



Karna: An Ideal Tragic Hero of The Mahabharata

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ABSTRACT

The longest epic *The Mahabharata* by Ved Vyasa is a gem for humankind & literature. Its characters are the classical heroes of Indian Literature. Karna one of the chief characters of this grand narrative qualifies profoundly as one of its heroes. Karna with his ambiguous identity & tragic fate meets his end with the flawed qualities of human character. Karna optimizes the universal human natures like loyalty, righteousness, integrity, but despite of all these high standards like Shakespearean tragic hero also bears the burden of hamartia.

Objective: - To study & analyse Karna as a tragic hero in the light of Greek & Shakespearean tragic heroes.

Introduction: -

The Mahabharata, the longest Hindu epic composed by Maharshi Vyasa in Sanskrit consists of over 200,000 verses. It narrates the story of the Kuru dynasty who fought the war of Kurukshetra for claiming the throne of Hastinapur. This narrative contains everything that can be found in other literatures as well but whatever is not found in *The Mahabharata* can't be found anywhere. Along with numerous themes, this epic also encompasses the theme of bravery, love, loyalty, sacrifice, & the complexities of human character like moral & ethical dilemma. This grand epic has not only influenced Indian culture,

literature, & art but also have equal significance & impact on the tradition of spiritual and philosophical wisdom of this land often revered as 'Devbhumi' (Land of Gods).

This epic is a store house of heroes like Pandavas on the one hand who are the templates of dharma i.e. righteousness & the qualifiers of goodness, whereas the Kauravas on the other hand displays evil deeds and were hence treated wrong and defeated in the war. But apart from them one character that arouses the feeling of pity & sympathy within us is none other than Karna.

Karna's story begins with the divine interference. His biological mother Kunti was blessed with a boon by sage Durvasa for her service and devotion to him. In order to examine the authenticity of the mantra/boon i.e. words to invoke the gods, Kunti invokes Suryadev, the Sun God. From their union, Karna was born with divine armour and earrings that make him invincible in the battlefield. Though at the time of Karna's birth Kunti was unmarried. Thinking about the societal consequences and shame Kunti left Karna in the river Ganga keeping him in a basket.

Fortunately, the infant was discovered by Adhiratha, a charioteer, a low caste, and his wife Radha who raised him as their own child. Therefore, Karna was treated as low caste though born of divine lineage.

Despite the love, care & affection he received from his foster parents, Karna was grown up along with the stigma on his own real identity. For Karna his divine birth became a burden which fuelled his desire to prove his worth. Craving for the acceptance & recognition Karna throughout his life had dwelled on the path of conflict & sorrow. Despite coming from an uncertain and low lineage Karna had deep thirst for acquiring knowledge and ambition to become the greatest archer of his time. He first approached Dronacharya, the abled guru of the Kuru princess. Dronacharya was bound by the rigid societal norms and so he refused him to teach as finding him unfit among the royal princess due to his low birth. But this rejection didn't shake Karna's ambition to acquire the learning of archery and warfare and he approached Parshurama, Dronacharya's own guru an incarnation of Vishnu, a warrior sage known for his animosity with the Kshatriyas. Fearing rejection Karna approached

Parshurama, disguised as a brahmin in order to earn favour and learn warfare and the use of the celestial weapons. But later his truth was revealed and was recognised of his low caste. This resulted into a devastating curse from his Guru Parshurama that all his knowledge will be forgotten by him when he needed it the most in the battle. This trapped Karna into a vicious cycle of fate & circumstances as Dronacharya denied him to give knowledge in warfare while Parshurama cursed him because of his false identity.

