

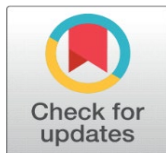
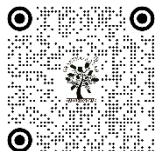
THE WOMB AS WEAPON AND WOUND: REPRODUCTION, MYTH AND STATE POWER IN KALKI 2898 AD

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ABSTRACT

Reproductive control has remained as the most profound embodiment of state control, and Nag Ashwin's *Kalki 2898 AD* exemplifies this with precision. In the film, Nag Ashwin renders this convergence with exceptional clarity. The article is an exploration of how the film understands reproduction and mythology in this dystopian narrative. Tapping into the works of a Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Silvia Federici, and the feminist political theory in general, this analysis claims that *Kalki 2898 AD* defines Sumathi, the female protagonist, as a contested site for the emergence of a new world order. Proceeding through three correlated arguments, the film probes the geopolitical structure of the Complex, Yakshin command centre, to understand how reproductive extraction functions as the foundation of Kashi's hierarchical polity. Additionally, it also looks at the mythological framework of the film, indicating that the future incarnate of Kalki functions through a celestial logic where the feminine serve as a breeding ground for masculine redemption, instead of being an agent in their own right. Overall, the article concludes by suggesting that *Kalki 2898 AD*, in spite of its grand scope and overt display of reproductive labour, reiterates the patriarchal grammar of gender where the women at the core are sidelined for the renewal of masculine societies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The maternal body has remained as site of controversy in the history of political thought for a long time. Across social worlds, the ability to bear a child has been hailed as the bedrock of intergenerational survival, bringing it under exceptional mechanisms of regulation and discipline. Starting from statutory control over contraception to the religious framing of motherhood as a divine responsibility, the pregnant body has never existed merely as a physiological reality. Significantly, "motherhood has everything to do with a history in which women remain powerless by reproducing the world of men" (Allen, 1983). "Maternal practice responds to the historical reality of a biological child in a particular social

world" (Ruddick, 1980). As a literary genre, dystopian writing has traditionally acknowledged this aspect with striking clarity. Right from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the creative exploration of alternate futures has time and again returned to fertility or womb as the key marker of dictatorship. By making reproduction as the central theme, these narratives ultimately rests on a deeper political insight; that is, to control the future, one needs to restrain reproductive labour—who steps into it, under which conditions and on whose behalf.

It is out of this intellectual background, the film, *Kalki 2898 AD* (dir. Nag Ashwin) takes shape. Met with remarkable success and instantly recognized as a milestone in the cinematic landscape of India, the movie establishes a dystopian wasteland split between the glittering metropolis of Kashi and the irradiated terrain outside of its walls. An immortal autocrat, the Supreme Yaskin (Kamal Hassan) commands the city with total power, sustaining his existence by an organic substance obtained from life-bearing bodies. Beyond the enclosure, a prophetic collective of Shambhala anticipates the arrival of Kalki—the last avatar of Lord Vishnu to reinstate the cosmic moral order. Central to this story lies SUM-80 aka Sumathi (Deepika Padukone), the feminine presence whose gestating body becomes the nucleus of the prophetic lineage and the target of Yaskin's procurement. The entirety of the system—the survival of Yaskin, the salvation of the universe—relies upon what occurs to and transpires through her embodied self.

As a blend of Hindu mythology and Hollywood science fiction, the film has displayed a great visual grandeur. Moreover, *Kalki 2898 AD* is not confined to showing an expectant woman as the primary character; it constructs its whole political vision around the circumstances of reproduction, alongside "chosen one" in Sumathi's womb. It is against this backdrop that the article intends to conduct a rigorous analysis of the film, and contents that it converges three distinct modes of power in the female body, including the biopolitical economy of the regime, the ontological framework of Hindu mythology and the affect-oriented ideology of civilizational promise. The first section explores how the dystopian world works by examining Yaskin's Complex vis-à-vis formulations of Michel Foucault and Silvia Federici. The second part, in turn, focuses on the sacred lore of Kalki Purana to investigate the logic of female subjectivity within theology. The third questions the imagined future of the film and the subsequent promises of such a fantasy.

