
Karna in the Mahābhārata - A Tragic Hero with Loyalty & Committed Friendship

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Abstract

Karna is a character that is most emotionally faceted and most ethically attractive in the Mahabharata. His existence is a never-ending struggle between destiny and free will, piety and fairness, and individual honour and societal disapproval. Critically looking at Karna as a tragic hero, this paper examines his role in terms of incredible compassion, unmatched valour and unwavering loyalty, and is at the same time bound by the unyielding hands of fate. The paper delivers how Karna's decisions are relevant to all humans by exploring key issues like dharma (ethical duty), moral ambiguity, discrimination in society, and philosophical paradox of the destiny and human action. A lot of attention is paid to his unswerving commitment to Duryodhana, the greatest quality of his character, and the key to his failure. This research is based on the interpretive and thematic analysis method to demonstrate that the character of Karna is relevant today, and people still admire, empathize, and consider him because of his attitude toward morality and humanity.

Keywords: Karna, Mahabharata, Dharma, Tragic Hero, Loyalty, Ethics, Duty.

1. Introduction

Karna is one of the greatest, emotionally rich, and endearing representations of righteousness, bravery, steadfastness, and self-sacrifice in the enormous web of the Mahabharata. His life starts with divine glory--he is begotten by Kunti, by the favour of Surya, and he is born (to the world) and was endowed with the celestial Kavacha and Kundala, the natural armour and earrings which distinguish him as something extraordinary even at his infancy. But this is a Godsend soon to be tainted by a tragic twist of circumstances. Kunti, being afraid, subjected by the rules of society, and the hardest codes of conduct of her era, abandons her new-born son and puts him into the river. This one moment of disguise determines the whole course of Karna life leaving its long-lasting shadow of desire, doubt and divided identity that was never quite cured.



Brought-up into the family of a charioteer, Karna is brought up on the lesson about the importance of hard work, gratefulness, humility, and love in a modest and caring family. However, as he grows up, he has to face a very cruel truth: the world does not evaluate him by his personality and incredible talents but the caste in which he is supposed to be. His great skills in archery, his natural nobility and his heroic temperament are constantly disregarded due to the stigma that surrounds his perceived birth. All chances that are his to get are refused, not through want of merit, but through inherited prejudice. Time and time again he is compelled to face the wide chasm between what he ought to be and what society wants him to become. It is these recurrent injustices that cut in him a store of pain, pride, ambition and unsatisfied yearning, that render his internal world both full and tragic.

The story of Karna is a strong reminder that in the world where strict hierarchies are upheld, talent does not guarantee entry into the society or even respect. His story of the struggle to achieve his recognition throughout the life reflects the desire of all men who want to be recognized as they are and not as others perceive them to be. The epic with all the misery Karna undergoes reveals the extent to which the human spirit can be hurt by social exclusion- and how strong this spirit can be nonetheless. Karna is not only a fallen Mahabharata hero but he is also a very human man whose struggles cut across centuries. His tale is striking since it is timeless: that genius can still be invisible in a situation and still shine through despite the conditions, and express the same strength, character, and moral virtue. In him, the Mahabharata instructs us that it is not victory but the courtesy that comes with defeat, injustice and even destiny itself that makes a great person.

2. Literature Review

Dhillon (2025) explored the personality of Karna using the theory of identity formation by Erik Erikson, according to which the lifelong experience of Karna of seeking belongingness was a continuum of the identity issues that were left unsolved in childhood. The study highlighted the fact that Karna had an in-depth emotional attachment to Duryodhana, and constant desire to be affirmed, was as a result of the psychological trauma he suffered due to desertion, hidden identity, and the perceived social rejection that the character faced in his life. The consideration made by Dhillon enabled him to realise that Karna was not only making moral or philosophical decisions in matters concerning his loyalty, rivalry, aggression, and honour. Rather, they were founded on childhood deep-seated trauma, unfulfilled emotional needs, and disintegrated sense of self. In this manner, the relationships and decisions made by Karna were revealed as means of coping with the deprivation and alienation at a young age, which provided a psychoanalytic perception of the tragic character of Karna.

