Myth Re-imagined: Tech-driven Storytelling in Kalki

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Abstract

The movie Kalki 2898 AD exemplifies a seamless fusion of futuristic technology and ancient mythology, showcasing how this blend shapes both the narrative and its characters. It serves as a prime archetype of balancing technological advancements with mythological depth. While Kalki employs cutting-edge technology to immerse the audience in a vividly imagined futuristic world heralding the arrival of Lord Vishnu's tenth reincarnation, it simultaneously critiques the risks and ethical dilemmas posed by rapid technological progress. This paper delves into the dual portrayal of technology in the movie Kalki 2898 AD: as a tool for engagement and storytelling, and as a harbinger of potential societal challenges. The extensive use of VFX and advanced AI tools brings mythical characters, celestial realms, and divine battles to life, creating a sensory-rich cinematic experience. By examining these elements, the paper seeks to unravel how Kalki re-imagines mythology through a tech-driven lens, blending ancient wisdom with contemporary innovation. Representation of divinity and apocalyptic themes, crafted to depict divine interventions or end-times scenarios, will be analyzed alongside the contemporary setting, reflecting issues like climate change, societal decay, and technological overreach. This study reveals how the technological and mythological dimensions of Kalki have broader cultural, societal, and cinematic implications.

Keywords: Futuristic technology, Mythology, Storytelling, Apocalypse, Climate change, and Societal decay

Introduction

Mythology has always served as a repository of collective wisdom, offering moral guidance and reflecting upon existential questions through allegorical narratives. In the contemporary era, cinema has emerged as a powerful medium to reinterpret these age-old tales, infusing them with new dimensions

using advanced technological tools. Kalki 2898 AD, a cinematic re-telling of Lord Vishnu's prophesied tenth incarnation, stands as a testament to this evolution of cinema as a medium. The film marries the grandeur of ancient myths with the visual splendor enabled by cutting-edge technology, particularly VFX, holographic appearances, and AI-driven storytelling. However, Kalki does more than merely translate mythology into a futuristic context; it interrogates the consequences of unbridled technological advancement, echoing concerns of societal decay, environmental crises, and ethical dilemmas. This paper explores how Kalki re-imagines mythology through a tech-driven lens, focusing on its narrative, character development, and thematic resonance.

At its core, Kalki draws from Hindu mythology, particularly the prophecy of Lord Vishnu's tenth reincarnation destined to appear during an era of chaos and moral decay. This myth, while rooted in ancient scriptures, finds new relevance in the film's portrayal of a dystopian world ravaged by technological excess and ecological imbalance. The integration of advanced technologies like VFX, motion capture, and AI-enabled CGI enhances the narrative by bringing mythical elements to life. Divine interventions, celestial realms, and apocalyptic battles are rendered in breathtaking detail, creating an immersive experience for the audience. The use of technology in Kalki is not merely ornamental but serves to deepen the audience's engagement with the narrative. For instance, AI-generated landscapes of a futuristic Earth juxtapose the decaying human condition with the timeless wisdom of mythological teachings. Kalki uses technology as a tool to re-imagine ancient myths, presenting Lord Vishnu's reincarnation in a setting that resonates with contemporary audiences. Through hyper-realistic VFX, the celestial grandeur of Kalki's imminent descent and the ensuing battle against evil forces are portrayed with stunning clarity. Mythological symbols like the Sudharshana Chakra and Kalki's white horse are depicted with an almost divine precision, blending ancient iconography with futuristic aesthetics.

Simultaneously, Kalki critiques the unchecked proliferation of technology, portraying it as a double-edged sword. The dystopian world depicted in the film is one where humanity's over-reliance on technology has led to moral corruption,

environmental degradation, and social disintegration. The film's antagonist, Supreme Yaskin (played by the veteran Kamal Hassan, the God of South Indian movie industry), is a tech mogul who seeks godlike power through artificial intelligence. Yaskin, in fact, is an embodiment of the ethical dilemmas posed by technological overreach.

Kalki employs apocalyptic imagery, a hallmark of mythological narratives, to depict the arrival of a divine savior in times of crisis. The futuristic dystopia in the film echoes concerns about climate change, societal inequality, and the loss of humanity's moral compass. These themes are accentuated by the portrayal of Kalki as a messianic figure whose arrival heralds not just destruction but also renewal. The narrative weaves together ancient moral frameworks and contemporary ethical concerns. It is important to highlight that Kalki's mission to restore cosmic balance mirrors modern call for sustainable development and ethical technological practices. The film draws parallels between mythological adharma (unrighteousness) and current issues like corporate greed, AI misuse, and environmental negligence.

