

Reconciling Recognition and Heroism: An Exploration of Hegelian Perspective on Karna in The Mahabharata

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ABSTRACT

The research attempts to explore Karna's journey of recognition in the epic *Mahabharata* through G.W.F Hegel's philosophy of recognition proposed in his treatise *Phenomenology of Spirit* published in 1807. Karna being a subject of marginalization has been a major subject of study for many scholars and the character has been appreciated for his unflinching determination to gain recognition. The idea would be to decode the concept of recognition as a social and ethical phenomenon and how it determines Karna's social identity in a complex hierarchical social structure. Hegel's philosophy of recognition codifies the phenomenon of recognition as a socio-cultural process which takes place between Individuals of equal strata sanctioned by social institutions. Hegel's concept of recognition talks about several fundamental concepts such as battle between two self-consciousness, lordship-bondage dialectic, spiritual ethics which is vital to the understanding of Karna's quest for recognition. Hegel's theory echoes the idea of man being a 'social being' and attempts to study the social characteristics of Individual in relation to the mechanisms of the state which means that our idea of social integration depends upon our acceptance by the society. Karna's identity as a charioteer's son and his transition to ruler amidst societal challenges is a major point of concern. The research aims to illustrate how Karna's journey of heroism resonates with Hegel's idea of recognition and self-consciousness offering a profound insight to the dynamics of identity and heroism in the *Mahabharata*.

Keywords: Heroism, Identity, Recognition, Self-Consciousness, Society

INTRODUCTION

The character of Karna has been subjected to multiple interpretations devised by various authors over the period of time. Karna's heroic ambition in the *Mahabharata* and the repercussion on its self can be interpreted through a close analysis of the attributes the character of Karna projects across the varied versions of the *Mahabharata*. There are several eminent scholars who have re-interpreted *Mahabharata*. The interpretation of *Mahabharata* by P. Lal is one of the prominent works in the modern-day context. Author P.lal in his version of *Mahabharata* provides a comprehensive detailing of the "Complexity of Characterisation" narrated by various authors. He refers to Romesh P. Dutt's portrayal of characterisation of the text *Mahabharata* in later Sanskrit poetry. As per Lal's observation, there is hardly any variation in the characterisation of the characters. There is hardly any distinguishing factor between the characters whereas in Vyasa's version, each character is beautifully moulded with

distinct personalities with “dignity of strength and repose”. Karna is Vyasa’s version is referred to as “proud” and “peerless”. The author Romesh P. Dutt stresses on “finely nuanced complexity” of the characters and provides “psychological depth and intensity” to its characters. However, author P. Lal finds Dutt’s approach as “Weak-kneed” where the true meaning of the lines and scenes are lost while translating the text into English. Apart from Romesh P. Dutt, there has been several other writers who had deviated from the true meaning of the lines making it more too simplistic. For example, in Vyasa’s version of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi’s menstrual cycle is more explicitly mentioned as compared to the modern versions scripted by authors V. Raghavan and J.A.B Van Buitenen. Author Lal prominently points towards the scene from *Sabha Parva* Where Draupadi is dragged into the assembly hall while she is in her menstrual cycle. J.A.B Van Buitenen in the *Mahabharata*: “And as she was dragged, she bent her body

And whispered softly, “It is now my month!

This is my sole garment, man of slow wit,

You cannot take me to the hall, you churl!” (Lal, 1980).

