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Karna: The Eternal Quest For Self

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Abstract

The recent developments in the field of world literature which upholds theories like modernism and postmodernism has allowed, or rather influenced the readers to decentralise the major plot of any literary work and see through it, examining 'the other side.' This technique is being used by many writers in the contemporary literary tradition by rewriting the epics and mythologies from the perspective of the antagonists and the marginalised. Karna is seen as one among the greatest tragic heroes of Indian mythology, especially after the redefinition of this character by Bhasa. This research paper discusses the problem of identity crisis in the life of Karnain the ancient classical play Karnabhaara by Bhasa, based on Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development.

Keywords: *Identity Crisis, Erik Erikson, Psychosocial Development, Karnabhaara, Bhasa*

1. Introduction

The world of literature has always been very keen to excite and influence the readers, matching with the trend of the age. With the increasing popularity of modernism and postmodernism, literature became a mode of expressing one's rebellious ideas about social injustices, rather than escaping into an utopian world where romantic heroes reside, which triggered the trend of viewing a story from the perspective of 'the other', that is, the least important characters and also the ones with a shady aura around them. This fashion of revisiting ancient epics and finding a counter-reality is encouraged now more than ever, and every literary critic observes that nobody is born as a villain, but rather made one; it is not about being unrepresented, but rather misrepresented. The initial stages of this technique can be traced back to 5th century BC, when Bhasa, the first major playwright of the Indian classical theatrical tradition lived and wrote plays,



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which were always against the conventional rules and regulations of Natya Shastra, the Magna Carta of Indian visual, acoustic and fine arts. He preferred physical violence and death in his plays than classical emotions of love and kindness. He has made his mark in the history of Indian theatre by letting his hero Suyodhana/Duryodhana to die on-stage while preserving his identity as a true warrior, thereby becoming a pioneer to do so. Karnabhara written by the playwright is yet another literary work that unfolds the magnanimous and valiant nature of Karna, one among the so-called villains of Mahabharata. The play focuses on the evolution of Karna, exploring his cloudy mindscape and complex psyche and finds justification for his present condition, and this research paper follows the plot of the play (based on the English translation by Aditya Narayana Dhairyasheel Haksar) closely to find out the deep psychological issue of identity crisis faced by this character, seeking help from American-German psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and hence prove that his actions throughout the play is the outcome of his unending quest for a real and acceptable identity.

2. The Unidentified Identity

The play Karnabhaara begins with a depiction of the Mahabharata battle and its present condition. It is the seventeenth day of the battle and Karna finds that he is not able to deal with the anxiety and confusion rising within him. He is aware that the battle is nearing its end and travels back to his memory lanes where he reminisces the encounter with his mother Kunti and the curse of his guru Parasurama, and describes the same to his fellow warrior and charioteer, King Shalya. When the latter sympathises with Karna, he wards away such emotional talks and figures out himself as a strong warrior whose ultimate destiny is immortal fame. Then Lord Indra disguises himself as a priest and reaches Karna's abode. Karna who is viewed as the epitome of kindness and generosity offers various gifts to the priest which he refuses. Finally, when he offers him his divine armour, the priest is overwhelmed with excitement and Karna realises the trap being laid. Yet

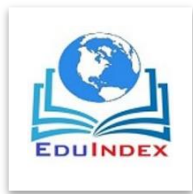
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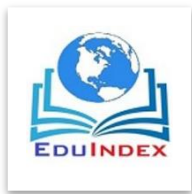
he does not back off from his promise and hands over his armour to the latter who believes that he has paved the way for his son's victory. When King Shalya warns him about this betrayal, Karna makes him realise though he gave away his armour, Indra has become his debtor. Hearing this, Indra sends his messenger to Karna (again disguised as a priest) offering him Vimala, the irresistible and powerful weapon. Karna tells him that he will ask for it at the time of utmost need, but it is made clear to the audience that he will never ask for it. Karna is completely aware that he is vulnerable to all the harm that his enemies would lay for him, yet asks Shalya to lead the chariot to the battlefield, where Arjuna is. The play ends in a high note of power and courage, though the spectators are well aware of the fact that Karna will end up as a dead warrior and tragic hero. Yet, the playwright tries his best to redraw Karna as a magnanimous warrior. The spectators of the play recognize him as a tragic hero who never left loyalty and his ideals behind for any recognition, relation or fame; and not as a villain as given in the original epic.

