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From Kurukshetra to Kashi: Myth, Dystopia, and Civilizational Memory in *Kalki 2898 AD*

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Abstract

Kalki 2898 AD (2024), directed by Nag Aswin, reimagines the *Mahabharata* within a dystopian futuristic landscape shaped by ecological collapse, technological authoritarianism, reproductive control, and civilizational decay. Beginning from the battlefield of Kurukshetra and culminating in the wasteland of futuristic Kashi, the film collapses distinctions between mythological past and apocalyptic future, suggesting that humanity remains trapped within recurring cycles of violence and ethical failure. This paper examines how the film transforms epic memory into a framework for interpreting contemporary anxieties concerning surveillance, biopolitics, environmental destruction, and the commodification of life itself. Drawing upon theories of cultural memory, cyclical temporality, biopolitics, and dystopian studies, the paper argues that *Kalki 2898 AD* constructs a form of mythic futurism in which ancient archetypes survive within technologically intensified modernity. Through figures such as Ashwatthama, Bhairava, Sumathi, and Supreme Yaskin, the film reworks mythological motifs into dystopian forms while simultaneously engaging with global science-fiction traditions. The paper further explores the symbolic opposition between the extractive dystopia of the Complex and the regenerative possibility represented by Shambala, demonstrating how the film positions mythology not as nostalgic return, but as a living cultural structure capable of interpreting historical and futuristic crises.

Keywords: epic, myth, retelling, dystopia, cultural memory, cyberpunk

What is found here may be found elsewhere; what is not found here will not be found elsewhere.

Mahabharata, *Adi Parva*

Whenever there is a decline in righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Arjuna, then I manifest Myself.

Mahabharata, Bheeshma Parva, Bhagavad Gita 4.7

Introduction

Contemporary Indian cinema has increasingly turned toward mythology not simply as a repository of cultural nostalgia, but as a living framework through which modern anxieties

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may be negotiated. Mythological retellings are no longer limited to highlighting the devotional or historical aspects; instead, they are being reimagined through the languages of dystopian fiction, ecological catastrophe, technological modernity, and political crisis. Within this evolving cinematic landscape, *Kalki 2898 AD* (2024), directed by Nag Aswin, occupies a distinctive position. As Aleida Assmann observes, "Cultural memory transforms factual into remembered history and thus into myth" (55), *Kalki 2898 AD* operates precisely through such a transformation, where the *Mahabharata* no longer functions merely as an ancient epic narrative preserved in textual memory, but as a living symbolic structure through which contemporary anxieties concerning war, ecological collapse, authoritarianism, and technological violence are interpreted.

The film begins on the battlefield of Kurukshetra and explores the dystopian ruins of futuristic Kashi. This movement across temporal worlds is crucial to the film's philosophical vision. The trajectory from Kurukshetra to futuristic Kashi reveals how myth survives not outside history, but through history's continual reinterpretation. Kurukshetra is not presented as a completed historical event sealed within mythological time; rather, it becomes the origin of a cycle of violence that continues to echo across ages. The futuristic wasteland of Kashi emerges as another manifestation of the same civilizational crisis. In this sense, the film collapses distinctions between antiquity and futurity, suggesting that technological advancement has not liberated humanity from the ethical failures of the past. Instead, the future reproduces ancient structures of greed, war, exploitation, and moral fragmentation in technologically intensified forms. The dystopian imagination of the film gains further complexity through its continued engagement with questions of reproductive control, ecological collapse, and authoritarian power, in the midst of sacred futurity. The authoritarian state of the Complex survives through extraction – of natural resources, biological vitality, and female reproductive capacity - while Shambala emerges as a fragile counter-space associated with regeneration, ecological continuity, and messianic expectation. Through these oppositional spaces, the film stages a larger conflict between extractive modernity and the possibility of ethical renewal.

This paper argues that *Kalki 2898 AD* constructs what may be called "mythic futurism," a narrative mode in which mythology functions as a living cultural memory capable of interpreting contemporary and futuristic crises. *Kalki 2898 AD* as a narrative of cultural memory forges a trans-space and trans-time connection. Drawing upon cultural memory studies, myth criticism, biopolitical theory, and dystopian studies, the paper attempts a close reading of how the film transforms mythological archetypes into modern forms for reflecting upon surveillance, reproductive politics, ecological devastation, and civilizational decay. Ultimately, the film suggests that humanity still remains trapped within recurring cycles of Kurukshetra, reenacting ancient conflicts even within technologically advanced futures.