2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. REPRODUCTIVE GOVERNANCE AND BIOPOLITICS OF THE DYSTOPIAN STATE

The bureaucratic core of Yaskin's mission lies in the Complex. It is not a secluded institution in any manner, even if the site keeps a secret shame. Within the Complex, the spatial layout exhibits sharp contours and pristine surfaces combined with constant surveillance. Strictly speaking, it represents the highest echelon of the film's global system—a harshly tiered structure wherein the resources are allocated in tandem with wealth and access to authority. Beneath it, the bulk of the human race persists in the depleted stretch of Kashi, yearning for inclusion into a realm that has by design excluded them. For this reason, the Complex is not limited to the locus of Project K's the harvesting of reproductive labour as it also defines the narrative's logic of sovereignty. The exploitation of pregnant women along with the planetary reserves constitutes distinct forms of violence.

Deciphering the broader implications of this configuration calls for a departure from the moral framework of the film, which places Yaskin's vision as inherently malevolent, and has to pay attention to its underlying principle. At the Complex, instead of names, the women are signalled by numerical indicators: SUM-80 and others of her kind are deprived of personhood in the wake of being biological assets. To enumerate an individual is to transform them from a subject to an object, and it is an administrative prerequisite for any kind of extraction. Since it is not feasible to systematically extract a social actor, one can, however, definitely procure from a stock. In the fictional setting of *Kalki 2898 AD*, this predicament on women is fixed and the story moves forward by leveraging the impact it has on the characters. Women of childbearing age are brought from the outskirts to be experimented for the benefit of Supreme Yaskin, and those who fail in this endeavour are discarded or worst killed in the lab itself.

In the work *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault illustrates the advent of modern forms of governance as means of coercive utilisation of human life. In the conventional sense, the sovereign command is executed via the ever-present spectre of fatal harm. Biopower, on the other hand, acts by way of disciplining the corporeal self and controlling the collective bodies.

"The bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both

these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern" (Foucault, 1978).

Yaskin's Complex functions on these two premises. Women are abducted, taken into the facility and forced into making foetuses for the Supreme's life-sustaining imperatives. What distinguishes the film apart is how it surpasses the Foucauldian model to a considerable extent. In the narrative, biopolitical machinery is not used to enrich the life of the social body but to self-serve the interest of the sovereign himself.

Similarly, Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* proposes that the harsh modulation of fertility formed an essential basis for transforming early modern Europe into a capitalistic society. The outlawing of contraceptive practices and persecutions of witchcraft demented the autonomy of women to a large degree. As maternal labour consolidates wealth and influence, the need to subject it to higher levels of subjugation remains paramount for the upkeep of society.

"The main initiative that the state cooks to restore the desired population was the launching of a true war against women clearly aimed at breaking the control they had exercised over their bodies and reproduction. The war was waged primarily through the witch-hunt that literally demonized forms of birth-control and non-procreative sexuality, while charging women with sacrificing children to the devil. But it also relied on the redefinition of what constitutes reproductive crime" (Federici, 2004).

Nag Ashwin takes this idea into a radical register to make Yaskin the monstrous Other. Thus, the 120-day cap placed upon the womenfolk cannot be treated in the guise of calculated compromise as death is inevitable for them. Yaskin is ruthless but his viciousness is rooted in the wider arrangement of asymmetrical power relations in the Complex. The way his men extract the embryonic tissue has far-reaching repercussions for how the film captures the interplay among the apex authority and intergenerational temporality. In other words, what the Supreme harvests is, at its core, the yet-unfolding time. The life-sustaining force of a new lineage is taken out before its arrival to extend his present. Through his wicked plan, Yaskin tortures young women and withholds their progression to the next era. In essence, he is a predator of the future who seeks to circumvent the relationship between history and time.

