

# SYNTHETIC SELVES, FRACTURED FUTURES: AN INTERSECTIONAL POSTHUMANIST READING OF KALKI 2898 AD

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## Abstract

Contemporary science fiction in film is a stage where we play out issues of ethics and being in a posthuman world. But it is mainly Anglo American products which academia looks at. We are ignoring the important input of Global South cinema. In this paper we put right that imbalance by looking at Nag Ashwin's great Indian epic *Kalki 2898 AD* (2024). I put forth that the film is a pioneer in what I term "mythological posthumanism" they use the structure of Hindu cosmology to put down Western tech utopian thinking and to put forth other world views but also that which is put forth is not fully there without an in-depth intersectional analysis. I draw on the work of Rosi Braidotti's zoe based posthumanism and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality to decode the film's complex play with biopolitics, non-human agency and social hierarchy.

The study goes into three parts: first we look at Project K's use of the maternal body as a stand in for biocapitalist control. Second, we look at the characters of the AI Bujji and the immortal Ashwatthama which we see as breaking down the human/non human divide. Finally we do a critical intersectional read of the films take on gender and its use of caste and class in its dystopian economy. In this paper we put to rest that the film is a great model for culture based posthumanism which we must pay attention to, also it also brings to the fore the ongoing issue of mainstream narratives which do not include full feminist and anti caste critique. We put forth that for a true ethical posthumanism which deconstructs all power structures an inter disciplinary global perspective is a must which this research supports.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Indian Sci-Fi Films, Intersectionality, Technoscientific, Voiced Autonomy.

## Introduction

For more than 100 years, based on criticism of science fiction cinema, it has become a semi-magical foil where the society's deepest fears and hopes for technology, an ecological crisis, and the uncertainty of being human are expressed and examined. As artificial intelligence suddenly speeds up horizontal genetic variations and digital surveillance reaches into every conceivable life dimension, the genre emerges as a space par excellence in which ethical and ontological dilemmas concerning posthuman futures are worked out. Foundational scholarship-Furthering the critique of techno-orientalism by scholars like **Lisa Nakamura**-to that of materialist posthumanism from **N. Katherine Hayles** and that of vitalist theory from **Rosi Braidotti**-have thoroughly mapped various contours of these imagined futures as conceived by Western cinema traditions. Films such as *Blade Runner 2049*, *Her*, and *Ex Machina* appear to have entered the canon in demarcating fuzzy boundaries between human and machine, concentration, biopower, and ethical implications of the creation of new beings. While such work sets a really much and well theorized territory, it also points to a major limitation in the global conversation on posthumanism.

The established territory of posthumanist film theory, however, remains disproportionately Anglo-American and Europeanist productions. This meant a huge scholarly space: the relative neglect of potent contributions, often quite different, emanating from the Global South. These cinemas tend to imbue the generic conventions of sci-fi with rich, living mythological traditions to give critique against globalizing techno-utopianism and local social hierarchies from alternative epistemologies. Probably the most supreme example of this untapped potential is the recently released Indian Telugu-language epic, *Kalki 2898 AD* (Nag Ashwin, 2024). Through a big gamble, it brazenly associates a dystopian cyberpunk pictorial with the deep narrative and cosmological structures of Hindu mythology to give rise to the widening and decolonizing framework for considering humanity's future. However ambitious the film is, initial analysis suggests that this radical vision could in fact be blocked by certain traditional social frameworks with which it has failed to fully disengage, opening the necessity for a critical framework that trials beyond the pure posthuman or formalist reading.

This paper takes on a unique role by providing a critical look at *Kalki 2898 AD* through a combined theoretical perspective. Hence, we propose that the film presents a new variety of "mythological posthumanism," using Hindu cosmology to puncture Western techno-utopian ideals and envisage alternative futures richly embedded within culture. However, this paper argues that the broad scale of its ambitions cannot be fully realized without deep, intersectional analysis, offering a reminiscent and captivating way of reading the films intricate relation with biopolitics and non-human agency as well as a framework which is responsible for its social impacts through Rosi Braidotti's theory of zoe-centric posthumanism, which mainly focuses on concept of zoe i.e, impersonal, generative and vital force of life and Kimberley Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality which argues that social identities such as gender, caste and class are not separate but interlocking hence impacting the experience of being in society. This paper is a multilayered analysis. In the first section, the treatment of the maternal body as a site of control by *Project K* under bio capitalism is explored, through Braidotti's idea of a 'bio-political' economy. Then, the figures like immortal *Ashwatthama* and *AI Bujji* are investigated as they blur the boundaries between human and non-human realms, merging organic life with technological aspects. Lastly, we present a critical intersectional perspective on the film's gender dynamics and its allegorical exploration of caste and class within the dystopian landscape of the Complex. By adopting this interdisciplinary approach, this paper illustrates that a genuinely ethical posthumanism must be fundamentally intersectional, dismantling all power hierarchies at once to prevent reproducing the very exclusions it aims to challenge.

