

INFLUENCE OF EPICS IN INDIAN MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE AND CINEMA 'KAAVIYA THALAIVAN' AND IT'S RELATION TO INDIAN EPIC, 'MAHABHARATA'

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Abstract

This paper examines the thematic parallels between the Tamil film Kaaviya Thalaivan (2014) and the Indian epic Mahabharata, while also exploring the tension between cultural preservation and commercialization. Directed by Vasanthabalan, the film follows the rivalry between two theatre artists, Kali and Gomathi, set in pre-independent India. Their complex relationship reflects the dynamics between key characters from the Mahabharata, particularly Karna and Arjuna, with elements of Draupadi embodied in the character of Vadivu. The narrative explores themes of ambition, jealousy, friendship, betrayal, and destiny – echoing the dilemmas faced by epic heroes. Kali's natural talent and rebellious spirit parallel Arjuna's prowess, while Gomathi's loyalty and inner turmoil resemble Karna's struggles for recognition and identity. The film not only reinterprets classical mythology but also highlights the challenges faced by traditional art forms in balancing authenticity with the demands of commercial success. Through this lens, the study argues that Kaaviya Thalaivan reflects the dual nature of storytelling - as a means of preserving cultural heritage and adapting it to modern audiences for wider appeal. By drawing from the Mahabharata, the film bridges the gap between myth and reality, underscoring how ancient narratives continue to shape contemporary values and cultural expression.

Keywords: Theatre rivalry, Karna-Arjuna dynamics, Cultural identity, Mythological reinterpretation, Authenticity in story telling

Introduction

Kaaviya Thalaivan (2014), directed by Vasanthabalan, is a Tamil period drama set in the early 20th century, exploring the lives of theatre artists. The film reflects personal conflicts, ambition, and betrayal, and it draws many narrative parallels to the Mahabharata. This paper analyses the relationship between Sivadasan and Kaliappa Bhagavathar (Kali) through the lens of Arjuna and Karna, along with themes such as the role of women in the arts, and cultural preservation versus commercialization, which are embedded in the narrative.

Rivalry and Ambition: Sivadasan and Kali as Arjuna and Karna

A. Sivadasan (Arjuna) – The Idealist and Disciplined Prodigy

Sivadasan, like Arjuna, is portrayed as a focused individual who excels in his art through dedication. His obedience to his mentor and adherence to artistic values make him the troupe's favored disciple.

B. Kali (Karna) – The Ambitious Outsider

Kali struggles with being in Sivadasan's shadow, much like Karna in the Mahabharata, who yearns for recognition. Both characters channel their frustrations into rivalry, which turns personal ambition into destructive envy.

Feminism: Marginalization of Female Characters

While the film primarily focuses on the two male leads, the female characters - particularly Vadivambal (played by Vedhika) - serve as critical lenses to explore feminism and gender dynamics. The marginalized role of women in both theatre and mythology becomes evident.

A. Women's Limited Agency in the Arts and Relationships

Vadivambal's character reflects the challenges women face in male-dominated fields, both on and off the stage. Although she is talented, her success and autonomy are often contingent upon her relationships with the male protagonists, paralleling how women in the Mahabharata – such as Draupadi – are pivotal yet restrained by patriarchal norms.

B. Performing Arts as a Site of Female Empowerment and Constraint

While theatre offers women like Vadivambal a platform for self-expression, their roles are often scripted and controlled by men, limiting their agency. The film subtly critiques this duality by highlighting her struggle to carve out an independent identity amidst the male rivalry. This resonates with the feminist critique of the Mahabharata, where women's voices shape the story but are constrained by societal expectations.

Cultural Preservation vs. Commercialization

The film also engages with the tension between maintaining traditional art forms and embracing commercial pressures, which is a key conflict throughout the narrative.

A. Theatre as a Reflection of Cultural Identity

Sivadasan represents the preservation of artistic purity. He is committed to classical forms of performance, believing that art should serve a higher cultural purpose. This echoes the Mahabharata's emphasis on adhering to dharma (duty), where characters strive to maintain order and tradition.

B. Kali and the Allure of Commercialization

Kali, in contrast, seeks popular recognition and material success, embodying the modern pressures of commercialization. His willingness to compromise on artistic values for fame reflects the conflict between cultural heritage and the demands of a changing world.

C. The Battle between Integrity and Profit

The film critiques how art forms, once sacred, are threatened by the pursuit of profit and public approval. Sivadasan's resistance to these changes can be likened to Arjuna's

adherence to his principles, while Kali's pursuit of fame mirrors Karna's willingness to side with Duryodhana for personal validation. This dynamic highlights how the commercialization of art often leads to the erosion of its cultural essence.

Tragic Fate and the Inevitable Consequences of Choices

The inevitability of tragedy is a recurring theme in both Kaaviya Thalaivan and the Mahabharata. Characters are often trapped by their circumstances and personal decisions.

A. The Downfall of Kali

Despite his talent and ambition, Kali's choices—driven by jealousy and the desire for recognition—lead to his downfall, much like Karna's misplaced loyalty results in his death. The film suggests that ambition, when unchecked by morality, can lead to personal destruction.

B. The Role of Fate and Karma

Both narratives emphasize the inescapability of fate. Just as Karna cannot escape his tragic destiny, Kali too is bound by the consequences of his actions. His death symbolizes the culmination of his inner conflict, while Sivadasan's survival underscores the triumph of integrity over ambition.

Theatre as a Symbolic Battlefield (Kurukshetra)

The theatre stage in Kaaviya Thalaivan serves as a microcosm for the moral and ideological conflicts that drive the story. Every performance becomes a contest not only between Sivadasan and Kali but also between their differing visions of art.

A. Artistic Rivalry as War

Just as Arjuna and Karna battle on the field of Kurukshetra, Sivadasan and Kali battle on the stage, each trying to outshine the other. The stage becomes a space where personal ambition, jealousy, and artistic values collide.

B. Performances Reflecting Personal Conflicts

Each theatrical performance becomes a symbolic act of war, where the characters express their inner struggles through art. The use of drama as a battleground highlights how art can be both a form of self-expression and a site of conflict.

Conclusion: A Modern Retelling of Mythological Themes and Social Commentary

Kaaviya Thalaivan draws heavily from the Mahabharata, exploring themes of ambition, rivalry, and the consequences of personal choices. The film offers a layered narrative that not only mirrors the mythological rivalry between Arjuna and Karna but also engages with contemporary social issues, such as the marginalization of women in the arts and the tension between cultural preservation and commercialization. Through its exploration of these

themes, the film serves as both a reflection of ancient narratives and a critique of modern artistic practices, making it a relevant and insightful commentary on the timeless struggle between ambition, morality, and cultural integrity.

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