

Intersections of Devotion, Duty and Defeat: Exploring Karna Through Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

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Abstract

The Indian epics possess exemplary heroes and warriors over the yugas. The Mahabharata is one of the greatest epics of ancient India, an accumulation of ethics, morals, and values. The research sheds ample light on Karna's character in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*, which is narrated through Uruvi's perspective. Uruvi is a Kshatriya princess who married Karna, a sutaputra, against societal norms. According to Vyasa's Mahabharata, Karna is defined as a noble warrior destined by fate, whose life has been doomed by abandonment, humiliation and struggle for identity. Uruvi analyses and questions Karna for his morality against her immense love for him. Kane sheds light on Karna's pain, trauma, inner conflicts and his downfall through the lens of Uruvi. This paper analyses Karna's character with the concepts of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, which includes hamartia – a tragic flaw; anagnorisis – recognition; peripeteia – reversal of fortune; and catharsis – emotional purification. The study incorporates how the intersections of devotion, duty and defeat play a key role in outlining Karna's life.

Keywords: Aristotle's tragedy, fate, identity crisis, loyalty, mythological retelling, trauma.

Introduction

Indian mythology is composed of legends, folktales and epics. The Ramayana and Mahabharata had their mark on Indian culture, philosophy and ethics. The epics do not just tell stories, but they also represent the way of life. The Mahabharata, as said, does not represent only war, but it also elucidates the downfall of the Kuru dynasty. The retellings have been a new genre in Indian literature through which writers represent the characters in a new dimension. Writers like Amish Tripathi, Ashok Banker, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik and Kavita Kane are some among those writers who focus on retellings of Indian mythology.

Among the numerous characters in the Mahabharata, Karna stands apart as the quintessential tragic hero—gifted, generous, and noble, yet cursed by birth and doomed by destiny. In the canonical narrative, Karna is remembered for his valour, his steadfast loyalty to Duryodhana, and his ultimate defeat in the battle of Kurukshetra. His story is steeped in contradictions: a

warrior of unmatched prowess but denied recognition, a man of immense generosity yet accused of siding with adharma, and a friend whose loyalty borders on self-destruction.

Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2013) retells Karna's story through the voice of Uruvi, a Kshatriya princess who chooses him over Arjuna, the Pandava prince. Kane not only narrates the emotional depth of Karna's character but also offers a critique of patriarchal and caste-based structures within the epic. The novel focuses on three crucial intersections in Karna's life which deal with devotion, duty, and defeat that highlight how these shape his trajectory as well as his relationships.

Literature Review

The Indian epics have caught the literary attention of many scholars in various ways through multiple characters. Karna is one such character who owes a substantial position in the Mahabharata. Alf Hiltebeitel discusses defining dharma in relevance to Karna in his book *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (2001). He raises Karna's unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana over his morality and values.

Uma Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (2003) provides a broader understanding in relation to gender, caste, patriarchy and social hierarchy in Indian traditions. Chakravarti focuses on how the social structures regulate people in Indian society with the preservation of caste boundaries.

Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian contemporary writer, has characterised Karna in his book *Jaya : An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) as a morally conflicted character, righteous in valour, courage and generosity, yet his choices had eventually led to his downfall.

Chithra Mohan explains about Karna in her research article titled *Valiant Karna through the Eyes of Uruvi, a Tale Unveiled through Kavita Kane's Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2017). Mohan exemplifies Kane's representation of Karna from Uruvi's point of view as she challenges the societal discrimination of Karna, who is seen as an outcast. Mohan elucidates as Uruvi bridges to comprehend Karna's inner conflicts, emotional struggle and identity crisis.

Similarly, Tuhin Subhra Mandal has extended the research in his article titled *Seen Through 'Other' Eyes: The Reincarnation of Karna in Kavita Kane's Novel Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2019). Mandal emphasises the narrative of Karna through the female gaze and also highlights Uruvi as she questions how the societal position of Karna is valued over his birth rather than his worth. Mandal states as Kane encounters the androcentric tradition by representing Uruvi as the central character in redefining Karna. He further strengthened his argument through Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism.