2.2. THE SACRED VESSEL: MYTHOLOGY, FEMININITY AND THE GRAMMAR OF DIVINE EMBODIMENT

Kalki 2898 AD's mythic narrative structure deals with the notion of femininity in Hindu cosmology and its biopolitical orientation circles around the state's regulation of fertile bodies. In the film, mythological references are integrated not as embellishments but as cultural textures. As the title suggests, the cinematic narrative leans into the ideology of Dashavatara—notably the Kalki avatar to nudge the internal grammar to reveal the tension between Yaskin and the Shambhala tribe. More importantly, the puranic order of the film unfolds way before 2898 AD. To be precise, it starts at the Kurukshetra war of Mahabharat, and the opening sequence sets the stage for the post-apocalyptic world of the film. In the final moments of the epic battle, Ashwatthama deploys Brahmastra, the deadliest weapon, to kill Abhimanyu and Uttara's soon-to-be-born child. This event—the urge to wipe out a patrilineal bloodline—sparks the genesis, and the maternal body becomes the site for cosmic civil war. Even before any character in the present is introduced, the womb dwells in the battlefield and ends up as the target for masculine contests and assertions.

For Ashwatthama's heinous act, Lord Krishna places a curse upon him which is gendered in its dimensions. Ashwatthama, the son of great Dhronacharya, is bound to a life of immortality and everlasting pain while protecting a pregnant woman for the rest of his life. Here, it is interesting to note that he is not meant to respect women or acknowledge their individual autonomy. To him, only the foetus matters and it decides the path for his own salvation. Except for being the vehicle of "the saviour", the agency of the mother is not even a question that the curse intends to examine. As it turns out, the idea of sacred vessels is one of the most archaic and insidious patriarchal practices in almost every culture. It identifies the female figure whose value is determined by the relationship she holds to the divine: Devaki in the Bhagavata Purana, Kaushalya in the epic Ramayana and Virgin Mary in Christian theological scholarship are few examples. She is venerated for what is inside her, denying her subjective experience. Hence, this is a token of respect that functions by trade-off: the divine essence of the "son" is extended to the maternal flesh, stripping away her individuality.

Although the film touches upon Hindu mythological traditions in general, the Kalki Purana stands as its principal source. Coming off as the final incarnation of the Lord Vishnu, Kalki is a masculine warrior arriving to fight adharma to commence the period of Satya Yuga, the age of truth and wisdom. As per the Purana, Kalki is born into a Brahmin family,

rides a white horse and wields a sword to vanquish his foes. As per the Puranas, the maternal parent of this divine manifestation—Sumati—is depicted as a pious woman who is a devotee of Vishnu. Ultimately, she is the womb and the spotlight on her starts to end once the act is fulfilled. This simplification of the mother is not unique to Sumati or any other avatars as this is the normative template. For instance, take the case of Devaki, Krishna's birth mother. Throughout the lore, she endures pain, she is held captive by her cousin but when the time comes, despite all her hardships, she delivers the divine child. From then onwards, the text shifts attention to the incarnation and leaves out the biological mother. This encapsulates the figure of the avatar-mother: she exists solely to be a vassal with no theological authority of her own.

In no way, such modes of expressions are accidental or a matter of coincidence. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Lucy Irigaray posits how the maternal-feminine always occupies the blank state—the site, the conduit or the vessel—out of which the anointed one arises and steps into the world. The maternal labour produced the subject of the God-sanctioned, yet she cannot be fully recognized in the process of meaning-making.

"Accordingly, the subject of knowledge acquires two other characteristics: a masculine gender identity (the properties of the masculine pronoun he) and the role of the subject of speech, the "I speak" of discourse. Through the blending of these three categories—subject of knowledge, masculinity, and speaking subject—the subject of knowledge is explicitly positioned in the role of male speaker, so that "male speaker" and "subject of knowledge" become interchangeable descriptions. Correspondingly, the object of knowledge, precisely because it is object for a subject and lacks a subjectivity of its own, is a being that does not speak. For Irigaray, the object is the denied feminine, or fetishized woman. She uses the feminine pronoun she to refer to the object of knowledge, a reminder of the status of fetishized femininity as constructed by the masculine gaze" (Schutte, 1991).

Kalki 2898 AD builds on this foundation and partly amplifies it. The narrative's choice to shape the circumstances of Kalki's incarnation, as opposed to the avatar itself, may seem at first to reorient the mythic centre towards the maternal-feminine. However, what the film does is to make the maternal body a puzzle to crack: a field of conflict, risk and the augural significance wherein competing forces interact for the mortal coil. Kalki 2898 AD treats Sumathi's corporeal self in the same way a warfare campaign takes care of a crucial ground: the territory is the top priority in the context of the clash it must be protected at all times. In the film, SUM-80 is the narrative anchor yet she is not fully evolved to have a tangible mindset of her own. On one scale, her gravid form is perpetually sanctified by the visual language of sacred symbolism, and on the flip side, she is in peril and needs to be saved. What is notable is how the glorification and vulnerability are mutually inclusive in the handling of the abject maternal.

