

# Poetry in Search of a Common Ground: Conflation of Myth and Marxism in Kuvempu's "Kalki"



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## Abstract

One of the strategies that writers in all languages all over the world employ is the reinterpretation of ancient myths. Critics have shown that such deployments of myths are attempts to contemporize them to suggest that modern maladies are in essence paradigms of age old problems. It is no secret that myths hide in their wombs the distilled wisdom of the societies that created them. Ancient though they be, they are nonetheless capable of providing solutions to the present day's seeming conundrums. This article is an attempt to illustrate how writers, while using myths to hint at the directions in which solutions could be looked for, remain loyal to their art in terms of showing the potential of their art. The article proposes to suggest that Kuvempu, a well-known Kannada writer, critic, distinguished academician and a Sahitya Akademi awardee, extends the frontiers of the craft of poetry making it a search for a common ground for apparently irreconcilable ideologies such as religion and Marxism. The poem chosen for analysis is "Kalki", a much anthologized text, originally written in Kannada but translated into English. The article suggests that one of the reasons why this has come to a remarkable poem is because of what it attempts to do: search for a common ground between ideologically opposed fields.

**Keywords:** Myth, Marxism, Poetry's Search, Experimentation in Poetry, Kuvempu, Navodaya, Kalki Avatar.

## Introduction

Most scholars, while admitting that it is very difficult to define a myth in terms that are "acceptable and intelligible to all" (Singh 2010:45), go on to point out that the deployment of myths in Indian literature has been mainly to re-tell, re-interpret and re-value (Ramachandran 2010: 70). Several Indian literary texts attempt to contemporize myths in the process of re-telling, re-interpreting and re-valuing them. And several erudite and incisive critical engagements with such texts have shown how successful the writers have been in their attempts. It is also not uncommon to find writers often reformulating present day problems in mythical paradigms with a view to suggesting that the answers to modern problems could perhaps be sought in the ancient, pre historic wisdom – some of Girish Karnad's plays readily come to mind, *Hayavadana* and *Agni Mathu Male* (*The Fire and the Rain*) being obvious instances. One of the ways in which writers reformulate a problem is by exploiting the elasticity inherent in myths that allows the myths to be reshaped. Often this strategy involves redrawing and remapping the contours of ideological fields in which myths and what the writer seeks to interweave it with are located. This strategy also, very frequently, demands of the writer to choose between the aesthetic protocols of the craft and her/his ideological position and predilection. When and if a writer chooses the later, it is a conscious choice that underpins the writer's political stand.

This paper is an attempt to illustrate how writers reconfigure the cartography of two hostile ideologies to suit their political proclivities. The paper proposes to accomplish this by subjecting Kuvempu's poem "Kalki" – a poem that confronts, to put it in the words of the well-known Indian poet-critic Dilip Chitre made in another context "...an ugly and abiding reality of our republic leading [its] readers into its terrifying core" (Chitre, 2007: 7) – to a close reading.

For such readers who have some working acquaintance with the Sahitya Akademi's Jnanapeet awardees – India's highest literary honour – the name Kuvempu (a *nom de plume* for Kuppali Venkatappa Gowda Puttapa) would not be unfamiliar. Being one of the greatest of the twentieth century writers in the Kannada language, his works are widely prescribed in Kannada programmes and courses in universities. Apart from being the

"Rastrakavi", he holds the unique distinction of being the Vice-Chancellor of a university where he was a student (University of Mysore). This versatile 'titan of modern literature' (Gowda) excelled in all literary genres—as a poet, short story writer, novelist, dramatist and an essayist—rarely leaving a genre unexplored.

