

MEDIA REVIEW

Care, control, and justice: A feminist review of *Eko*

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***Eko*, Producer: MRK Jhayaram under the banner Aaradyaa studios, Director: Dinjith Ayyathan, November 2025, 125 minutes, Malayalam.**

Eko is a 2025 Indian Malayalam-language mystery thriller, which is the third and final part of writer Bahul Ramesh's animal trilogy. The film centres around the mysterious legacy of Kuriachan, a dog trainer whose dark past haunts the hills of Kattukunnu. Though Kuriachan has been missing for years, those wounded by his atrocities come to Kattukunnu seeking revenge and justice. In an isolated house on the hills resides Kuriachan's third wife, Mlaathi Chettathi, along with a fierce breed of dogs, and a caretaker named Peyoos.

Mlaathi is shown in two periods of her life. At the start, as an elderly woman living in a hilltop at Kattukunnu, with Peyoos and the dogs. Later, in a flashback, we see her as a young married woman in an isolated house in interior Malaysia. Her days are shaped by her husband's absence and the presence of the dogs he breeds. Cut off from social life, her life is marked by repetitive labour and emotional repression. In her old age, the geography has shifted but the structure of her life remains strikingly similar to that of her youth.

Unspoken and menacing: forces that transcend species boundaries

The sensory world of *Eko* is vast and quietly intimidating, with the non-human world shaping the narrative from the outset. Early on, an entrapped female dog in heat is brought to Kattukunnu by a mysterious owner to be mated with Kuriachan's Malaysian breed. This moment is upsetting not merely because of the act itself, but because of how uneventfully it merges into the everyday life of the people involved, normalising violence and control.

Much of the film unfolds through unspoken dialogues and gestures that suggest histories that are never fully revealed. Governed by discipline and surveillance, *Eko* slowly builds up towards a disturbing parallel between the plights of women and female dogs.

The sensory experience of *Eko* is incomplete without its characters and their profound dualities. Kuriachan, largely unseen except through flashbacks, oscillates between heroism and sociopathy, leaving his moral core and motivations unclear. Equally mysterious is Mlaathi, quiet yet assertive, and gentle yet determined in matters that concern her. Peyoos, attentive and devoted, yet unpredictable, subtly reveals the fragility of power and authority.

At the heart of *Eko* are the dogs, conscious forces that symbolise nature's capacity for love, loyalty, and aggression. They are not mere companions but moral subjects through whom the film explores how violence and care transcend species boundaries.

Violence, deception, and a care beyond control

Eko's political world is hypermasculine, with men drawing legitimacy from inflicting emotional and physical harm on others. The film draws parallels between human women and canine females, suggesting that female bodies need supervision and control, often framed as "protection" or "care" or both. Mid-narrative, as part of Mlaathi's backstory, the film criticises the idea that care is often manifested as protection, which requires the exercise of control. Ironically, it is Kuriachan himself who advances this idea, through a monologue to a younger Mlaathi, that any protection offered in exchange for one's freedom is to be shunned, thereby rejecting any moral alignment between domination and care.

As the story progresses, *Eko* reveals a more insidious and crafty form of "care," one manifested through deception and the calculated display of love and respect. Such performances cultivate loyalty, but they remain a form of domination because the ultimate purpose is control. Often, this brand of domination is not easily recognised, delaying the realisation that one is being controlled.

The makers use Mlaathi's relationship with the dogs to demonstrate care grounded in trust and respect, rather than control. She fiercely advocates for their freedom from domesticated entrapment. When Peyoos insists this is how humans have always handled dogs, she counters him by asking, "So what if she (a female dog) has given birth? Does she not need time for herself?"

Mlaathi seek neither loyalty nor productivity from her dogs, nor does she want to control them. She revels in the act of caring itself, where carer and cared mutually flourish. For her, care and protection are freely given — not exchanged for freedom — indicating the practice of justice across species boundaries.