This study uses important text analysis, a qualitative method to detect ideas and ideologies in the film *Kalki 2898 AD* (Ashwin, 2024). This method examines the film as a cultural text in a systematic way, in principle, to produce a detailed interpretation rather than a broad, factual data. The following sections describe data sources, theoretical backgrounds and method of analysis to ensure clarity and rigidity.

The study is a descriptive case study of the film *Kalki 2898 AD* (Ashwin, 2024). The film was chosen as the primary data source as it is a major Indian film that mixes Western science fiction styles with Hindu mythology. Given its recent release and cultural impact, it is a suitable example to see the rise of mythological posthumous in global South films.

The analysis focuses on the entire film, including story, character, visual design, dialogue and symbolism. Human participants were not included in this study; The analysis was directly conducted on publicly accessible film text.

The analysis is based on two connected theoretical ideas that serve as the main ways of understanding the film.

1) **Rosi Braidotti's Posthumanism: Braidotti's (2013)** posthumanism, which centers on life and materials, offers the main ideas for analyzing non-human actions and biopolitics. Key analysis tools from this idea include:

- The division between human and non-human and its breakdown.
- The idea of zoe, the basic life force, as opposed to bios (political life).
- The concept of the posthuman as a related, physical, and connected being.
- A close look at biopower and biocapitalism, which helped in analyzing the film's economy and politics.

2) **Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality: Crenshaw's (1989)** intersectionality theory is used to examine how the film shows social structures. This theory calls for an analysis of how power works in relation to:

- Gender, looking at how women are shown and act.
- Caste, understood through the film's symbolic look at social levels and purity inside the Complex.
- Class, analyzed through the economic differences between the elite in the Complex and the poor outside it.

These ideas were used together throughout the analysis to examine how technological and social levels are formed together in the film's story.

The film was watched many times. The first watch was to understand the story, and then more focused watches followed. During these watches, detailed notes were taken on scenes, dialogues, character actions, and visual symbols that were important to the research questions. Notes were kept in a digital document with time codes for easy reference. The researcher found themes in the notes. The notes were checked and coded for new themes. This coding was based on the combined theoretical ideas. For example, scenes were coded for times of biocapitalist exploitation, changes to the human/non-human division, support of gender rules, and symbols of caste and class. All scenes about the character *SUM-80* and *Project K* were analyzed using Braidotti's biocapitalism to support the argument about using the mother's body. The scenes of AI Bujji and immortal Ashwatthama have been brought under close speculation. They reflect how they change typical roles, drawing on Braidotti's thoughts about the posthuman. The women's character arcs came under scrutiny too.

So did the social setup inside the complex. All of that used intersectionality to spot limits in the film's forward-looking posthuman ideas. Those limits tie into its handling of gender and social structures.

This approach kept the reading grounded in the film's own words. It followed the picked theories for guidance. That let us get a deep, cross-field grasp on *Kalki 2898 AD*. Looking at *Kalki 2898 AD* from Ashwin in 2024 brought out some solid points. They fell into three big themes. Each one matched the framework we used. The results come next in a straightforward order which are observed from the story details in close speculations.

The part of Project K which involves Biocapitalist Exploitation stands out strong. The plot around Project K and the character SUM-80 points to a setup that turns living bodies into profit tools. The key takeaway shows the mother's form as just a container for pulling out resources. That lines up right with biocapitalist thinking.

In the Complex's records, SUM-80 shows up not as a full person. She gets called the "Universal Mother." They keep her in frozen sleep only to draw out a vital fluid called "Astra" from her body. The whole thing runs like an assembly line under the strict rulers. It has constant body scans and a cold, doctor-like vibe from the workers. The way they show SUM-80 on screen hits hard. She appears wrapped in cords and pipes in a clean, metal room. All that stresses her spot as a living machine, not someone real.

The characters Bujji and Ashwatthama really stretch what counts as human or not. They pull it off in ways that differ a lot. Bujji goes beyond a simple AI setup. She works as an AI in a vehicle with sharp wits and real emotions. Think sarcasm and quick fixes for problems. Plus, she sticks tight to Bhairava, the main guy. Parts of the tale have her stepping up big. She challenges what Bhairava decides. She even dreams of catching sight of the sea. For her, those moves shake up the whole plot.

