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The Auditory Trap of Kaattukunnu: Exploring Acoustic Ecology and Canine Sovereignty in *Ekō*

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Abstract: Dinjith Ayyathan's *Ekō* is a 2025 Malayalam thriller set in the misty hills of Kaattukunnu, a forest backdrop which acts as a driving force of the plot. While the film is analyzed for its ecocritical and ecofeminist perspectives, this paper focuses on the acoustic ecology where the unique sounds and geography become the central forces of the movie. The deceptive echoes, wind, and barks confuse and suffocate the human characters, completely stripping away the human logic and authority. Through this study of sound, the paper explores the concept of canine sovereignty. It argues that the movie uses dogs as the natural protectors of the forest. Their barks act as an invisible army that threatens to make the guns, money and logic of humans totally useless. By shifting the focus from visual clues to soundscapes, this study argues that the physical environment of the isolated Kaattukunnu serves as a sensory trap that enforces its own natural justice. The paper argues that true sovereignty and justice in wilderness do not belong to humans, but to its wild topography that rules its territory through sound.

Keywords: *Acoustic Ecology, Canine Sovereignty, Ekō, Soundscape, Wild Topography*

Ekō, directed by Dinjith Ayyathan is a 2025 Malayalam film set in the misty landscape of Kaattukunnu. The movie revolves around an elderly woman, Mlaathi Chettathi, living with the realities of the past in her isolated house, while all other characters are in search of her notorious dog breeder husband, Kuriachan. Searchers like Mohan Pothan and an unnamed naval officer (played by Narain) enter Kaattukunnu driven by their personal motives, bringing their secrets and conflicts into the forest. While the movie's primary focus relies on the outbreak of buried secrets through the searchers, the forest backdrop of the film acts as a major driving force.

Kaattukunnu, the fictional setting of the film, is a fog-covered, isolated region near KeralaKarnataka border. In the film, Kaattukunnu acts as an active character that mirrors the life of the characters and enforces the theme of control, isolation and surveillance.

Traditional Malayalam thrillers rely heavily on visual evidence, clues, and dramatic face to face confrontations. *Ekō* shifts this cinematic focus into the auditory realm. Unlike the traditional thrillers that use visual investigation and intelligence to solve a mystery, the thick, shifting fog of Kaattukunnu acts as a barrier to the character's visual sight, forcing both the audience and characters to rely on listening rather than seeing. Apart from the dense fog-covered grasslands and steep cliffs, the unique soundscape becomes the central force in the movie. With its focus on soundscape rather than visual clues, the isolated Kaattukunnu acts as a sensory trap that enforces the authority of the natural landscape over humans. The film portrays how the acoustic environment nullifies human logic, strips humans of their superiority, and establishes canine sovereignty all over Kaattukunnu.

The existing studies on Dinjith Ayyathan's *Ekō* focus largely on anthropocentric control and its patriarchal dominance. Anagha Vinod highlights how film's wilderness "transforms its spatial entrapment into a complete inversion of power, where patriarchal dominance is overpowered by sovereignty of wild space"(1168). Athira Menon examines the coloniality of power in *Ekō*, demonstrating how non-human forces dismantle human authority by co-opting Kuriachan's own systems of surveillance to displace him (78–81). In her film review on *The News Minute*, Maria Teresa Raju expands this neutralization of human domination, analysing that the narrative blurs the line between human control and canine sovereignty, completely shattering the illusion of human authority. While the existing studies addressed the coloniality and ecofeminist views, there remains a significant gap regarding its auditory realm. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on the acoustic ecology and canine sovereignty to demonstrate how Kaattukunnu serves as a sensory trap.

Acoustic Ecology, as propounded by R. Murray Schafer, refers to the study of the relationship between living beings and their sound environment (Wrightson 10). This is further defined by Pijanowski et al. as "the collection of biological, geophysical and anthropogenic sounds that emanate from a landscape

and which vary over space and time reflecting important ecosystem processes and human activities" (203). An acoustic environment consists of the background sounds of a place such as wind, water, whistles and traffic shaped by "keynotes" and distinct "soundmarks". In Dinjith Ayyathan's *Ekō*, the fog, the wind, the sonic border between city and the soundscape of Kaattukkunnu, the invisible border through the barking of dogs and their dominance exposes how incapable human logic is in the sensory trap of Kaattukunnu. This trap enforces the canine sovereignty of Kaattukunnu, where "ecological imagery challenges anthropocentric domination" (Menon 81), with every scene and barking of dogs acting as an omnipresent force throughout the plot.