After finishing their training in warfare and politics, the Kuru princess were ready to perform their skills before the people of Hastinapur. Karna enters before the audience and challenges Arjuna, the most skilled archer among the Pandavas. Before the duel could begin Kripacharya, the family teacher of the royal Kuru family intertwined and asked Karna to introduce and disclose his identity before the duel with Arjuna, a royal prince, hence, only a royal blood is eligible to challenge him. But after this Karna remained silent and bowed his head down into the earth. Kripacharya says;

“The prince, who is ready to fight with thee, is the son of Pritha and Pandu and a scion of the Kuru race. Reveal, O mighty armed the parentage and the race rendered illustrious by the birth. It is the only after knowing the lineage that Partha can fight with thee, for high- born princes cannot engage in single combat with unknown adventures”. (Rajgopalachari,45)

Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava and Arjuna’s cousin recognised Karna’s prowesses and sensing an opportunity to take advantages over the Pandavas & secure a powerful ally in the form of Karna. Duryodhana declared Karna the king of Anga and elevated his societal status by challenging the established norms of the society. This incident proved a turning point in the epic, especially for Karna whose life’s discourse was changed from here.

Duryodhana’s generosity brought respect from Karna and hence Karna pledged his unwavering support & commitment to Duryodhana throughout his life. His loyalty to Duryodhana is a testament of his character which was later discovered as his tragic flaw that leads to the path of his own tragic end and destruction.

Karna was a man of righteousness. He was a follower of dharma. He was very well aware of Duryodhana’s evil intentions for the Pandavas. He within himself developed the anger and animosity against the Pandavas, especially with Arjuna for no reason, except to prove his superiority over him in archery. Whenever Duryodhana did any wrong to the Pandavas, Karna was the equal partner with adding his anger. When in the game of dice, Yudhishtira lost all his possession & Draupadi, the consort of the Pandavas, Duryodhana asked his brother Dushashana to bring Draupadi into the assembly hall and robe her clothes; Vikarna, another Kaurava & the brother of Duryodhana spoke against this obscene conduct. At that moment Karna rose up and said:

“O Vikarna, forgetting that there are elders in this assembly, you lay down the law though you are but a stripling. By your ignorance and rashness, you are injuring the very family which gave you birth, just as

the flame generated by the arani destroys its source, the stick. It is an ill bird that fouls its own nest. At the very beginning, when Yudhishtira was a free man, he forfeited all he possessed and that of course, included Draupadi. Hence, Draupadi had already come into Shakuni's possession. There is nothing more to be said in the matter. Even the clothes they have on are now Shakuni's property. O Dushashana, seize the garments of the Pandavas and robes of Draupadi and hand them over to Shakuni". (Rajagopalachari,113)

Karna had the potential to live a life of honour, to make his own impressions but all his qualities which were inherited in him could not elevated his position. Though born of divine lineage his voice remained unheard as he belonged to the low social group because of his parentage and hence was called Suta-Putra i.e. the son of charioteer. Throughout his life he received nothing but the words of humiliation & insults. At the Swayamvara, even Draupadi did not allow him to participate and insulted Karna in the assembly before all.

Grateful to Duryodhana, when the rest of the society disobeyed him, Karna developed an unwavering support and loyalty to Duryodhana throughout his life. Their friendship and Karna's loyalty became a defining aspect of his character by exposing the complex interplay of their friendship, duty & moral choices. Karna's story reminds us to look beyond the societal constructs and to respect and recognize the worth of every individual on the basis of merit not on the basis of birth.

Karna's life is a perfect example of ethical dilemma. Ethical dilemma takes its course when an individual has more than one moral obligations and one obligation can't be fulfilled unless violating the other. As Karna was suffering from the ethical or moral dilemma where he had to choose between the dharma i.e., righteousness and his duty, between his loyalty to Duryodhana and his moral values, between his mother Kunti and his friend Duryodhana. In all these circumstances we find Karna being stuck, where it is difficult for him to decide his side.