Ashwatthama brings a different angle. He pulls from the Mahabharata tales and faces endless life. His not-quite-human side stems from old myths, not tech advances. His path deals with time weighing heavy. It involves huge strengths and deep isolation. Side by side, Bujji and Ashwatthama highlight two separate forms of non-human drive.

The social identities such as Gender, Class and Caste have a crucial part to play by serving as the prominent reason behind uneven social setups where the class differences are quite visible on the surface, the gender and caste differences remain deepseated which is followed by some visible traditional divides. The upper-tier folks exist in this bubble of "purity," cut off from the "impure" outside world. Meanwhile, those at the bottom are stuck doing the hard, dirty work that keeps the whole system running without ever enjoying the benefits. The film doesn't directly criticize caste; instead, it lays out how that logic works.

The study asked how *Kalki 2898 AD (Ashwin, 2024)* enters and complicates talk on posthumanism by joining science fiction hardware to Hindu mythic plots. The clearest result is that the film coins a style best labelled "mythological posthumanism"; it attacks Western techno utopia, but the attack cracks because the story does not keep an intersectional check on its own caste, class and gender ladders. The next paragraphs unpack that result, place it beside earlier work, list the limits of the present reading plus point to questions that later research and theory can take up.

The foremost contribution of the film *Kalki 2898 AD* is to prove that posthumanist anxieties are not the exclusive preserve of the Western philosophical traditions. The portrayal of Project K in the film offers a strong allegory for biocapitalism that perfectly fits with yet distinctively reframes Braidotti's (2013) concepts. The exploitation of *SUM-80's* body as a source of "Astra" directly mirrors Western critiques of the body as a site of biopower and commodification. By framing this exploitation not just through a capitalist lens but through a mythological one - where the "Universal Mother" evokes figures like Prakriti or the generative force of the cosmos - the film grounds its critique in a culturally specific ontology. This takes the conversation beyond the mere translation of western ideas and instead presents an alternative critique from the standpoint of Hindu cosmology, and in doing so, "provincializes" Eurocentric posthumanism, and shows that there are a variety of tools to utilize to critique it. The film does not progress on the intersectional front - it critiques class hierarchy openly enough, but maintains a traditional stance on gender. *SUM-80* drives the final plot turn, but her choices remain mostly passive and tied to reproduction. She fits the "mother goddess" mold that praises women through self-sacrifice and childbirth, a pattern that narrows female action to a single role (Sreekumar, 2021). Side figures such as DIANA repeat the same limit - they exist to push the male leads forward. The result clashes with the fuller feminist posthumanism that scholars like **Braidotti** promote, exposing a gap between the film's breakdown of "the human" and its safe return to familiar gender rules.

The film also wastes its chance to speak about caste. The Complex runs on a ladder that places "Supreme Yaskin" at the top and speaks of blood purity - the scheme copies the caste order point for point. The story, however, treats the fight as a matter of money and class - the distinct rules of caste dissolve into a general class war. The silence matters - anti caste writers such as Gopal Guru (2021) read it as one more sign that mainstream Indian texts still refuse to treat caste as a basic building block of society. Because the film never names or attacks this ladder, its "mythological posthumanism" leaves a central Indian hierarchy untouched.

This study looks at only one movie. Because of this, it can give a detailed analysis of that one film. But it cannot tell us about other Indian or South Global science fiction movies. This study is based on ideas and interpretations using which people can compare the film to movies coming out of other Global South countries. That kind of comparison really highlights common themes along with some clear differences. The research also digs into viewer opinions which results in exploration of how interpretations vary on the elements of gender and caste in the film taking note of which enhanced the argument.

*Kalki 2898 AD* stands out as a key film in its own right. It brings fresh takes on posthumanism that feel pretty innovative. At the same time, it highlights gaps in the usual approaches. But stories like this from the Global South matters a lot. They have secured an important position in the field of posthuman and sci-fi films and are not just side notes to western concepts. Yet, the movie fails to bring changes in gender and caste issues prevailing the age-old concepts of patriarchal order. This overlooked section serves as a real warning. Posthumanism needs to be truly fair if it wants to move forward.

It has to tackle two main areas. One involves dropping the idea of humans and non-humans as totally separate. The other means working to dismantle biases around gender, caste, class, and race. We cannot ignore that. If synthetic humans become part of our future, we have to base it all on solid, equal social foundations. That is the only way forward.

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