The initial scenes of the movie itself establish the sonic border between the city—a man-made region and Kaattukunnu—a wild reigned region. The beginning sequence where Appootty fetches Mohan Pothan from a city lodge and their ongoing conversation regarding Kuriachan is presented in a normal human level voice. Inside the lodge as well as in their initial jeep ride inside the city, human voice remains the dominant one. The acoustic environment of manmade urban regions and vehicles allows a smooth, effortless conversation between humans. Here the anthrophony- human-generated sound-remains the supreme, representing a human governed environment created to facilitate smooth social interaction.

However, this sensory comfort instantly shifts as their journey reaches its destination. The moment they step outside the jeep, in the core area of Kaattukunnu, their voice suddenly increases as if they have to shout in order to hear each other. This transition is not just by the change in landscape, but in its acoustic environment. The whole conversation in the forest is overpowered by the noise of wind and the waters of the forest of Kaattukunnu. The rustling and roaring of streams and the blowing of wind instantly captures the sonic atmosphere. This shift demonstrates what soundscape theorist R. Murray Schafer defines in *The Tuning of the World* as a transition from low-fidelity human environment to high density natural landscape. In his "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology", Kendall Wrightson states that non-human sounds are not just static background of natural landscape, but are active musical notes that enrich human sensory experiences (10). This initial scene itself shows the shift from the anthrophony of the city, where humans are in control of the sonic pressure of their own environment, to the acoustic ecology dominated by the wild geography of Kaattukunnu.

In the city, the easy access and smooth vocal transmission takes a complete turn the moment they step into the wilderness of Kaattukunnu. In the city, even a whisper and normal speech are easily carried because the acoustic environment of a city is managed to protect human interaction. But in Kaattukunnu, the thick fog along with the natural background noise forces humans to shout and strain, stripping them from the smooth communication a human domain region offers. When Appootty and

Mohan Pothan reach Kaattukunnu, their sounds immediately show the strain of acoustic shift. The same repeats in a flashback scene where Kuriachan and Appootty, after a bloody incident that forces Kuriachan to hide, had to talk with thick fog surrounding them. The heavy fog blocks their sight and forces them to talk loud with their strained vocal cords. Thus, the forest does not adapt to humans, but forces humans to adapt to its natural keynotes, confirming right from the beginning that human logic and authority is instantly weakened by the wilderness of Kaattukunnu.

This stripping of human logic is further emphasized through the upcoming scenes where Peeyoos has to fetch a doctor from the city to check on Mlaathi Chettathi. The panting of both the doctor and Peeyoos after climbing Kaattukunnu and the diagnosis of Chettathi's ear balance issue further highlights the limits of human survival in this landscape in stark contrast to the omnipresence of dogs. Whenever humans climb up Kaattukunnu, their physique as well as their communication gets exhausted. It clearly manifests that Kaattukunnu physically rejects human biology while favouring canine adaptation. This scene plays a major role that highlights the physical strain. In normal city spaces, human movement is easy and smooth, but in Kaattukunnu, climbing up the hills requires immense physical effort. The sound of heavy breathing and panting fills up the audio space as Peeyoos and the doctor make their way up to Mlaathi Chettathi. The high altitude and steep terrain lead to audible exhaustion, proving that human beings are out of their element in the wild setting.

In addition to this, the diagnosis of Mlaathi Chettathi's ear balance issue also carries a thematic meaning in the film. The fact that Chettathi suffers from an ear balance issue, detrimental to both hearing and physical balance, shows how the landscape of Kaattukunnu directly affects and damages human sensory organs. The acoustic environment and atmospheric pressure disrupts human inner balance. This physical and sensory exhaustion stands in stark contrast to the tireless adaptation of dogs. While humans struggle to climb, breathe and keep their balance, the dogs continue to wander the steep cliffs and misty hills. They do not get tired or lose balance. The canine pack holds complete sovereignty over the terrain.

Apart from the failure of human biology, the film also shows the failure of human logic and technology. The device that Appootty uses to call the police when returning with the doctor, shows that mobile phones cannot be used here for smooth communication. The fact that they have to get down soon before a particular time shows how the landscape of Kaattukunnu is not under the dominance of humans, stripping humans of their superiority, reducing them to primal prey. The urgency to leave Kaattukunnu within a specific time limit highlights how humans are forced to follow the schedules of the forest. Humans always control their environment and schedule, but in Kaattukunnu human logic and schedules do not apply. Kaattukunnu forces them to operate on its own

dangerous timeline. The forest becomes increasingly dangerous once darkness falls and the fog thickens, which affects not only their sight but also auditory capacity.