Kurukshetra and the Persistence of Historical Violence

The opening sequence of *Kalki 2898 AD* establishes the philosophical foundation of the narrative by returning to the aftermath of the Kurukshetra war. Rather than treating Kurukshetra as a distant epic memory, the film positions it as the beginning of an unresolved historical trauma that continues to reverberate across ages. The battlefield becomes not

merely a setting from the mythological past, but a symbolic condition repeatedly reproduced throughout human civilization.

The opening sequence of the film centers on Ashwatthama's attempt to destroy the unborn child of Uttara following the annihilation of the Kaurava lineage. The act is deeply significant because the unborn child represents futurity itself - the possibility of continuity after catastrophic violence. Ashwatthama's attempt to extinguish the final surviving heir is therefore not simply an act of revenge; it is an assault upon historical regeneration itself. Krishna's intervention preserves that fragile continuity. The representation of Krishna in the opening sequence is also deeply significant (*Kalki 2898 AD* 00:04:51). Much like the visual strategy employed in William Wyler in the representation of Christ in his movie *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Kalki 2898 AD* avoids revealing Krishna's face completely. Instead, the audience encounters silhouettes, divine light, and partial bodily presence. This cinematic withholding transforms Krishna into an abstract sacred presence rather than an individualized human figure. The strategy preserves theological transcendence while simultaneously invoking a cross-cultural cinematic memory associated with representations of Christ in epic religious cinema. Through this visual parallel, the film situates Krishna within a universal iconography of divine intervention and messianic salvation.

Ashwatthama's curse subsequently transforms him into one of the film's most compelling symbolic figures. Condemned to immortality and perpetual suffering, he wanders through history as a wounded witness to recurring violence. His characterization recalls the Fisher King of Arthurian legend, whose wounded body mirrors the decay of the kingdom itself while awaiting redemption through the arrival of a restorative figure. The film significantly positions the cursed figure of Ashwatthama by transforming him from destroyer into protector of the future. In a reversal of cosmic roles, the man who once sought to murder the unborn child becomes the guardian of Kalki, the unborn divine incarnation in a future age. This transformation establishes one of the central philosophical concerns of the film: redemption through historical continuity. The cursed immortal becomes the carrier of civilizational memory across yugas, embodying the burden of witnessing recurring violence across time. His immortality thus functions not as divine privilege but as traumatic endurance.

The title sequence expands the significance of Kurukshetra beyond Hindu mythology and transforms it into a universal metaphor for human cruelty. The song montage traverses multiple historical catastrophes, linking the Mahabharata war to global histories of violence and oppression. Images recalling the crucifixion of Christ, Roman gladiatorial combat, the transatlantic slave trade, the exploitation of Black bodies in cotton plantations, the rise of Nazism, gas chambers, the Cambodian killing fields, the devastation caused by Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, Molotov cocktails associated with civil unrest, the horrors of Partition, and the displacement of refugees within the Israel–Palestine conflict collectively construct an archive of civilizational trauma (*Kalki 2898 AD* 00:06:32–00:08:10). The montage also incorporates violence against women, animals, and the environment, extending the idea of war beyond military conflict into systemic exploitation and ecological destruction. This sequence universalizes Kurukshetra as an eternal battlefield embedded within human

history. Mircea Eliade argues that "by the repetition of the cosmogonic act, concrete time, in which the construction takes place, is projected into mythical time" (21). This formulation becomes central to understanding the temporal structure of *Kalki 2898 AD*. The war of the *Mahabharata* ceases to be a localized mythological event and instead becomes a recurring structure of violence that reappears across historical epochs. In doing so, the film transforms mythology into cultural memory. In *Kalki 2898 AD*, the future is not new; it is memory returning in another form. The *Mahabharata* is retold not as a narrative belonging to the ancient past but as a living symbolic framework through which contemporary crises can be interpreted. The battlefield extends from Kurukshetra to colonial plantations, concentration camps, refugee crises, ecological collapse, and finally to the dystopian future of Kashi.

Kashi, the Complex, and the Architecture of Dystopian Modernity

If Kurukshetra represents the mythic origin of civilizational violence, futuristic Kashi emerges as its exhausted afterlife. The violence unleashed in the epic world has not disappeared; it has merely evolved into technological form. Kashi survives materially while remaining spiritually hollowed out; technological modernity has replaced spiritual consciousness of the sacred place. River Ganga has dried up and the gods themselves are banned in Kashi. But it still remains as the last standing city of the world. The visual atmosphere of Kashi strongly recalls the fragmented landscape of "The Waste Land" (1922) by T. S. Eliot. Water is scarce, the environment is devastated, and ordinary existence is shaped by deprivation and exhaustion. The apocalypse imagined by the film is therefore not merely ecological; it is spiritual. Against this atmosphere of decay, the appearance of a celestial star announcing the birth of a saviour introduces an important messianic symbolism. The imagery recalls the Star of Bethlehem associated with the birth of Christ, creating parallels between Kalki and broader religious traditions of divine salvation. The film repeatedly merges Hindu mythological symbolism with global religious imagery, constructing the saviour figure as transhistorical and universal rather than confined to a single theological tradition.

