"Meta-Textual Adaptations of Popular Mythological Fiction into Films: A Study with Reference to *Kalki 2898 A.D.*"

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Abstract:
"Young people in India cannot be understood in separation with films, film-going as a culture in India is so popular and influential on the lives of young people in India in specific and all over the world in general. They need to be informed of the strategies of "Story-telling" in which meta-adaptations of popular texts as an approach had been primordial. This paper explores the evolving practice of meta-textual adaptations of popular mythological fiction into films, with particular reference to *Kalki 2898 A.D.*, a science fiction retelling of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. The phenomenon of translating ancient mythological narratives into the context of contemporary and futuristic cinematic representations is analyzed through the lens of postmodern theory. This study critically examines how such adaptations mediate the relationship between traditional narratives and modern sensibilities, incorporating elements from both the original texts and their reinterpretations. The paper contends that the adaptation of mythological works into films is not merely a transference of stories, but a dynamic interplay of texts, subtexts, and cultural dialogues in which the audience is invited to both deconstruct and reconstruct meaning."
Keywords:
Meta-textual Adaptations, Mythology, Film Adaptations, Kalki 2898 A.D., Mahabharata, Science Fiction, Postmodernism.

Introduction

The adaptation of mythological narratives into contemporary film has become a prominent mode of storytelling in modern cinema. The traditional stories, revered as part of cultural heritage, are often re-imagined to reflect modern societal contexts or futuristic landscapes. These adaptations offer new interpretations that resonate with contemporary audiences, while simultaneously reflecting the postmodern tendency to deconstruct and recontextualize established texts. A particularly fascinating example of this phenomenon is *Kalki 2898 A.D.*, a film directed by Nag Ashwin that reconfigures the epic *Mahabharata* in a futuristic science fiction setting. The transformation of such a revered mythological tale into a futuristic narrative provides a unique case for studying meta-textual adaptations.

This paper aims to examine how the transformation of the *Mahabharata* in *Kalki 2898 A.D.* reflects the trends and challenges of meta-textual adaptation, exploring how the mythological framework is both preserved and reshaped through the medium of film.

Theoretical Framework: Meta-textuality and Adaptation

The concept of meta-textuality, as defined by literary theorists such as Gérard Genette, refers to the intertextual relationship between texts where one work refers to, comments on, or reconfigures

another. In the context of film adaptations, this manifests as the practice of adapting existing literary works—especially those grounded in mythological, historical, or classical traditions—into cinematic forms that might diverge from or complicate the original narrative. Postmodern theories, notably those advanced by Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes, argue that modern adaptations are not simple reflections of an original but are acts of hyper-real production, where the boundary between the "real" and the "represented" becomes blurred.

In this sense, the adaptation of a mythological narrative like the *Mahabharata* into a futuristic science fiction film like *Kalki 2898 A.D.* operates within the realm of meta-textuality. It is a dialogic engagement between the traditional, revered myth and the new cinematic and technological realities that the film presents.

The Mahabharata in Context: A Legacy of Mythological Narratives

The Mahabharata is one of the longest epics in world literature and holds a central place in the cultural and spiritual identity of the Indian subcontinent. It is not merely a story but a complex amalgamation of myth, philosophy, history, and moral dilemmas. Within the epic are explored issues of duty (dharma), righteousness, justice, the nature of evil, and the complexities of human emotions—especially in the context of war and governance.

The epic's themes of fate, family dynamics, divine intervention, and moral ambiguity have contributed to its enduring popularity. It has been adapted and retold through multiple forms: theater, television, literature, and, in recent years, cinema. The transition from the *Mahabharata's* oral and written forms to film adaptations necessitates a re-interpretation, where the filmmakers recontextualize the narrative for new mediums and audiences.