E. Ann Kaplan in *Women and Film* proposes that cinema often situates women's bodies as a spectacle having a tacit masculine subject position: women are gazed upon and men behold. In Kalki 2898 AD, the glance locked on Sumathi is overwhelmingly distant and critical. The film portrays her in close-ups, mediums and long shots; her reactions are captured but prominence is given to the events that happen in relation to her body. Nonetheless, the story's arc seldom takes her vantage point and muting her is not an arbitrary choice. It is the film's way of showcasing the mythic syntax of the text: the sacred vessel warrants examination; it should be valued and contested but not inhabited. Just as Sumathi is the darling of the divine in the Kalki Purana, SUM-80 weaves similar terrain in the film—centrally placed and thoughtfully shot.

Adhering to the myth's structure, the ethics of consent is a question Kalki 2898 AD cannot even inquire about. Arrival of Kalki is predetermined by the celestial decree—woven into the fabric of time and dependent on the metaphysics of Hinduism. Whether Sumathi intends to conceive Kalki or not is a query neither the Puranas nor the film answers, as it rings hollow in the wider order of things. Fate operates without consent and it only mandates a medium. In the film, the medium is a female body, seized and sanctified by a universal imperative that surpasses any kind of individual agency. Sumathi exists as a vehicle and it defines her entire identity—the one entrusted to bear Kalki. Adrienne Rich's principal difference between motherhood as an institution and being-a-mother is vital for comprehending this dilemma. In the work, *Of Woman Born*, Rich claimed that male-centric cultures habitually dominate the day-to-day aspects of motherhood—its affective, corporeal registers—and institutionalise it to advance social interests which are beyond women's preferences.

Within the matrix of the film, this exclusion is almost complete. Almost no access is extended to how Sumathi's herself feels about the pregnancy—the emotions involved in nurturing a foetus amidst dire situations and destitution. Kalki 2898 AD shows her trials and tribulations alongside her unwavering resolve. However, she fails to offer her interiority with any seriousness or depth. This is not merely a consequence of the tropes associated with action thrillers

as it is truly ideological and anti-women in its execution. For example, when the film explores Bhairava (Prabhas), the audience is made aware of his tactics, his world-weary outlook and his inner terrain quite exquisitely. Likewise, when it comes to Ashwatthama (Amitabh Bachchan), the story is told from his point of view—his eons of seclusion, his trauma and his gradually revived sense of purpose. To put it simply, the male leads are the protagonists of their exploits while Sumathi remains as an object where those narrative strands converge. While the movie relates to Sumathi's plight, it essentially stays devoted to a story that needs her crisis to keep going strong. Therefore, her liberation from Yaskin's Complex is not equal to avoiding control as it only happens to be a transfer of her fertility to the prophesied reproductive claim. Kalki 2898 AD marks the Yaskin's use of the female body as wrong but it is not entitled to see if the second system is also right.

2.3. MATERNAL FUTURITY, GENDERED SACRIFICE AND THE POLITICS OF HOPE

Towards the climax, the narrative text primarily rests on the interaction between maternal duty, sacrifice and posterity. In certain aspects, Kalki 2898 AD is also about clinging onto hope amidst apparent desperation. Such distress reveals the film's strong convictions and the rationale behind the audience's sincere interest in Sumathi's survival. The reality it shows is dying out: drained, the ecosystem is ruined and most individuals live in abject poverty under Yaskin's cruelty. Amidst this turmoil, the prospect of Kalki's descent holds the potential for atonement and renaissance. Dissecting the process by which the film deconstructs such a maternal future warrants an analysis of three different yet intertwined aspects: attribution of hope to the gestating self, the acceptance of maternal hardship as penance, and the gendering tomorrow's world with respect to the masculine incarnation.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed starts by noting that hope is never equally shared. Hope is aimed at specific targets in relation to how it can cast itself optimistically into the future, which in turn, is decided by the institutional structures that govern social and cultural norms. In conservative societies, women inspire the possibility of hope—they manifest and maintain it—yet the future orientates men and their desires. This mismatch is deliberate and exposes the gender-based segregation of work where women are deemed to herald emotional labour while men take on the chain of command.