In a paper entitled "Literature and New Myths", presented in a Sahitya Akademi- organized seminar on "Myth in Contemporary Indian Literature" at New Delhi in February 2003, R Shashidhar cites Raymond Williams' observations made in *Marxism and Literature*, on how "the English word "and" as conjunction is capable of playing mischief" and goes on to illustrate:

In titles such as myth *and* literature; modernity *and* literature, Buddhism *and* non-violence or Gandhi *and* modernity, "*and*" as conjunction pretends to bring two mutually exclusive, self sustaining, present-to-themselves entities face-to-face from outside. But if we proceed from the assumption that the social world is the primary cause from which all else derives, then such exclusiveness is hardly possible. In most cases terms are not mutually exclusive, banging against each other causing a cosmic event. (2010: 3)

Shashidhar's point is that the conjunction "and" is deliberately allowed to play the mischief since the "terms" that he uses to illustrate are constructed as "mutually exclusive", in other words as binary. However, this article is of the opinion that the "and" that joins the two terms "Myth" and "Marxism" in the title, though rooted in the "social world...from which all else derives", are mutually exclusive. Not only are the two terms, and what they have come to denote and connote, "mutually exclusive", but also intensely territorial. They are, to borrow a simile from the wildlife ecology, like two male tigers. Kuvempu's poem "Kalki" shows why such statements as Shashidhar makes can fall under the category of "sweeping statements" for they may not always be tenable in discussions of cultural products which have a habit of defying efforts to straitjacket them – for the poem while drawing on the Puranic myth of avatars frames it in Marxist rhetoric.

Kurtkodi, a well-known critic, as do several other critics, situates Kuvempu in the context of the first phase of modern Kannada poetry (2007:15). The first phase of this movement in Kannada's literary history is referred to as the "Navodaya" movement. The term "Navodaya" was coined by Kuvempu himself which translates to the "new dawn", or "new rise" (Raghunath). The credo of this movement finds correspondences with some of the British Romanticism's core principles, especially the Romantic predilection for the re-positioning of nature-human relationships, championing the cause of the underdog and privileging subjectivity—for these Navodaya writers, particularly Kuvempu, grew up copiously fed on their works (Prabhushankara, 2013: 17).

The poem "Kalki" is included in his collection of poems published under the title *Panchajanya* in 1936. For an Indian who is well versed with the great

epic, *Mahabharatha*, the allusion is clear at once. Krishna, one of the avatars of Vishnu, signals the commencement of the Great War by sounding his divine conch Panchajanya. And it would not be impertinent to remind the reader that the War was fought to establish "Dharma". Kuvempu imparts this spirit to his poem "Kalki".

The poem opens with the mention of the speaker in the poem trudging and toiling through a "dream-street in the world of sleep" (Gowda, 2011: 193) losing his way only to find himself in the midst of a "primal forest" that is "dense, immense, /With gigantic trees untold, /And creepers close entwined" (Gowda, 2011: 193). This forest is not clearly people-friendly for it bears "...bushes full of thorn, / Creepers with saw-toothed leaves/ and prickly pears looming like spectres"(2011: 193). The speaker after traversing this "horrible forest" where "phantoms of fear slunk and stalked" is confronted with a mysterious "weird half -light/ Which was neither light nor darkness", a mystery that only "the Lord" could have understood (2011:93). Having "crossed" this "horrible forest", the speaker comes to a mountain whose "summit rose/touching the very clouds!" (2011: 193). The speaker, though arduous the climb, scales the mountain to reach its "crest" that provides a vantage point to peer down on a "city of sheer enchantment" (2011:194).

What makes up for the "enchantment" of the city is a heart rending scene that underlines the stark economic inequalities that the society has colluded to create:

The mansions of the rich rose on one side,  
The hutments of the poor stood on the other side;  
Blazing crystals lamps there,  
Darkness, pitch darkness there!  
The soft voice of song on that side,  
The long scream of lament on this side!  
From pride their food they threw away there,  
For want of food they pined away here!  
There you saw a park,  
And here you saw a grave!  
In silks they paraded themselves there,  
Not a rag to cover their loins here! (Gowda, 2011: 194)

Though now here in the poem does the speaker use expressions that allude overtly to Capitalism, the coordinates presented by the above cited lines compel the reader to locate it in that paradigm. These lines are a scathing comment on a society that has ruthlessly divided its people between those "who in silks parade[.] Themselves there" and these without "a rag to cover their loins here".

