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Rewriting the Tenth Avatar: Myth, Modernity, and Narrative Innovation in Kevin Missal's Kalki Trilogy

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Abstract

This paper examines Kevin Missal's Kalki Trilogy: Dharmayoddha Kalki: Avatar of Vishnu (2017), Satyayoddha Kalki: Eye of Brahma (2018), and Mahayoddha Kalki: Sword of Shiva (2019) as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian mythological fiction. Kalki, the prophesied tenth avatar of Vishnu, occupies a uniquely incomplete position in Hindu eschatology: foretold in the Kalki Purana and the Bhagavata Purana as the destroyer of adharma at the end of the Kali Yuga, his story exists primarily as prophecy rather than completed narrative. This gap of indeterminacy, to use Wolfgang Iser's term, makes the Kalki figure exceptionally open to creative reimagination. Situating Missal's work within the broader "mythology boom" in early twenty-first-century Indian publishing, initiated by Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy, this paper argues that the Kalki Trilogy advances the genre through three mutually reinforcing strategies. First, it radically humanises the divine avatar by recasting him as a Bildungsroman protagonist whose identity is achieved through experience, doubt, and moral growth rather than cosmic conferral. Second, it constructs a syncretic fictional world that fuses Puranic cosmology with post-apocalyptic dystopia and political thriller conventions, enabling an allegorical engagement with contemporary concerns. Third, and most significantly, it destabilises the Puranic myth's binary moral framework by rendering dharma itself contested and paradoxical, transforming eschatological certainty into genuine moral uncertainty. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Hutcheon, Bhabha, Moretti, and Bakhtin, the paper also acknowledges the trilogy's limitations: uneven prose, constrained female agency, and reliance on archetype, while concluding that within the compromises of popular genre fiction, Missal achieves a level of philosophical seriousness that merits sustained scholarly attention.

Keywords: Kalki, Mytho-Fiction, Bildungsroman, Dharma, Hindu Eschatology, Cultural Adaptation.

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Introduction: The Unfinished Avatar

Among the *Dashavatara*, the ten principal incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu, Kalki holds a uniquely paradoxical position. Unlike the narratives of Rama or Krishna, which have been elaborated for centuries in texts such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavata Purana, Kalki's story remains fundamentally incomplete within Hindu eschatology. The *Kalki Purana*, the *Vishnu Purana*, and the *Bhagavata Purana* each provide only fragmentary and sometimes contradictory accounts of this final incarnation. Kalki is prophesied to appear at the end of the Kali Yuga, the current, most degraded of the four cosmic ages, to destroy *adharma*, restore cosmic order, and inaugurate a new Satya Yuga (Doniger, 2009, pp. 487–492; Matchett, 2001, pp. 102–108). The eschatological nature of the myth means Kalki's story exists primarily as prophecy, a future-oriented promise rather than a completed retrospective account.

This prophetic incompleteness creates what Wolfgang Iser would call a massive "gap of indeterminacy": a textual absence that invites, even demands, writerly participation (Iser, 1978, p. 169). It is precisely this narrative lacuna that has made the Kalki figure so attractive to contemporary Indian writers of mythological fiction. Kevin Missal's *Kalki Trilogy*, comprising *Dharmayoddha Kalki: Avatar of Vishnu* (2017), *Satyayoddha Kalki: Eye of Brahma* (2018), and *Mahayoddha Kalki: Sword of Shiva (2019)*, represents one of the most sustained and commercially visible engagements with this mythological gap in recent Indian popular literature. Remarkably, this trilogy has achieved wide readership while simultaneously engaging serious theological and philosophical questions that its source myths raise.

This paper argues that Missal's trilogy constitutes a significant intervention in contemporary Indian mythological fiction through a tripartite strategy: the humanisation of the divine protagonist through the Bildungsroman tradition; syncretic world-building that merges Puranic cosmology with post-apocalyptic and fantasy genre conventions; and the deployment of moral ambiguity that destabilises the binary eschatological framework of the source myth. Together, these strategies transform the Kalki figure from an awaited cosmic event into a psychologically complex narrative subject whose struggles resonate with contemporary readers across cultural boundaries.

Scholarly engagement with Indian mythological fiction has accelerated in recent years, yet it remains unevenly distributed. Foundational work by scholars such as Meenakshi Mukherjee on the Indian novel in English offers useful conceptual tools for understanding the relationship between literary form, cultural identity, and narrative tradition in Indian writing in English (Mukherjee, 2000). However, it was written before the mytho-fiction boom fundamentally reshaped the publishing landscape. More recent critics have begun to map this new territory, but sustained close reading of individual trilogies, rather than panoramic genre surveys, remains relatively rare. Missal's work in particular has been underserved, perhaps because it occupies an intermediate position: more philosophically ambitious than straightforward devotional fiction, yet more accessible plotted than literary mythological retellings. This paper attempts to bring it into sharper critical focus, arguing that such works deserve scholarly attention precisely because they mediate between popular audiences and sophisticated mythological traditions in ways that both expand and challenge the genre's boundaries.

