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Myth, Ritual, and Ecology: Indigenous Environmental Consciousness in *Kantara*

Prerna Anmol

ORCID https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8534-1569

Corresponding Author: Prerna Anmol, Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, prerna.anmol@gmail.com

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Abstract

Aim: *The aim of this research paper is to analyse the Kannada film Kantara (2022) as a cultural text that portrays the dramatization of indigenous environmental consciousness through myth, ritual and living customs in the context of ecological practices. The paper examines the articulation of the relationship between humans, land, spirits, and nature. It also investigates the challenges of anthropocentric and modern developmental narratives in the framework of indigenous cosmologies and environmental ethics.*

Methodology and Approach: *This paper is qualitative research and an interpretative methodology inherited from ecocriticism, indigenous studies, and myth criticism. The film is studied as a narrative and visual text concerning landscapes and the interaction of the protagonist and the community with nature.*

Outcome: *The exploration of the film concluded that nature is not a passive resource but a living, spiritual, and moral force. Rituals like 'Bhoota Kola' and the narratives of the community, the myth of the place, are all embedded in such a way that they maintain balance between humans and nature. The film also gives a lens for the conflict between indigenous ecological ethics and modern capitalist exploitation of land, focusing on the violence of displacement and environmental degradation.*

***Conclusion and Suggestion**: It establishes it within native myths, cosmological traditions, land ownership discourse, and the never-ending conflict between humans and nature. It discerns the land not as property in a materialistic manner but as a living entity in a sacred way.*

***Correspondence:** Prerna Anmol, prerna.anmol@gmail.com

Over the past few decades, ecocriticism has come to be an essential cross-functional area within literary and cultural studies, acknowledging the acceleration of major environmental issues like ecological degradation, climate change, and environmental injustice. Though the initial focus of ecocriticism is on the writing about nature extended to the fields of contemporary cinema, folklore, and indigenous narratives, the main goal is to understand how cultural texts affect human nature and bring changes towards the natural world. Indian cinema, in particular regional cinema embedded in native traditions, provides a conducive atmosphere for ecocritical inspection due to its association with myths, landscapes and lively ecological realities.

Kantara (2022) is a Kannada-language film having a set of forest coastal regions of Karnataka, granting a gripping and captivating ecological narrative implanted in indigenous belief systems. The term 'Kantara' represents wilderness or forest land, highlighting nature as both the setting of the film and also the central character. The film interweaves myth, native rituals, indigenous beliefs, folk elements and realism to portray the conflict between forest-house communities and modern forces and the power of land appropriation. Basically, *Kantara* cross-examines the notion of land ownership and presents a new ecological ethic rooted in sanctified landscape and ancestral memory.

This paper presents *Kantara* as an ecological text that emphasises indigenous cosmology as a counter-discourse to capitalist modernity. By interrogating the film through the perspectives of ecocritical study, indigenous knowledge, and ecological justice, the examination reveals how *Kantara* dramatises the struggle between humans and nature, which is not a battle where victory matters but an ethical and spiritual accounting that requests humility, respect, and coexistence. In his book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), Glotfelty and Fromm define, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). They further expand the point:

> Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.

> Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature (xix).

Contrasting the ideas of traditional literary criticism, which generally give priority to human-centred concerns, ecocriticism values nature as an active presence rather than a passive backdrop.

The primary focus of ecocriticism is the critique of anthropocentrism, which is a belief that humans are the central and most significant entities in the universe. Ecocritical texts promptly question the ideology which justifies environmental exploitation, such as capitalism, colonialism, and technological advancements. In that respect, indigenous knowledge systems presume critical importance because they often conceptualise nature as sacred, animate, and relational. Lawrence Buell discussed these factors in his book *The Environmental Imagination* (1995),

> Yet by far the single most significant aspect of cultural difference with which we shall have to reckon pertains neither to ethnicity nor to gender but to anthropocentrism, that is to the parallax engendered by human-centered vision, particularly in the modern age of print culture and advanced technology. All living writers and readers, regardless of gender and ethnicity, are more or less constrained by it: by the ethnocentricity of the human estate (20).

Indigenous cultural practices shaped by the lived experiences of the natives perform an essential part in framing environmental ethics by providing symbolic frameworks in such a way that human beings understand, value, and relate to the natural world. In the distant past, the unfolding of environmental science, and cultures all over the world expanded myths and rituals that encoded ecological wisdom, moral responsibility, sustainable practices and traditional knowledge systems. By narrating the consequences of profaning natural laws through calamities like droughts, floods or divine punishments, myths act as ethical warnings that reinforce ecological balance.

