

ETHICAL DILEMMA OF KARNA IN “THE MAHABHARATA”: A CRITICAL STUDY OF KARNA’S CHARACTER IN THE LIGHT OF EPISODE “THE TEMPTATION OF KARNA”

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ABSTRACT

Along with Valmiki’s ‘The Ramayana’, Ved Vyasa’s ‘The Mahabharata’ is the most classic epic of all times to come. Although The Mahabharata is an Indian epic, its popularity and fame is not only confined within the geographical boundary of India but throughout the world. It is a long narrative poem consists of more than two lakhs shlokas. The story of the Mahabharata is divided into 18 large books popularly known as parvas. Each parva consists of many episodes. The story displays Lord Krishna’s (an incarnation of Lord Bishnu) endeavour to establish dharma all over the world. The epic marks the dawn of a new era and the end of another one. The epic introduces heroic figures like the Pandavas on the one hand, who always stands on the side of goodness and Kauravas on the other who born to commit only evil deeds. But whenever we recollect the story of mahabhata, a character immediately comes to our mind which arouses the feeling of utmost pity and sympathy i.e. the character of maharathi Karna.

The story of Mahabharata teaches us what ethical dilemma is and most of the major figures in the epic suffered from ethical dilemmas at different point of their lives, where they had to choose between dharma and duty. The character of Karna is one among them who faced an ethical dilemma just before the outbreak of the battle of Kurukshetra. The dilemma that Karna was going through was not an easy one because that was a decision making time for him where he had to make a choice between his mother and his friend. He did not want to violate his duty to the either. But at the same time, he could not choose both of them. Hence, Karna undergoes a very traumatic situation. This paper is an attempt to explore the ethical dilemma of karna as reflected in the episode ‘The Temptation of Karna’.

KEYWORDS: Karna, Ethical dilemma, Dharma, Battle & kurukshetra

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1. INTRODUCTION

The epic of *Mahabharata*, which was written in the remotest past of ancient India, is much more than a mere account of a battle between two branches of family. Rather it is a storehouse of moral, ethical and life-changing lessons that can elevate a man’s life from the position of chaos to cosmos. It stands as a pole star to humanity which guides and motivates mankind to choose the path of righteousness and to give up the side of evil and lawlessness. No other epic in the world is as bulky as *The Mahabharata*. It is eight times longer than Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odessey*, four times than Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and three times than *The Bible*. *The Mahabharata* bears the stamp of rich cultural heritage as well as the undying and golden history of ancient India. It is the story of bravery and indomitable courage.

Though *The Mahabharata* was written in the ancient India, it is still relevant in the present era. The story of *Mahabharata* has always been imparting valuable lessons- it teaches humanity the lessons of morality, ethics, righteousness and the lesson of life, by following which one can attain the ultimate goal of human life. This epic renders valuable suggestions to those who are seeking moral guidance or facing ethical dilemmas.

The episode '*The Temptation of Karna*' very vividly displays Karna's ethical dilemma as Lord Krishna reveals his true identity, which dumbfounded him for a moment. Besides, Krishna also asked him to join the pandavas but Karna refuses to leave Duryodhana's side as he was indebted to him. Karna's real ethical dilemma occurred when Kunti came to him and requested him to fight for the Pandavas cause. Hence, this episode was a turning point in Karna's life.

2. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF KARNA'S CHARACTER

Maharathi Karna was the most tragic and unfortunate character of **The Mahabharata** and at the same time, he was the most powerful of all. He was even stronger than Arjuna because Arjuna could not have vanquished him without the aid of Lord Krishna and the divine deity Indra. Karna was the son of Surya and the unmarried teenage Kunti for which the latter, out of shame abandoned him. Karna was adopted and raised by the foster suta parents named Radha and Adhiratha due to which he was named as 'Sutaputra'. His other names were Vasusena, Anga-Raja, and Radheya. Karna had all the qualities of Pandavas. The qualities that were distributed among the five Pandavas were possessed by him. He was intelligent, a great archer, powerful, a man of moral values as well as handsome.