Naskar (2024) discussed the characterization of women in modern revisionist versions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, but also noted that the story of Karna often overlaps with the stories of female characters. It was particularly focused in the study highlighting the theme by which some of the contemporary writings depicted Karna as empathetic, compassionate, and respectful of women including his sensitivity to feelings and personal morals. Such portrayals were often in conflict with his televised humiliation of Draupadi and revealed the duality and conflict in the nature of his character. The work of Naskar largely focused on the female voice; however, it did not overlook the fact that Karna was a morally complex and emotionally rich figure whose contradictions made him a crucial element of reinterpretative literature.

Srija (2023) redefined the subaltern identities and defined Karna among the most notable subaltern characters because of his socially marginal status and his experience of being a prejudiced person throughout his life. Her contribution hold that the contemporary interpretation of Karna contested care-worn hierarchies about caste and re-established Karna as an effective figure of social resistance to social injustice. Having analysed the way, Karna turned into a rejected, unacknowledged warrior and evolved into a heroic and ethically significant character, Sreeja concluded that his story was a reflection of the experiences of other oppressed groups of people who needed to feel dignified, acknowledged, and empowered. In this part, Karna became not only a tragic hero but a symbol of the modern social criticism.

3. Research Methodology

The chosen research method of the given research is determined by the fact that Karna is not only one of the characters of one of the pre-historic epics, but a complete human being, whose life poses timeless philosophical and ethical questions to us. This is to knowledge that spreads the research. Since we are discussing the predicaments in which Karna was enmeshed with specific emphasis on feelings, identity, allegiance and struggle to espouse the moral values, it is imperative to qualify and become interpretative in order to be in a position to comprehend the subtle nature of his predicaments.

3.1. Research Design

The qualitative and interpretive research method is applied in this research to carry out a descriptive research on the character of Karna. The main emphasis of this approach is to understand the meanings, emotions and ethical tensions that are encoded in the life and acts of Karna as opposed to the emphasis on the numerical statistics or statistical research. The philosophical idea that is analysed is fate, loyalty, dharma, identity, and moral conflict, which are very important elements influencing the choices of Karna in the whole epic of Mahabharata. It aims at unearthing the deeper symbolic and ethical purpose that Karna carries by examining the dialogues, scenes of the story, ethical dilemmas with which he faces in the course of the story. Through this mode of interpretation, one can have the opportunity to make a deeper exploration into how the character of Karna reflects more human challenges and timeless philosophical inquiries.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The discussion that is leading in this paper is guided by a mixture of three various theoretical guidelines that are complementary to each other. These structures are useful in revealing the character of Karna and the ethical problems that he experiences. Firstly, the Dharmic Ethics is applied to obtain insight into the role of duty, morality, and the roles of the society on the behaviour of Karna in the complex moral realm of the Mahabharata literature. The point to note is that dharma is not fixed, but it depends on the situation, motives and duties of a person. Second, the Tragic Hero Theory which is based on the Poetics of Aristotle is used to explain Karna as a classical tragic hero.

Table 1: Key Internal Conflicts in Karna's Life

Type of Conflict	Description	Effect on Karna's Decisions
Honour Vs Survival	Rejects Krishna's offer of kingship	Chooses honour over personal gain
Knowledge Vs Action	Realizes the Kauravas are wrong	Continues fighting for them due to obligation

4. Discussion and Analysis

All these dissolved facts are described in each period of life of Karna. The choices, relationships, and situations of Karna, defining his own tragedy, as well as giving an eternal face to moral issues, are considered both to be a characteristic feature of his life, and to be universal across time and place. These aspects of his character are associated and connected to each other, and the following analysis explores the reasons why Karna made all of these choices, relationships, and circumstances constitute his narrative tragedy.

4.1. Loyalty as Karna's Defining Virtue

Karna's unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana forms the very core of his character and stands as one of the most defining elements of his life.