The Rise of Indian Mytho-Fiction

The early twenty-first century has witnessed what many commentators describe as a "mythology boom" in Indian popular literature, particularly in the English-language market. While mythological narratives have been central to Indian literary production for millennia, the specific phenomenon of popular, commercially oriented "mytho-fiction" as a recognisable genre is relatively recent. The publication of Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha* in 2010 is widely cited as the catalytic moment for this genre's emergence as a dominant force in Indian publishing. Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, which reimagined Lord Shiva as a tribal

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chief whose actions are retrospectively mythologised, demonstrated the enormous commercial potential of mythological reimagination for a young, urban, English-reading Indian audience that was hungry for narratives rooted in its own cultural inheritance.

Several scholars have attempted to account for this phenomenon. Romila Thapar has offered a more critical reading, suggesting that mythological fiction is entangled with the cultural politics of Hindu nationalism and the consolidation of a particular vision of India's past (Thapar, 2014). Each of these perspectives illuminates a different dimension of what is, ultimately, a complex, multivocal, and ideologically heterogeneous cultural phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single political or spiritual impulse.

Several theoretical frameworks prove useful for analysing Missal's contribution to this genre. Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* provides a foundational framework, insisting that adaptation constitutes a creative act of interpretation, "repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 4) rather than mere reproduction. Wendy Doniger's concept of mythological narratives as "palimpsests" preserving traces of multiple interpretive layers resonates with Missal's syncretic approach (Doniger, 2009, pp. 28–31). Sheldon Pollock's analysis of the "cosmopolitan vernacular" offers historical precedent for understanding contemporary mythological fiction as the latest iteration of a longstanding Indian practice of retelling and reinterpretation across languages and registers (Pollock, 2006, pp. 15–23). Despite its commercial success, the Kalki Trilogy has received minimal sustained academic attention, with existing scholarship often favouring Tripathi's mythological fiction and Pattanaik's mythological retellings (Pattanaik, 2010). This paper addresses that critical gap.

Humanisation of the Divine: Kalki as Bildungsroman Protagonist

The trilogy's most immediately striking feature is its radical humanisation of the divine avatar. In Puranic sources, Kalki is described primarily in functional and eschatological terms as the destroyer of the wicked, the restorer of dharma, and the inaugurator of a new age. Even in the relatively elaborated *Kalki Purana*, the figure remains largely flat, a vehicle for divine purpose rather than a psychologically complex individual (Dalal, 2010, pp. 198–201). The avatar arrives fully formed, armed with cosmic mandate, and proceeds to execute his eschatological function with little interiority or developmental arc. Missal's trilogy represents a decisive departure from this template.

Missal's Kalki is introduced as a young man burdened by a destiny he did not choose. *Dharmayoddha Kalki* opens not with a confident divine warrior but with the uncertainty of a youth confronting extraordinary claims about his identity (Missal, 2017, pp. 12–18). This strategy establishes the trilogy's dominant mode: divine incarnation narrated through psychological realism and the conventions of the Bildungsroman. The reader follows a protagonist who doubts himself, makes mistakes, grieves losses, and gradually grows into the role that prophecy has assigned him without the process ever feeling mechanically predetermined.

Franco Moretti argues that the Bildungsroman is the symbolic form of modernity itself, narrating the process by which the individual is socialised while asserting the value of interiority and development (Moretti, 1987, p. 15). Missal's adoption of this form for the avatar narrative constitutes significant cultural translation: the cosmically predetermined avatar is recast as a modern subject whose identity must be achieved through experience, choice, and self-reflection rather than divinely conferred in a single moment of revelation. This strategy creates productive narrative tension because readers know Kalki's ultimate destiny while remaining uncertain about the process through which he arrives at it.