Throughout his life, Karna got nothing but utter humiliation and insults. Everyone cast scornful eye on him due to his low descent. Karna never got an opportunity to prove himself as the best. Even Draupadi did not allow him to participate in her 'Swayambar' and insulted him in front of all.

The character of Karna can be interpreted from many perspectives. He was brought up and grown up in the lineage of sutas hence he got the name 'suta-putra'. This very idea evokes the concept of casteism that was privileged during that time of ancient India. The sutas belong to the lowest strata of society who lives at the margin of society and are humiliated and subjugated by the higher caste or the people from royal family. Thousand times Karna received disgrace in the name of caste. Guru Dronacharya refused to give him the knowledge of warfare because of his caste; Draupadi refused to marry him and prevented him from taking participation in her swayambar just because he was a suta. Thus, it is clear that the caste system, which has been playing a vital role in Indian society as a means of social stratification, is not the product of modern India rather the very seed of casteism had been sown in the ancient India and Karna was the worst victim of caste system.

Karna's character can also be viewed from the post-colonial perspective of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'subalternism'. A subaltern is a person from 'an inferior rank' living at the edge of society. Karna, though in reality was born in the lineage of royal family, was known as suta-putra to the external world because of his suta parentage. Throughout his life, Karna was never given due respect because everyone regarded him as a person from an inferior rank. Everyone refused and rejected him due to his low origin.

Karna has all the potentialities to shine in life and to make an identity of his own but he could not achieve this because of his subaltern origin. He could not elevate himself from that position nor was he ever allowed to rise by the privilege society. Being a subaltern, he did not have any voice to rise or even if he raised his voice, it is unheard by all because his voice was hindered by the element of noise. Only after meeting Duryodhana, he was able to receive a little honour with the title 'Anga-Raj' as the former accepted him as his friend and offered him the anga rajya.

Karna's tragedy is neither completely Aristotelian nor wholly ancient Greek but an amalgamation of both. Like the other Classical Greek tragic heroes, Karna too is a mere puppet in the hands of destiny. But at the same time, like Aristotelian tragic heroes, he has some faults of his own or some tragic flows (hamartia) which heighten the effects of his tragedy. It was his misfortune that his mother abandoned him at the very moment of his birth and although royal blood was flowing in his

vein, he was always condemned by people as a suta. From this standpoint, one can admit that Karna’s misfortune was brought upon him not because of his hamartia but purely for his fate. But at the same time, viewing his character from Aristotelian perspective, we can state that Karna, being a man of morality and ethics, could have chosen the side of Dharma. But by helping and supporting Duryodhana, he indirectly supported adharma, which ultimately led him to his fatal doom. Hence Karna suffered partly for his fate and partly for his hamartia. Nevertheless, his fate including the curse that he had received from his Guru Parsurama is mainly responsible for his misfortune.

Karna is very benevolent. His character has been universally acclaimed for his charity and is widely known as the greatest ‘Daan-veer’ of the world. Nobody returned empty handed from his door. This is evident when the divine deity Indra approached Karna in the guise of a Brahmin and asked for his armour(kavacha) and ear-rings(kundala), Karna, despite being aware of the fact that the man was not a Brahmin but the deity Indra himself, did not hesitate to offer his only possessions. Karna was well-aware that he was unvanquished as long as he had his armour and ear-ring, but even then, he willingly gave them up without thinking about his safety.

3. ETHICAL DILEMMA OF KARNA

An ethical dilemma arises when a person is committed to two or more moral obligations and he cannot fulfill one without violating his duty to the other.¹ This is exactly happened in case of Karna in the episode ‘*The Temptation of Karna*’. At one point of time in *the Mahabharata*, Karna was also suffering from a great ethical dilemma. That was the decision making time for him, in which he had to choose between law (dharma) and his duty; between his mother and his friend. That was a hard time for karna where he could not obey his mother without violating his duty to his friend, at the same time he could not remain loyal to his friend without disobeying his duty as a son.