The film's reliance on advanced cinematic tools showcases how technology can redefine storytelling. The movie, Kalki, opens and concludes with visually striking depictions of Kurukshetra, the combat ground of the epic battle from the Mahabharata. It is projected as a symbolic setting that ties the ancient mythological war to the film's futuristic narrative. Technology plays a pivotal role in bringing this iconic battlefield to life, blending traditional imagery with futuristic elements to create a cinematic masterpiece. At the beginning of the film, advanced VFX and CGI recreate the Kurukshetra of the Mahabharata in all its grandeur; sweeping shots of vast armies, celestial weapons, Bhishma Pitamaha on his bed of thorns (Sharshaiya), and divine interventions are brought to life with intricate detailing and fluid motion. The use of motion capture technology ensures realistic movements for mythical characters like Krishna, Arjuna, and, of course, Ashwatthama. High-resolution rendering and AI-driven lighting techniques craft an ethereal glow around divine beings and their weapons, enhancing the mythical aura of the battlefield. Surround sound technology and spatial audio immerse the audience in the chaos of battle, from the

clash of weapons to the recitation of divine songs and verses. The verbal encounter between the silhouetted Krishna (aesthetically depicted on screen by Krishnakumar Balasubramanian) and AI generated Ashwatthama (a much younger version of Amitabh Bachchan, the Superstar of the Millennium), Ashwatthama trampling the bud under his foot, the shooting of the Brahmastra, depiction of mutilated bodies, and the larger post-war sense of waste are a result of computer-generated tools. This opening sequence of the movie not only honors the traditional narrative of Kurukshetra but also establishes a visual and thematic foundation for the film's futuristic reinterpretation.

Conversely, in the climactic finale, the futuristic Kurukshetra battlefield is re-imagined in a dystopian future, reflecting the moral and ecological decay of the modern world. The setting for the same is the mythical Kingdom of Shambhala, a morally and ethically driven sanctuary; an oasis in the middle of a wasteland. Shambhala suffers attack from the raiders under the commandership of Manas with the sole mission to abduct SUM80, the "Maa" (portrayed by Deepika Padukone). Here, it is also pertinent to mention the crucial chase which is inserted in the storyline before they could reach Shambhala. This chase is steered by Manas to check the escape of SUM80 from the Complex. Her rescuers are the three major rebels from the Kingdom of Shambhala, Veeran, Ajju, and Kyra. A deadly chase ensues and they are attacked by the bounty hunters who try to track down the rebel truck in the hope of winning more and more units. The confrontation between the anti-hero Bhairava (essayed by Prabhas) and the mythological superhero Ashwatthama is a treat for the audience. A close study of both the above-mentioned scenes reveals significant thematic, structural, and technological aspects. Such combat scenes are depicted in a scorched, desolate wasteland, symbolizing the consequences of technological overreach and environmental destruction. AI tools create hyper-realistic textures of ruined cities and lifeless terrain. The battles involve advanced weaponry and biomechanical creatures, blending mythology with science fiction. The use of drones and virtual cameras captures panoramic views of the battlefield, showcasing the scale of destruction and emphasizing the cyclical nature of war.

Out of the long character list, the pivotal character is that of Lord Krishna. In the movie Kalki, Lord Krishna is portrayed as a timeless and transcendental figure, bridging the ancient past with the dystopian future. His presence is central to the narrative, symbolizing wisdom, guidance, and the moral compass in a chaotic world teetering on the brink of destruction. The depiction of Krishna in the film blends mythological authenticity with modern cinematic techniques, creating a character that resonates across generations. Lord Krishna is depicted in a silhouette, with his signature attributes, including his radiant blue-black complexion and the peacock feather-adorned crown. In an exclusive interview with ETimes, director Nag Ashwin stated:

There was one thing I was very sure of right from the start that we shouldn't have something identifiable or an actor or a defining feature of Krishna because we are saying that he's God and we thought the mystery would work if we don't see that person. (Shah)

While Krishna's attire in the film pays homage to traditional iconography, it incorporates futuristic elements, such as metallic textures and celestial patterns, to align with the movie's sci-fi aesthetic.

