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From Curse to Redemption: Ashwatthama as True Hierophany against Yaskin's False Transcendence in *Kalki 2898 AD*

Abstract: *Though both Ashwatthama and Supreme Yaskin in Kalki 2898 AD embody immortality, they approach it in radically different ways. Ashwatthama, drawn from the Mahabharata, endures a cursed immortality that, despite its suffering, is ultimately sanctified through his renewed purpose in serving the Kalki avatar. Yaskin, by contrast, embodies a technocratic quest for artificial transcendence, simulating divinity through power and technology. Informed by Mircea Eliade's categories of The Sacred and the Profane, the study argues that Ashwatthama represents a true hierophany, while Yaskin exemplifies a false one.*

Keywords: Ashwatthama, Supreme Yaskin, *Kalki 2898 AD*, immortality, hierophany, sacred and profane, Mircea Eliade.

From Curse to Redemption: Ashwatthama as True Hierophany against Yaskin's False Transcendence in *Kalki 2898 AD*

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Immortality, a concept that is intricately woven into the fabric of human longing and imagination, is peppered throughout the different layers of Indian mythology. Indian philosophy, which is generally very adamant about the cyclical nature of time, life, and death as well as the impermanence of existence, quite contrastingly provides varied instances of immortality which challenge the very notion of conditional existence. While the gods are the prime example in the divine domain of the myths, in the mortal realm, we find the 'Chiranjeevis' (destined to live forever), and also individuals blessed with 'Amaratva' (without death). Chiranjivi refers to beings blessed or cursed with profound longevity, destined to live for an extended period, often until the end of a cosmic age, such as the Kali Yuga. This is distinct from Amaratva, which denotes absolute, true deathlessness, a state typically achieved by deities or those who have transcended the cycle of birth and death. However, such immortality is not always the result of a boon or eternal devotion. Ashwatthama, son of Guru Drona, is cursed with immortality by lord Sri Krishna for committing heinous war crimes. The recent Indian movie *Kalki 2898 AD* draws from the original myth of the *Mahabharata* and adds to it in a futuristic dystopian setting. The character of Ashwatthama, played by Amitabh Bachchan, is the result of the cursed immortality granted by lord Krishna. Conversely, the film's antagonist, Supreme Yaskin, is seen as a figure consumed by an obsession with power and immortality. His distorted perception of human nature—particularly its inherent flaws, imperfections, and vulnerabilities—and his desire to eradicate such imperfections instigates his exploitative and ruthless pursuit of the embryonic serum. This, quite intriguingly, juxtaposes the two powerful characters of the film – a divine (albeit accursed) immortal, seeking redemption, and a pseudo-immortal with a poisoned sense of retribution and justice.

Ashwathama's birth is rooted in divine intervention, yet his destiny ends in stark contrast. He was born to Dronacharya, the revered royal guru of both the Pandavas and Kauravas, and his wife Kripa. His birth was considered auspicious, a direct result of Dronacharya's severe penance to Lord Shiva, through which he sought a son possessing the deity's valour. Some traditions even regard Ashwathama as an avatar of one of the eleven Rudras or a combined incarnation of Shiva, Yama, Kama, and Krodha.

A distinguishing feature of Ashwathama from birth was a divine gem (mani) embedded in his forehead. This gem granted him extraordinary abilities and near invincibility, protecting him from

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hunger, thirst, and fear. This inherent protection suggests a pre-existing form of immortality or profound longevity, implying he was not inherently cursed from the outset. This initial potential for greatness makes his subsequent moral downfall and cursed immortality a more profound tragedy, highlighting the corrupting influence of unchecked ego and vengeance. His inherent divine gifts were ultimately overthrown by his choices, leading to a perversion of his intended destiny.

The crucial turning point in Ashwathama's role came with the deceitful death of his father, Dronacharya, orchestrated by the Pandavas. This act, particularly the false report of "Ashwathama is dead" (actually referring to an elephant, not Drona's son), caused Drona to lay down his arms, leading to his demise. This profound betrayal and loss plunged Ashwathama into uncontrollable grief and an unquenchable rage, fundamentally transforming him from a loyal warrior into a figure consumed entirely by vengeance. Driven by his insatiable thirst for revenge after the Kurukshetra War, Ashwathama, along with Kritavarma and Kripacharya, launched a ruthless and morally reprehensible night attack on the sleeping Pandava camp. Mistaking the five sleeping sons of Draupadi (the Upapandavas) for the Pandava brothers themselves, he ruthlessly decapitated them. This heinous act, involving the massacre of unsuspecting, defenceless children, is widely regarded as one of the most condemned deeds in the entire *Mahabharata*, violating fundamental rules of warfare and human decency.

Following this massacre, Ashwathama was pursued by Arjuna and Krishna, who sought justice for the murdered children. In a desperate attempt to annihilate the Pandavas, Ashwathama unleashed the Narayanastra, a potent celestial weapon, upon the Pandava army. When this weapon failed to achieve his desired destruction, he resorted to an even more extreme measure. In a final act of unbridled malice, he redirected the ultimate weapon, the Brahmastra, towards the womb of Uttara, aiming to kill Abhimanyu's unborn child, Parikshit, and thereby extinguish the entire Pandava lineage.

