **darkest corners of the human psyche**, specifically how the human ego handles catastrophic loss and trauma.

- **The Uncompromising Need for Dominance:** Human nature dictates that when we are deeply wronged, we don't just want justice – we want validation. Luke Antony's campaign isn't about legal closure; it is a manifestation of an unyielding ego. He cannot accept that his enemy died peacefully without facing *his* wrath. His mind invents a ghost just to ensure he can win a war, proving that human nature is capable of inventing its own reality to feed an obsession.
- **The Survivalist Matriarch:** Seetha (the mother) perfectly embodies the primal, animalistic side of human motherhood. Human nature includes a fierce, territorial instinct to protect one's offspring, even if those offspring are monsters. Seetha's absolute lack of guilt or remorse for her family's past crimes shows that when survival and family legacy are threatened, human morality easily evaporates, leaving behind pure, calculated self-preservation.

2. Ekō and Human Nature: The Obsession with Control and Hierarchy

Ekō shifts the focus outward, examining human nature in relation to **power, territory, and the illusion of superiority**.

- **The Hubris of the Apex Predator:** Human nature is inherently driven by a desire to categorize, cage, and dominate our surroundings. The missing patriarch, Kuriachan, represents the ultimate human flaw: the belief that through intelligence and structures (cages, chains, training), we can entirely tame the wild. Ekō argues that human arrogance blinds us to the fact that we are still just animals subject to the laws of nature.
- **The Paranoid Tribal Instinct:** When the outside factions descend upon the misty estate, their behavior reverts to basic tribal warfare. The Maoists, the corporate figures, and the state agents all display the classic human trait of territorial greed. Everyone is wearing a mask, driven by distrust and a desperate urge to conquer a space they don't belong to.

The Contrast in Human Nature

- **In Rorschach, human nature is a Maze:** It is complex, easily broken by grief, and capable of generating internal monsters that are far more terrifying than anything in the physical world. It shows that our greatest battle is often with the reflections of our own trauma.
- **In Ekō, human nature is a Cage:** It highlights our tragic, hardwired compulsion to restrict and control our environment out of fear, completely oblivious to the reality that the walls we build to keep the world out ultimately lock us in.

A comparative study of **Rorschach** (2022) and **Ekō** (2025) highlights a fascinating evolution in modern Malayalam high-concept thrillers. Both films confidently reject commercial formulas,

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choosing instead to focus on complex, deeply atmospheric narratives where the main driver of the plot is an unseen or absent force.

Beneath their structural similarities lies a stark contrast in their core concepts: Rorschach is an internal psychological descent into madness, while Ekō serves as an external ecological exploration of power and human overreach.

Critical Analysis of Core Features

1. The Absent Puppet Master

The most brilliant parallel feature between the two screenplays is that the plot is entirely dictated by a character who is practically invisible.

- **Dilshod in Rorschach:** He is dead and buried before the movie finds its rhythm. Yet, his past malice, his half-built house, and the defensive, corrupt instincts of his surviving family are the exact coordinates Luke uses to wage his war.
- **Kuriachan in Ekō:** Played in memory/flashbacks by Saurabh Sachdeva, the legendary dog breeder has been missing for five years. Yet, his historical footprints, his vast, isolated estate, and his bred army of exotic Malaysian guardian hounds entirely govern the behavior of the state agents, rebels, and corporate figures hunting for him.

2. Character Archetypes & Cast Subversion

Both films achieve a deeply unsettling atmosphere by completely flipping traditional Indian cinematic tropes on their heads.

| Feature / Archetype | Rorschach (2022) | Ekō (2025) |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| The Outsider / Aggressor | Luke Antony (Mammooty): A wealthy, impeccably dressed NRI who uses modern, clinical psychological warfare to break a rural village. | The Outside Factions: Corporate entities, state officials, and rebels who arrive with institutional entitlement to strip-mine a mountain's secrets. |
| The Formidable Matriarch | Seetha (Bindu Panicker): Subverts the gentle mother trope into a fiercely protective, terrifyingly corrupt survivalist willing to hide any stain of blood. | Mlaathi (Biana Momin): A fragile-looking, silent custodian of the estate who acts as an unyielding fortress, mirroring the cold patience of nature. |
| The Audience Surrogate | Shashankan (Jagadish): A local cop representing standard human fear and confusion, framing the sheer absurdity of Luke's psychological state. | Peyoos (Sandeep Pradeep): A grounded, mild-mannered estate helper whose sharp observations and survival instincts anchor the high-concept mystery. |

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Critical Overview and Media Reference

For a deeper visual breakdown of how Eko masterfully uses animal behavior and complex pacing to tie up the final chapter of Bahul Ramesh's acclaimed film anthology, you can watch this analysis on the Eko Movie Review and Trilogy Breakdown. This video provides excellent context on how the film's unique technical framing and sound design compare directly to the experimental waves seen in contemporary Malayalam neo-noirs like Rorschach.

Summary: The Mirror and the Echo

Psychologically, these two films represent the two ways the human mind handles the "Unbearable." The Echo (Eko) is what happens when you cannot stop hearing the past. It is a story of Entropy—the slow winding down of a soul. The Rorschach (Rorschach) is what happens when you decide to paint over the past with your own blood and shadows. It is a story of Reconstruction—albeit a dark and twisted one.

Contemporary Malayalam cinema is experiencing a profound phase of psychological storytelling. Filmmakers are shifting away from using mental illness merely as a dramatic or sensationalized plot device, choosing instead to portray psychological struggles as raw, deeply felt internal realities. Both Eko and Rorschach are pillars of this movement, showing us that the most terrifying monsters aren't in the woods, but in the way we perceive the world.

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[Eko Movie Review: A messy thriller](#)

[Eko: A Dark, Layered Thriller That Completes the Animal Trilogy](#)

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