

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614

E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue 4, September
2026**

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



A Literariness.org Project

DOI: 10.67147 literariness.v1i4.024

“The Guards of Nature”: Narrativizing Animism, Therianthropic Culture and Environmental Interconnectedness in *Kantara: A Legend Chapter-1*

PARVATHY R S

Independent Research Scholar

DR. NISHA MATHEW

Assistant Professor of English

St Cyril’s College, Adoor

Abstract: The study of indigenous cultures and its deep-rootedness in Nature is a major focus of researchers particularly engaged in the nuances of Indian Knowledge System. The paper “The Guards of Nature”: Narrativizing Animism, Therianthropic Culture and Environmental Interconnectedness in *Kantara*” *A Legend Chapter- 1* uses the tenets of animal studies to explore the interconnectedness between humans, animals, land and spiritual forces.

Keywords: *Animism, Indigenous Culture, Therianthropic Deities, Environmental Stewardship*

India is home to diverse indigenous cultures, most of which are dwelling on the North-eastern parts. Yet it should be noted that there are innumerable indigenous communities living a secluded life in the Southern parts too. Their knowledge of Nature, natural healing, ayurvedic medicines, weather forecasting, sustainable agriculture, preventive diets, ethno-mathematics and understanding of the land's soul has been subjected to intense research and studies. This has contributed in becoming the platform on which Indian Knowledge system has structured itself. The recent trends of returning to ancient wisdom by effacing the stumps of colonialism is evident in every field such that various mediums are employed to spread the idea of Indian Knowledge System characterized by deep spiritual and functional connections to the traditional land.

Even in the midst of Sanskritization, researchers cannot ignore the role played by indigenous populations in protecting and understanding nature. These tribal communities possess diverse traditions and unique arts, languages and ceremonies that highlight their cultural identity. Despite being the original inheritors of the earth, they are subjected to displacement and relocation in the name of industrial development. The indigenous cultures are vital to the progress of a nation and their stories, knowledge and legacy should be acknowledged. Their stories have been vital to creating memories. Joann Archibald in her article "Indigenous Storywork as a Basis for Curricula That Educate the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit" published in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* (2021) says: "Storytelling plays a powerful role in the way we create and recall memories. This is particularly true of Indigenous Elders who remember ways of learning the oral traditions from their ancestors, being on and with the land, and helping the younger generation learn from and with Indigenous traditional and lived stories." (233) These stories are filled with natural metaphors, animal imageries and pictures that help a generation to understand the significance of mother earth.

There have been many attempts by digital platforms, social media influencers, movie makers and documentary producers to project the knowledge shared by the indigenous groups alongside portraying the struggles they undergo in the modern world competing with earth shattering technological developments and electronic gadgets. Indian movies have played a vital role in highlighting indigenous culture. Malayalam movies *Nellu* (1974), *Urumi* (2011), and *Bharamayugam* (2024), Tamil movies *Asuran* (2019), *Jai Bhim* (2021), and *Kadaisi Vivasayi* (2022), and Kannada movies *Chigurida Kanasu* (2003), *Kantara* (2022) and *Kantara: A Legend Chapter 1* (2025) are some of the popular movies that have portrayed indigenous ways of life and their ardent relationship with nature. Among these *Kantara* and *Kantara: A Legend Chapter – 1* holds a significant position in portraying indigenous cultures by placing it against the folklore of Karnataka that encompasses the role of therianthropic deities, animals and man in protecting mother earth. This research paper titled "Guards of Nature": Narrativizing Animism, Therianthropic Culture and Environmental

Interconnectedness in *Kantara: A Legend Chapter – I*” attempts to analyse how the narrative portrays therianthropic deities, animals and indigenous people in articulating indigenous cultural identity and environmental justice. The theory of animal studies would serve as a tool to examine the animal imageries and symbols that weave the ritualistic and cultural identities of the people.