At the center of this world stands the Complex, ruled by Supreme Yaskin. The inverted pyramidal structure of the Complex becomes a metaphor for civilizational inversion itself. Traditionally, pyramids signify sacred hierarchy, transcendence, and permanence, but the inversion of the pyramid visually encodes a reversal of ethical and spiritual order. Moral structures have collapsed, but systems of exploitation continue to rise. The Complex survives by consuming what remains outside it. Resources, bodies, fertility, and biological vitality are transformed into fuel for authoritarian survival. The future becomes parasitic. The Complex may be read as a dystopian inversion of Indraprastha from the *Mahabharata*. Indraprastha was built by destroying the flora and fauna of the forest Gandhava. Complex also recalls Panem from Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), where centralized privilege depends upon systemic exploitation. At the same time, the cityscape evokes cyberpunk dystopias such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Yet *Kalki 2898 AD* distinguishes itself by infusing this futuristic aesthetics with epic cosmology and cyclical time.

Supreme Yaskin embodies the logic of endless consumption. His dependence upon vitality extracted from reproductive bodies recalls the myth of Yayati, who demanded the youth of

his sons in order to continue enjoying worldly existence. V. S. Khandekar's reinterpretation of the myth in *Yayati* transforms this desire into an existential and psychological condition, where endless craving becomes a metaphor for civilizational excess and moral exhaustion. Yaskin reproduces this same impulse within a dystopian technological framework. His survival depends upon the extraction of life from reproductive female bodies, suggesting that the future ruler survives not through transcendence but through systemic consumption. In this sense, technology does not eliminate ancient human desire; rather, it amplifies it into biopolitical form. Sudhir Kakar's studies of myth, patriarchy, and desire in Indian culture become particularly relevant here. Kakar argues that Indian mythological narratives often reveal deeply embedded anxieties concerning authority, succession, bodily control, and immortality within the Indian cultural psyche (Kakar 34-39). Kakar analyses Yayathi as an example of the rivalrous father archetype, where the father and son are caught in the conflict of power, legacy, and continuity. Here unlike Freudian/Western narratives, the Indian mythological conflicts give importance to the ideas of sacrifice and duty rather than direct confrontation. Yaskin as modern Yayathi, embodies precisely such an anxiety-ridden fantasy of endless continuation. His dependence upon extracted reproductive energy transforms the myth of Yayati into a dystopian politics of survival where the aging ruler sustains himself through the consumption of future generations. The film therefore presents authoritarian modernity not as historically disconnected from mythology, but as the technological intensification of ancient structures of desire and power. The future ruler becomes a technological version of an ancient archetype. Even sacred power becomes vulnerable within such technocratic worlds. When Yaskin later acquires the ability to lift Gandeeva, the legendary bow of Arjuna, the moment becomes deeply unsettling. The film suggests that technological modernity can appropriate even sacred memory itself.

Reproductive Politics, Sacred Motherhood, and Biopower

The deepest crisis of the future in *Kalki 2898 AD* lies not merely in ecological destruction, but in the politics of the human body itself. Reproductive capacity becomes the most valuable resource within a dying civilization. This logic becomes visible through "Project K," where fertile women are imprisoned, artificially impregnated, and drained of a serum extracted from their wombs. The women are confined within a laboratory structured like a panopticon, evoking systems of surveillance, discipline, and bodily regulation associated with modern biopolitical regimes. The architecture of the laboratory becomes crucial because it ensures constant visibility and control over female bodies. Once the extraction process is complete, the women die and their bodies are discarded into a fire pit. The female body is thus transformed into a consumable biological resource within a technologically advanced necropolitical order.

