

**Artistic Parallels between Mythic Fiction and Movie: A Comparative Study of Kevin Missal's Novels *The Kalki Trilogy* and Mari Selvaraj's Movie *Karnan***

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**Abstract**

The article endeavors to do a comparative study of Mari Selvaraj's movie *Karnan* (2021) and Kevin Missal's mythic fiction *The Kalki Trilogy*. *Karnan* portrays the life of a marginalized community from a village called Podiyankulam. *The Kalki Trilogy* is a series of mythic fiction written in three parts namely *Dharmayoddha Kalki: Avatar of Vishnu* (2018), *Satyayoddha Kalki: Eye of Brahma* (2018) and *Mahayoddha Kalki: Sword of Shiva* (2019). The storyline and the characters are heavily inspired from plethora of ancient Indian mythological narrations such as Kalki Purana, Mahabharata and Ramayana. The plot portrays the vivid journey of its protagonist, Kalki Hari, the tenth avatar of Lord Vishnu who is prophesied to destroy the evil forces of Kali Yuga. The paper aims to demonstrate the similarities between the select works in terms of characterization, literary technique, and symbols. Under characterization, the researcher peculiarly focuses on the heroes' journey as Messianic (savior) figures and symbols of hope.

**Key words:** characterization, foreshadow, Messianic figures, symbols.

The paper aims to analyze the similarities between the select works in terms of the heroes' journey as saviors, restorers of righteousness, and symbols of hope. It also focuses on the

animal symbolism and foreshadowing as a literary technique. The film *Karnan* (2021) by Mari Selvaraj portrays the life of a marginalized community from a village called Podiyankulam. The inmates of the village are denied fundamental transport facilities which ultimately affect their access to education and healthcare for many generations. The movie limelights the journey of the protagonist, Karnan, a spirited and fearless youth who becomes aware of the intentional systematic discrimination faced by his village from the neighboring dominant community from Melur. Unlike his fellow villagers who blindly adjust their fate as oppressed Karnan oaths to bring back equality and righteousness in their life. As the plot moves, he inspires his fellow people to fight against the unjust system. Despite undergoing bitter experiences and sacrifices, he succeeds to earn the rights of Podiyankulam people.

Kevin Missal's *The Kalki Trilogy* is a series of mythic fiction written in three parts namely *Dharmayoddha Kalki: Avatar of Vishnu* (2018), *Satyayoddha Kalki: Eye of Brahma* (2018) and *Mahayoddha Kalki: Sword of Shiva* (2019). The storyline and the characters are heavily inspired from plethora of ancient Indian mythological narrations such as Kalki Purana, Mahabharata and Ramayana. The plot portrays the vivid journey of its protagonist, Kalki Hari, the tenth avatar of Lord Vishnu who is prophesied to destroy the evil forces of Kali Yuga. From being an innocent man with unnatural physical power Kalki goes through a transformative journey before he comes to terms with his responsibility as the savior avatar. With the help of his old friend Kripacharya, he learns to meditatively connect with the previous avatars to hone his skills. Eventually he fights many battles before coming face to face to with his ultimate enemy, the 'adharm' who is to be evacuated from the world as prophesied. And thus comes an end to the battle between the good and the evil.

The characters Karnan and Kalki from the select works are endowed with Messianic qualities. In Christianity, it is believed that the Messiah is the predetermined savior of mankind. It is described in *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments* as “the Messiah—The people in darkness will see a great light—Unto us a Child is born—He will be the Prince of Peace and reign on David’s throne” (Isaiah 9.1). Reflecting these attributes of a savior, in the *Kalki Trilogy*, Kalki serves as the premeditated avatar of Lord Vishnu, destined to purify the corrupt world by vanquishing the ultimate evil force, the ‘adharm’. Though he is reluctant in the beginning, he eventually embraces his divine responsibilities and pursues his journey to learn the ways of an avatar. Throughout his journey he proves his friends and fellow inmates that he is the predestined avatar to eradicate the ‘adharm’ in the Kali Yuga which is consumed with chaos. On the other hand, Karnan hails from a marginalized community. When the members of his community learn to survive under the oppression of the dominant group, Karnan takes a different path. He makes them comprehend the intentional deprivation of fundamental rights by the unjust social system. Hence he determines to bring them a life of dignity by fighting the dominant benefactors who are poisoned with the ideology of pride and discrimination. Thus the people of Podiyankulam accept Karnan as their savior.