Gender, power, and agency: the crux of *Eko*

One of the most profound and unsettling insights from the film is encapsulated in the idea that "sometimes protection and restriction look the same." Mlaathi's life is saturated with this ambiguity through gendered experiences of control, right from her youth. Her movements and choices are

continuously interpreted and monitored by the men around her. In Kuriachan's prolonged absence, her son, Peyoos, and even the local community take over the caretaker roles, claiming legitimacy using the language of "protection." Yet, it is revealed that beneath this rhetoric, the motives are the same – surveillance and control.

As an older woman living alone, Mlaathi is both infantilised and suspected, her age used to justify surveillance disguised as protection. Despite her obvious preference for Peyoos, she repeatedly asserts her autonomy against his efforts to "protect" her. Her outsider status compounds this vulnerability. Despite a lifetime in the hamlet, she remains marked as unfamiliar and exotic, making her a target of suspicion and gossip by the local community. The film also blurs the boundary between Mlaathi and the ecology she inhabits. Her body and labour, much like the more-than-human world around her, are treated as mere resources for sustaining life, while remaining subject to interpretation and control. Her resistance to easy interpretation is attributed to her complicity in crime, immorality, or even black magic. The community's gaze thus operates as a form of moral surveillance, ensuring that deviation from the norm, especially by an older foreign woman, is neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Yet, Mlaathi's agency lies precisely in her quiet refusal to conform. Her resistance is neither confrontational nor loud but a casual, amused emotional distance that proves more powerful than rage. By choosing opacity over emotion, she simply dismisses the moral order seeking to control her.

Power, paternalism and the ethics of care

The ethical questions raised by *Eko* are equally relevant in the context of healthcare which has long been shaped by paternalistic traditions. Classical medical paternalism rests on the assumption that healthcare professionals, by virtue of their expertise, are best positioned to determine what serves a patient's interests [1]. Often experienced as benevolent and reassuring, even protective, this model is sustained by unequal power relations and information asymmetries that allow control to be exercised in the name of protection. The language of care may simply mask the domination, particularly when patients' autonomy is subordinated to professional power.

These tensions are especially visible in women's healthcare, where the body frequently becomes a site of moral regulation alongside clinical intervention. Reproductive healthcare decisions, including those concerning contraception and abortion continue to be mediated by socially constructed norms of femininity and motherhood. Manifestations of these include disrespectful maternity care and the denial, delay, or moral policing of reproductive services, which illustrate how protection and beneficence may be conditional upon conformity to patriarchal norms [2]. Such extension of care

into the regulation of women's choices, reproduces the very paternalism that *Eko* so powerfully critiques.

Mlaathi's repeated insistence that neither women nor animals should surrender freedom in exchange for protection therefore resonates far beyond the film. It challenges us to distinguish between care that enables autonomy and care that legitimises domination. The question is not whether care is offered, but whether it is offered with respect for the agency and dignity of those who receive it.

Conclusion

Eko is remarkable because it compels us to question some of our familiar assumptions about care. The film sensitively traces the fragile boundary between care and control, and reveals how domination often survives not through overt violence but through the language of protection, affection, and responsibility. This is a familiar contradiction in healthcare settings, where systems that feel genuinely protective may still erode autonomy and agency while continuing to present themselves as benevolent care. At a time when healthcare is increasingly marked by tensions between patients and providers, *Eko* reminds us that ethical care cannot be built on domination disguised as protection. Rather, it should be measured by the extent to which it preserves people's freedom and dignity. Like an echo, the film's ethical questions continue to reverberate long after the credits, asking us not whether care is present, but whose freedom it protects, whose agency it constrains, and whose interests it ultimately serves.

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Conflict of Interest: None declared

Funding: None

To cite: Mohan M, Thomas SC. Care, control, and justice: A feminist review of *Eko*. *Indian J Med Ethics*. Published online first on September 2, 2026. DOI: 10.20529/IJME.2026.053

Submission received: February 2, 2026

Submission accepted: August 15, 2026

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