

Delving Deep into Karna: Search of Self of a Divine Solitude

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Abstract: The indispensable impulse of human being is to search a meaning of 'self' and it is quite confusing to live a life with an uncertain identity because people cannot live without an solid self or the identity of a person ties him up closely with a meaningful system in which he can spend his life contentedly. Identity is the source of familial and social recognition. When it is questioned, the root of existence starts shuddering; the unidentified or unnamed self is excluded from the social periphery and the consequence is only conflict with society, anguish for recognition and a fight with oneself with an excruciating ache inside for having nameless origin. A handful of people can have the realization about the identity of 'true self' which is 'avidya' but the rest is confined to the limited reign of 'world consciousness'. It is time which merely can liberate mundane from the delusion and establishes the truth that the true identity of a self is actually beyond body. True identity of a being reflects through stages like, Cosmic Consciousness (*Kshara*, the Cosmic Self), Pure-Consciousness, (*Akshara*, the Immortal Self) and Supreme Consciousness (*Purushottama*, the Supreme Self, the whole unified universe). As 'self-realization' is quite rare and as human beings belong to society, so to get the societal acknowledgment, identity is inevitable. This paper is an earnest attempt to explore and analyze the destined and 'karmik' causes of the crisis of the identity of Karna, the deserted hero of great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*.

Key Words: Identity, society, recognition, dilemma

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The indispensable impulse of human being is to search a meaning of 'self' and it is quite confusing to live a life with an uncertain identity because people cannot live without an solid self or the identity of a person ties him up closely with a meaningful system in which he can spend his life contentedly. Identity is the source of familial and social recognition. When it is questioned, the root of existence starts shuddering; the unidentified or unnamed self is excluded from the social periphery and the consequence is only conflict with society, anguish for recognition and a fight with oneself with an excruciating ache inside for having nameless origin. Mythology has been very foundation of many cultures and civilizations and Indian society is greatly influenced by it. Every culture has its own myth which helps the society to recognize its customs and ways of viewing the world. Indian thought process is deeply influenced by its wealthy teaching of *The Gita* which helps to understand the true meaning of life and the consequences of 'karma'.

Karna, the great warrior of the great epic *The Mahabharata*, is seen throughout his journey of life as ignored and rejected by most of the elite clan of *kaurava* as well as *pandava* due to his low-birth. He was abandoned by his natural mother, his brothers, his teacher, even God. The mythology says that once Kunti, the princess blessed with a magical formula to summon the sun-god, Surya. Without knowing proper consequences, she used that boon but the sun god was compelled to give her a child. Frightened with having a child conceived at maiden stage, Kunti places the child – born with a natural armor and divine earrings in a cane basket and discarded him afloat to a river's whim which takes Karna, the son of a princess, into the house of a charioteer, Adiratha, his foster father.

Thus speaking unto the daughter of Kuntibhoja, the illustrious Tapanas the illuminator of the universe gratified his wish. And of this connection there 'was immediately born a son known all over the world as Karna encased in natural armour and with face brightened by ear-rings. And the heroic Karna was the first of all wielders weapons, blessed with good fortune, and endued with the beauty of a celestial child. And after the birth of this child, the illustrious Tapanas granted unto Pritha her maidenhood and ascended to heaven. And the princess of the Vrishni race beholding with sorrow that son born of her, reflected intently upon what was then the best for her to do. And from fear of her relatives she resolved to conceal that evidence of her folly. And she cast her offspring endued with great physical strength into the water. Then the well-known husband of Radha, of the Suta caste, took up the child thus cast into the water, and he and his wife brought him up as their own son. And Radha and her husband bestowed on him the name of Vasusena... (Vyasa, Shambhava Parva, section CXI, 262)

A Kshatriya, member of the ruling class had transformed into a shudra. Karna is humiliated and segregated by this alternate identity; is abused and maltreated due to being 'Radhey', son of Radha or 'Suta Putra', son of a shudra as per *varna* system. This kin and social rejection of elder son of Kunti, elder brother of Pandavas made his life miserable till the end. He was always in a dilemma about his identity which made him despondent and ill-fated.

The crisis of identity can create a deep dig into the mind and soul of an individual that he is compelled to lead a stressed and depressed life. In Karna's case, he fights back again and again and he is mortified continually. He was born with armor; though he was brought up in a shudra family but by heart he had a feeling of a warrior. He was quite inquisitive about the exceptional Kavach and Kundal which his body had. It made him invincible. It was mainly because of these natural gifts that Karna always remained inquisitive about his birth and upbringing and also refused to stay a life of a Suta and followed his basic instincts and heart that was living a life like a warrior rather than a charioteer. But the irony of fate is that when he approaches Dronacharya who taught the Kuru princes, and requested him to teach warfare, he is rejected because he was not Kshatriya and he comes back with the suggestion to stick to his own caste duties. But the question is what exactly is meant by 'caste duty' as 'caste' is associated with the social identity of an individual. Generally, the duty of the father of any caste is transferred to his heir and that sole duty is considered as the caste duty of a son. But who is to be considered as the father of Karna? Which caste duty does he stick to? Originally he was the son of sun God Surya and unmarried Kunti but that identity is not revealed by the mother due to social criticism. Secondly, if Karna is the son of Kunti, he is the elder brother of Pandava, Pandu is then considered to be the father and lastly, as he was fostered by a charioteer, Adiratha, the suta, Karna will follow the duty of shudra caste. The tangled relation leaves Karna nowhere only to suffer. The humiliation continued when after completion of the learning of warfare, both the Pandavas and the Kauravas showed off their awesome skills and Karna outshone each of them, he was directed to leave the place by Drona for not being a Kshatriya. He also confirmed the great capacity of Karna as guilt or *adharma*, because he embezzled all the warfare knowledge, he was not allowed to it.