The idea of Messianic figure is also symbolically represented in so many other ways in the movie. The introductory song of the movie “Kanda vara sollunga” acts as a welcome anthem for Karnan which leaves him a savior impression among the audience. It resonates the voice of the oppressed people from Podiyankulam village lamenting for justice and dignity to be restored by their hero. In another instance, the villagers conduct a ritual of cutting fish which is thrown in a pond. It is believed that the person who cuts the fish from the other shore of the pond wins the village sword which itself a symbol that the villagers are waiting for a savior to emerge and save

them from the trials of caste discrimination. Karnan takes part in the combat and secures the sword with which he ultimately decapitates the antagonist Kannabiran, an IPS officer. Along with the sword, Karnan also wins the faith of his villagers. This is a symbolical representation that portrays the protagonist as the Savior of his community.

Similarly, in the *Kalki Trilogy*, so many symbols are employed to demonstrate Kalki as a savior figure. As a common village boy born with unusual physical power, Kalki encounters an eccentric old man called Kripacharya who reveals him the purpose of taking birth in the Kali Yuga, the chaotic world. One of the prominent situations that demonstrate his power is his immunity towards the Soma, the magical liquid capable of driving the ordinary human beings mad. The liquid is known to empower only the supernatural being of either good or evil nature that is the 'dharm' and 'adharm' respectively. When Kalki gets injected with Somalata, he remains completely unharmed rather he gets drastically strengthened by it. According to Kripacharya, this proves him to be the tenth avatar of Lord Vishnu, the savior figure of Kali Yuga. Apart from this, Kalki proves himself as a divine warrior in many circumstances where he combats with powerful leaders around the world with the help of his previous avatars. Ultimately he fights in the final battle with the 'adharm' restoring the peace and righteousness. .

When the select texts are analyzed more deeply, so many other symbolic similarities can be observed. One of the prominent aspects is the animal symbolism. It is prophesied that the tenth avatar of Vishnu will arrive on horseback with the sword of Shiva to eliminate the evil from the Kali Yuga. Kalki and his horse Devadatta have a strong spiritual connection which saves his life in so many instances. Throughout their journey, Devadatta guides Kalki with his intuitive power from dangerous signs. The ultimate battle takes place between the allies under the forces 'dharm' and 'adharm'. When Manasa's army against the 'adharm' almost lost the war,

Kalki gives an unexpected heroic entry with his horse and the sword of Shiva. Eventually he kills the evil forces with all his might. Likewise in *Karnan*, in the crucial moment of his final battle, Karnan mounts his horse which has travelled along the story from the beginning. The animal fiercely gallops towards their villagers who have been gravely waiting for the arrival of their rescuer. With the destined sword in his hand, Karnan surrounds the police force which has cruelly drenched the village with blood. He slashes each and every one of them and finally he beheads the higher official Kannabiran whose ego was the ultimate reason for all the bloodshed happened to his people. Hence the arrival of both the heroes into their final battle field with the horse and sword attracts a huge attention.

Even till the very end of his life the antagonist Kannabiran carries a dominating attitude towards the people of Podiyankulam. He tries to make Karnan feel little being a part of an oppressed community with no power. Yet Karnan is the only person among the villagers who dares to face the crooked strategy played by his so called superiors. Though he struggles with his mental conflict of whether to kill or leave the official, the latter's attitude leads to his own death. Thus Karnan becomes the savior of Podiyankulam the moment he decides to face his weakness strategically framed by the upper class society. Such brave fight of an oppressed can also be traced in Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* in which the protagonist Draupadi terrorizes her enemies by fighting against her weakness framed by the society i.e., the objectification of her body. Being a revolutionist, when she was brutally raped and abused by the police officials, she sends chills into their spine by walking completely naked with her wounded breasts and says, "What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me—come on, *counter* me--?" (*Draupadi* 402)

The first scene in both the *Kalki Trilogy* and *Karnan* begin with a huge idol of God with one significant difference. In the former, it is the statue of Lord Vishnu before which Kalki

prays, “He looked up at the grandeur of the stone statue, the tall twenty feet marvel” (prologue) whereas in the latter, it is an idol with no head. The lack of head in the second case symbolizes the absence of identity for the marginalized community in Podiyankulam.