Kalki 2898 A.D.: A Meta-textual Reinterpretation of the *Mahabharata*

Kalki 2898 A.D. is an ambitious reimagining of the *Mahabharata* set in a post-apocalyptic, futuristic world. It introduces new, technologically advanced characters and reconfigures the divine beings of the epic as god-like artificial intelligences or extraterrestrial entities. The central characters—*Kalki, Arjuna, Draupadi*, and others—are situated within a high-tech, dystopian world where virtual reality, cybernetics, and space warfare dominate. This futuristic interpretation creates an intriguing space for the Mahabharata to be viewed through the lens of contemporary anxieties about technology, governance, and morality.

A. Thematic Adaptation:

The film explores several themes central to the *Mahabharata*, such as power struggles, the ambiguity of good and evil, and the consequences of unchecked ambition. However, the choice of a futuristic setting allows the filmmakers to infuse these timeless themes with contemporary concerns about technology, surveillance, and the collapse of traditional structures of power. The character of *Kalki,* a messianic figure, is aligned with the *Mahabharata's* concept of divine intervention but is reinterpreted through the lens of technological advancement, where *Kalki* becomes a savior not by divine grace, but through human ingenuity and the harnessing of technology.

B. Re-contextualization of Characters:

The film's characters are situated in a world where traditional mythological roles are altered, and their relationships with technology are crucial to the plot. For instance, *Draupadi*, often portrayed as a central female figure in the *Mahabharata*, is reimagined as a technologically empowered leader who navigates political complexities in a high-tech dystopia. Similarly, *Arjuna*, known for his exceptional archery skills, becomes a futuristic warrior skilled in digital combat and virtual warfare.

C. The Visual Language:

The film's use of visual aesthetics—ranging from CGI landscapes to the portrayal of divine beings as holograms or A.I. figures—demonstrates how technological advancements reshape the narrative. The visual spectacle of *Kalki 2898 A.D.* is not only a reflection of technological progress but also acts as a medium for the re-contextualization of the original epic's spiritual and philosophical ideas.

The film's visual language is, therefore, an intrinsic part of its meta-textual function, translating ancient mythology into a new visual and cultural idiom.

The Postmodern Turn: Deconstruction of the Original Narrative

One of the key elements of postmodern adaptations, including *Kalki 2898 A.D.*, is the play with deconstruction and subversion of traditional narratives. In the postmodern view, myths are not sacred, unchangeable truths but cultural constructs subject to reinterpretation and deconstruction. *Kalki 2898 A.D.* embraces this by not adhering strictly to the *Mahabharata's* established plot. Instead, it introduces parallel narratives, restructured character arcs, and new conflicts that subvert the moral and philosophical assumptions of the original text.

For example, in the *Mahabharata,* the *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* are presented as rival factions whose conflict revolves around the dharma of kingship. In *Kalki 2898 A.D.*, these factions are re-imagined as rival technocratic elites vying for control over a collapsing world. The moral complexity of the original epic, where victory is not always synonymous with righteousness, is echoed in the film's narrative where characters' motives are more intricately tied to issues of technological power rather than ancient concepts of honor and duty.

Conclusion: Meta-textuality in the Age of Filmic Adaptations

The adaptation of mythological narratives like the *Mahabharata* into films such as *Kalki 2898 A.D.* serves as an important vehicle for examining the intersection of tradition, technology, and cultural transformation. These adaptations do not merely replicate the original narratives; they engage with and reinterpret the themes, characters, and conflicts of the ancient epics within contemporary or futuristic contexts. In doing so, they open up space for a meta-textual dialogue between the past and the present, between mythology and modernity.

The success of *Kalki 2898 A.D.* as a meta-textual adaptation lies not just in its visual and narrative spectacle but in its ability to transform a traditional myth into a relevant commentary on the anxieties and possibilities of a rapidly changing world. The future of film adaptations of mythological fiction, therefore, may continue to evolve in this direction, where the cultural significance of the original texts is preserved even as their form and interpretation are reimagined for new generations of viewers.

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