This humanisation has Indian precedents. The concept of *lila*, divine play, provides a theological

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framework for understanding divine participation in human vulnerability. Krishna's childhood *lila* in the *Bhagavata Purana* and Valmiki's portrayal of Rama's grief represent divine vulnerability in literary form (Hawley, 1983, pp. 23–35; Goldman, 1984, pp. 52–58). However, Missal goes considerably further: his Kalki's interiority is rendered through free indirect discourse and modern psychological realism rather than *kavya* or devotional poetry. Moreover, Kalki's vulnerability is constitutive of his character rather than a temporary divine performance. By embedding the narrative within global fantasy frameworks drawing on the "chosen one" archetype found in Rowling's Harry Potter and Tolkien's Frodo Baggins (Campbell, 1949, pp. 28–37) while insisting on its specifically Hindu dimensions, Missal produces what Homi Bhabha might call a "third space" of cultural hybridisation (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 53–56): neither purely devotional nor entirely secular, but something genuinely new.

Syncretic World-Building: Puranic Cosmology Meets Genre Fiction

The trilogy constructs a fictional world that fuses Puranic cosmology with post-apocalyptic, epic-fantasy, and political-thriller conventions. Its geography draws on Puranic sacred places, Shambhala, Kashi, and Illavarti, but reconfigures them within an epic fantasy landscape of competing kingdoms and morally compromised environments that reflect the Kali Yuga's spiritual degradation. The result is a setting that feels recognisable to readers of both Hindu scripture and contemporary genre fiction, creating a dual readership that the author exploits with considerable skill.

The Kali Yuga concept, an age of moral decay, social disintegration, and the dominance of adharma, maps remarkably onto the conventions of post-apocalyptic fiction. Missal exploits this convergence, constructing a world that reads simultaneously as mythological prophecy and recognisable dystopia. Corruption pervades every institution; traditional social bonds have frayed; violence is normalised. The setting allows allegorical engagement with contemporary Indian and global concerns: political corruption, social inequality, environmental destruction, and the erosion of ethical consensus. This connects Missal's work to a longstanding Indian tradition of mythology as social commentary, from medieval *bhakti* poets through Girish Karnad's mythologically grounded dramas (Dharwadker, 2005, pp. 112–118).

The incorporation of political thriller elements, factional competition, hidden agendas, shifting alliances, and power struggles provides plot complexity far beyond the source myth's eschatological structure. These elements reflect what Fredric Jameson calls the "political unconscious" of genre fiction, encoding contemporary debates about governance, the relationship between religion and politics, and the corrupting effects of power (Jameson, 1981, p. 20). Dense intertextual references to the broader Hindu mythological corpus, Parashurama, various asuras, and figures from multiple Puranic lineages create what Gérard Genette terms a "palimpsestuous" relationship between the trilogy and its sources (Genette, 1997, p. 399), layering new meanings onto familiar mythological material without erasing the originals.

What emerges from this syncretic project is a fictional universe that is simultaneously ancient and contemporary. Readers who know their Puranic geography will recognise Missal's landscapes; readers who know their post-apocalyptic fiction will recognise his dystopian textures. This double legibility is not a compromise but a genuine creative achievement, proof that the distance between ancient cosmological imagination and contemporary speculative fiction is smaller than it might initially appear. Both traditions are ultimately concerned with the same fundamental questions: how do communities survive civilisational collapse, what does justice look like in an unjust world, and what kind of heroism does moral complexity demand?

Moral Ambiguity and the Destabilisation of Dharma

The trilogy's most intellectually significant aspect is its systematic complication of the Puranic myth's

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binary moral framework. Traditionally, the eschatological scenario is unambiguous: Kalki embodies divine righteousness; his opponents embody cosmic evil. The battle between them is cosmically guaranteed to end in Kalki's triumph. Missal retains this broad outline while introducing substantial and consequential complexity. Antagonists possess comprehensible motivations and tragic backstories that make them difficult to dismiss as mere embodiments of evil; allies harbour secrets and pursue questionable methods; Kalki himself confronts moral dilemmas that cannot be resolved through divine authority alone (Missal, 2018, pp. 145–152; Missal, 2019, pp. 203–211).

Missal's treatment of the demon Kali exemplifies this revisionism. Rather than a straightforwardly evil personification of cosmic wickedness, Missal's Kali is granted complexity and occasionally genuinely sympathetic dimensions, a figure whose corruption is explicable, even if not excusable. This reflects a broader trend in contemporary mythological revisionism: Neelakantan's *Asura* retells the *Ramayana* from Ravana's perspective, while Gardner's *Grendel* reimagines *Beowulf* through its monster's eyes. However, this technique is particularly significant when applied to eschatological narratives, where moral binaries are, by definition, absolute. The eschatological frame exists precisely to establish cosmic stakes beyond ordinary moral complexity; Missal's refusal to honour that absolutism is therefore a genuine act of literary and philosophical daring that few writers of commercial fiction would risk.