Krishna appears as a mentor and strategist, echoing his role as Arjuna's charioteer in the Mahabharata. His dialogues are infused with philosophical depth, drawing from the Bhagavad Gita while addressing contemporary issues like technological ethics, environmental degradation, and moral decay. Krishna is shown as the link between the celestial and mortal realms, effortlessly navigating both. His presence signals divine intervention, ensuring that the cosmic balance is maintained. At the beginning of the film, Krishna appears in the battlefield to rebuke Ashwatthama while recounting the lessons of Kurukshetra and forewarning of a new age of chaos. This scene blends stunning visuals with profound monologues, setting the tone for the narrative. Krishna's movements and expressions are enhanced using motion capture and AI, giving him an ethereal yet lifelike quality.

In the movie, Ashwatthama is depicted as a complex and formidable character. His initial actions in the great battle of Mahabharata, while destructive, are driven by a sense of purpose rooted in his eternal suffering and quest for redemption. As one of the most

enigmatic figures from the Mahabharata, his powers are re-imagined to align with the film's dystopian and tech-driven narrative. A dark, brooding atmosphere surrounds Ashwatthama, enhanced by sound design and lighting effects. The visual contrast between his divine origins and technological augmentation reflects his internal conflict. The film draws from the Mahabharata, where Ashwatthama is cursed by Lord Krishna to wander the earth for eternity, bearing the burden of his sins. This immortality forms the core of his character in Kalki. However, the movie expands on this curse, presenting it as both a source of power and torment. Ashwatthama's immortality is portrayed as both a blessing and a burden. While it grants him unparalleled power, it also isolates him from humanity, making him a tragic figure. The Keshava Madhava song in the movie, also referred to as the "Wait of Ashwatthama" befittingly captures the quandary of Ashwatthama as he lives through all the ages and histories of the world, witnessing revolutions, crimes, and atrocities. Ashwatthama's long, frustrating wait for the coming of Keshava is depicted brilliantly through animation in the song. A critic opines,

The song has an epic feel to it and we can see Ashwatthama walked inside a temple at the end unable to witness all these atrocities anymore and starts praying till Kalki's arrival. It is designed in a wonderful manner and the entire team of 'Kalki 2898 AD' (cis) should be appreciated for showing something unique and enthralling to the Indian audience. (Desk)

As the son of Dronacharya, Ashwatthama is portrayed as a master of warfare and divine weaponry. In the movie, this knowledge is adapted to include futuristic weapons and combat strategies, making him a lethal force in a dystopian world. In the film, Ashwatthama wields both traditional celestial weapons, like the Brahmastra, and technologically advanced armaments. His ability to integrate ancient techniques with modern technology highlights his adaptability and intellect. Enhanced by his immortality, Ashwatthama possesses extraordinary physical strength and speed, depicted through motion capture and VFX during action sequences. His combat scenes are a blend of raw power and precision, emphasizing his dominance on the battlefield. The movie introduces the concept of Ashwatthama merging with AI technology

to amplify his cognitive capabilities. This synergy makes him a near-omniscient and omnipotent figure, capable of predicting enemy movements and manipulating futuristic systems, for instance when he incapacitates Bhuji, Bhairava's robotic car, by removing an important part of the machine during the combat at Shambhala.

Ashwatthama's immortality is reinterpreted using advanced CGI to depict his regenerative abilities. Even after sustaining fatal injuries, his body heals rapidly, making him nearly invincible. His curse is visualized through a glowing scar on his forehead, a constant reminder of his eternal suffering. The glowing scar on Ashwatthama's forehead is rendered using advanced VFX. His regenerative powers are depicted through seamless CGI, showing his wounds healing in real-time during battles. Motion capture technology brings fluidity and realism to Ashwatthama's combat scenes, emphasizing his speed and precision.