Lord Krishna, witnessing Ashwathama's unforgivable act of targeting Parikshit in Uttara's womb, pronounced a severe and lasting curse upon him. This curse fundamentally transformed Ashwathama's inherent longevity, which he possessed due to his birth gem, into a state of perpetual suffering. Krishna declared,

Oh, Aśvatthāmā, you will be denounced by all as a sinner for killing this unborn babe.
To suffer for this evil deed, you will roam about in the earth for three thousand years.
Nobody will associate with you; you will be shunned by society. You will be tormented
by all diseases on earth. (Section 16, Soutika Parva, *Mahabharata*).

Thus, Ashwatthama, the son of Drona, is condemned by Lord Krishna to a life of unending suffering for his transgression in slaying the sleeping sons of the Pandavas on the final night of the Kurukshetra war. This curse renders him one of the seven Chiranjeevis—immortal beings destined to persist until the end of the Kali Yuga—or eight, should Markandeya be included in the count. In the traditional

narrative, this immortality is not a boon but a punishment: Ashwatthama's body is afflicted with terrible wounds, his existence marked by isolation, and ceaseless agony.

In *Kalki 2898 AD*, Nag Ashwin, the director of the movie, adapts this mythic figure through intentional deviation from the canonical myth. The film draws on a variant of the epic in which Krishna not only curses Ashwatthama but also severs the mani, the glowing jewel set in his forehead that signifies his invulnerability. In this retelling, the removal of the mani ushers a prophecy: it will be restored only upon the arrival of the tenth avatar of Vishnu, Kalki, whom Ashwatthama is destined to aid. The film visually intensifies his cursed state, depicting him with a grotesquely diseased and deteriorating figure covered with unclean bandages tinged with turmeric and blood, which drastically amplifies the relatively restrained descriptions in the epic. His eventual retrieval of the mani from the character Raia marks a pivotal metamorphosis—from a withered, tormented figure into a restored and formidable warrior – the ancient warrior standing much taller than the other humans of the dystopian future, easily claiming victory against the bounty hunters with far advanced technology than his time period. This restoration functions symbolically as both physical rejuvenation and the reclamation of prophesied divine purpose. Ashwin has explicitly stated, in an interview with ETimes, that he envisioned Ashwatthama as “the Indian version of Gandalf” from *The Lord of the Rings*, thereby placing him within the archetype of the sagacious protector and guide. This parallel is especially evident in his role as the guardian of the unborn child believed to be the Kalki Avatar, a role he affirms in the film with the line: “My purpose is to save... only one person. Only one.” In reframing Ashwatthama in this manner, *Kalki 2898 AD* engages in a form of myth-making, merging the moral complexity of the Sanskrit epic with the archetypal structure of Western high fantasy, and in doing so, expands the interpretive possibilities of his legend for contemporary audiences.

Amitabh Bachchan's cinematic legacy as the “angry young man” of his early Hindi movies – embodying the simmering anger of a generation disillusioned with the systemic social injustice – finds a compelling transformation in his portrayal of Ashwatthama in *Kalki 2898 AD*. In this reimaged epic, the actor's hallmark intensity is neither the raw, unmediated rage of rebellion nor the impulsive defiance of a wronged individual. Instead, it is channelled through the motif of mythic temperament and divine guidance.

As shown in the prologue of the movie, wandering on the face of the earth for more than 3000 years, Ashwatthama witnessed the horrors of the ‘Kali Yuga’, far worse than the ones in the war of Kurukshetra. The agony of the world and the torment of his own situation tempered the volatile energy of the young, hot-headed warrior into a sacralised anger, disciplined and weaponised in service of a cosmological duty: the safeguarding of the Kalki avatar.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, we find the figure of Supreme Yaskin. Yaskin is portrayed as the autocratic sovereign of the fortress-like complex where he exercises dominion over resources and

human subjects with clinical detachment. His authority establishes a rigid hierarchy, technological superiority, and sustains himself by the extraction of life from the vulnerable. The very structure of his empire becomes an extension of his persona – sterile, mechanised, and devoid of compassion. This stands in sharp contrast to the mythological concept of immortality symbolised by Ashwatthama. Instead of accepting his mortal nature, he tries to achieve ultimate power and immortality through exploitative power and sacrificial violence.

The very first appearance of this character in the movie is no less than a visual spectacle as well as a vibrant example of narrative dichotomy – residing at the very top of the complex, suspended in the air by the use of advanced machineries, which also seem to sustain his old fragile body placing him as an authoritative and imposing character, one who controls from above, but also function as a literal life-support system and serves as a metaphor of simulated transcendence. The backdrop creates a halo-like sphere behind him, mirroring the ancient monks and ascetic sages of myths. In the post-credit scene, after taking the embryonic serum, he is apparently able to claim the bow “Gandiva” and the orbs around him transform into four extra hands behind him, giving him the appearance of a typical Hindu deity.