In review of the existing studies, they provide an insightful overview of Karna's character, including various key themes such as social discrimination, oppression, humiliation and marginalisation. Kane has presented Karna's character from a feminist lens, which highlights his psychological, ethical and literary perspectives. Karna has caught attention through the male gaze in Mahabharata; rather, Kane has represented Karna through the female gaze of Uruvi, who is socially higher than Karna but identified as an outcast after marrying him. Therefore, Karna has been less explored as an individual rather than as a warrior or king. The present study identifies this gap from the relevant scholarly articles and other reviews. The research focuses on Kane's perception of Karna through Aristotle's theory of tragedy.

Research Methodology

The study incorporates qualitative and interpretative analysis to examine the depiction of Karna in Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*. The novel serves as the primary source for textual analysis and a close reading of the text, reliable with the characterisation of Karna. The secondary sources for the research include scholarly articles on Karna, tragedy, caste, The Mahabharata and Aristotle's Poetics. Aristotle's theory of tragedy acts as the theoretical framework applied to interpret Karna's character using the concepts of hamartia, anagnorisis, peripeteia and catharsis.

Karna's Quest for Identity as Anagnorisis

Kane introduces the first instance of Karna at the archery tournament arranged by Bhishma Pitamaha to highlight the archery skills of Kauravas and Pandavas. Karna's thirst for identity had led him to participate in the contest uninvited, flaunt his skills and challenge Arjuna, the Pandava prince, to compete with him. Karna caught the attention of everyone over there, including Uruvi, the princess of Pukeya. Uruvi was fascinated towards Karna, the handsome young man who had mesmerised everyone with his extraordinary skills.

As Karna had challenged Arjuna for a duel, Kripacharya asks Karna to introduce himself, as only a kshatriya can fight another kshatriya. The next moment, Karna's radiant face went pale, and he was strangely silent. Kane describes him as "His lips were clenched and his noble head was bowed, as if in shame. The proud archer suddenly appeared lost." (4) The very next moment, Duryodhana states, "I proclaim this youth King of Anga!" (Kane 5) Duryodhana surprised everyone present there, including Karna. He stood by Karna as a saviour in the hour and had given an identity to challenge any kshatriya as the king of Anga.

In terms of Aristotle's concept of anagnorisis, Karna was striving for identity and social recognition which had been denied to him from his birth, as he was adopted by his foster parents, Adhiratha, a charioteer, and Radha. Karna was humiliated at the contest by Pandavas when he was known as 'Sutaputra' and not a prince. Duryodhana's act of making Karna the king of Anga has brought a new recognition to him, which he strived for so long.

The day at Hastinapur's contest has brought significant changes in Karna's life; one is Duryodhana's friendship and being king of Anga, and the other one is Uruvi, who had witnessed Karna at the contest and fell in love with him. Uruvi had married Karna against all the societal odds, as she was a kshatriya and Karna was a sutaputra. Uruvi was a strong and intelligent woman who adored him selflessly. Uruvi got to know about Karna gradually, and through her observation she says, "I find something missing...he is with his family, yet apart.' Although surrounded by people who love him, Karna is so alone, never satisfied. It seems that he is always searching, always wondering who his natural parents are..." (Kane 51) Through Uruvi, Kane represents Karna's never-ending search in finding his true self. Uruvi finds Karna's perpetual endeavour to have social recognition for his valour and kindness rather than his birth.