According to author Lal, the phrase “It is now my month” requires a more detailing which conveys the fact that the modern day writers of the *Mahabharata* need to be more vocal in terms of conveying the emotions of the characters. He questions if “Vyasa tells it straight; why should we equivocate?” (Lal, 1980). Similar kind of differentiation can be observed in Karna’s context. While some authors prefer to give a detailed genesis of the events often overshadowing the characters, some prefer to condense the events in order to highlight the grandeur of the particular character. This kind of variation can be observed in authors M.N Dutt version of the *Mahabharata* and the *Mahabharata* scripted by V. Raghavan. In M.N Dutt’s version, *Karna Parva* starts with speech of Janamejaya narrating the detailed incident of Dronacharya’s fall and the emotional turmoil the Kauravas go through. The text specifically points out how Karna was sleepless the night after Dronacharya’s fall – “Thereupon mourning for the death of Drona, they (the kings) being highly oppressed with griefs and deprived of energy on account of their gloominess of mind sat around the son of Sharadvata. They having confronted him for a short while by citing reasons arrived at in the Shastras, the rulers of the earth departed to their respective abodes on the advent of the night. Especially the son of Suta, King Suyodhana, Dushasana and Shakuni could not sleep at all.” (Dutt, 2022). It is evident that in M.N Dutt’s version of the *Mahabharata*, the emphasis is more on the events rather than the characters. Moreover, the character of Karna appears to be a delicate character infused with a sense of apprehension and uncertainty. The narrative structure has been designed as such that the plot of *Karna Parva* dominantly appears to be a part of the *Mahabharata* rather than being an episode dedicated to Karna. In contrast to M.N Dutt’s version, V Raghavan’s version provides a more comprehensive view of the events of the *Mahabharata* granting more weightage to Karna rather than the events. While *Karna Parva* in M.N Dutt’s version begins with a detailed narration of the aftermath of Drona’s death, V. Raghavan’s version, it begins with the coronation of Karna as commander-in-chief in the Kaurava army- “Then, desirous of victory, Duryodhana and the others anointed Karna as the commander” (Raghavan, 1946).

The above narration about Karna meticulously highlights the grandeur of Karna’s worth as a warrior which seems to be absent in M. N Dutt’s version. Author Raghavan also narrates

how Karna “ standing on the chariot, reins of the horses Salya was holding shone forth” whereas in M.N Dutt’s version there is there is a detailed account of the coronation ceremony rather than highlighting the Karna’s grandeur after he is appointed as the commander of the Kaurava army. “ After having made Karna their generalissimo with the due performance of the most auspicious rites Victory” (Dutt, 2022). With reference to western writers, the narrative is structure is similar to that M.N Dutt where the *Parvas* have a detailed narration of the events rather than adding weightage to the characters. The *Mahabharata* translated by John D. Smith follows a similar structure. *Karna Parva* begins with the scene of mourning and passing sleepless nights by the characters- “ After Drona’s death , Duryodhana and the seniormost Kauravas pass a miserable , sleepless night , full of regret for their offences against Draupadi and the Pandavas. In the morning Karna is appointed as commander in place of Drona. A fierce battle takes place against the Pandavas; it lasts for two days and them Karna is killed by Arjuna .” (Smith, 2009) . These differences in representations of Karna in the *Mahabharata* across multiple texts can be used as a strong base to study the complex mechanism of the idea of “ Self” and the diverse meanings associated with it through different context and time.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing textual analysis of the *Mahabharata* to examine key episodes and dialogues involving Karna. Hegel's notion of recognition, self-consciousness and the master-slave dialectic serves as the theoretical framework for interpreting Karna's actions and motivations. By closely examining Karna's interactions with other characters such as Duryodhana, Krishna and Kunti, the study aims to unveil the philosophical groundwork of his quest for recognition and its relevance to the broader themes of ethics and heroism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* , the evolution of the consciousness is an inward journey where the individual tries to negate between truth and reality where as in the *Philosophy of Right* , it is a socially inclined process where the consciousness attains freedom in a social context. The dialectical process propagated by Hegel can help to understand the evolution of the consciousness connecting the personal and the social realm of life. Karna’s journey in the *Mahabharata* is marked by societal challenges which determines his development as a character. The transformation Karna goes through from birth to his death in the battlefield can be analysed by applying Hegel’s master -slave dialectic. The understanding of sense-certainty and perception is essential to decode the master-slave dialectic. The initial process of sense-certainty is a stage where the consciousness gains an immediate perspective of the physical things around. At this stage, the consciousness has an immediate perception of the things around without the deeper understanding of it. This is the nascent stage of the consciousness which is limited in itself which could lead to delusions and period of crisis. Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* refers to *Sense Certainty* as “ The knowledge or knowing which is at start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate of what simply is ” (Hegel, 1998). Karna being an abandoned child had always experienced society as an instrument of discrimination where the people