Thus, while the character of Ashwatthama emerges as a classic archetype of the flawed warrior, cursed to a tragic and painful immortality for his transgression against divine law, Supreme Yaskin conversely can be seen as an authoritarian technocratic dictator who likewise seeks to control eternity and is illusioned into believing he is a divine avatar. The juxtaposition of Ashwatthama and Yaskin is paralleled in Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane*. Eliade identifies the ‘profane’ as the mundane, mortal realm of existence, while the ‘sacred’ is the domain of the divine. ‘Profane’ is the ordinary, everyday world – linear, historical time and unstructured, secular space. Life here is transient, chaotic, and without inherent meaning unless connected to something beyond itself. Sacred is the transcendent, timeless, divine reality. It is absolute, eternal, and wholly other than the mundane. Sacred space is fundamentally different from profane space, and sacred time is cyclical, allowing humans to ‘return’ to mythical beginnings through ritual.

Although the contrasting study of Ashwatthama and Yaskin follows Eliade’s concept of the sacred and the profane, the situation in the movie operates with a crucial deviation. Eliade states that religious people seek to “return” to mythical time through ritual, symbol, and festival, thereby re-enacting the divine acts that structured the cosmos. In such cases, the sacred does not descend directly but is re-presented through ritual practices: the profane imitating the divine. Yet, within the cinematic universe of *Kalki 2898 AD*, this idea is dramatically reversed. The mythological figure of Ashwatthama does not remain in the distant, ancient sacred past; instead, he enters directly into the dystopian, profane world of the future.

Whereas ritual action merely simulates the sacred origins, the narrative framework of the film allows for the literal presence of mythic beings in the temporal and spatial order of mortals. The rebels

of Shambhala, with their acts of memory and resistance, enact a religious connection to sacred time, reflecting Eliade's classic model of 'homo religiosus'. But Ashwatthama's return illustrates a more radical form of hierophany, where the sacred does not await human invocation but actively disrupts profane history. Such a configuration reimagines the dynamics of myth and ritual, positioning cinema as a space where the divine not only becomes visible but incarnate, transgressing the boundaries Eliade sets between emulation and presence.

Eliade observes in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*,

In imitating the exemplary acts of a god or of a mythic hero, or simply by recounting their adventures, the man of an archaic society detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time. (Eliade 23)

Supreme Yaskin, the technocratic dictator of the dystopian world *Kalki 2898 AD*, however, can be interpreted as embodying a false hierophany, a counterfeit emulation of the sacred. Yaskin does not receive or channel the sacred but simulates it through technology and subjugation. His floating fortress, along with his levitating, meditating figure, visually situates him as a pseudo-divine being. The halo-like design framing his figure, as well as the post-credit sequence where he appears with additional arms reminiscent of Hindu deities, further accentuate this counterfeit divinity. These gestures mimic the apparent ritualistic form of hierophany but fail to transcend the profane, since they arise from human ambition, exploitation, and an obsession with eradicating imperfection. In his illusioned conscience, he sees human beings as a flawed and corrupted species, as he says to the scientist who tries to assassinate him, "It's not your fault. This is an inherent defect of humankind."

Yaskin's "immortality" is thus a technological artifice that parodies transcendence in a vain attempt, representing modern man's attempt to simulate the sacred through profane means, mistaking spectacle for revelation. Unlike Yaskin's simulated transcendence, Ashwatthama's return to purpose functions as a genuine hierophany, the sacred breaking into the dystopian world and reorienting history itself. Ashwatthama, even in his cursed state, stands as the bearer of authentic hierophany. His immortality, though tragic, is grounded in divine law and cosmic order: it is not sought by him actively but imposed by Krishna's curse, situating him within the sacred domain as a Chiranjeevi destined to persist until the end of the Kali Yuga, allowing him to both reflect on and rectify his atrocities of the *Mahabharata* war. In the film, his grotesque, diseased body covered in turmeric-stained bandages becomes a visual sign of the burden of true sacred immortality—an existence that is not triumphant but tragic, isolating, and marked by ceaseless suffering. Yet, when his mani is restored, he reclaims both his vitality as well as his prophesied role as protector of the Kalki avatar.

The dichotomy between Ashwatthama and Yaskin dramatises two divergent responses and attitudes towards immortality: one rooted in the acceptance of divine destiny, however painful, and the other in the profane ambition to artifice divinity. Ashwatthama's cursed immortality and eventual

redemption testify to the paradoxical authenticity of the sacred—tragic yet cosmologically meaningful. Yaskin's counterfeit transcendence, by contrast, reveals the dangers of confusing technological spectacle with divine revelation. Together, they illustrate Eliade's tension between the sacred and the profane, refracted through the lens of cinema: the sacred as genuine presence versus the profane as false imitation.

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