Myths are not fantasy but cultural texts which project a community's worldview. Generally, environmental myths represent nature as sacred, animate, and morally significant. In most of the indigenous traditions, parts of nature like forests, animals, rivers, and mountains are personified as deities, ancestors, or

spiritual entities. Such portrayals summon anthropocentric presumption by placing humans within, rather than above, the ecological order. As an example, myths surrounding sanctified roots in India or the Gaia (Earth Mother) in Greek mythology stimulate a sense of admiration for nature, controlling exploitation and promoting coexistence.

In Hindu culture, banyan and peepal trees are worshipped as divine entities, and animals like cows, snakes and elephants represent Kamadhenu, Lord Shiva and Lord Ganesha, respectively. By expanding indigenous narratives, in North India, the Ganges river and the sun are worshipped in Chhath Puja. Another example of these narratives is people celebrating Govardhan Puja, which represents the worship of mountains. The Zamzam water story reflects how nature is sacred for those who visit Mecca. These traditional narratives and performative acts carry on at the present time, specifically in an era marked by ecological crisis and environmental degradation.

Rituals convert the symbolic meanings of myths into lived reality. Seasonal festivals, agricultural rites, and worship of natural elements standardise admiration for the environment through repeated, communal action. Rituals such as rain-invoking ceremonies, harvest festivals, or tree worship not merely convey gratitude and respect to nature but also balance human behaviour in relation to ecological cycles. These customs motivate moderation, restraint, and reciprocity, key features of environmental ethics. Practices that prohibit hunting or logging in the course of seasonal activities serve as traditional conservation strategies, securing the regeneration of natural resources.

In present-time environmental ethics, myths and rituals provide other options to purely scientific or utilitarian propositions. The contemporary ecological crises are generally embedded in a mechanistic worldview that assumes nature is an object for consumption. Myths and rituals encourage an ethic of care, responsibility, and humility, reminding humans of their dependence on ecological systems. By invoking sacred narratives, communities authorised environmental preservation as both a moral and cultural imperative.

The major concern of this paper is to analyse how the film, *Kantara*, portrays indigenous environmental consciousness rooted in myth and rituals. Other specific objectives of this research include the examination of folkloric

narratives which influence the relationship between communities and nature and the study of the role of native myths and folklore in creating environmental worldviews as shown in *Kantara*. The paper aims to investigate the dramatisation of rituals and customs and focuses on the mechanism of ecological balance and cultural continuity. Another major goal is to explore the symbolic importance of the relation between nature and non-human beings and how these indigenous narratives help in ecological conservation.

This research paper applies an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology that intermingles ecocriticism, indigenous studies, and myth criticism to study *Kantara* as a cultural and cinematic text expressing ecological consciousness. This analysis takes the film as popular cinema as well as a narrative site where myth, ritual, land, and ecology intersect, possessing other ways of knowing nature that create a conflict amongst dominant anthropocentric and capitalist paradigms.

Methodologically, the paper depends on textual and visual portrayals of *Kantara*, focusing on narrative structure, symbolism, ritual performance, spatial representation of forests and land, and character interactions with the natural world. Prominent scenes of the film, like 'Bhoota Kola' ritual, forest encounters, and conflicts over land ownership, are neatly associated to examine how environmental values are rooted within indigenous belief systems. The study is aided by contextual interpretation, drawing upon anthropological, folkloric, and ecological studies of coastal Karnataka's indigenous culture, as well as enduring literary and cultural theory.

The principle conceptual framework is ecocriticism, specifically its alteration from nature-as-background to nature-as-character. Relying on theorists such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Bell, and Greg Garrard, the paper studies how Kantara emphasises the interdependence between humans, land, spirits, and animals. Conventional environmental narratives that generally advantage preservation through legal or scientific discourse, in contrast, *Kantara* represents ecology as sacred and relational. The forest is not a resource to be exploited but a lived reality ruled by moral, spiritual, and communal obligations. This ecological lens assists in exposing the critical study of the features of the film, such as anthropocentrism, state authority, and capitalist land appropriation.

In the context of ecocriticism, indigenous narratives contribute a pivotal structure for understanding the epistemological foundations of the film. Studies of indigenous cultures draw attention to land-based knowledge, oral traditions, ritual practices, and collective identity. The relationship of the community with the forest deity displays an indigenous worldview in which environmental management is inseparable from cultural survival. This perspective ignores romanticising indigeneity while emphasising indigenous agency, resilience, and ethical frameworks of coexistence. The third theoretical orientation, myth criticism, is enrolled to study how myth and ritual work as ecological narratives. Myth in *Kantara* is not distracted fantasy but a vital force that conciliates between humans and nature. Ritual performance becomes a means of environmental communication, strengthening ecological boundaries and collective memory. This research tries to explore *Kantara* as a powerful counter-narrative to modern environmental discourse by emphasising native ecological ethics embedded in sacred ecology, communal responsibility, and mythic consciousness.