The fibre of the Indian poetry of the first half of the twentieth century notwithstanding the language, Das points out, consisted of two "politically inspired phases" (2013:196). The first of the phases spanning from 1910 to 1947, "motivated by the struggle for Independence", reflects the patriotic-nationalistic sentiment that gripped the nation and the second phase called the "Progressive Movement" began in 1936, the year the Progressive Writers meeting was convened in Lucknow. This movement which was impacted by the Marxist ideology

.... appropriated certain aspects of the Romantic tradition particularly that of social protest and an oppression free world. The patriotic-nationalistic poetry therefore, often overlapped with the 'progressive' trends, and the romantic poetry continued to exist with the progressive poetry, which claimed to be free the vestiges of the bourgeois idealism. (2011: 196)

This poem written before 1936 (the collection in which the poem appeared was published in 1936 as noted above) may be located in the context of the general tenor of Indian writing (not necessarily in English) of the times, and Kuvempu was not the only Indian poet/writer who articulated such distinctly Marxist sentiments as Sisir Das clearly demonstrates. Even as the speaker is contemplating on the divide, he is startled by a new turn of events that frightens him:

I looked and looked, still looked and looked;  
And, as I was looking, I started out of fright;  
From the bellies of the poor Rose the fire of  
hunger;

(Gowda, 2011:194)

This fire "of the poor man's hunger" that reaches "[U]pto the clouds, upto to the skies" (2011:194) paradoxically, though directed at "the rich", destroys the "hutments" first ("The hutments themselves first caught fire" (2011:194)). But it not long before the fire shooting "out its tongues" draws the rich in and enfolds them "in its arms" (2011: 194). As the "fire of the poor man's hunger" blazes, it sings "the crests of the mansions of the rich". Once lit, the fire's innate and instinctive nature (its "dharma") takes over" and does not spare anyone, as the speaker "standing on the peak of a far-of mountain" is forced to witness:

And I heard the screams of babes and children,  
Mothers expecting children, and mother in child  
bed  
Newly-wed brides, and long married ladies,  
The young and the old, the lame and the deaf,

(2011: 195)

In the Hindu pantheon, Agni, the Vedic god of fire, is both venerated and held in great awe for the potential it has to devastate. Its ability to cause utter destruction is brought out in these celebrated lines from the *Rig Veda*:

Thou levellest all thou touchest; forests vast  
Thou shear'st, like beards which barber's  
razor shaves. Thy wind-driven flames roar  
loud as ocean's waves, and all thy track is  
black when thou hast past.

(John Muir, qtd. in Wilkins, 2009:26)

It is not difficult to see that Kuvempu is clearly mapping the Vedic characteristics attributed to Agni on to the poor man's hunger, thus imparting a divinity to the hunger. In its fury, the "fire of hunger", like the Agni having gutted the vulnerable, spares no one, but reserves its special wrath for especially

... those who were deaf to the wails of the poor,  
And those who had donned the ochre robes of  
the monk  
Just for the sake of filling their big bellies,

Who, by feeding the hungry poor with ignorant  
superstition Had brought themselves a life of  
wealth and comfort,  
And touched not anything but rich, luxurious fare:

(Gowda, 2011: 195)