Although Karna is given the distinguished position of a tragic hero, we can see him struggling with a complicated identity crisis throughout his life. Most of the modern readings of Karna's character depicts the same about him, but Bhasa during the infancy of Indian theatrical journey allowed this confusion to be blended with the heroic nature of the protagonist. Reading between the lines of the play, we can see this when Karna points out about the inexplicable anxiety that holds him back from action and his feeling of being worthless. This confusion is further decoded along the course of the play when Karna moves back to his flashback with Parasu Rama. The curse of his guru holds an imaginary wall between his ability and confidence. The American-German psychoanalyst Erik Erikson and his theory of psychosocial development does hold a possible explanation for this anxiety of the protagonist. His theory explains that every individual, irrespective of their present stage experiences an identity confusion across eight different stages during his life journey, beginning from infancy and stretching out to perhaps the last phase of life (that is, from trust v/s mistrust

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during infancy, autonomy v/s shame or doubt in early childhood, initiative v/s guilt at the time primary schooling, industry v/s inferiority amid proper childhood, identity v/s role confusion while crossing adolescence, intimacy v/s isolation at adulthood, generativity v/s stagnation throughout middle age and integrity v/s despair in the old age till the end). Almost all the writings about Karna, both ancient and modern, depicts this identity crisis either explicitly or subtly because this character has a very complex mindset that triggers these confusions and has always been the favourite subject of analysis for many critics throughout the history of literature. Although the play reflects only certain glimpses of Karna's life, we can trace out some stages in Erikson's theory in the same.

The play moves in a non-chronological order, moving between past and present. There are three major incidents in Karna's life in the play, and his underlined identity crisis protruding within his mind, so that the readers become very well aware of the same. The protagonist recites his experience with his guru Parasu Rama and his curse. "Recognizing me for what I was, he suddenly flared with anger and cursed that my weapons may fail me in time of need." (Haksar, 102) [1]. The curse that Karna received during his adolescence has created incurable wounds deep inside the mind of this character. His unexplained anxiety clearly shows this, especially during the beginning of the play. Adolescence is a stage of life when every human being discovers his own true self despite being confused between his identity and role confusion, according to Erikson. The two fundamental questions that every individual encounter during adolescence is 'Who am I?' and 'Who can I be?' The adolescent Karna is somebody who is wounded by the society around him and ostracized for his low-caste origin. A common boy who always wanted to be a warrior and challenge the existing social norms based on caste found his only way to be 'someone' is to lie to his guru about his roots. Even though he was able to secure the position of Parasu Rama's favourite student, his mind was filled with guilt which forced him to unveil his true self and he fails miserably to find or form his true role, when guru



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realises who he is. Karna's hope for being a game-changer in the existing social structure is shattered, and this irrational fear of him being worthless is unveiled to the spectator when he discusses his experience to Shalya just before the battle. This feeling of not being sure about oneself was something that Karna had to undergo throughout his life, making him even more sympathetic in the eyes of the audience.

In the play, Karna mentions that he is restrained by his mother. In the original epic, when Kunti meets Karna and begs him to side his siblings and not kill Arjuna, he promises his mother that when the battle gets over, she will have five sons. But this promise once again keeps him from being true to himself and finds it hard to choose between loyalty and blood-relation. This complex crisis once again harasses him within his mind and the question of 'Can I make my life count?' remains unanswered.