When the war between the Pandavas & the Kauravas became inevitable then Lord Krishna visited Karna and for the first time Karna came to know about his true identity. Krishna tempted him to join the Pandavas & says;

"Come with me and you shall be a king.....Pandavas shall have to recognise you as the Kaunteya senior to Yudhishtira. The five Pandavas shall clasp your feet as your brothers and so shall the five sons of Draupadi, and the vanquished son of Subhadra, mighty Bhimsena himself shall hold grand white

umbrella over you.....Arjuna shall drive the chariot drawn by his white horses.... Abhimanyu, Nakula, Sahdeva, and the five Draupdeyas shall be at your back and call.....” (The Mahabharata: Selections from the Sabha Parva & Udyoga Parva, Pg- 93)

Finding Karna’s unwavering support and loyalty to Duryodhana, Krishna further adds that he himself would follow Karna if he joined the Pandavas’ side. But Karna refused all these sparkling offers because his loyalty to Duryodhana is unshakeable because Duryodhana was the only person in his life who always stood behind him, and helped him overturn his fortune by declaring him the King of Anga. For Karna, Adhiratha and Radha were his true parents because for him they offered their unconditional love, but on the other hand his biological mother Kunti left him floating in the river Ganga while stillborn.

After knowing his true identity, Karna requested Lord Krishna not to disclose his real identity to the Pandavas because he knew that if Yudhishtira came to know about his true lineage, that Karna is his elder brother Yudhishtira would refuse to rule over the kingdom because he is a true symbol of dharma and in turn Karna would hand over the crown of Hastinapur to Duryodhana because of his generosity and his help, friendship & loyalty and this will be injustice to the throne of Hastinapur. When Lord Krishna found himself unsuccessful in order to turn Karna towards Pandavas in the battle Lord Krishna advised Kunti to do so, then Kunti said,

“You are the son of Kunti, not Radha, nor is Adhiratha your father, you have not been born in the line of Sutas.....I gave birth to you before I was married. You are my first- born whom I carried in my womb in the palace of Kuntibhoja”. (The Mahabharata: Selection from the Sabha Parva & Udyoga Parva, Pg- 103)

Kunti further said,

“Cut yourself from the Dhritrashtra and enjoy Yudhishtira’s fortune.... Let the Kurus today witness the meeting of Karna and Arjuna in a spirit of brotherhood. Let Karna and Arjuna be like Rama and Janardana. When the two of you are united in spirit, what could you not achieve in the world! Surrounded by your five brothers, you shall surely shine forth, Karna, like Brahma surrounded by the Vedas and their branches....” (The Mahabharata: Selections from the Sabha Parva and Udyoga Parva, Pg- 103)

Karna became emotional as he met Kunti but in no time he resembles his unconditional support to Duryodhana. Kunti asked Karna a favour as he is known for his generosity. As he decided to help Duryodhana but promised Kunti that he will not let her go empty handed, he promised Kunti and said:

“I shall not kill your sons in the battle.... that is, your sons Yudhishtira, Bhima and the twins, excepting Arjuna. In killing Arjuna on the battlefield, I shall find my reward, or reap fame if the left-handed Archer kills me. So never shall your son’s number less than five, glorious woman: either without Arjuna but with Karna, or with Arjuna, if I am killed”. (The Mahabharata: Selections from the Sabha Parva & Udyoga Parva, Pg-105)

Thus, it is very much clear that Karna faced dilemma in performing his duties both as a brother and a true friend. If Karna would leave Duryodhana before the battle of Kurukshetra this would be a dishonour in the name of friendship which he can’t bear as Duryodhana helped Karna when he needed someone like him the most. But Karna couldn’t disobey his mother Kunti. Being the elder Pandavas it was his prime responsibility to save the life of his younger brothers.

Karna is always praised for his generosity. This gave him the title of ‘daanveer’ (the hero of charity). Throughout his life he followed this principle no matter what will be the consequences. This earned him respect not even from his enemies but also from the divine.

“Indra foresaw that a supreme contest was inevitable between his son Arjuna and Karna; and he put on the grab of a brahmana and came to Karna, who was reputed for his charity, and begged of him his earrings and armour. The sun god had already warned Karna in a dream, that Indra would try to deceive him in this manner. Still, Karna could not bring himself to refuse any gift that was asked of him. Hence, he cut off the earrings and armour with which he was born and gave them to the Brahmana”. (Rajagopalachari – 46)

Even though Karna was very well aware of the consequences of the war he remained loyal to Duryodhana till his last breath in the battlefield. Karna has ego tussles & imprudence, says