In the movie, Karna is also re-imagined as a key character, Bhairava, whose story echo's themes of loyalty, honor, and the moral complexities of human existence. While rooted in his mythological origins from the Mahabharata, Bhairava/ Karna's role in the film is adapted to the futuristic context, making him a compelling figure of conflict and redemption. The character represents the enduring struggle between fate and free will, highlighting his inner turmoil and unwavering sense of duty. Karna is portrayed as a warrior of unmatched skill and courage, bound by loyalty to those who recognize his worth, much like his devotion to Duryodhana in the Mahabharata. In Kalki, this trait is carried forward, but with a futuristic twist, as Bhairava/ Karna aligns himself with powerful forces seeking to reshape the world order. The film also preserves Karna's origins as a son of the Sun God (Surya) abandoned at birth and raised by humble parents. Bhairava, also, is a war orphan raised by a Pilot (played by Dulquer Salmaan). His identity as an outcast fuel his determination to prove his worth, a theme that resonates throughout the narrative. Bhairava is depicted as a character torn between his sense of duty and his moral compass. While his allegiance to the antagonist forces creates conflict, his moments of solitude reveal a deep yearning for justice and recognition.

In the climax of the movie, Karna's celestial chariot, his Kavach (armor) and Kundal

(earrings) are re-imagined with an AI-enhanced technological golden glow, granting them indestructibility and granting him near-invincibility. He also wields mythological weapons, such as the Vijaya dhanush (bow) enhanced with advanced targeting systems and energy-based arrows. In the futuristic version, Bhairava (Karna) is depicted as a master strategist, often outmaneuvering his opponents through intelligence and foresight. Bhairava's introductory scene establishes his unmatched physical prowess and his complex relationship with the antagonist forces. Motion capture and AI-driven choreography bring fluidity and intensity to Bhairava's combat scenes, showcasing his agility and strategic brilliance. The scene highlights his duality – a warrior bound by ethics but driven by a desire for recognition and a glamorous, comfortable lifestyle at the Complex. Bhairava's climactic confrontation with Ashwatthama at Shambhala is one of the film's most visually and emotionally impactful moments. The sequence juxtaposes their opposing ideologies, with Bhairava (Karna) questioning the morality of divine intervention while Ashwatthama challenges his loyalty to corrupt forces. Bhairava's story

in Kalki explores the tension between his predetermined role as an outcast and his choices, highlighting the universal struggle between destiny and self-determination. Furthermore, the ancient city of Kashi is re-imagined as a dystopian landscape, symbolizing the decay of morality, spirituality, and societal structures. Our first visual of Kashi-as-a-wasteland is when Rumi (portrayed by Rajendra Prasad on screen) and others reach a ruined city and the driver loudly announces that they have finally arrived at Kashi. It is referred to as the last city and the first city on Earth. Traditionally celebrated as a city of enlightenment and liberation, its dystopian portrayal underscores the consequences of unchecked technological advancement, environmental neglect, and spiritual erosion. In fact, it is a stark warning about the consequences of neglecting spiritual and moral foundations in pursuit of material progress. The city is depicted in a state of ruin, with crumbling structures and dried up Ganga River. Dark, dusty, muted tones dominate the visuals, creating an oppressive atmosphere. Flickers of artificial neon lighting and industrial structures encroach on Kashi's traditional skyline, signaling the invasion of modernity

into its ancient essence. Polluted air, arid landscape, famine-struck, crime-ridden, we see the people fighting for an apple and haggling over an egg that is packed in a treasure box. The erosion of dharma (righteousness) and replacement of its divine aura by corruption, materialism, and despair makes the futuristic Kashi the ideal setting for Kalki's mission to restore this fallen spiritual centre. By presenting Kashi as a dystopia, the film evokes a sense of loss and urgency, reminding the audience of the city's historical and cultural significance.

At the same time, this vision of Kashi and its dwindling resources starkly contrasts with the futuristic "Complex," which, though advanced, represents cold efficiency and human ambition. The Complex is depicted as a gleaming, futuristic mega-structure, defined by high-tech architecture, AI systems, and sterile environments. Bright neon lights and metallic hues dominate its aesthetic, contrasting sharply with Kashi's dark, crumbling facade. Bhairava's obsession with the complex and his solo visit to the complex when he is smuggled inside the premises by his friend, Roxie (played by Disha Patani) is just a glimpse of the endless possibilities, physical, scientific, and material, offered by the Complex. The construction of the Complex as a giant structure looming over the city highlights its inaccessibility, hugeness, vastness, and superiority. The Complex exerts influence over Kashi, furthering its exploitation and decay. This dynamic highlights the imbalance between material ambition and cultural heritage.