The atmosphere strongly recalls *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood. Like the Handmaids in Atwood's dystopia, the women in the Complex wear color-coded costumes, exist under constant surveillance, and possess little agency over their own bodies. Fertility becomes a state-controlled resource in a collapsing civilization where reproduction itself is rare and politically valuable. The panopticon-like laboratory reinforces the Foucauldian dimension of the film, where power operates not merely through violence but through the

regulation, observation, and disciplining of biological life. The film therefore foregrounds biopolitics by showing how authoritarian structures seek control over reproduction in order to maintain political continuity and survival. Yet the film extends this reproductive politics backward into mythological history itself. Project K may be read symbolically as "Project Kuruvamsha." Dynastic continuity within the *Mahabharata* repeatedly depends upon the reproductive labor of women whose desires remain secondary to political necessity. Following the death of Vichitravirya, Ambika and Ambalika, the princesses of Kashi, are compelled to participate in niyoga with Vyasa in order to preserve dynastic continuity. History is repeated in such a tragic way that the fates of Kashi princesses are similar to that of the modern female prisoners of the Complex in Kashi. Similarly, in *Mahabharatha*, Kunti's motherhood becomes politically necessary for the survival of lineage and kingdom. In each case, the female body functions as instrument of succession and historical continuity. The imprisoned women also evoke Devaki of *Bhagavatha Purana* imprisoned by Kamsa because of the prophecy surrounding her child. The maternal body becomes sacred precisely because it threatens authoritarian power. The incarcerated women also remind us of the 16000 women imprisoned by the demon Narakasura. They also recall the forgotten or less studied histories of nameless and countless concubines and comfort women, the victims of violence across time. Foucault argues that in modernity, "the body is directly involved in a political field" (25), suggesting that power no longer functions solely through visible violence but through systems that discipline, monitor, and control biological existence itself. This logic becomes central to the operations of Project K, where women are transformed into reproductive subjects whose bodies are medically regulated, artificially inseminated, and ultimately consumed for the extraction of biological serum. Fertility itself becomes a state-controlled resource.

The introduction of the pregnant lab subject SUM-80 transforms the symbolic structure of the film. Her miraculous pregnancy recalls both Mother Mary and mythological maternal figures such as Devaki and Kunti. The film creates a transreligious image of sacred motherhood associated with civilizational renewal. But the film never romanticizes motherhood completely. SUM-80 becomes valuable precisely because her body can be exploited. Sacredness and biopolitical violence coexist simultaneously. Her escape through a tunnel of fire strongly evokes the birth of Draupadi from sacrificial flames. Emerging from fire, she undergoes symbolic rebirth and is renamed Sumathi. Inside the dystopian laboratory she existed only as biological inventory; outside it, she re-enters symbolic and human history. Naming restores the humanity erased by the numerical logic of the Complex. The whole cinematic narrative around the escape of SUM-80 strongly suggest the influence of P.D. James' novel *Children of Men* (1992) and its subsequent 2006 film adaptation by Alfonso Cuaron. The pursuit of SUM-80 by both Ashwatthama and Bhairava introduces a crucial ideological and mythological conflict at the center of *Kalki 2898 AD*.

Shambala, Messianic Hope, and Ecological Renewal

If the Complex represents extractive modernity, Shambala emerges as its spiritual and ecological counterpoint. Hidden from authoritarian machinery, it survives through memory, coexistence, and preservation. Shambala is mentioned in *Vishnupurana* as the birth place of

Kalki, the tenth reincarnation of Vishnu. This place is also mentioned in Buddhist tradition as a place of peace, harmony and wisdom. The arrival of Sumathi in Shambala marks a turning point in the narrative. A dried tree blooms again. Rain falls after years of drought. The unborn child becomes associated with ecological restoration itself. The imagery recalls the wasteland symbolism of T. S. Eliot while simultaneously drawing upon Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies associated with Shambhala as a hidden sacred kingdom awaiting renewal. Shambala represents the possibility of another civilization - one not organized around extraction and technological domination. Yet the sanctuary remains fragile. The invasion led by the armies of the Complex recalls the destruction of ecologically integrated worlds in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). The assault on Shambala reveals how authoritarian modernity seeks to eliminate all forms of life that cannot be commodified.