"Hope is crucial to the act of protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible. Indeed, anger without hope can lead to despair or a sense of tiredness produced by the 'inevitability' of the repetition of that which one is against [...] It would be tempting to say that it is in the failure of the past to repeat itself that the conditions for political hope might exist. But such an argument would empty politics of work and it would allow us to sit back and do nothing. I would argue instead that hope involves a relationship to the present, and to the present as affected by its imperfect translation of the past. It is in the present that the bodies of subjects shudder with an expectation of what is otherwise; it is in the unfolding of the past in the present. The moment of hope is when the 'not yet' impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future. If hope impresses upon us in the present rather than being merely futural, then hope requires that we must act in the present, rather than simply wait for a future that is always before us" (Ahmed, 2004).

In Kalki 2898 AD, Sumathi epitomises the world's hope: her unborn child—Kalki—holds a promise of tomorrow, transcending the gloom of the Kali Yuga. In her journey to pave the way for his birth, she has to undergo humiliation and misery. The journey traversing the barren expanse and the stretches of intense physical vulnerability are all considered as part of maternal altruism. By illustrating the woman's ordeal as the pinnacle of love, the film normalises the environment in which such affliction prevails. Without leaving any benefit of doubt, Nag Ashwin implies how the jeopardy that Sumathi tolerates has nothing to do with the world of Kalki—Yaskin's regime, the prophecy of the ordained one or the women's conditions—but the inevitable result of motherhood.

In *No Future*, Lee Edelman brings up the notion of reproductive futurism, which postulates how contemporary politics centers on the archetype of the child to justify the status quo. The time-ahead is inherently reserved for kids, which implicitly suggests that suffering is a natural part of existence. This reasoning is deeply traditionalist, as it rules out the potential of conceptualizing a fresh political paradigm in real time. The "hope" is different to the future and the chances of transformation occur in the unknown. More importantly, the prodigy assumes the perpetual vista of revolution, and the present must be sacrificed at its altar. In Kalki 2898 AD, the unborn Kalki is not only a proxy for a new political trajectory; he is the future incarnate.

"That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good, though always at the cost of limiting the rights "real" citizens are allowed. For the social order exists to preserve for this universalized subject, this fantasmatic Child, a notional freedom more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due. Hence, whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends" (Edelman, 2004).

To understand this gendered futurity comprehensively, the character arc of the male characters must be put into scrutiny. In the film, Bhairava starts off as a bloke who has fully assimilated into the stratified system of Kashi. For him, what counts is Units (equivalent of money), access, and ascent from the periphery into the Complex. His keenness to chase down Sumathi for Commander Manas—despite knowing that she would be killed—is not shown as gross inhumanity but as the culmination of a biased moral code. In the end, what inspires his growth is the Vijaya Dhanussu—the revered bow which unveils his true self as the rebirth of Karna—tragic hero of the Mahabharat. While the divine armament drives his metamorphosis; Sumathi's presence provides him with the moral fibre. Likewise, a similar element exists in the cosmic syntax of the movie, and it gets introduced via Raia (Keya Nair), Ashwatthama's young confidant. As someone tied to Ashwatthama with a partly devotional loyalty, Raia is hailed as the corroborator of the Vijaya Dhanussu's potency. His move to tell the secrets of the bow to Raia is a way of transferring Ashwatthama's relation to Karna, and it marks the one of the most subtle yet pertinent aspects of the film. This intergenerational transmission of information from a veteran sage-warrior to a prodigy overtly indicates the narrative's structure of pivoting the story towards the youth.