Kane clearly presents Karna's identity crisis even after being the King of Anga. Uruvi was bewildered by Karna, as he has everything he aspired for, but it still seems like nothing to him. Uruvi further states,

As the King of Anga, the first duty Karna had taken upon himself was an oath. He swore that anyone who approached him with a request at midday, when he worshipped the sun, would not go away with his request unfulfilled. That was the reason why he would never allow anyone to leave empty-handed. Uruvi wondered, is that why he gave away alms so generously every noon? Was that unquenchable thirst for social recognition turning him into the most magnanimous of gift-givers? Was his philanthropy kindled by his need for self-glorification? Or was it an identification with the sun god and the inherent generosity of Surya? Or, more aptly, was it a driving need to imprint an unforgettable impression on society? (Kane 52)

Kane projects Karna's hunger for social recognition and establishes him as a righteous king of dharma, confined by self-absorption.

Finally, Karna finds his true parentage before the war begins through Krishna. Karna discloses to Uruvi with utmost happiness that "At last I know who I am. I am a kshatriya, Uruvi, that identity I so desired all my life." (Kane 235) Through Aristotle's concept of anagnorisis, recognition is the ultimate goal where Karna has finally succeeded in his true self.

Karna's Abrupt Destiny as Peripeteia

Karna's destiny took a massive turn at the contest with the declaration of Duryodhana claiming Karna as the king of Anga. Thereon, Karna was known as the king who was a Sutaputra. Karna was dutiful towards his people, yet his aspirations were always limited to Duryodhana. Karna further states, "All I ever wanted was respect, Uruvi. And Duryodhana has given me that,' Karna said quietly. 'I aspired for nothing else. I wanted to be recognised for my merits. Not for what I was born as. Not for my lineage—or rather, lack of it." (Kane 86) Karna was never treated as an equal among the Kshatriyas, but none could deny him his position. Karna and Duryodhana had a thick bond; none dared to hurt either of them.

With Aristotle's concept of peripetia, there was a reversal of fortune in Karna's life through Duryodhana, to whom Karna was always indebted. Karna, being the son of a charioteer, has achieved the unexpected by his true valour that proved his worth among everyone. Kane has characterised Karna as a true warrior of spirit.

Karna's Unwavering Loyalty as Hamartia

Karna was well known for dharma and blind loyalty towards Duryodhana. He was a man of faith, love, kindness and bravery. Karna was always true to himself except in case of Duryodhana. Karna loved him so much that he could find good even in bad. Uruvi questions Karna over their true friendship as,

By crowning you King of Anga, has he bought you body and soul, Karna? Are you so indebted to him that you are blinded with gratitude? A friend is one who advises the other when he goes wrong. Have you ever told your friend that he is wrong? That he was wrong when he tried to poison his cousin Bhima? That he is wrong when he does not give what rightfully belongs to the Pandavas—their share of the kingdom? That he was so wrong when he tried to kill the Pandavas and Kunti in the lac palace? (Kane 84)

Karna pacifies Uruvi that he can do anything for her but nothing against Duryodhana. Kane highlights Uruvi by questioning Karna, who follows all the dharma sastras yet was bound to Duryodhana under the name of gratitude.

Uruvi tries to make Karna see reason that Duryodhana has made Karna a ploy in winning over the Pandavas, yet Karna declares,

'I will always stand by him, whoever and whatever I am against,' Karna's words were deceptively soft, his face a mask of cold inscrutability. 'Duryodhana gave me the kingdom without my asking for it and I shall give him my undying friendship in return. I promised him I shall serve him till my last breath and I am committed to him for life. Only Duryodhana offered me an opportunity to prove myself—to be a king, a warrior and an archer—and I took it. (Kane 86)

Karna was completely enclosed to Duryodhana, and no matter whatever happens, he was constricted to it, which eventually leads to Aristotle's concept of hamartia as a tragic flaw. Kane has emphasised Karna's characterisation as tragedy, where his decisions played a key role in his life.