Presently, environmental literary studies began to flourish as an eminent area, and critics and scholars started to take it as a crucial part of study. Hopefully, a good amount of research has been published on the movie *Kantara*, including the fields of environmental justice, indigenous culture and narratives, subaltern identity, caste dynamics, and folklore (Bhoota Kola). Also, it included the areas of political commentary, Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory, and media studies. The research papers, including seminal pieces like "Film Review: Indigenous Epistemology, Media, and the Representation of Women in Kantara" (2023), by Argha Basu and Priyanka Tripathi, and "Examining (in)justice, environmental activism and indigenous knowledge systems in the Indian film Kantara (Mystical Forest)" (2023), by Goutam Karmakar and Payel Pal, are based on the indigenous cultural side of the film. The goal of the former paper is to reflect indigenous communities in the context of the portrayal of women and media, and the latter one focuses on the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems. While this paper is based on myths and rituals rooted in folklore with the same scenario of indigenous cultural background with different approaches.

Kantara, directed by Rishab Shetty, is a magnum opus and an example of eco-cinema embedded in indigenous cosmology and environmental justice.

Kantara represents forests, land, and wildlife as lived and sanctified entities, not commodities. Indigenous knowledge in *Kantara* is reflected through folklore, myths, rituals, and the relationship between the community and the forest. Native practices foreground coexistence, collective ownership, and respect for ecological boundaries. In his book, *Sacred Ecology* (2012), Fikret Berkes discussed traditional knowledge, which is considered at four integrated levels, as shown in fig. 1 (17). "The figure shows the four levels of analysis as concentric ellipses, with the management system encompassing local and empirical knowledge, the institution level enveloping the management system, and all three levels embedded within a worldview or belief system" (Berkes and Folke 1998). Further, Berkes expands the discussion that "local language may widen; management systems along with institutions may adjust, modify, change, and fall down and may be started again. Worldviews give an outline structure to observations and social institutions but may themselves be affected by transformations taking place at the other levels, such as the integration of management systems" (19).

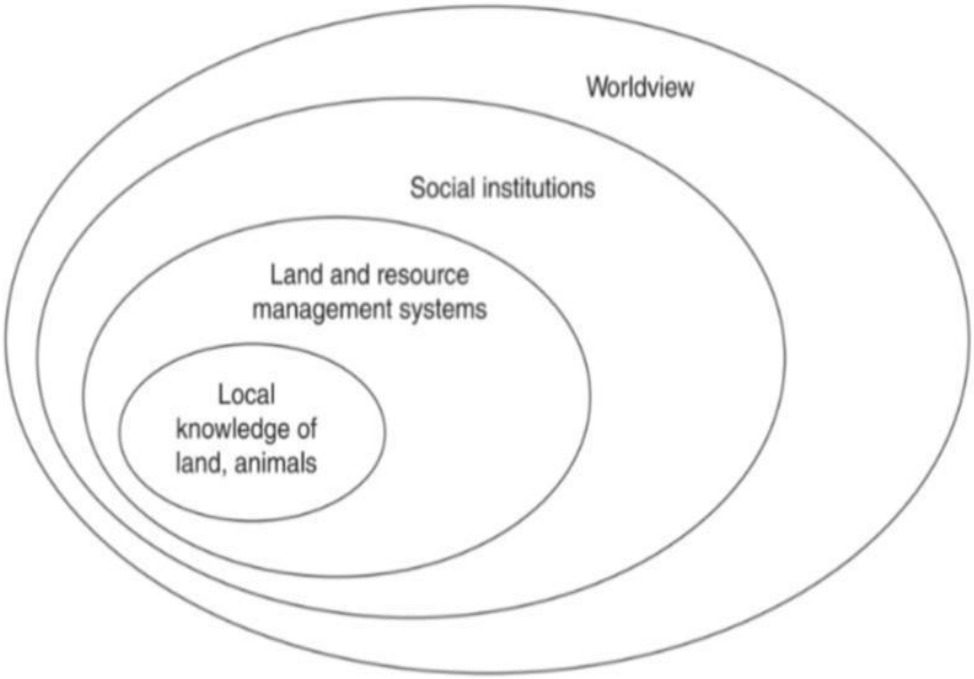

Fig. 1

Kantara extracts extremely from the myth traditions of coastal Karnataka, particularly the folk and belief systems of the Tuluva region. At the core of this