Meanwhile, prior to Vijaya Dhanussu transferring the notion of Bhairava's previous birth, Kalki 2898 AD orchestrates a toned-down version of the similar logic in a scene which has not obtained the evaluation it deserves. During Bhairava's kickoff sequence, an elderly man spots a miniature item—a small vighraha (idol)—resting in the former's palms. The man immediately recognizes it as Kaala Bhairava, and then makes the ownership claim for the object. Afterwards, he glances up to Bhairava and conveys "you should protect Kashi now". Without an iota of idea on what transpired, Bhairava loses interest in the idol and gives it back to the elderly man: "you won't get any units for this. Take it". As the scene unfolds, the older man refuses to look at Bhairava first to crown him as the protector, instead he gazes at the artifact, honouring its heritage. The uniqueness of Kaala Bhairava—the guardian of Kashi—refuses to arise from the man as it stems from the murti (spirit). Not until the older man's eyes lift from the idol to Bhairava, the transfer is initiated.

This sequence shows the framework for discerning the trajectory of Bhairava's character. The elderly man's idol and Karna's Vijaya Dhanussu, deep down, are essentially one and the same: two efforts intended to impart the guardian role to an individual whose environment has shaped him to be reluctant about it. The first push employs the humble words of morality; the latter, on the other hand, adopts the flamboyant language of cosmic epiphany. When it finally comes to shove, both miss the mark. The might of Vijaya Dhanussu recedes at the climax of the film and Bhairava returns to his former self, nabbing Sumati to earn the bounty. The motif the old man gently set up as an effort to confer the defensive persona is abruptly switched off in exchange of quid-pro-quo thinking, and this tension is reiterated at the film's climax. This restoration to the "old ways" highlights that the issue lies not in the magnitude of the dispatch but in the complexity of the makeup which the premonition is trying to undo. Kashi's philosophy of exploitation is thoroughly ingrained in Bhairava where even the collective ethos or the fabled tradition cannot make a difference for the time being.

However, in the moral economy of gender, Kyra's (Anna Ben) character merits serious thought. As a rebel agent, Kyra gives up her life to help Sumathi flee the Complex. She went all out and the movie validates it but the nature of her sacrifice lacks depth. Kalki 2898 AD defines her to a bare minimum to feel her death as a void, and the only catalyst for such an act comes from the prophecy of Sumathi's unborn child, instead of any emotional bond between the two. This episode exemplifies the film's logic of gender-assigned sacrifice: apart from Sumathi, almost all the female figures are born to die for the sake of Kalki, while the male subjects circling the gestating body are reinvented to serve a purpose. In essence, maternal futurity is the burden of the women while men use it as a vehicle to enhance their newfound awareness.

Above all, the film genders the era in itself and takes it beyond Sumathi. With the arrival of Kalki, Kali Yuga, the age of darkness, is over, and He welcomes the zeitgeist of Satya Yuga. As per the Puranic traditions, the new cosmic age will be distinguished for reviving the Dharmic order—a resurgence of the organized hierarchy that Kali Yuga has disrupted.

In the Puranas, this renewal happens covertly in the social spheres: the advent of this new Yuga re-establishes varnasharmadharma—that is, division of labour according to caste, and proper restructuring of gender relations. Conveniently, Kalki 2898 AD opts out of explicitly engaging with this discourse. However, such a leeway fails to recognize the ambit of the film since the narrative itself is based on the tenth avatar of Lord Vishnu. After Kalki's birth, the world will be dictated by the male incarnate, shielded by warrior men with sacrifices made by the war-hawks.

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey has zeroed in on the inclination of mainstream cinema to portray women as "the bearer of meaning rather than maker of meaning". Through this way, female characters live as objects to ground, facilitate and shape the male lead in his ventures.

"In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process) demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror-recognition in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of this imaginary existence. He is a figure in a landscape. Here the function of film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism) all tend to blur the limits of screen space. The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action" (Mulvey, 1975).

In Kalki 2898 AD, Sumathi prevails as a locus for which the male characters evolve, but in course of it she lacks her redemption or even a proper character arc. Her means and ends are justified with the pregnancy, and no other personality strands are explored in the film. Everything about Sumathi resides in pain and fortitude, leaving nothing but little space for emotional growth. However, resilience in itself is not development and it makes a huge contrast. The difference between Bhairava's implicit denial to be the protector and Sumathi's inexorable destiny to bear the prophesied child juxtaposes the way in which Kalki 2898 AD formulates gender. On one hand, Bhairava has the agency to refute an ordained identity and the film backs it up with his line of reasoning. In fact, Nag Ashwin quite deliberately accommodates this dismissal as a plot point that could be overhauled in the upcoming sequel. However, Sumathi is offered no parallel turndown. There is not even a single moment where a character strives to channel the maternal origin of Kalki to her, and she is in no position to decline it. The cosmic plan is to be incubated with her; it is innate, visceral and non-negotiable. In the film, men can momentarily withdraw from their fate while women are tied to it for the whole time.