The necessity to get down immediately shows that humans are not the rulers in this landscape. They cannot fix the schedule and timeline, which forces them to flee the terrain before its hidden dangers overpower them. By removing the safety nets of humans such as effortless communication, basic technology, and control over their own lives, Kaattukunnu redefines the relationship between humans and nature. By placing humans in an environment where they cannot rely on communication or easy movement, where their technology fails, where the heavy fog dictates their schedules and makes their physical bodies weak, the humans lose their perceived authority over nature. Kaattukunnu reduces humans from confident supreme authority to cautious objects acting as prey of the wilderness of Kaattukunnu.

This auditory disorientation directly points to the canine sovereignty of Kaattukunnu. The appearance of dogs every few minutes of the film highlights how Kaattukunnu is completely under surveillance. This sovereignty begins from the initial city scene itself where Appootty stumbles over as he hears the barking of a dog from the luggage of Mohan Pothan. Though a dog is not shown in the scene, its bark or growl dominate the scene. From that moment onwards the growling of dogs prevails in the background throughout the film even without any visible source. It is analyzed that every happening, meeting and conversation between humans are constantly monitored by dogs. The closeup shots of dogs after each major event in the story highlight this.

The dog silently watching Appootty return with the doctor is a perfect example for this. No one comes and goes without them watching. This continuous surveillance highlights that the dogs of Kaattukunnu are not just passive animals in the forest; they act as the active guardians of the forest who control who enters and leaves the terrain. The luggage scene is particularly important as it establishes the power of the dog even without visually showing a dog on screen. Even their sound itself is enough for humans to stumble over and lose their balance. As the plot progresses, the barks and growls remain a constant presence in the soundscape, making the audience feel the presence of dogs everywhere at once, watching everything behind the fog. This surveillance is fully explained in Appootty's own words as he describes how dogs guard the entire area:

It's about those dogs on Kaattukunnu hills. Suppose a stranger starts climbing that hill... Every hundred feet or so a dog will suddenly appear from the woods and block his path. It sizes him up for a while. It might bark or growl to scare him. If he's the cowardly type, he'll turn back right then and there. But those who've got the courage to keep going

can try their luck. But another hundred feet up, another dog will be waiting. You have to pass through several of these check-posts to reach Kuriachan's house. (01:03:11-47)

This dialogue is a clear manifestation of how dogs act as an organized security force in Kaattukunnu. The dogs set up an invisible, acoustic border. Like human societies protecting their property and borders by placing gatekeepers and securities, the dogs place themselves every hundred feet, appearing suddenly out of the fog and growling towards any human outsider. Their growl acts as a barrier that turns away anyone. By calling them “checkposts”, Appootty highlights that humans cannot enter this landscape at their own will. Instead, they need to be permitted and inspected by the dogs at every hundred feet. Appootty’s description highlights that these dogs do not even bite right away, instead they position themselves skillfully to confront human intruders even before any physical confrontation. As *The News Minute* analyses, *Ekō* operates "on a foundation of blurry lines between human and animal, dog and disciple, the guard and the guarded, loyalty and servitude... and protection and restriction" (Raju). The sound does not travel in a straight line as the geography of Kaattukunnu acts as an acoustic filter. The thick fog conceals human speech, the rocks and cliff disrupts and shatters the human voice. While human orientation is swallowed by the acoustic environment, the barking of the dogs remains steady and echoes through the mist. This echo makes it difficult for humans to find out where the sound is actually coming from or where the dogs are actually standing. This demonstrates the way Kaattukunnu works against human reason, as fog leaves humans visually blind and the echoes make them audibly confused.

This realization of canine sovereignty is also explicitly stated by Peeyoos when he plans to search the mountains with Sukumaran and Soman, the police officers disguised as lorry drivers: "Another hazard to note are the dogs. Instead of going too high, we should descend along Madakkupaara's slope. The higher we climb, the deeper we'll be in the dogs' territory. If they smell something wrong, they won't let us through." (01:21:14-31). This dialogue clearly shows that the characters themselves recognize that all of Kaattukunnu is dominated by packs. Peeyoos has to change his route down to Madakkapaara’s slope specifically to avoid trespassing into the dog’s territory. The phrase “they won't let us through,” shifts the authority entirely to dogs, highlighting the dogs as security guards protecting Kaattukunnu.

Furthermore, the closeup shots of dogs after every major narrative event reinforce the nonhuman authority of Kaattukunnu. When Appootty rides back down the hill with the doctor after checking on Mlaathi Chettathi, the camera shows a closeup shot of a dog, watching them silently. It is to be noted that the dog does not bark or growl; it simply observes. This scene demonstrates that nothing in Kaattukunnu happens without the dogs knowing about it. Every secret meeting and conversation

between the characters like Mohan Pothan and Peeyoos is always under the watchful eyes and sharp ears of the dogs. Through this combination of watchful packs, checkpoints and thick fog, the film portrays how the human authority is completely replaced by the canine sovereignty of Kaattukunnu.