dramatic text lies the ancient myth of Panjurli and Guliga, formidable Daivas, the spirit deities who were honoured and worshipped by native people. It is believed that these protectors are the guardian spirits of the land, forests, and the standards of behaviour that bind humans to nature. In her book, *Myth and Environmentalism: Arts of Resilience for a Damaged Planet* (2024), Sánchez-Pardo deals with the interrelation of myth and environment and concludes it as "Myth and the environment are not rigidly bounded fields; rather, they are expanded areas of experience, practice, and knowledge growing out of a socially constructed understanding of nature" (1). She further explains, "Nature and reality are mirrored in myth, and the frame, the substance, and the major elements—setting, conflict, resolution of myth" (3). She expanded her thoughts:

> Traditional accounts of myth have enhanced our relations and understanding of the environment. The anthropological, philosophical, and sociological study of myth, together with the scientific evaluation of climate change damage, deserve further investigation to grasp the interactions between science and culture in a continuum rather than as worlds apart (3).

The major character of this cinematic text is the part of deities and spirits in the sacralisation of land and forest. The purpose of sacralisation as a moral mechanism is to treat the forest as divine territory; the community is ethically surrounded to respect ecological limits. The unfair treatment of land becomes not an economic or legal issue but a sacrilegious action with spiritual consequences.

In his book, *The Power of Myth* (2011), Campbell and Bill answer the question of how they get the experience of life and experience of meaning from the search for meaning to define a myth in this way:

> Read myths. They teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols. Read other people's myths, not those of your own religion, because you tend to interpret your own religion in terms of facts- but if you read the other ones, you begin to get the message. Myth helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive. It tells you what the experience is (5).

The myth tells a story which reflects a pious connection between humans and the forest. As folklore narrates, the land does not belong to kings or individuals;

rather, it is granted over to humans by the spirits, who demand respect, honesty, and balance. Wealth and success will follow if human beings respect this bond, but when it is disrupted by greed, betrayal, or injustice, the Daivas intercede to bring back dharma (cosmic justice). This faith is stored through the help of a ritual practice known as 'Bhoota Kola', in which a chosen medium incarnates the deity, dimming the boundary between the human and the divine.

In this film, 'Bhoota Kola' is painted as a living, embodied practice. In this practice, the performer becomes a vessel for divine justice. The ritual transforms the body of a human into a sacred site of communication between the divine and the community through intense physical movements, face painting, towering headdresses, and rhythmic drumming. Those spirits are not distant gods but rather powerful forces who helped to tie them to specific geographies and make the native people realise their reciprocal relationship with the land. As a cinematic text, *Kantara* interweaves realism with mythic storytelling. The transformation of Shiva, the protagonist, is central to the logical setting of the culture.

In the beginning of the story, Shiva was rebellious; he was the person who was disconnected from tradition and purely ethereal, but gradually as the story goes on, he is the one who gets aligned with the Daiva and becomes the personification of the return of suppressed cultural knowledge. His symbolic performance, specifically the climax, that last ritual scene, which is magnified as a masterpiece, dismissed the boundary between actor, character, and the cultural performer. The different expressions of the 'Bhoota Kola' ritual are as shown below in figure 2 and figure 3. And lastly, the film's sound design, folk music, and regional dialect wonderfully maintain the balance between the local culture and universal resonance.