‘*The Temptation of Karna*’ occurs in the ‘Episode- 53’ (‘*The udyog parva*’) of *The Mahabharata* which is wholly devoted to the classic and sublime scene in which Lord Krishna disclosed to Karna about his true descent, about his real mother and the secret of his birth. Just before the outbreak of Kurukshetra war, both Krishna and Kunti approached to Karna and revealed the truth of his birth and urged him to join the Pandavas. Karna, for the first time, learnt about his true descent from Lord Krishna that he is not Radheya but Kunteya and five Pandavas are his brothers. . After hearing this, Karna was shocked for a moment and he did not understand how to deal with this traumatic situation. He became so helpless that he started having ethical dilemma- the dilemma of responsibilities both as a son and a friend.

Krishna Visited Karna First and Tried to Tempt Him by offering Several Advantageous Choices which he Would Get by Joining Pandavas:

“come with me and you shall be a king.....Pandavas shall have to recognize you as the Kaunteya senior to Yudhisthira. The five pandavas shall clasp your feet as your brothers andso shall the five sons of Draupadi, and the unvanquished son of Subhadra mighty Bhimasena himself shall hold the grand white umbrella over you...Arjuna shall drive the chariot drawn by his white horses...Abhimanyu, Nakula, Sahadeva, and the five Draupadeyas shall always be at your beck and call.....”²

¹ Sharma, Dr. Kavita A. Ethical Dilemmas in Mahabharata: Ethics and Dharma. www.drkavitasharma.org. time: 7:30 pm

² *The Mahabharata: Selections from the Sabha Parva and Udyoga parva*, page- 93.

Lord Krishna even offered him the company of Draupadi if he choose to side with pandavas “ and at the sixth turn you shall lie with Draupadi.” Krishna further said that he himself would follow Karna if he joined the Pandavas.³

Karna refused to accept all the offerings of Lord Krishna, because he knew that it was too late for such offerings. Rather he determined to stay with Duryodhana, because it was only Duryodhana who always stood behind him. When he was all alone, Duryodhan was the only person to come to his aid and he would never give him up. Karna also told Krishna that he considers Adhiratha and Radha as his real parents because they showered unconditional love on him, whereas Kunti cast him out as though he had been stillborn.

Even Karna request Vasudeva not to disclose their meeting in front of the Pandavas because if Yudhisthira learnt about the true identity of Karna, he would give away his kingdom to him, because he is a true dharma abiding person, and he (Karna) in turn would give to Duryodhana because of his friendship and loyalty.

When Lord Krishna Failed to Tempt Karna, Kunti came to Meet him and Revealed herself as his Mother:

“you are the son of Kunti, not of Radha, nor is Adhiratha your father, you have not been born in the line of sutasI gave birth to you before I was married. You are my first-born whom I carried in my womb in the palace of Kuntibhoja. You are a Partha, my son...”⁴

Kunti Further Said

“cut yourself off from the Dhartarastras and enjoy Yudhisthira’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.....”⁵

Thus, it is clear that the stone hearted mother, Kunti was trying to emotionally blackmail Karna so that he could join the Pandavas and fought for their cause. She revealed in front of him the untold truth and secret of his birth and accepted him as her son, not out of love but in order to protect the life of her legal sons. In reality, by inviting Karna into her son’s side she wanted to have a life-long protection and permanent armour (kavach) for her favourite sons. Had Kunti really love Karna, she might reveal his true identity in front of her five sons and begged Karna’s life instead. But she did not do that. If she had really soft corner for her first born son, she would have accepted him in front of all at the time of Pandava’s first military exhibition. When Karna, for the first time, challenged Arjuna for archery competition but he was refused and was humiliated by all due to his low origin. Everyone especially the 2nd pandava, Bheema mocked at him by saying that a suta does not have the efficiency of a warrior. It would be a dishonor for Arjuna if he fought with a suta. At that time, Kunti could have disclosed Karna’s true identity and saved her son from utter humiliation instead of remaining a silent audience of her son’s mockery. How selfish Kunti was! She remembered her first son just before the outbreak of war when Karna wholly determined to destroy the Pandava’s troop.