Unlike Kashi's decay, the Complex is portrayed as a hub of innovation, efficiency, and order. However, this progress comes at the cost of human values, with its inhabitants living mechanized, disconnected lives. Inmates live in pods, food is rationed and that too after the biometric reads their identity, high tech labs where strange, mysterious experiments are being run, and an army of scientists forever struggling to achieve their 'goal.' The Complex symbolizes the moral cost of rapid advancement. Its residents, like Supreme Yaskin, Commander Manas, and Counselor Bani, though technologically empowered, are spiritually and emotionally hollow, lacking the cultural and ethical depth that Kashi once embodied.

The master of the Complex, Supreme Yaskin, emerges as a formidable antagonist, embodying the darker aspects of human

ambition and technological obsession. He is a visionary leader of the dystopian Complex and the architect of the enigmatic 'Project K,' a controversial initiative that lies at the heart of the film's conflict. Through Yaskin, the narrative delves into the ethical dilemmas posed by unchecked technological power and the quest for immortality and control. Yaskin is portrayed as a charismatic yet ruthless figure, driven by an unrelenting desire to reshape the world according to his vision. His intelligence makes him a compelling antagonist, capable of manipulating both people and systems to achieve his goals. Despite his villainous actions, Yaskin's character retains a layer of complexity, as his motivations stem from a twisted idealism – an ambition to "save" humanity through technological dominance. As the supreme leader of the Complex, Yaskin wields immense power, overseeing a society built on efficiency, innovation, and control. He is revered by his followers as a revolutionary thinker and an agent of control. Yaskin believes that human flaws – such as mortality, emotions, and spiritual dependence – are obstacles to progress.

It is revealed that Yaskin's ultimate initiative is Project K, a massive technological experiment designed to transcend human limitations and establish a new world order. In one of the significant scenes, the horrific scale of Project K is unveiled, showcasing human subjects trapped in laboratories, subjected to invasive procedures. The project aims to combine advanced artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and cybernetic augmentation to create a powerful serum. Project K serves as a metaphor for the dangers of hubris, representing humanity's overreach in attempting to play god. The project involves unethical experiments on humans, leading to the creation of enhanced beings who serve as Yaskin's enforcers. These experiments result in widespread suffering, sparking rebellion among those who refuse to conform to Yaskin's vision. Yaskin's pursuit of becoming a god-like being draws comparison to figures like the demons in mythology, Asuras, who sought to usurp celestial power. Though we meet him only twice in the movie, Supreme Yaskin and Project K are central to the film's exploration of humanity's struggle to balance progress with morality. While Yaskin's vision represents the allure and dangers of unchecked ambition, Kalki's mission highlights the enduring relevance of faith,

ethics, and the divine. This conflict serves as a cautionary tale, reminding audiences of the importance of preserving humanity's essence in the face of rapid technological change.

Kalki 2898 AD exemplifies how ancient mythology can be revitalized through modern technology to create a narrative that is both timeless and timely. By seamlessly integrating VFX, AI, and other advanced tools, the film not only brings mythical tales to life but also critiques the ethical dilemmas posed by technological overreach. Its exploration of apocalyptic themes, divine interventions, and moral dilemmas makes Kalki a significant contribution to both cinematic innovation and cultural discourse. Paired with the technological grandeur of the Complex, Kashi's plight emphasizes the need for balance between progress and preservation of spiritual and ethical values. The film also incorporates elements from many eschatological figures to craft a narrative where mythology, theology, and futuristic themes intersect. Rudra Chakrin, Kala Bhairava, and the concept of the Second Coming provide a rich framework for depicting Kalki as a savior who transcends time, cultures, and religions to restore balance in a world on the brink of collapse.

The recreation of Kurukshetra demonstrates the power of technology in bridging the past and the future. The dual portrayal reinforces the timeless relevance of Kurukshetra as a metaphor for moral conflict and cosmic balance. At the same time, Krishna's presence represents hope, renewal, and the assurance that even in times of great despair, divine guidance will prevail. Krishna's portrayal underscores the universality of his teachings, emphasizing their relevance in addressing contemporary concerns like technological misuse, ecological imbalance, and moral ambiguity. The film fosters a dialogue between tradition and innovation, appealing to both older audiences familiar with the myth and younger viewers intrigued by its contemporary relevance.

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