Ami Ganatra in her book. *Mahabharata Unravalled: Lesser- Known Facets of A Well- known History*

“Karna was undoubtedly a warrior to reckon with. He had impressed the indomitable Jarasandha with his archery and wrestling in combat. Due to Karna’s support, Duryodhana was able to win the princess to Kalinga as his wife, defeating an assembly full of warriors. To help Duryodhana conduct the

Vaishnava Yajna, he defeated the kingdoms of Kambhojas, Videha's, Ambasthas, some Kiratas & other Himalayan Kingdoms & got them to swear their allegiance to Hastinapur". (Pg. 123)

Karna can also be classified as a victim of Narcissism. He made his every effort to please others, often he has difference of opinion from others, he worries about what others think of him and so he was depressed and anxious. His character lacks self-expression & self-directiveness. He finds himself responsible for the misdeeds of the others. Karna is unaware of his own feelings & thoughts, for him there is no personal sorrow & joy, he has only sole objective in his life, that is, to prove himself a better warrior than Arjuna. He participated in war for no reason except his animosity with Arjuna. Throughout his whole life all his intentions were pure but like a narcissist he burdened over himself for all the misdeeds. Karna was weak enough to observe Duryodhana's mistakes.

"Individuals afflicted by tragedy and loss, even if this be by natural cause or calamity, often carry the additional burden that comes with wondering if they might have caused or been responsible for their suffering. Patients who have suffered childhood trauma and abuse often blame themselves for the cruelty and violence they experienced, believing on an affective level that they somehow caused this to happen, permitted it to continue and did not do enough to make it stop". ("Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Religion" Pg- 929).

Because of constant humiliation throughout his life, he was hungry for respect & recognition which he received only from Duryodhana; hence, he devoted all his life in the name of Duryodhana. Karna was a great man who settled for less than he deserved.

In Draupadi's Swayamvara, he proved his potential before the aristocratic Kshatriyas but Draupadi on Krishna's suggestion denied to accept Karna as he belonged to a low class of society. Karna even after being proven his eligibility at the place of gaining praise & respect was humiliated and rejected because of his no fault.

"Karna wondered what he was doing in this resplendent hall, crowded with the bravest and noblest of kings. He wanted to be far away from this madness. This Swayamvara was a travesty, he thought wryly, the outcome of which was known to all- Princes Uruvi of Pukeya would choose prince Arjuna as everyone had guessed and they would live happily even after. Karna heaved a long sigh, trying to shout out a memory that was wrenching his soul.....Draupadi's Swayamvara" (*Karna's wife* (30).

Like Greek or Shakespearean tragic heroes Karna was also embedded with hamartia i.e., tragic flaw.



A tragic hero's life is full of the episodes of fate and misfortune bought not by vice or depravity but by the error of judgement. This idea of hamartia is a suitable ingredient for tragedy propounded by Aristotle in *Poetics*. Like Shakespeare's King Lear, whose tragic end occurs because of his arrogance & excessive pride. This fatal defect in a tragic hero's life finally brings his downfall.

As Aristotle's tragic hero suffers more than what he deserves, likewise Karna throughout his life had suffered more than what he deserved. Karna as Greek tragic heroes is a noble but an imperfect character who is not moral rather 'amoral'. Like Greek hero Achilles in Homer's *Illiad*, Karna would also live his life gently rather than going through the cycles of ups & downs and ends tragically. A tragic hero chooses a life of grandeur and honour. Like Karna & other tragic heroes who keep their words on top, their lives shine because of their courage. These heroes possess qualities like loyalty & kindness.

Kavita Kane in her book *Karna's wife: The Outcast Queen* beautifully deploys Karna's character with the divine attributes along with moral flaws that leads his life towards his end. Karna's end was the amalgamation of fate along with the like attributes, generosity, loyalty, courage with aspiration, anger, rivalry & hunger for recognition.

Thus, this can be said that despite his valiant efforts Karna was unable to change his fate. He lived his life on his principles despite being attempted so many times to switch his side even at the cost of the thrown of Hastinapur. These qualities put Karna in the frame of heroes along with their flaws that determine his fate.

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