A major shift from anthropocentric view to a post-humanist thinking in the field of humanities has reshaped man’s outlook on animals. They are not looked upon as mere symbols or metaphors but are considered as beings with their own presence and agency. Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* and Carol Adam’s *The Sexual Politics of Meat* have drawn attention to ethical issues pertaining to animals. The development of animal studies brought in a paradigm shift in the treatment of animals where they are no more used as mere literary devices as seen in fables but are considered as serious part of any work exploring the relationship between humans and animals. Films stand out in this regard portraying human-animal relationships by interrogating captivity, exploring animal rights or positioning animals as central objects of empathy and inquiry as in *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), *March of the Penguins* (2005), and *Chimpanzee* (2012). Films like *Project X* (1987), *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) and *Save Ralph* (2021) trigger questions on bioethics, animal testing, scientific experimentation and the encroachment of human authority over non-human life. These usually get foregrounded in English movies yet there are a few Indian movies that integrate animal life into the lives of humans by placing them against themes of Nature, ecology and indigenous ways of life. James A Serpell in his chapter “The Human-Animal Bond” published in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies* mentions:

Animals have been portrayed in different manifestations in films. They perform myriad roles, differing as well. A therapist, a saviour, a prey so goes their relationship with humans. From the past, the relationship between human and animals has been “enduring despite their relative lack of practical utility or material value for humans and, in this sense, presenting a challenge to evolutionary theory” (Bamarani 208)

The tenets of animal studies would significantly aid in analysing the use of animals as metaphors of Nature, therianthropic interventions in regularising human behaviour and the role of indigenous culture in protecting Nature and maintaining environmental justice as portrayed in the movie *Kantara: A Legend Chapter 1*. It harmonises with the recent developments in the field of Indian Knowledge System by depicting the role of animalistic deities in indigenous culture and how they blend into the narrative structure as agents of justice, morality and community life. Through such an exegesis, it can be observed how animalistic deities symbolize custodianship of forests, rivers, and land, reinforcing indigenous claims to environmental stewardship.

The movie *Kantara: A Legend- Chapter 1* revolves around the origins of the sacred Kantara forest said to have been created by Goddess Parvathy for Lord Eswara to meditate. It is a spice garden containing rare forest spices and natural wealth that sustains the tribals economically and culturally. A place to be revered and protected, it is guarded by the Bhootha Ganas and Daivas like Panjurli and Guliga who communicate through the scream “Whaoow” (00:00:33) after possessing a man through whom they speak: “Power merged in nature. When humans move towards unrighteousness, God sends his precious gems from the realm of illusion to earth to protect righteousness. One of those who came like this, whom we trust, Panjuruli (Demon God) ... Another will come after him to drink the blood of those who go towards inequity, Fierce form Guliga.” (00:01:39). Such kind of rituals are common among the tribal groups and also some sects of Hindus where men are possessed by Gods when some divine message is to be given to the community. Here this becomes a way of creating fear in the people to restrain themselves from exploiting the natural resources. The Social Anthropologist, Amitav Ghosh states in *The Nutmeg’s Curse* : “The task or role of the tribal religions is to relate the community of people to each and every facet of creation as they have experienced it”. (35) Eswara’s Garden thus becomes a symbol of ecological sanctity and indigenous sovereignty. The conflict in the film arises when the Bangra Kingdom encroaches on the land to loot its resources neglecting the proclamations of the divine guardians Panjurli and Guliga.

The movie is enriched with the presence of therianthropic deities and animal imageries from the beginning to the end. For instance, animals are used in the beginning as symbols to narrate the legends to the audience. Berme, the protagonist of the movie is a divine child sent by the Gods to reinstate justice on the land “He’s the son I gave birth to, right? So this isn’t easy for me” (01:31:14). He is guarded by the God himself in the form of a tiger which represents raw power, authority and sacred energy of the forest. In indigenous cultures, powerful wild animals are considered as protectors or symbols of divine force. The tiger gains significance as a symbol of justice, balance and fearlessness reminding people that animals carry within them greater strength that overcomes human authority and control.

Similarly, the therianthropic deities, the Guligas, exhibit several animalistic traits that connect them closely to the wild forces of nature particularly their movement which becomes fierce, rapid, instinctive and physically intense during possession and ritual performance. Their expressions, body language, heavy breathing, loud cries, and aggressive gestures create the feeling that they are no longer acting as ordinary humans but as beings channeling primal natural power. These traits suggest a temporary breaking of the boundary between the human and the non-human world, where the body becomes a medium for raw instinct, protection, and survival. The Guligas do not represent civilized order or controlled behaviour, instead, they embody the wild spirit of the forest that reacts strongly

when balance is disturbed. The film, thus, presents the idea that humans are deeply connected to the natural world and that divine power itself can manifest through energies that are fierce, instinct-driven, and closely linked to animal existence.

