

## **Marginalized yet Empowered: A Study of Ekalavya and Karna from Mahabharata**

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### **Abstract**

Having an epic scale grandeur attached with it Mahabharata occupies a great volume in the Hindu culture across the boundaries. Even though it comments on almost every possible aspects of society it also, at the same time, reflects the bitter truth of what society stands for. The epic actually compels us to confront the bitter reality of life - the essential fact that there is not essentially always lie a happy ending after every chapter of life, or even if the life ends altogether. With a technique of “a-tale-within-a-tale” it is difficult to pin down any single protagonist in the epic. Yet there are some important characters that occupy significant space in the epic and lead the plot with them. Despite such an ensemble cast there remain certain characters who are not much talked of and are cautiously sidelined not only in their portrayal but also in the course of action in the epic. The paper analyses two such characters: Ekalavya and Karna from the Mahabharata, comparing their individual situations amidst the grandeur of the epic and what essentially makes them marginalized despite being empowered in their own rights. Establishing the characters in the framework of Tragic Heroes, as defined by Aristotle, the paper also analyses the characters with Arjuna, the Pandava prince, as the epicenter.

**Keywords:**Karna, Ekalavya, Arjuna, marginalized, epic

## Introduction

*In the moving history of our land, from time immemorial great minds have been formed and nourished and touched to heroic deeds by Ramayana, and Mahabharata.*

(Rajagopalachari, 1958)

One of the pioneering texts that define the Hindu civilization the Mahabharata is one of the two major epics of ancient India written in Sankrit language, the other being Ramayana. It is this heroic deeds and the thirst for achieving the credit for being the greatest warrior is what drives as the main theme in both of the epics, especially in Mahabharata which culminates into greatest war of all time, the Kurukshetra war. Apart from being about the great Kurukshetra battle and its consequent carnage the epic heavily focuses on *purusharthas* or four goals of life, notion of dharma or the sense of duty along with the teachings of Bhagvad Gita. Falling somewhere between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE the epic is also referred to as the Great Tale of Bharata Dynasty. With an ensemble cast at its center the epic does mention and portray some characters as its protagonists but cautiously sidelines some of the characters to whom only a single *parva* or chapter is devoted to; in other *parvas* they are hardly mentioned or even if they are constant in the entire epic they are cornered in quite a clever way. Ekalavya and Karna - both sidelined and victim of constant ridicule because of their low caste in the epic, emerge as the true hero at the end. Even though Eklavya was the prince and heir to Nishaada community and Karna was the king of Anga and also had the divine thread attached with him yet they were ridiculed at the hands of the society including the mighty and moralistic Pandava princes. Both have been ripped off their innocence and were exploited of their serene honesty - something which they gladly embraced adhering to their principles of morality by giving the thumb as *guru dakshina* and *kavach* and *kundal* as *brahaman-bhiksha* respectively; both of the episodes being the epitome of injustice and dubiousness in themselves. Both were in possession of a community/court to rule over, people to obey them and the divine qualities that make them transcendental figures beyond the conditioned understandings of the mortal beings. This is probably why none of them were never correctly configured by any of the other mighty characters in the epic, especially by the high and mighty Pandavas who were constantly ridiculing both at different points in the epic thus defying their divine nature of serenity and high moralistic values.

## Ekalavya-Karna: The Tragic Heroes

*“A tragic hero is a man whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity but by his error or frailty.”*

(Aristotle, 1996)

The most apt definition of a tragic hero is what considered being that given by Aristotle in Poetics where he clearly distinguishes a tragic hero from that of a hero. Apart from what he says about “error” being conducted by the tragic hero the other traits which according to Aristotle define a tragic hero are:

- He must suffer more than what he deserves.
- His fate must be greater than what he lives in his life or what he deserved.
- He must be doomed from the beginning of the plot but does not possess any responsibility for possessing his flaw.
- Must be noble in nature but imperfect at the same time allowing the audience to connect with the character.

Both Ekalavya and Karna fit the above traits in an apt way emerging as the tragic character in the epic. Marginalized and outcaste from the society they definitely suffered a lot more than what they deserved. Both of their own “error” or rather “error of judgment” or *hamartia* in Aristotlian language is what responsible for their reversal of fortune essentially from good to bad or *peripetia* by their own hands finally culminating into *anagnorisis* or the discovery of the truth. Both of them were successful in arousing fear and empathy in their audience while they learn from their constant mistakes or rather life experiences.