The overt allusion to the "priests and their votaries" (2011:195) conflated with the extended description of the economic disparities quoted earlier present coordinates that locate the poem in the classical Marxist paradigm. Indeed, this neatly aligns, with some minor extensions, with Marx's dictum "Religion is the opium of the masses" which forms the cornerstone of Marxism's stance on the question of religions. It is common knowledge that Marx is of the view that all religions and religious institutions are bourgeois apparatuses created to validate the exploitation of the working classes by "befuddling them" (Xuezen: 2014, 268). It is also true that much of Marx's formulations have been revisited in the last 60-70 years, but in all fairness, it must be remembered that these critiques were not available to Kuvempu in the early 1930s. His initiation to the Marxist thought had come from a translation of Lenin's biography into Kannada published in 1923 (Shivananda et al). To a contemporary mind, this might sound a little too naïve as it attempts to transport the Marxian dictum without being aware of and sensitive to the complexities that now we are aware of. However, Kuvempu's attempt to resituate the ancient puranic myths in the framework of the modern Marxian formulations must be seen in the context of the views that were available at the time.

The destruction caused by the fire in the poem presages the appearance of Kalki, who "is indeed the poor man himself" (Gowda, 2011: 195). To the Indian readers it would not be necessary to remind that Kalki is the tenth incarnation or avatar of Vishnu and that the objective of this incarnation, like the nine other incarnations before it, is to "put an end to wickedness, and establish a kingdom of righteousness" (Wilkins, 2009: 245). Neither would it be necessary to remind that unlike the other nine, this incarnation has yet to be "made". It is this pliable aspect of the myth that opens it up for re-situation.

In the *Vishnu Purana*, Kalki's appearance as a fulfillment of Lord Vishnu's promise to humanity to reincarnate himself periodically on earth to redress the dharmic imbalance, is occasioned by the prevalence of a condition in which "The kings will be of churlish spirit, violent temper, and ever addicted to falsehood and wickedness. They will inflict death on women, children, and cows; they will seize power, the property of subjects, be of limited power, and will, for most part, rapidly rise and fall; ... their desires insatiable, and they will display little piety" (Wilkins, 246). Thus, Kalki is envisaged as the "messiah who will appear at the end of the present age, the Kali Age" (O'Flaherty, 1975, 236-7).

Admittedly, Kuvempu's poem does not explore the causes for the generation of the economic imbalances—at least not explicitly. But it is clear that the idea is embedded in the Puranic prediction that augurs the incarnation; specifically "... they [the rich] will seize the power, the property of the subjects..." It is this detail that facilitates Kuvempu's attempt to create a platform that will not just seamlessly

interweave the ancient Puranic belief with the modern Marxian precepts, but also extend the margins of the two irreconcilable, hostile and antithetical ideologies so that they can co-habit.

The “new spectacle” that follows the lines cited above is strongly reminiscent of the Russian Revolution of October 1916.

But what was this new spectacle?

Falls of blood!

Stink of human flesh!

Plunging, plunging, did the blood roar,

Springing from it was the people’s anguished scream!

The heavens were all blood, the earth was all blood!

Look everywhere, it was blood, it was blood!

Woe and alas! It was blood

In the plunging red blood-fall

Human skulls,

Human trunks,

Were plunging down

As the hail-stones roll down

In the monsoon’s swollen streams!

Rising up was the spray of hot blood! (Gowda, 2011: 195-96)

What dominates this gory section of the poem is the word “blood” that occurs eight times in the course of fifteen lines. The general practice of poets in the creation of, what critics and teachers call, ‘imagery’ is to deploy words that are either near synonyms or expressions that reinforce the overall visual rather than repeat the same word several times. The classic example is that of Shakespeare in his plays *Macbeth*, where the blood imagery dominates and *The Mid-summer Night’s Dream*, in which the moon imagery ( suggesting mutability) is scattered all through the play. Kuvempu, the accomplished poet that he was, chose not to do it. This decision to sacrifice aesthetic requirements may have been due to a compulsion to fall in line with his own exhortations to his fellow poets of his time in a sonnet called “Kali of Revolution”:

Throw out parrots, cuckoos, springs,  
Creepers and curls, cool breezes, fairy tales of kings,  
And moonshine from your poetry, O you, coward!  
Your duty, today, is to sing of poverty and manure,  
Of swords, spades, and crowbars, of sweat and blood.