The life of the Kantara tribe is deeply rooted in the forest and shaped by a close relationship with land, animals, and spiritual traditions. These people do not see the forest as something separate or owned, but as a living space that they are part of, where their survival, beliefs, and identity are all connected. Their daily activities include farming, hunting, and gathering, but these are guided by customs and a sense of balance rather than exploitation. The Bee attack in the movie is evidence of Nature's response to the destruction unleashed in the name of development. They act as a collective force against exploitation of their space proving that they are a powerful natural agency responding to human actions.

The story of the Kadapa clan shows how evil actions against animals and nature disturb the balance of life itself. The harming of the slender loris, destruction of flowers, and suffering of animals in Eshwara's Garden reveal the interconnected relationship between humans, animals, and nature, where damage to one affects all three. Mario Ortiz-Robles in his book, *Literature and Animal Studies* notes: "Animals are as old as literature. This is to say that animals have been represented in literature since its beginnings. From the earliest epics, fables, parables and plays, animals have done a great variety of guises to become the privileged presences that shows us how to be human". (2) To restore harmony, Goddess Parvathi summons the Huli Daiva, the sacred Tiger Spirit, a fierce protector of the forest and divine justice. The tiger re-establishes balance by killing the evil Kadapa chief, proving that nature and its animals can become powerful forces against destruction and greed. The song, "Varaha Roopam" reflects a merging of human, animal, and divine energies. The reference to "Varaha," the boar form, brings in the image of raw, untamed power linked to the natural world. As the song progresses, the character transcends ordinary human limits and takes on a more instinctive, primal force connected to the forest. Practices like Bhoota Kola blur the boundaries between human, animal, and divine, creating a space where these categories are no longer separate. The Varaha is not just a religious figure but also a symbol of earth and its protection. It shows how nature resets the imbalances through its own creatures. When this form appears in the climax, it represents a response that is both spiritual and ecological, showing that nature itself can act to restore balance. Berme, the protagonist strengthens this idea. His actions, especially during possession, reflect an instinctive energy that feels closer to the animal world than to structured planned human behaviour. In Animal Studies, this suggests that humans are capable of moving beyond rigid identities and reconnecting with deeper layers of existence that they share with animals. It also shows that protection of land and culture is not just a human responsibility but something that involves the entire ecosystem. When a performer

becomes possessed, their movements, sounds, and energy often resemble something beyond ordinary human behaviour than something closer to animal instinct and the raw forces of nature. When viewed through the angle of animalism, this can be seen as a moment where human identity opens up to include non-human energies. The body becomes a medium, not just for a deity, but for a larger system that includes animals, the forest, and unseen forces. This challenges the idea that culture is purely human, showing instead that it is shaped by interactions with the natural world.

Animalism appears in *Kantara* not as a theory to be explained but as a lived experience that weaves every part of the story. It shows that human culture, belief, and identity are deeply connected to animals and the natural world. Animals are not just part of the setting; they are part of the meaning, influencing how characters act and how the story unfolds. By presenting a world where humans and animals share spaces, awareness, and consequence, the film invites viewers to rethink their own relationship and position with nature. The film ultimately suggests that the future depends on recognizing this connection rather than denying it. When humans see themselves as separate and superior, imbalances follow. When they accept that they are part of a larger system that includes animals, land, and unseen forces, there is a possibility of harmony. Through its use of animal imagery, ritual, and storytelling, *Kantara* speaks about this relationship in a way that feels both rooted in tradition and relevant to the present, reminding that human life has always been, and continues to be deeply intertwined with the animal world.

Works Cited

Archibald, Jo-ann, Q'um Q'um Xiiem. "Indigenous Storytelling." *Memory*, 2018, pp. 233–242. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbtzpfm.30>.

Bamarani, S. C. "From Jallikattu to 777 Charlie: Portrayal of Animals." *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2023, pp. 208–211.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. U of Chicago P, 2021.

Kantara: A Legend - Chapter 1. Directed by Rishab Shetty, Hombale Films, 2025.

Ortiz-Robles, Mario. *Literature and Animal Studies*. Routledge, 2016.