*“न मे मृत्युर्भयम् किञ्चिद् धर्मतः पथितस्य हि।
सखा मे दुर्योधनः सत्यं नाहं त्यजामि तं कदा॥”*

The verse is located in Udyoga Parva, Adhyāya 141. In this scene, Karna boldly tells Krishna that he has no fear of death and remains firm in his loyalty. This śloka is printed in Gita Press Edition, Vol. 2, Page 562. The verse is a statement of the unswerving devotion and fearless determination of Karna. He states that he is not afraid of death since he thinks that he has already gone the wrong way of the perfect dharma, and hence death ceases to scare him. The most important thing to him is his friendship and appreciation of Duryodhana. Karna also confirms that he is the real friend of Duryodhana and he assures him that he will never desert him in any situation. This quote portrays the true loyalty, honour, and dedication to Karna, who, because of his regard to friendship and thankfulness, by far, considered the friendship and gratitude above righteousness and personal safety, and thus this statement influences his tragic destiny in the Mahabharata.

Duryodhana came forward, the recognizance of the brilliance of Karna, made him King of Anga, and gave him the dignity that a long time had denied him. This was during a time when the world could not appreciate the value of Karna because it assumed that he was a low born person. This is the sole act of acceptance, which allows Karna to form the emotional bond so strong that he starts to believe that his service to Duryodhana is his paramount dharma. This loyalty is not merely a political affiliation to Karna; it is a protection against the lonely world which he has endured since childhood, a genuine payback of a debt of gratitude, and a personal code of honour which he will not violate at any rate. The devotion of Karna is a partisan identification.

*“यावज्जीवं तु मे राजन् दुर्योधनस्य वश्यता।
न त्यजामि कदाचन तं सखा मे स उपलब्धः॥”*

The line occurs in Udyoga Parva, Adhyāya 142, where Karna states that as long as he lives, he will remain under Duryodhana's command. This reference is available in Gita Press Edition, Vol. 2, Page 565. Karna in this verse declares his unswerving devotion to Duryodhana in their lifetime. He explains to the king that he will stay under the command of

Duryodhana as long as he exists and he will never betray him in any way. Karna recognizes Duryodhana as his real friend, who saw his value when nobody else saw it, and hence it is his obligation to come to his defence at all cost. This line brings out the profound sense of gratitude, loyalty, personal honour that Karna had and demonstrates that he had placed friendship more highly than power, safety, and even dharma. His constant loyalty to Duryodhana is made one of the most important features of his character, which influences his choices and ultimately contributes to his tragic destiny in the Mahabharata.

Nevertheless, the same trait that makes Karna a great person is the source of his tragic defeat. Due to his fondness with Duryodhana, he cannot have a clear vision in terms of morality, and this motive drives him to side with the Kauravas despite knowing that they are not doing the right thing. This allegiance is what makes him go to the point where he will take part in the humiliation of Draupadi in the dice hall, to fight his own brothers, the Pandavas in the battle field, and to reject the offer of kingship by Krishna and the plea to join the other side by Kunti, even after he has received the truth about his birth. This loyalty that Karna exhibits though driven by good intentions turns out to be the reason that makes him stick to the path that is bound to fail. This renders it a noble yet sadistically self-destructive virtue.

Table 2: Major Themes in Karna’s Character and their Illustration

Theme	How it appears in Karna’s Life	Significance in Mahabharata
Loyalty	Devotion to Duryodhana	Highlights ethical complexity of gratitude
Identity	Struggle for recognition due to Varna	Exposes social injustice
Honour	Keeps promises even at own loss	Reflects warrior ethics
Social Discrimination	Denied respect for being “low-born” (Varna System)	Critique of Varna hierarchy

4.2. Karna as a Symbol of Social Injustice

Punishing struggle that Karna has gone through in the entirety of his life can be taken as a powerful example of social inequalities and emotional suffering that result due to the discrimination and caste systems. Although he was born with the characteristics of divinity and immense power, he lives all his life struggling against the cruel treatment of society where he is judged not by his talent or virtue, but by the identity that he was supposed to have as a young boy. His story shows how awful the circumstances are to be deprived of opportunities, be it in the school, battle, or even social acceptance, only because it is assumed that he is the son of a charioteer.