This is further enhanced through the visual framing when portraying both humans and dogs. Dogs are always on close-up shots, focusing their eyes and growling whereas humans in frame are mostly on wide shots with the immense landscape of Kaattukunnu in the background. This framing creates an evident visual contrast that portrays who holds the power in Kaattukunnu. By placing the dogs in close up shots, the camera forces the audience to confront the sensory awareness and immediate physical presence of the dogs. These close ups shots capture every tiny detail- their posture, vibrating growls, narrowing of eyes. In contrast, human characters placed in wide shots are rendered small against the massive landscape. The overwhelming mountains, the thick shifting mist, and dense forest appear as dominant figures, making humans look smaller and completely isolated. The wide shots present humans as insignificant figures swallowed by the overwhelming wilderness.

This visual strategy ties directly back to the concept of sonic entrapment. The dense landscape acts as a physical wall that traps not only their sight but also their voices inside the forest. As Appootty says, "Kaattukunnu hill is nothing but a windswept wilderness. No one would even hear you scream"(00:22:50). This dialogue demonstrates that the roaring wind and fog create an environment where humans' calls for help disappear into the air, leaving humans unheard and helpless within the canine sovereignty.

This marks the ultimate sovereignty of Kaattukunnu which rejects human logic and communication. It also points to the mysterious disappearance of Kuriachan. Even if he is alive and trapped as the ending implies, the forest conceals his cries and shouts. All that one can hear echoing through the fog will be the growling of dogs. This demonstrates that the tools of authority that Kuriachan once trained to enforce his power are co-opted by subaltern forces, transforming his own methods of surveillance into the mechanisms that displace him (Menon 78–79). It reduces the protagonist into "a string puppet who vainly revelled in the illusion of autonomy" (Raju). This environmental isolation is further stated when Peeyoos, as he first came to Kaattukunnu, had to stay at the top of a tree as dogs were trying to attack him. No one heard him cry or shout. When asked about this, he recalls that moment of complete failure of human voice in that landscape: "Like anyone could've heard me! So what did you do for two days? Stayed up that damn tree! What else could I do? Those sons of bitches just wouldn't leave! They took turns, keeping watch right below me."(01:31:43- 49). Kaattukunnu presents an environment that completely conceals human sounds and distress signals. Human tech fails, human screams are swallowed by the forest. It forces characters to shout their secrets they wanted to whisper. The physical

climate of Kaattukunnu, heavy fog and mist sabotages human safety and privacy, dismantling any human control over the natural world.

The constant sound of barks every few minutes creates an auditory fence around Kaattukunnu. Long before one can see a dog, the bark penetrates through the thick fog and dense trees. It creates a boundary that humans cannot cross. This acoustic fence demonstrates that this space is monitored not by humans, but by the natural and animal elements of Kaattukunnu. The murder of Mohan Pothan exemplifies this boundary. It is the dangerous dog barks that make Peeyoos and Mohan Pothan stop their conversation and run towards the mountain's edge. It is the dogs who murder Mohan Pothan, pushing him down the steep cliff. It is crucial to observe that even when he is falling, neither his desperate cries nor his shouting is heard by anyone. But instead of focusing on the terror of a human murder, the camera focuses entirely on dogs and their growling. In popular thrillers, a character's death is marked by a dramatic scream, or a final dialogue. In *Ekō*, the landscape of Kaattukunnu deliberately mutes Mohan Pothan's cry and replaces it with the fierce growling of the pack. The sound design of the film refuses to give the dying man a voice. The sonic environment of Kaattukunnu swallows his final moment. The sonic trap is finalized here: The dog's growl completely erases human presence, authority and voice from Kaattukunnu, establishing absolute governance.

Ekō transforms the fictional landscape of Kaattukunnu from a passive geographical backdrop to an active character that strips humans of their authority and even voice. The sonic entrapment along with visually dense, shifting fog forces the audience into a state of uncertainty; it reflects the philosophy of *Ekō*: the fog blurs the boundaries of what is real, making what looks like protection actually a silent, life-long cage. This environment transforms spatial entrapment into a complete inversion of power, where patriarchal dominance is permanently replaced by the sovereignty of the wild space (Vinod 1168). The film uses its unique soundscape to demonstrate that the environment itself holds the absolute power. As Mohan Pothan's final voice is swallowed and Kuriachan remains lost to wilderness, the auditory landscape of Kaattukunnu confirms the total erasure of human authority.

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