Bhairava, Karna, and Mythological Cyberpunk

Opposed to Ashwatthama is Bhairava, one of the film's most morally ambiguous and layered characters. His very name evokes Kala Bhairava, the fierce form of Shiva associated with destruction, time, and guardianship over Kashi. In Hindu tradition, Kala Bhairava functions as the protector and keeper of sacred space, especially the city of Kashi. Bhairava's narrative trajectory may also be understood through Joseph Campbell's formulation of the "reluctant hero" in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell argues that the hero initially resists the call toward transformation, often remaining trapped within fear, self-interest, or attachment to familiar structures before gradually moving toward responsibility and sacrifice. Bhairava embodies this pattern within the dystopian landscape of *Kalki 2898 AD*. Unlike conventional epic heroes driven by moral clarity or divine purpose, Bhairava begins as a bounty hunter motivated primarily by survival and personal ambition. His desire to enter the Complex reflects not revolutionary idealism but attraction toward privilege and security within an unequal world. Even after encountering Sumathi and witnessing the violence of the Complex, he repeatedly retreats into transactional logic, attempting to capture her for reward rather than protect her. Yet beneath this cynicism, moments of ethical awakening continue to surface - particularly during the destruction of Shambala, where he instinctively rescues children and shields Sumathi despite himself. Campbell observes that the reluctant hero often "refuses the summons" before eventually confronting a larger destiny (54). Bhairava's hesitation similarly reveals a fractured heroism shaped by dystopian survival rather than moral certainty. The later revelation that he is the reincarnation of Karna deepens this archetypal structure further, transforming his reluctance into a continuation of Karna's tragic divided loyalties within the Mahabharata tradition. Bhairava therefore emerges as a distinctly modern epic hero: morally unstable, self-interested, emotionally fragmented, yet repeatedly drawn toward ethical action by forces larger than himself.

One of the film's most remarkable achievements lies in the way it transforms epic archetypes into cyberpunk figures inhabiting dystopian modernity. Bhairava resembles the morally ambiguous protagonists of cyberpunk fiction, particularly Rick Deckard, the bounty hunter, from Philip K.Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). But unlike conventional cyberpunk antiheroes, Bhairava gradually emerges as Karna reincarnated. His attraction toward the Complex parallels Karna's attachment to Duryodhana despite his deeper ethical

complexity. Bhairava is neither heroic nor villainous in any stable sense. He is fractured by survival itself. His relationship with Bujji also becomes significant. Emotional attachment increasingly shifts toward machines in a civilization where human relationships have collapsed. Technology therefore appears simultaneously as companion and instrument of domination.

During the destruction of Shambala, Bhairava experiences a temporary ethical awakening. He protects children and rescues Sumathi despite his original motivations. These moments suggest that heroism survives within him as submerged memory rather than stable identity. The revelation that Bhairava is the reincarnation of Karna transforms the narrative further. His divided loyalties mirror Karna's tragic position within the Mahabharata. Bhairava exists between survival and ethical responsibility, attraction to power and instinct toward compassion. The conflict between Ashwatthama and Bhairava reenacts unresolved tensions from the Mahabharata within dystopian futurity. Once again, the fate of civilization revolves around the protection of an unborn child. The future becomes another Kurukshetra.

Conclusion

Kalki 2898 AD reimagines the *Mahabharata* not as a distant sacred text belonging to the past, but as a continuing structure of cultural memory through which contemporary and futuristic crises may be understood. By collapsing the temporal distance between Kurukshetra and futuristic Kashi, the film constructs a cyclical vision of history in which humanity repeatedly reenacts unresolved patterns of violence, ecological destruction, reproductive control, and moral collapse. The film's dystopian future therefore does not emerge outside mythology. It emerges from mythology's continuation. *Kalki 2898 AD* constructs a dense intertextual universe where the Mahabharata intersects with dystopian science fiction, mythological symbolism, cyberpunk aesthetics, and global narratives of violence and apocalypse, allowing ancient epic memory to converse with contemporary cultural anxieties. Through Ashwatthama's immortality, Bhairava's reincarnation as Karna, the biopolitical violence of Project K, and the messianic symbolism surrounding Sumathi and Kalki, the film reveals the persistence of mythological structures within modern technological systems. At the same time, the opposition between the Complex and Shambala dramatizes two competing visions of civilization: one founded upon extraction and domination, the other upon regeneration and coexistence.

As the first installment within a larger Kalki universe, the film ultimately remains suspended within anticipation rather than resolution. Kalki remains unborn, the apocalypse continues, and the struggle between extraction and regeneration remains unresolved. Yet through its merging of mythology, dystopian science fiction, reproductive politics, ecological collapse, and messianic expectation, *Kalki 2898 AD* constructs a mythological futurism in which humanity endlessly reenacts ancient conflicts across technological ages. The future is not separate from mythology but its continuation, revealing that the crises of Kurukshetra continue to shape civilization even at the edge of apocalypse. Ultimately, *Kalki 2898 AD* suggests that humanity continues to inhabit Kurukshetra even within technologically advanced futures. The apocalypse represented in the film is not merely the end of the world, but the repetition of unresolved ethical failures across history. Yet within this landscape of

ruin and recurrence, the unborn figure of Kalki continues to symbolize the possibility of another future - one capable of restoring balance within a civilization trapped between memory and collapse.

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