This is probably why both Ekalavya and Karna becomes the most humane character in the entire epic devoid of any major divine intervention into their lives. Even though this cannot be said in case of Karna who is himself born out of divinity yet the only point where a divine intervention is seen in his life is when Indra - the king of Gods, approaches him for his divine protective armors, *kavacha-kundala* in the guise of a Brahmin. This divine intervention is more of an episode of debauchery than of the serene divinity that should have been attached to it. A

combination of lack of divine intervention and in possession of mortal flaws is what makes these two characters the most humane characters among all the other larger than life characters in the epic.

## **Arjuna: The Weaving Thread between Ekalavya and Karna**

Interestingly, even though none of them ever knew each other, Karna and Ekalavya were actually driven by the same fate which doomed their destiny by enlightening Arjuna's - the Pandava prince. And ironically even though they were fighting their own battle aggressively in their own way they were actually actively engaged in paving the way for Arjuna to become the greatest archer of all time - a dream that both of them harbored and cherished within themselves. Could Ekalavya's story be a perfect rag to riches story complying with the notion of dharma that runs through the epic? Was Pandava prince Arjuna not as moral as it has been tried to establish? Was Dronacharya fails as a guru? All such questions stir quite a dilemma whenever the character of Drona is pitted against his pupils whom he was supposed to favor and teach equally according to his dharma as guru. This dilemma is probably best expressed and also answered to a certain extent in T.P. Kailasam's Purpose where he presents the lack of devotion on Arjuna's part as a pupil and the sense of guilt in Drona while he rebukes Ekalavya.

Caste-conflict comes as an important parameter for analyses and understanding here in this context reflecting the dubiousness and hypocrisy of the society. In Purpose, T P Kailasam beautifully reflects upon this caste-conflict through two of the powerful child characters of the epic: Arjuna and Ekalavya:

*Arjuna: "become the greatest archer in the world!!! Indeed!!how can you even for a moment think it possible for a Nishaada to become what is almost impossible even for an Arya?!"*

*Ekalavya: If you really do know what there is to be proud of in being an Arya that there is not being in Nishaada..tel me!!!*

*Arjuna: You may be all this and as good as I in archery - if Guruji takes you on as his pupil!! And yet, after all is said and done ...AN ARYA is AN ARYA! And a Nishaada is only a LOW BORN NISHAADA!!!*

(Kailasam, 1966)

The dialogues between the two may appear to be spoken out of childish innocence yet they reflect the deeper and a more bitter reality of what society and life in general stands for. It also comes quite as a surprise that the note on which Mahabharat starts off reflecting an impartial picture of the reality of the society and the human behavior and psychology therein, yet it comes across as if there lies a specific yet blur line between good and evil; specifically between WHO is good and WHO is evil. The Pandavas, the mighty heroes of the plot with all the divine potentials who can never be wrong in their morals not only continuously taunts Karna because of his low caste, but in Purpose as well, Arjuna is shown to refer Ekalavya always as “*bad barbarian boy*”. Arjuna, the high and mighty Pandava prince is portrayed as possessing not the divine qualities instead basic human flaws and incapability of controlling them. The lack of aim in life as pointed out by Drona,

*“Drona: Your AIM Partha, is just this: TO ATTAIN FAME AS AN ARCHER! No more... Every moments you spent at work, your mind is FULLER of thoughts of the day when you’ll be acclaimed as the very greatest archer of all times, than of thought of the work itself!”* (Kailasam, 1966), makes Arjuna quite un-heroic in his stands and rather escalates Ekalavya’s standard to more than a hero, probably that of a transcendental figure when he agrees to and actually cuts off his thumb despite being fully aware of its consequences. Ekalavya’s devotion to not only his archery practice, his fawns and forest, towards the Mother Nature and towards his guru - all makes him a transcendental figure in true sense with whom the audience tends to connect more than the actual hero of the epic, Arjuna.

With *sambhavaparva* the very first obstacle of Arjuna’s path is cautiously and cleverly removed both by the guru, his favorite pupil Arjuna, and also by an apparent divine force that is probably responsible for the momentum in the actions that takes place. The very next obstacle that the *guru-shishya* duo faces is in the form of Karna - the *suta* and also *suryaputra*, the hero yet the tragic hero in its true sense. A legend in his own right, Karna is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating characters in the Mahabharata. His unmatched warrior skills were a true spouse to his unflinching loyalty to his friend Duryodhana. While there is a lot of debate whether Karna can be out rightly called as a hero or an anti-hero, Kavita Kane in her book *Karna’s Wife: The*

Outcaste's Queen, portrays quite a humane character of Karna with all the divine possessions yet with mortal flaws driving his own karmic wheel towards his end, thus justifying the trait of a tragic hero. A combination of fate, personal traits and shrewd battle strategies is what proved to be fatal in case of Karna who had the aura of his father, *Suryadev*, yet the insults and humiliations that he was recipient of throughout his life often eclipsed his brightness.