Karna was a great combatant who stood different on battle field as well as in his life. His quest for learning warfare made him to take the alternate way to reach his goal. He disguised himself as a Brahmin to learn warfare from Parshurama. He learnt everything but his identity again becomes the tool for the horrified curse by Parashurama that Karna would lose all fundamental knowledge of weapons when he would need them the most. He was cursed because he disguised himself as a Brahmin to become the disciple of Parashurama but

he was rejected again as his master identified the characteristics of a Kshatriya in him and he introduced himself as Brahmin. Dronacharya rejected him for not being kshatriya, Parashuma relinquished him for being kshatriya, not a Brahmin. In both the cases the common thing is disgrace to an innocent individual in the name of caste, varna or identity. Another incident confirms the repeated hammering by Bhishma, one of the elderly intellectuals of kauravas because he refused to fight under or along with a warrior who was not a kshatriya. So Karna was dishonored and had to wait until Bhishma fell, so that he could take part in the battle of Kurukshetra.

Tragedy becomes inevitable when individuals are unable to disentangle themselves from the conflict between who they are and who they are supposed to be. Equally, individual's consciousness of his true self is indispensable to the ultimate accomplishment of self-actualization. Otherwise a vacuum is felt in life or life seems insignificant. When it was the *swayamwar* of Draupadi, Karna was successful to target the fish before Arjuna, but he was rejected out rightly by Draupadi as she proclaimed in front of the whole crowd that she would never marry a Suta (the lowly caste).

And beholding the son of Suryya Kama of the Suta tribe like unto fire, or Soma, or Suryya himself, resolved to shoot the mark those foremost of bowmen the sons of Pandu regarded the mark as already shot and brought down upon the ground. But seeing Kama, Draupadi loudly said, 'I will not select a Suta for my lord! Then Kama, laughing in vexation and casting a glance at the Sun, threw aside the bow already drawn to a circle. (Swayamvara Parva, Section CLXXXIX 425)

Karna was rejected on the grounds that a man of unknown origin and low rank cannot even contend to be the groom of Draupadi.

Karna had nothing to accept his fate though he was punished for what he was not responsible. Kunti recognizes Karna by his armor and earrings and identifies him as her son at the time of showcasing the talent of archery in Hastinapur but she dares not tell anyone of her pre-marital offense. The identity of a child, first and foremost is closely connected with its natal cord with its mother. If the life provider is reluctant to accept the child gracefully, then who exactly is responsible for the suffering of the child? It was only Duryodhana, eldest of the Kauravas, declared Karna 'king of Anga', thus making Karna a Kshatriya by merit if not by birth and reduced the burden of the internal conflict of Karna and in return of that support, Karna showed the eternally gratefulness to Duryodhana and remained a true friend of his till last though his integrity was wasted on a man (Duryodhana) without integrity. This is only an authentic relationship where Karna found his worth and to some extent a

meaningful existence of himself here in this earth because no one except Duryodhana took Karna's royal title seriously; he remained as the suta-putra, the charioteer's son or the outsider. Before the war started, when Lord Krishna came to Karna with a request to join Pandavas:

...let the Pandavas know thee as a son of Kunti born before Yudhishtira. The brothers, the five Pandavas, the son of Draupadi, and the invincible son of Subhadra will all embrace thy feet...Surrounded by the Pandavas, like the moon by the stars, rule thou the kingdom, O son of Kunti, and gladden Kunti herself. Let thy friends rejoice, and thy enemies grieve. Let there be, this day, a brotherly union between thee and thy brothers, the sons of Pandu. (Udyoga Parva, Section CXL, 280)

Karna had to decide between Krishna's advice and Duryodhana's (adharma) side, he chose his dharma and it was not to deceive the man who provided him his social identity, rank of a Kshatriya when he was dejected by everyone. So he replied to Krishna:

My mother, while a maiden, bore me in her womb, O Janarddana, through her connection with Surya. And at the command of Surya himself, she abandoned me as soon as I was born. Even thus, O Krishnai I came into the world. Morally, therefore, I am the son of Pandu. Kunti, however, abandoned me without thinking of my welfare. The Suta, Adhiratha, as soon as he beheld me, took me to his home, and from her affection for me, Radha's breasts were filled with milk that very day, and she, O Madhava, cleansed my urine and evacuations- How can one like us, conversant with duties and ever engaged in listening to scriptures deprive her of her Pinda ? So also Adhiratha of the Suta class regardeth me as a son, and I too, from affection, always regard him as (my) father. (Udyoga Parva, Section CXL, 280)

The conversation between an abandoned son with his natural mother is very ironic because the true identity of Karna is now revealed by his mother Kunti though the reason behind this revelation is to save five pandavas.