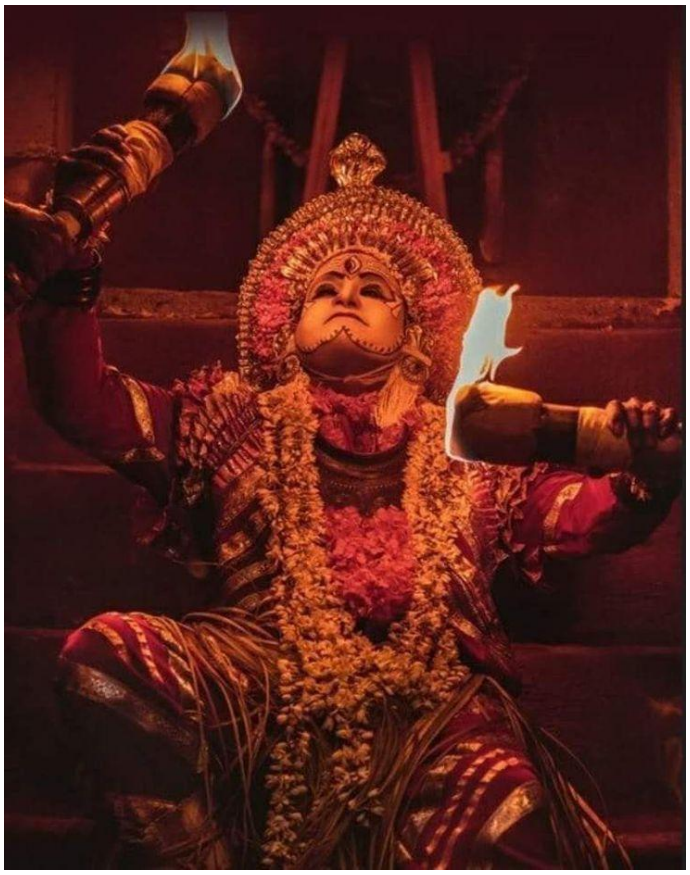

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Cinematically narrative, based on folklore, *Kantara* is a multi-layered critique of developmental modernity, capitalist land relations, and the erasure of indigenous environmental worldviews. In the film, the capitalist approach gets a lens through landlords, the state, and modern law, and according to their rules, the land is a private property; it is a commodity to be owned, surveyed, taxed, and ultimately exploited. According to the zamindar and the representatives of the state, the forest is unused and unproductive, justifying enclosure, extraction, and development. Through this side of the movie, Shetty tries to draw the attention towards capitalist modernity's instrumental rationality, where the price of land is economical and nothing exists in the sense of ecological value or cultural meaning.

Another tension shown in *Kantara* is also a central issue between customary law and formal legal systems. The native people manage through ritual, oral memory, and collective accountability. 'Bhoota Kola' performance is a moral and judicial meeting where justice is purely ecological and restorative. Though the modern state takes the charge of written law, bureaucracy, and documentation, generally indecipherable and out of the way to the native communities. This is the place where mismatch happens and everyone suffers in the mask of legal injustice.

The forceful and threatening arm of the modern state is embodied through the eyes of the forest department and police. State authority claims to be neutral and legal but also imposes capitalist interests by criminalising conventional customs and practices and getting control over the ancestral lands. It is structural violence; it's not brutal, but it brings the storm of destruction. At the end, at the cost of development, the state's promise becomes null and prioritises extraction over human beings and over environmental well-being. In the film, deprivation is physical as well as cultural and spiritual. Loss of land causes the deterioration of rituals, collective memory, and identity. Ecological violence, deforestation, displacement of wildlife, and enclosure reflect cultural erasure. The disintegration of the human-nature relationship disrupts not only society but also individual morality as portrayed in the protagonist's internal conflict.

This research is confined to certain limitations. It examines textual and visual analysis of *Kantara* as a dramatic text and does not cover ethnographic

fieldwork or practical engagement with the actual custom of 'Bhoota Kola' or native communities of coastal Karnataka. The paper does not study in a comparative manner with other ecocritical or indigenous-centric films, neither within Indian cinema nor in the case of global contexts. The paper focuses on myths and rituals, environmental consciousness and indigenous narratives which lack the knowledge of oral traditions and native community systems. Lastly, it excludes political viewpoints and avoids commercial and economical reception and response of the audience; it is closely integrated within cultural symbolism and ecological philosophy.

In conclusion, *Kantara* assures a powerful cinematic representation of indigenous ecological ethics, where myth and ritual play a crucial role for environmental awareness and resistance. Through the reflection of culture, spirituality, and ecology, which are blended wisely, the film crosses the discourse beyond imagination and expectations in ecocritical studies. The main purpose is to make the audience understand and force them to rethink development, conservation, and sustainability with another perspective. These indigenous knowledge systems give prominence to coexistence, reciprocity, and reverence for nature. *Kantara* proclaims that the future of ecology will not be illumination after abandoning myth and ritual; rather, it will flourish through mentoring humanity for a more balanced and ethical relationship with the Earth.

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Fig. 1. A diagram showing the levels of analysis in traditional knowledge and management

systems from: Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology*. Taylor & Francis, 2012, p. 17.

Fig. 2. Sneha. “Bhoota Kola.” *Pinterest*. https://pin.it/2B4Oc68pt.

Fig. 3. Nithzflix. “Boothakola.” *Pinterest*. https://pin.it/5gm8mGwjb.

Prerna Anmol

Prerna Anmol is a research scholar in the Department of English and Modern European Languages at the University of Lucknow. Her research area focuses on Bhojpuri folklore. Her interest areas are: Ecocriticism, Film studies,

Psychoanalysis, Postcolonial studies and Translation studies. Apart from studies, she is a multilingual poet in the Hindi, English and Bhojpuri languages and has been published in various anthologies.