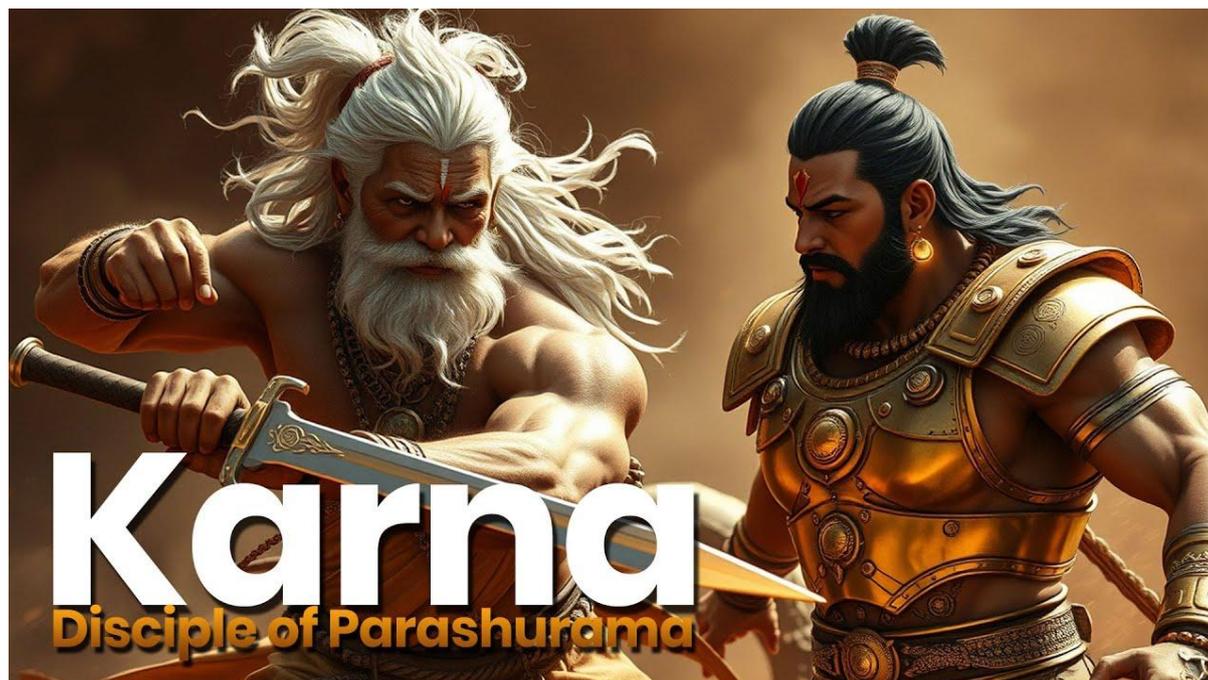


Table 3: Major Curses and their Consequences in Karna’s Life

Curse Giver	Reason for Curse	Impact / Consequence on Karna’s Fate	
Parashurama	Believed Karna lied about being a Brahmin	Karna forgot the incantation to use the Brahmastra during his final battle	
Brahmin (Cow Incident)	Karna accidentally killed a Brahmin’s cow	Karna’s chariot wheel became stuck in the mud during the war	
Mother (Bhumi Devi)	Earth	Karna accidentally injured a calf	The earth pulled down his chariot wheel, making him vulnerable
Kunti (Unrevealed Birth Secret)	Hid Karna’s true identity as her eldest son	Karna unknowingly fought his own brothers; remained loyal to the wrong side	

The relationship between the different curses that came and affected the life of Karna is discussed throughout the period of the Mahabharata and how each curse led to his unfortunate downfall. Some individuals such as Parashurama a Brahmin, Mother Earth (Bhumi Devi) and Kunti are part of the table listing the names of those who cursed Karna and is an explanation of the exact events that occurred to cause each curse. Thereafter, it creates a linkage between these events and the long-term consequences that would follow of them, like Karna forgetting the Brahmastra incantation, his chariot wheel sinking in the middle of battle, his forced loyalty to the Kauravas due to his secret birth identity. The whole table, in some sense, highlights how cumulative curses and hidden truths have contributed significantly to the horrible end of Karna life, which somehow justifies the idea of fate over merit and hard work.