³ Ibid, page- 93.

⁴ Ibid, page-103.

⁵ Ibid, page-103.

Kunti was so cruel and selfish that just to testify the validity of the mantra, which she had received from the sage Durvasa, she invoked the Deity Sun without thinking about the horrible result of her childish behavior and finally when she forced the latter to come to her and begot a son by him, she got rid of that child by simply floating the new born baby on the river Ganga without thinking anything for that child. Thus, it is apparent that Kunti tried to entrap Karna, emotionally.

After hearing Kunti's words, Karna became emotional for a moment, but finally he could read the true intention of Kunti that she did not come for him but for the protection of her five sons. Karna could not help without reminding Kunti about the misdeeds that she had done to him. So he replied to her:

*"what enemy could have done me greater harm than you have? When there was time to act you did not show me your present compassion. And now you have laid orders on me, the son to whom you denied the sacraments. You have never acted in my interest like a mother, and now, here you are, enlightening me solely in your own interest.....I who never had been known as their brother now stand revealed as one, at the hour of battle. If I now go to the Pandavas, what will the baronage call me? The Dhartarastras have let me share in all their comforts and have honoured me much at all times.....how could I desert them now when they see in me the boat they need to cross over this impassable battle and find the farther shore of this shoreless ocean?..."*⁶

Kunti, for the first time asked a favour from Karna and Karna is known for his generosity. Nobody returned empty handed from his door and Kunti was even his mother. But, if Karna obeyed to his mother's word, he had to cheat Duryodhana- that person who always supported him at the time of his misery. But, simultaneously he could not choose both his duties. He had to violate one in order to fulfill his duty to the other.

Thus, it is clear that karna is facing a dilemma regarding his responsibilities both as a brother and as a loyal friend. Duryodhana is in utter need of Karna and at this moment if he joined Pandavas and left Duryodhana, it would be a dishonour to his friendship. After all, a friend in need is a friend indeed. But Karna also knew that he could not ignore his duty as a son and a brother. Being the elder of all the Pandavas, it is his duty to protect his brother and to obey his mother.

At last, Karna chooses dharma over duty. His one and only dharma is to remain on the side of Duryodhana though he is an incarnation of evil and lawlessness. Although Karna decided to stay with Kauravas, he made a promise to his mother, Kunti:

*"I shall not kill your sons in the battle.....that is, your sons Yudhisthira, Bhima and the twins, excepting Arjuna. Arjuna I shall fight in Yudhisthira's army. 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 sons number less than five, glorious woman: either without Arjuna but with Karna, or with Arjuna, if I am killed."*⁷

4. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, Karna is the most unfortunate character of *The Mahabharata*. Throughout his life, he suffered a lot. Wherever he goes, he received nothing but humiliation and mockery. Everyone insults him and mocked at him with the derogatory term 'Suta-putra'. Despite being aware of the consequence of the battle, he remained firm in his decision to help Duryodhana.

⁶ Ibid, page-104.

⁷ Ibid, page-105.

Karna, having the knowledge of Vedas and the Scriptures of Law, knew that 'Dharma' always overpowers 'Adharma' and in this 'Dharmayudh', the ultimate victory will be attained by the Pandavas, the epitome of 'Law and righteousness'.

Karna is a man of morals and values. Because he not only remained in the side of his friend, Duryodhana but also kept his promise throughout the battle, which he had made to his mother, Kunti, that he would not harm the Pandavas other than Arjuna. But at last, Karna was unable to defeat Arjuna and met his tragic end at the hands of his opponent, Arjuna, his soul enemy. Hence, no other character in *Mahabharata* is as morally strong as the Maharathi Karna. He is the most powerful, heroic, inexhaustible, enduring, and unbeatable of all characters.

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