belonging to the Kshatriya caste have the privilege to take part in warfare and have the access to numerous opportunities to display their skills and attain acknowledgment for their skills as warriors. Even though Karna was Kunti's son but due to his association with Adhirath and Radha who were his foster parents, he eventually got associated with the Suta Caste which is inferior in status. As a growing individual his immediate perception was formed by the discrimination he faced which made him adamant to acquire the status of a Kshatriya. Karna's first bitter rejection came during his Brahmacharya phase where he was rejected by the Pandavas in the trial of arms conducted to display the prowess of the royal Bharata kinsmen. The following lines by Kripacharya reflects the societal structure which is based on hierarchy and discrimination; " Here stands the younger son of Kunti, son of Pandu , descendent of Kuru. He will fight you in single combat, sir. Now you too, strong-armed hero , must announce your mother , father and the royal lineage of which you are the glory . Once this is known to Kunti's son , he will fight you, or he will not" (Raghavan ,1946). Thereafter, Bheema after observing Karna embracing Adiratha further questions with humour his eligibility to fight as an opponent; " On seeing him, (Adhiratha), Bheema, son of Pandu , thought that Karna was a son of a charioteer and at that time spoke, as if laughing at him, " You are a son of a charioteer , you are not fit to be killed by Arjuna in a fight; quick take up the whip that is proper to your family, Nor you are fit , you low man to enjoy the kingdom of the Angas." (Raghavan , 1946). This particular instance from Karna's life makes him realize that recognition depends on a person's lineage and therefore his Sense- Certainty is marked by the belief that having a royal lineage is important to gain recognition as a warrior and his skills alone cannot grant me a place of respect and honour. Referring to Hegel's notion of Sense – Certainty, it is evident that the outer reality plays a pivotal role in shaping our consciousness and our consciousness begins from the immediate knowledge we gain from the things around. For Karna, his initial journey was marked by recurrent rejections. His belief was further substantiated by Duryodhana when he presented the kingdom of Anga to Karna in order to make him eligible as an opponent to the Pandavas; "Then after consulting king Dhritrashtra and grandfather Bheesma, Duryodhana said: This Karna deserves the kingdom of the Angas" (Raghavan, 1946).

After the stage of Sense- Certainty , the consciousness goes through the second stage which is known as Perception. At this stage, the individual starts contemplating the reality around. While the previous stage is based on sensory knowledge, this stage is based on reason. The consciousness here tries to negate realities by comparing the attributes with the other similar objects. During this negation process , an individual experiences crisis and confusion. According to Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* , " Perception on the other hand , takes what is present to it as universal. Just as universality is its principle in general, the immediately self-differentiating moments within perception are universal : 'I' is a universal and the object is a universal" (Hegel, 1998). Therefore the knowledge gained through perception is "logically necessitated" (Hegel ,1998). This negation can further be connected to the master- slave dialectic where the consciousness assumes the role of a master and one assumes the role of a slave through which it tries to negate the realities by comprehending the experiences of the world.

Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* deploys the 'Master-Slave' dialectic to explain the mechanism behind the acknowledgement or recognition of the self. As Hegel quotes "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when , and by the fact that , it so exists for