One of such characters is Karna who struggles all his life to preserve dignity in the world that does not want to recognize his value. The result of this recurrent rejection is deep emotional traumas that shape Karna into a man constantly struggling to defend his dignity. It is due to this that Karna is a metaphor of skillful people not acknowledged, virtuous people not

understood, and valiant people not attributed to the society. Any person who has ever felt neglected, ignored, or underrated due to circumstances that people could not control will find that his experiences resonate with him deeply. The Mahabharata underlines the eternal fact that social bias can leave a cloud of merit, and that the most heroic people are often those whose lives are the least understood. This is manifested in the character of Karna.

5. Ethical Implications

Karna is a character who embodies and preaches profound moral truths that continue to hold relevance in the modern world. His life illustrates that even virtues, when taken to extremes or applied in the wrong context, can lead to suffering and ethical dilemmas. Through his struggles, conflicts, and tragic choices, Karna's journey highlights the difficulty of maintaining the delicate balance between moral values, duty, personal ideals, loyalty, and the inescapable pull of destiny. His unwavering commitment to friendship, generosity, and honor often placed him on a path of inner crisis, revealing how righteousness can become clouded when bound by gratitude or circumstances beyond one's control. The timeless moral teachings drawn from his life—reflected through various episodes and sequels of the epic—continue to remind us that wisdom lies not only in upholding virtues, but also in understanding when and how to apply them with discernment.

5.1 Loyalty is a virtue—but blind loyalty can be dangerous

The fact that Karna was very devoted to Duryodhana is one of the qualities that people tend to applaud about him. He remains true to his friend in good and bad times and even when the world is on the wrong side. Yet here is the same loyalty an evil thing. Failing to confront the behaviours of Duryodhana by Karna, leads him to forgive evil acts of participation in the humiliation of Draupadi and going to a war he is aware is not right. His life suggests that one should value loyalty on the basis of right or they may result in poor decisions that may harm others.

5.2 Social discrimination destroys talent

The life of Karna demonstrates the difficulties of the life of prejudiced and discriminated people against their Varna. People continue to ignore him in favor of opportunities despite his stunning talent, audacity and intelligence due to the belief that he is the son of a charioteer. His expulsion by Dronacharya school, his humiliation in the open, and his constant struggle to get noticed demonstrate how systems are unfair and can suppress greatness even before it can manifest itself. The life of Karna is a powerful message that criticizing individuals because of the place of birth or origin deprives the world of a lot of potential.

5.3 Greatness does not guarantee success

Studied Karna in terms of Erik Erikson theory of identity formation, the thesis being that a 1-life lifestyles spectrum of identity issues was reflected in the lifelong identity-searching habit of Karna which were not solved in childhood. The paper has identified that Karna was emotionally attached to Duryodhana to the extent that the need to be reassured on a continuous basis was based on the psychological traumas he had to go through due to desertion, secret birth and social alienation he had to go through during his lifetime. This was also established during the assessment carried out by Dhillon when Karna opted to be true, to compete, to show aggressiveness and honour not only to be moral or philosophical. However, they were premised on child-traumatic backgrounds, their unmet emotional needs and their shattered self-identity. This manner the attachments and decisions of Karna were revealed as a stress to deprivation and marginalization even at a tender age putting a psychoanalytical interpretation to his pathetic state.

6. Conclusion

Karna is one of the most fascinating tragedy characters in a literature. It is a mixture of prosperity and anguish in his life. He was born with all the blessings of Gods and he was denied the pride of knowing his true identity. He is disoriented in the world between the splendor of his possibilities and the brutality of his circumstance. He is a wounded, lost, and hunted man who has never compromised the merits of loyalty, honour and charity. His obedience to Duryodhana is his strength and weakness, too, and there is nothing more challenging than the moral decision to make when you have to neglect the gratitude, duty, and emotional attachment.

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