3. CONCLUSION

Kalki 2898 AD merges the domains of science fiction, dystopia, apocalyptic mayhem and Hindu mythological thought. The universe it crafted is detailed and the creative vision enhances the emotional bandwidth of its characters. Nonetheless, it is a cinematic work whose ideological terrain gets limited by the stereotypical gender roles it strives to ignite and change. The article delves into three entwined aspects to understand how the film conceives gender and power. The first part analysed the world of Yaskin, primarily focusing on the Complex and its role in reproductive governance. For the boon of immortality, Supreme Yaskin imprisons gestating bodies to harvest their fertility. Here, none of the women have any autonomy to decide whether to be pregnant or not, their fate is decided by external structures which are beyond their control. Adding onto this section, the second strand navigates the mythological dimensions of the movie, contending that the last avatar of Lord Vishnu—Kalki—sanctifies the female body to its vehicle for birth. The concept of "sacred vessel" is brought up to understand the exploitation of Sumathi's maternity. On a similar vein, the third chapter converges the earlier postulations to advocate how the pregnant body turns into the focal point at which faith, promise and sacrifice intersect to create a "better" world.

Collectively, these propositions explain how Kalki 2898 AD formulates gender through a systematic blueprint: the rise of Sumathi to paramount glory while reducing her existence to that of a maternal figure. The film emphasizes her significance yet she counts only as a vessel—a realm of potential for society. To Yaskin, she is SUM-80, for the Shambhala tribe, she is the prophesied mother, and finally for Ashwatthama and Bhairava, she is the source of their transformation. The avenues for her feelings and aspirations, and a space to be herself is lacking throughout the movie. This lacuna is not a non-partisan void. The inability to adequately depict Sumathi's subjective experience to bestow her a personal landscape is deeply political and equally intricate as the surrounding stakes, influenced both by patriarchy and power hierarchies. If at all, an arc was provided from the point of view of Sumathi to see the extraction process first hand, the film would have been more nuanced. The same logic applies to the prophecy as well; Sumathi is the one who is carrying the future incarnate yet she holds no opinion about Him. If such a template were followed, the film would not have been

reduced to wicked people misusing female selves. In fact, it would demonstrate how it feels to occupy a self which the world regards as an asset.

The unwillingness of Kalki 2898 AD to make this move reflects a twisted ideology even if it is an unconscious decision. It also shows the boundaries of Indian mainstream cinema and its incapacity to realise the feminine perspective in larger-than-life films. As an action-thriller, Kalki 2898 AD works within the bounds of respective genre conventions, and accommodating Sumathi's subjectivity would necessitate an upheaval of the format itself. Thus, it is more convenient and a safer bet to retain Sumathi as a venerated yet obscure core of the plot, the figure through which men mature and legends evolve. Ultimately, what the movie uncovers is a precise layout of a gender-driven future which is ubiquitous in Indian cinema. The film never came up with this design nor drastically altered it. All it did was increase the scale of execution with uncommon candor, exposing the logistics vis-à-vis the maternal physique and how it is destined to hold the burden of future.

Since a confirmed sequel is coming out, Kalki 2898 AD withholds resolution in the first part of the franchise. As the movie culminates in a cliffhanger with Sumathi apparently being taken to the Complex, Ashwatthama chained and Bhairava unchanged, it is giving out a particular type of commitment to the audience. Sumathi's maternity will remain central to the narrative in the next instalment where the fate of other characters shall be revealed. The predictable sequel arc—Ashwatthama unleashed, Bhairava reborn, Sumathi bulwarked and Kalki's birth—would conclude the unanswered questions of the first part. A follow-up film that sets on this path would continue Kalki 2898 AD's logic without rethinking its intrinsic patriarchal form.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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