Divine intervention is yet another aspect which correlates the primary texts. In the *Kalki Trilogy*, the protagonist Kalki learns to contact his previous avatars,

“Kripa had taught him the ways of Channelling and learning from the predecessors, the ones who had ingested Soma. Kripa had told Kalki that the souls of the Avatars were connected, even though they were no longer manifest physically on the planet. By concentrating and Channelling his faculties, he would be able to tap into the resources of common experiences that had been passed down through the ages.” (Missal, *Dharmayoddha* 184)

Throughout the story, Kalki gets consistently guided by the previous avatars in each and every critical situation. As an amateur, he Channels only with Lord Bhargav Rama for a long time who teaches him the art of warfare. Subsequently, he meets Vaman, Narasimha, and others in so many other circumstances where they provide their guidance to combat his enemies. In *Karnan*, Kattu Pechi, the younger sister of the hero who dies due to the lack of transport facility to the hospital and the negligence of the upper caste people, turns into a deity. Throughout the movie, Karnan remains spiritually connected to his sister’s soul who happens to be his driving force to fight against the unjust social system. In fact, it is obvious that Karnan becomes determined to get their own bus stop after such dreadful death in his family. Hence in both the *Kalki Trilogy* and *Karnan*, the divine presence of the avatars and Kattu Pechi respectively play a prominent role in validating the actions of the heroes in their battle against the evil forces.

Parallel to the divine forces, the heroes are also guided by their elderly friends who can be identified as Joseph Campbell describes them in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “The herald or announcer of the adventure...often dark, loathly, or terrifying, judge devil by the world; yet if one could follow, the way would be opened through the walls of day into the dark where the jewels glow” (Campbell 48). In the *Kalki Trilogy*, it is Kripacharya who lures Kalki into the path of an avatar. Along with revealing the purpose behind the unnatural physical strength of Kalki, he also accompanies him throughout his journey towards Mahendragiri. He guides him to learn the meditative techniques of ‘Channelling’ towards the previous avatars of Lord Vishnu. In *Karnan*, the character Yamaraja plays the role of the guiding figure. Though he was initially accused for involving Kalki in unnecessary rebellious actions, he is the only person who supports, encourages, motivates and even sacrifices his life for the sake of his good friend Karnan and his mission. Whenever Karnan ends in the tangle of self-doubt, he looks for the opinion of Yama for motivation. It is demonstrated in the scene where Karnan gets the assurance from Yama about his ability to cut the fish in the ritual. Hence, the omnipresence of the guiding figures is inevitable in the moral journey of the heroes.

The technique of foreshadow is another literary device that can be found common between the chosen art works. When Kalki ‘Channells’ with Lord Bhargav Ram for the first time, the latter hints about the drastic sacrifices that Kalki has to experience before he learns the ways of avatar to vanquish the ‘adharm’. When Kalki questions Lord Bhargav about his future, he says, “These answers can be understood when you have learnt and lost enough” (Missal, *Dharmayoddha* 187)

Similarly, in *Karnan*, from the beginning of the story, Mari Selvaraj focuses on a little donkey whose legs are tied with a rope hindering it from wandering freely. Unlike his fellow

villagers who passes the suffering animal unbothered, it keeps on disturbing Karnan for a long time. He somehow correlates the donkey with the fate of his marginalized community who are metaphorical caged within their village without a bus stop. At a crucial point where the buses deny to stop for a full grown pregnant woman, the elder son of the woman pelt a stone into the bus which leads to a huge commotion. Despite listening to the battle, instead of taking part in it, Karnan focuses on untying the donkey from its bondage. Once he unties it, the donkey merrily runs upon a little climb towards the spirit of Kattu Pechi. This scene is the most significant part which foreshadows that one day Karnan is going to liberate his fellow villagers from the social tie which deter them to get empowered in every possible ways.

In the select primary sources chosen for research, the protagonist Kalki fights the battle with the corrupt and chaotic society of Kali Yuga whereas Karnan confronts the social injustices faced by his marginalized community. On the one hand, Kalki represents the whole humanity of the contemporary world whereas Karnan represents the group of people who are still marginalized from the mainstream population. In both the cases, the way the storylines end with an optimistic note manifests a lot of hope to the audience. Thus the paper demonstrates the similarities between Kevin Missal's *The Kalki Trilogy* and Mari Selvaraj's *Karnan* in terms of characterization, literary technique, and symbols. Under characterization, the article peculiarly focuses on the heroes' journey as Messianic figures and symbols of hope.

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