Karna's Eternal Fulfillment as Catharsis

Kane has delineated the suppressed pain, hurt and humiliation of Karna at Draupadi's swayamvar, which has made Karna lose his temper at the most irresistible time of Draupadi's disrobement. Karna confesses his act in shame to Uruvi by implying that,

'I will not defend myself, for what I have done is disgraceful. Yes, I have been a brute and a beast and done the lowliest thing possible. I hate myself for what I did. And I know it's been terrible for you. It was endless madness! It was as if something within me broke the moment

Yudhishtira staked Draupadi and lost,' his voice rose in passion. 'And I recalled Draupadi as she was at her swayamwara—hateful, haughty and taunting. I remembered how her words hurt me and I think I went completely crazy after that. All my loathing for her welled up in me and I was beside myself...yes, it was me who instigated the Kauravas, telling them that Draupadi be brought to the hall. Dushasana did what I had told him to do. He dragged her by her locks and threw her across the floor. I watched— and, yes, I felt elated. That mad jubilation drove me to do more...I wanted her to be humiliated the way she had publicly shamed me in front of all those kings. I wanted her to suffer the same ignominy, that same indignity. And then I said those terrible words. I called her a whore, I called her a woman available for all!' (Kane 117)

Karna declares in his intense form of revenge he lost himself at the moment. He further explains that his main idea was to make her feel humiliated the same way he felt at her swayamvar and confesses he was wrong at the moment.

The Aristotle's concept of catharsis has employed when Karna has accepted his crime before Uruvi where he got surrendered to her, saying,

'I had this horrible image in my mind at the time—it wasn't Draupadi whom Dushasana was stripping but you! In that huge hall with all those people there, I suddenly saw that it was you who was being assaulted, not Draupadi. It was you who was molested, not Draupadi. It was you who shrieked for help, I could hear only your voice screaming in agony. And that was when I regained my sanity but it was too late! I was lost! I was worse than the worst. I was doomed!' (Kane 119)

Karna was lost to himself at his dharma as the righteous king and even as a man who was once denied justice.

Karna's eternal fulfilment was done through the emotional purification when Krishna had disclosed Karna's true identity as a kshatriya and the eldest brother of the Pandavas, yet he was bound to his ethics. He answers Krishna,

"My Lord, out of the boundless concern you have for me, you told me the truth about my parents and my brothers. Yes, by dharma I may be a Pandava. But I am Radheya first. I was brought up by my mother, Radha, and Adhiratha with selfless love and unquestioning affection. Shall I spurn their love for a mother who left me when I was a baby? She does not need me. But Radha and Adhiratha do. Neither the whole world nor the biggest kingdom can make me either leave them or tempt me away from the bonds of their love. I cannot betray them nor can I betray Duryodhana. He is the only friend I have and I am indebted to him eternally. I would rather die than be ungrateful. I have promised him my everlasting support, and I shall not take back my word. What you are offering me has all the bright glitter of a new promise, but it cannot lure me from the truth that is so dear to me. You want to save me from a certain death? I would rather face that death than turn against my friend. The Pandavas are strong because they are under your protection. But I shall face them, knowing this, and die with my friend on the battlefield.'" (Kane 238)

Through this, Karna's unwavering loyalty towards Duryodhana and his love towards his parents represent Karna as a noble warrior and a man of faith.

Conclusion

Kane has depicted Karna as a tragic hero who strived for identity and social recognition. Though he was suppressed and humiliated, he stood as a noble king and valiant warrior. Aristotle's theory of tragedy serves as a key structure in analysing Karna's character through various concepts. The intersections of devotion, duty and defeat were incorporated within the concepts, such as Karna's unwavering loyalty as devotion towards Duryodhana, Karna's duty as the king of Anga and his final defeat, which was surrendered under his own decisions.

In conclusion, Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* imparts mythological impressions with the contemporary issues within the characters by employing Indian society and traditions along with the retellings. Through the lens of Uruvi, Karna's other side of the character has been clearly depicted, highlighting the sensitive issues that lie under the inner core of a person. Kane's blend of Karna's generosity and Uruvi's rage had intensified the characters.

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