Most profoundly, the trilogy renders *dharma* itself problematic, not dismissed or undermined, but shown to be genuinely difficult, contested, and paradoxical in practice. Kalki must repeatedly choose between competing obligations and irreconcilable moral demands. This has deep roots in the tradition that the Missal inherits: the Mahabharata is centrally concerned with the difficulty of dharma, and the *Bhagavad Gita* meditates on moral action amid irreconcilable demands (Malinar, 2007, pp. 87–95). If Kalki's mission is restoring *dharma*, but *dharma* itself is contested, then the mission's meaning becomes an open question rather than a foregone conclusion. This transformation of eschatological certainty into moral uncertainty is the trilogy's most significant and lasting departure from its Puranic sources.

Narrative Technique and Cultural Politics

Missal employs multi-perspectival narration, alternating between several characters' viewpoints across the three volumes. This polyphonic structure, which Bakhtin describes as "dialogic" narration (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 18), enables the moral complexity discussed above by granting readers access to diverse interiorities across the moral spectrum. Characters who might appear villainous from Kalki's perspective reveal their own coherent, even sympathetic internal logic when narrated from within. The narrative form thus enacts the thematic commitment to perspectival pluralism, preventing any single character or ideology from monopolising moral authority.

The trilogy's pacing blends epic and thriller conventions: short chapters, cliffhangers, and rapid perspective shifts maintain momentum and accessibility. Linguistically, Missal writes in accessible, contemporary English, positioning mythology as common cultural property rather than the domain of Sanskrit scholars or religious specialists. This democratising impulse, making ancient sacred narrative available to readers without specialised knowledge, aligns with the broader mytho-fiction project. It mirrors the way the *bhakti* tradition once made devotional narrative accessible in vernacular languages to audiences excluded from Sanskrit learning.

However, certain limitations warrant acknowledgement. The prose sometimes lacks the stylistic distinction needed to elevate it beyond capable genre fiction. Character development occasionally relies on archetypes rather than achieving genuine psychological depth. The treatment of gender merits scrutiny: female characters' agency is sometimes circumscribed by the demands of a male-centred quest narrative, a limitation illuminated by comparison with gender-revisionist works like Divakaruni's *The Palace of*

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Illusions. The trilogy's relationship to Hindu nationalist politics also remains productively ambiguous: it draws exclusively on Hindu material yet resists Manichean worldviews, suggesting that mythological fiction need not be ideologically homogeneous even when it operates within a single religious tradition.

These limitations do not invalidate the trilogy's achievements but rather locate them within the inevitable compromises of popular genre fiction. Missal is working within commercial and generic constraints that shape, and sometimes limit, his narrative ambitions. Recognising this allows a more precise evaluation: within those constraints, the *Kalki Trilogy* achieves a level of thematic seriousness and formal innovation that distinguishes it from mere entertainment. It asks difficult questions about identity, moral obligation, and the meaning of divine purpose in a degraded age, questions that its source myths raise but do not fully answer, and that Missal's novelistic form is peculiarly well suited to explore.

Conclusion: The Unfinished Story

Kevin Missal's *Kalki Trilogy* is simultaneously commercial entertainment, mythological retelling, philosophical exploration, and cultural intervention. Its central achievement is transforming Kalki from a prophetic cypher into a narrative protagonist, a figure whose story can be told and debated rather than merely awaited. In doing so, Missal participates in a retelling tradition as old as Indian literature itself, but in a distinctly contemporary idiom that speaks to modern readers shaped as much by global genre fiction as by Puranic inheritance.

The trilogy's three strategies, humanisation, syncretic world-building, and moral ambiguity, are not independent techniques but mutually reinforcing operations that together constitute the work's distinctive contribution. A humanised protagonist requires a world of moral complexity to navigate; moral ambiguity requires a cosmology rich enough to sustain competing ethical frameworks; syncretic world-building gains its deepest resonance when it serves a protagonist whose inner life is sufficiently developed to feel the weight of competing traditions. Together they constitute a coherent novelistic vision, even if the execution is sometimes uneven.

The Kalki myth's eschatological incompleteness makes it uniquely open to reimagination, and Missal's trilogy is one realisation of that potential. By humanising the divine, fusing cosmologies, and insisting on moral complexity where the source myth demands moral certainty, Missal creates a narrative space where ancient questions about *dharma*, identity, and cosmic order can be explored with the tools of contemporary storytelling. As long as Kalki remains a figure of prophecy rather than history, the story of the tenth avatar will continue inviting new tellings and new negotiations between the ancient and the modern, the sacred and the secular. Ultimately, the trilogy reminds us that myths are not fixed objects but living narratives, perpetually remade by each generation that receives and retells them.

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