Karna said: "I am Karna, son of Radha and Adhiratha. For what, O lady, hast thou come here? Tell me what I am to do for thee?"

"Kunti said: "Thou art Kunti's son, and not Radha's. Nor is Adhiratha thy father. Thou, O Karna, art not born in the Suta order. Believe what I say. Thou wert brought forth by me while a maiden. I held thee first in my womb. O son, thou wert born in the palace of Kuntiraja. O Karna, that divine Surya who blazeth forth in light and maketh everything visible, O foremost of all wielders of weapons, begat thee upon me.

Karna Said: “O Kshatriya lady, I cannot admit what thou hast said, viz., that obedience to thy commands constituteh (in my case) the highest of my duties. O mother, I was abandoned by thee as soon as I was born. This great injury, involving risk to life itself, that thou didst me, hath been destructive of my achievements and fame. If, indeed, I am a Kshatriya, I have, for thee, been deprived of all the rites of a Kshatriya. What enemy would have done me a greater injury? ...Thou hadst never before sought my good as a mother should. Thou addressest me to-day, however, desiring to do good to thyself. (Udyoga Parva, Section CXLV, 289-90)

There was an alternate way to reduce the burden of the conflict of identity of Karna. If Kunti unfolded the truth to his five sons, the result would have been different. Kunti’s immature deed snatched everything from her son and made his life pathetic. Even then Karna did not send her back fruitlessly as he promised, “O famous lady, the number of thy sons will never be less than five. Five it will always be, either with me, or with Arjuna, and myself slain.” (Udyoga Parva, Section CXLV, 291)

Rabindranath Tagore depicts the suffering of a castaway son Karna and socially conscious mother Kunti in his unique creation *Karna Kunti Samvad* in 1899. In other way, it is a conflict between two identities, between illegitimate childhood and unmarried motherhood. For Karna, Kunti is a living dynamic energy of all his lifelong disgrace and mortifications, but he deliberately embraces Kunti’s wish of let Arjuna live, “Joy houk amar houk pandobo sontan, Ami robo nishfoler hotasher dole” (Let the son of Pandu be the victorious and live forever, I choose to stay with the hopeless desperate ones.) (Tagore, 1961) Karna’s unyielding perception of loyalty makes him to declare,

The night of my birth you left me upon the earth:
nameless, homeless. In the same way today
be ruthless, Mother, and just abandon me:
leave me to my defeat, infamous, lustreless.
Only this blessing grant me before you leave:
may greed for victory, for fame, or for a kingdom
never deflect me from a hero’s path and salvation. (Tagore, 1961)

Kunti broke the truth to her sons when the war was over, and when Yudhishtira, Dhritarashtra, and others went to the Ganga to offer oblations to those killed in the war. Karna had been abandoned by Kunti years ago, given a name and identify by his foster parents, and a place in society by Duryodhana. The son had been acknowledged by his mother after his death but a true friend reflected the identity of a truthful friend by choosing

adharna through dharma and a utmost devotee of Supreme Being, prefers to abandon Krishna, who had come to him.

We meet another character Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra, suffering with similar identity crisis in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Souvali" which is a momentous reflection of *The Mahabharata*. It is a poignant tale about a *dasi* named Souvali who is forced to be a sexual companion to King Dhritarashtra while his wife Gandhari is with child. She is the mother of Souvalya or Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra, thus a Kaurava, a truth known but never acknowledged. He is the only son of Dhritarashtra to join the Pandava army and the only Kaurava son alive after the war. The agony and anguish of a son who performs last rites or *tarpan* for his dead father although he was never acknowledged is depicted very realistically. Being marginal, he remains deserted and neglected the whole life in the epic but his prolonged silence is a prevailing critic to the royal dynasty. He enquires, can an elite father get *moksha* by the *tarpan* done by a subaltern son?

Karna's suffering right from the beginning, his journey without having motherly affection, his bond with non-kinsmen, his constant dilemma- all were predestined. Infact, all human beings are here on the stage of life to shed off the burden of their *prarabdha* karmic debt. It is time which merely can liberate mundane from the delusion and establishes the truth that the true identity of a self is actually beyond body. True identity of a being reflects through stages like, Cosmic Consciousness (*Kshara*, the Cosmic Self), Pure-Consciousness, (*Akshara*, the Immortal Self) and Supreme Consciousness (*Purushottama*, the Supreme Self, the Whole Unified Universe). As 'self-realization' is quite rare and as human beings belong to society, so to get the societal acknowledgment, identity is inevitable but a divine peace can be achieved if a shift can be done from physical identity to metaphysical.

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