(Gowda, 2011:262)

The “falls of blood”, like the fire, is impartial for it drowns the “bodies of vice” as well as the “bodies of virtue”:

The heads of beauties,  
Marrow-balls of the rich,  
Bodies of vice,  
Bodies of virtue,  
Towers of temples, houses of religion,  
Floating, floating, floating, and floating,  
Were driving down like straw!

(Gowda, 2011, 196)

Soon after this overwhelming deluge, appears “The skeleton man” who is Mounted on a skeleton-horse Shaking his hoary white beard, The very spectre of a man! In his right hand a sword flashing like lightning,

And in his left, lightning itself!

A skeleton-horse, a skeleton-rider!

Was this the self-same *Kalki* –

The skeleton man,

The very spectre of a man!

(Gowda, 2011, 196, Italics original)

Most puranic descriptions and popular pictorial depictions of Kalki represent him as a white man riding a white horse with a sword in his hand. The idea, in the opinion of scholars “entered India with the Parthian invasions of the first centuries of the Christian era, a time when millennial ideas were rampant in Europe” in which “ Kalkin himself has the form of an invader: he comes riding upon a white horse, like the Scythian and Parthian invaders of India” (O’Flaherty:1975, 236). The image of Kalki, as can be seen, was appropriated by the Puranic authors, for in the Puranas, Kalki’s objective “is to destroy the invaders, to raze the wicked cities of the plain which [had become] polluted by foreign kings – these same horsemen - ...” (O’Flaherty, 1975, 236). Kuvempu extended this appropriation further by making a few changes in Kalki’s appearance. Where as in the *Vishnu Purana*, Kalki is represented as a white man riding a white horse, Kuvempu’s Kalki is a blood thirsty “skeleton rider” mounted on an equally blood thirsty “skeleton horse”:

“Blood, blood, blood! I want blood!” He shrieked,  
And plunged into the flood of blood  
Plunged, along with his horse!  
He dipped, and dipped his hands in the blood,  
And drank, and drank palms full of the blood!  
He picked up heads the heads bobbing up from the blood,  
And head after head he gobbled.

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The horse drank, the rider drank,  
And both crunched the dead bones and ate;

(Gowda, 2011, 197)

Kuvempu’s Kalki and the horse, along with being blood thirsty also have an insatiable appetite. Since Kalki is the poor man incarnate, the obvious explanation is that they, the poor, have been kept hungry and thirsty for such a long time that their thirst and hunger has assumed the “quenchless” proportion:

The flood of blood dried up, still they were thirsty!  
The corpses had all been swallowed, still they were hungry!  
O the quenchless thirst of the throats of the poor!  
O quenchless hunger of the bellies of the poor!  
Never, never, is that belly filled!  
Never, never, is that belly filled!

(Gowda, 2011, 197)

These lines can be read as the poet’s attempt to suggest that the “quenchless hunger” that the “bellies of the poor” have acquired is a result of capitalist economy’s practice of maintaining the labour at below the subsistence level, making them, as Marx puts it “wage slaves”:

Wage labour is both free and unfree. Unlike slaves, who are forced to work by their owners, wage labourers can decide whether they work and for whom. Unlike the serfs in feudal society, who were tied to their lord’s land, they can move freely and seek work wherever they choose. These freedoms are, on the other hand, somewhat illusory, since in a capitalist

ISSN No. : 2394-0344

society it is difficult to survive without paid work and little choice of work or employer may be available.(Fulcher, 2004, 15)

The poem ends with the speaker being rudely woken from his dream:

“Kalki, O it's Kalki”, I screamed.

The dream was broken,

And I was awake!

How could there be any more sleep?

(Gowda, 2011, 197)

This attempt to appropriate the Kalki avatar is yet another, and clear, evidence of Kuvempu's conscious intent to fuse the two apparently irreconcilable systems of thought in poetry.

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Remarking : Vol-2 \* Issue-3\*August-2015

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