"Why do I feel bereft at this time of battle? I, who am like an angry god of death in combat, smashing enemies in the clash of arms? Is it because I am the firstborn of Kunti, but known as the son of Radha? Is it because Yudhishtira and the other Pandavas are my younger brothers? This day of reckoning has at last arrived. But my skill with weapons seems worthless, and I am also restrained by my mother" (Haksar, 101) [1].

Karna wanted himself to be remembered for his courage and valour as he knew better than anyone what it means to be someone without a name, without an identity. Yet his promise makes him reluctant to fight with his true spirit. Once again, Karna fails miserably to identify and embrace his true identity.

Karna's encounter with Lord Indra also triggers another important stage of psychosocial development, which comes as a trap laid for him. Indra comes for the latter's divine armour which would make him exposed to all the possible threats and vulnerable to death. Despite being aware of the fact that he was being manipulated, he decides to be himself and give his ultimate protective shield to



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Indra. His act of baring himself to the real world allowed Karna to face the eighth stage of psychosocial development described by Erikson; ego integrity v/s despair. He adheres to his values risking his own life to satisfy his ego which is the only sign of his existence in the world. Later he justifies himself and answers positively to the question 'Is it okay to have been me?' asked within his heart by giving a true picture of what made him give away his armour without feeling any guilt or pain. He considers Indra to be his debtor with the exchange of the armour. He reflects himself without any divine protection and vows to prove himself by fighting with his true spirit. This can be seen as an act to find out his true self. Karna describes that being a part of this battle would give him immortal glory, which again resonates his desperate desire to create his own unique identity, a mark in the golden leaflets of history {"If we die, we attain heaven. If we win, we obtain fame. Both are worthwhile. War is not worthless" (Haksar, 102).[1]}, thus allowing his memory to be passed on through generations and hence extracting revenge from a society that has always looked down upon his social status with disgust.

"With great psychological insight, Bhasa has portrayed Karna's mental worries (bhara). He is worried about his mother Kunti's request that he should not kill her sons which means Karna's younger brothers...His second worry is about Parasu Rama's curse upon him. These worries (bhara) have actually robbed Karna of his courage and valour and his hold on life and that is perhaps the real tragedy of the greatest warrior of Kurukshethra" [2].

3. Conclusion

"Bhasa avoids the original scene of the Sun (Surya) the father of Karna appears to him in dream and warns him against Indra's treachery. Therefore, the arrival of Indra in the play Karnabharam has an element of surprise and the offer of various objects by the unsuspecting Karna has a thrilling dramatic effect" [2].



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Of course, Bhasa has tried his best to make Karna a tragic hero, revisiting his character from the epic and turning him into an epitome of kindness and generosity. Reading between the lines of the play, we find Bhasa representing an anxious and confused Karna who is often ripped apart between his choices of life, that is, 'What he wants to do' and 'What should be done'. Revisiting these questions of self-identity in the life of Karna is quite fascinating. His character has attracted many scholars and lay people alike, giving an example of what happens when one doesn't establish his unique identity and comes to terms with the question 'Who am I?' When one gets trapped in a quest for his own identity, one fails to build on the person one is.

Karna's heroic life shines because he remained true to his word of friendship till his last breath. "His life once again reminds the audience that true dharma is not the svadharma of caste, but the sadharana dharma of truth, commitment, generosity and friendship" [3]. Karna, like the other heroes in the Mahabharata, forces us to look at ourselves and at our frailties. All of us go through the same feelings that Karna underwent-doubts the security and confidence about our position in the society, and be treated as equals. Karna encountered status anxiety in every moment of his life which led to his fall and flaws, heightening his tragedy. Today when many have begun to challenge the acquired stringency of the existing social system, Karna's endeavour to pursue his innate aptitude seems courageous and rightful. Thus, Karna remains the most lamented tragic hero of Mahabharata, who was ever able to identify his true self to its fullest, suffering the evils of identity crisis throughout his life, and the most glorious self-made individual of Indian literary tradition.

4. References



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