another ; that is , it exists only in being acknowledged” (Hegel, 1998). Analyzing Karna’s context through the framework of master-slave dialectic , we observe that Karna’s consciousness is also split into two halves, one which takes the role of a master, inclined towards sharpening his skills and proving his valour and other the slave which is subordinate to the views inflicted upon by the society. While Karna acknowledges his flaws, he is unable to shed away his quest for achieving fame and glory and free himself from the bondage of ignorance. Karna’s dilemma can be visualised from his interaction with Krishna and Kunti where he is marked by emotions of remorse and guilt as well as sense of pride and honour. Karna in the *Udyoga Parva* regrets for his inappropriate behaviour towards the Pandav brothers. He says “O Krishna ! I regret the harsh words I used against the Pandavas to please Dhritarashtra’s son. I am now tormented by that deed” (Debroy, 2015). On the other hand, Karna’s rejection of Kunti’s offer to join the Pandavas in the war elucidates his ardent determination to prove his worth as a warrior and defeat Arjuna to achieve his desired societal recognition he has been longing for since his childhood, “ Having killed Arjuna I shall achieve reputation for great prowess; or being myself killed by Sabyasachin. I shall endowed with renown” (Dutt, 2022).

There are two significant observations that can be inferred from the *Karna Parva*. While Karna acknowledges the invincibility of Bhishma and Drona , he firmly stands by the belief that death and defeat is an inevitable reality which no warrior can evade. According to Karna “Seeing the immaculate Bhishma and Drona equal to Indra and Vishnu , the grinders of the best of cars , elephants and horses and who are not to be killed by any , slain by the enemy I do not feel any fear in battle today” (Dutt, 2022). The crucial element of concern in this episode from *Karna Parva* is the idea of absolute truth. While heroism is a pursuit of strength and actions, the idea of truth plays a pivotal role in determining a warrior’s course of actions. To understand it further it is essential to refer to Hegel’s approach regarding the idea of truth and freedom. Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* narrates the interconnectivity between freedom and notions, “ Notion is the essence of all actuality” (Hegel,1998). Therefore, it is inevitable that the notion of life that Karna perceived as a warrior determined his actions in the battlefield. According to Hegel, truth emerges through the journey of conflict and contradictions. In the *Mahabharata* Karna’s death signifies the realization of his actions throughout his journey and his reconciliation of his identity as a warrior. Hegel emphasizes the nature of truth as a transcendental force which surpasses individual desires and aspirations. Therefore, Karna’s death signifies the idea of truth proposed by Hegel where it signifies the complexities of human existence. Karna’s silence in the end can be interpreted as a resolution to the inherent conflicts where he accepts death with utmost clarity and realization. The death symbolically represents the truth of human existence where all human beings, irrespective of class , caste or any strata has to go through this journey of contradictions and eventually embrace the truth based on moral integrity.

For Hegel, Recognition is a notion that is intrinsically connected to the idea of freedom. Robert R. Williams in *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* says “Recognition is the process wherein and whereby freedom becomes both actual and ethical” (Williams, 1998). In other words, Hegel’s idea of recognition is not a personal victory, rather it is a journey which aims at positively impacting others. Karna’s death symbolically represents the closure to the conflictive thoughts that he had inculcated along and finally accepting the larger truth that heroism is a

moral responsibility that is beyond personal victory and achievements. It is in the end that Karna achieves his final recognition after the elimination of all conflict and contradictions. Karna's silence represents his reconciliation with his consciousness where he acknowledges his flaws and wishes for a final resolution. The self which attains the final truth is termed as the "beautiful soul" which is its own knowledge of itself in its pure, transparent unity- the self-consciousness that knows this pure knowledge of pure inwardness as Spirit. (Hegel, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Applying Hegel's idea of recognition to the context of Karna in the *Mahabharata* provides a deep insight to the complexities of human existence circumscribing power, truth and heroism. Hegel's approach provides a framework to understand the intricate conflict and the dialectical process that is responsible for attaining freedom at the backdrop of social convictions. Karna's recognition elucidates how conflicts and contradictions play a pivotal role in determining one's identity. Furthermore, it also allows us to understand how individual perceptions and aspirations interplay to redefine notions of honour and moral integrity. Hegel's approach enriches our understanding of Karna's struggle as a warrior in a conflictive structure and also encourages us to delve deeper into his struggles against the larger context of life.

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