Leading a life with a dramatic mix of valor, cowardice and luck Karna was probably at his honest-best at the early morning when he performed the *Suryapuja* and the offerings to the Brahmins which garnered him his other name *DaanveerYoddha*. One of the best portrayals of Karna is probably by Rabindranath Tagore in his work *Karna-Kunti Sangbad* where not only the human beneath the thick quilt of a warrior emerges in front of his biological mother, Kunti - a living driving force of all his lifelong humiliations and insults, but a tragic hero also makes himself prominent in audience's mind as he willfully 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)

Doomed from the very beginning it is often being argued that whether the outright consideration of Karna as a tragic hero is justified or not since his loyalty towards his friends actually calls for rescuing his friend from aggressively achieving the ruin yet Karna ended on the wrong side of what loyalty stands for driving not only his friend but also himself towards a doomed fate. Kavita Kane beautifully justifies this “error of judgment” in Karna's character through his princely wife Uruvi, as a tool for satiating his anger on being humiliated as *sutaputra* in Draupadi's *swayamvar*. As a mortal being this psyche for avenging one's own insult for something destined by fate is completely understandable and therefore, despite being landed up in the wrong side of morality and possessing misplaced notion of loyalty Karna emerges as a strong and powerful yet marginalized character in the epic. Despite drawing his karmic

renditions towards fulfilling his ambition to become the greatest archer of all time it is his this karma only which eclipses his ambition making him marginalized and empowering Arjuna at the end. Karna could probably aim for shining in his own right rather than harboring an ambition to outshine Arjuna - something which doomed Karna forever in his life.

## **Ekalavya and Karna: An Analysis**

While both of the characters have their due share of deprivation in the epic due to societal norms, they both indeed share a greater deal of appreciation and critical acclaim in modern Indian literature. With several retellings of Mahabharata from different perspectives both of the characters have come under severe scrutiny; as severe as their contemporaries and rivals in the epic.

While many argue that Karna's main flaw was his desire to outshine Arjuna and only him without emphasizing on his own escalation as a human being in general, the same can be said for Ekalavya as well. It is widely accepted fact that both of them nurtured an ambition of becoming the greatest archer of all time only to be cut-short by their ill fate and towering destiny of Arjuna. Being the epitome of divine *bhakti* they both were actually mere slaves of the mundane joys of life - to become big, to outshine Arjuna. Be it Karna's rigid notion of "loyalty" or Ekalavya's sacrifice of his thumb - both can be interpreted as a simple display of mundane bravado in accordance with the worldly pleasures of being the greatest of great of all time. The same gesture can also be alternatively interpreted as an urge and desperate attempt for achieving the recognition that has been wrongfully denied to them in their life because of some factors which they cannot have any control over.

And this very recognition they were indeed successful into achieving by sacrificing themselves to the desires of destiny. In the entire epic they were fighting against their destiny to achieve what they perceive has been wrongfully denied to them; and therefore they were at the receiving end of almost everything in their life. Yet, they succumb to the desires of their respective destinies is then that they receive the ultimate bliss of life - recognition, that one single thing that they were struggling for so far.

Ekalavya might not have been regarded as the greatest archer of all time in the epic but he does succeed in transcending beyond his socially conditioned stature escalating into a transcendental figure by sacrificing his thumb. Karna, on the other hand embraces his fate to be killed wrongfully on the battleground, thus achieving the recognition as one of the greatest warrior of all time.

## **Conclusion**

Even though Mahabharata has undergone several retellings and interpretations till date Ekalavya for the least, if not Karna, has never been provided with his due recognition or space for analyses apart from few handful of works, Purpose by T.P. Kailasam being one of them. Even Mahabharata by C Rajagopalachari, one of the pioneers amidst all the modern renditions of the epic, does pay attention to the tales within tales such as that of Devyani and Kacha yet does not mention much of Ekalavya. Even Karna, for that matter is being slightly sidelined in this pioneering modern rendition of the epic. Despite all the retellings and also the original version of the epic credited to sage Ved Vyasa Karna and Ekalavya remain two such characters with whom there lies ample space for critical analyses and discussion; they are as significant as any other lead characters in the epic open to various interpretations from vivid perspectives. However, it performs as a universal truth that they remain marginalized characters despite being empowered in their own respective situation.

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