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## A STUDY ON THE MAHABHARATA CHARACTER, KARNA IN DALIT CONTEXT IN THE LIGHT OF KARNA'S WIFE BY KAVITHA KANE

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### ABSTRACT

Man is a social animal – Aristotle, the philosopher's statement is true. Homo sapiens prove the statement by clinging on some shadow line differences. All are same by creation yet differences are vigorously followed among human race around the world. In India no one can escape from a deep rooted system called Casteism. It has been ruling the Indian society from ancient age. Still the system which was categorised based upon occupations holds its evil power. Karna is a charismatic character in Mahabharata with much superior qualities but all his righteousness is trampled under the feet of high caste people. He is of celestial birth – son of Sun god – but by the mistake of Kunti gets into the family of Sutaputra, the community of serving Kings. Branded as a son of Sutaputra, eminent Karna is treated unfairly though he excels in archery and deserves respect. The Humiliation and Manipulation Karna faced throughout his life are studied under Dalit context in the paper. It presents some facts about casteism collected through research. A solution in the form of Intra Caste Marriages to eradicate caste system can be taken account of from the paper.

Key Words: Social animal, Casteism, Sutaputra Karna, Humiliation and Manipulation, Intra Caste Marriages.

### Introduction

Dalit literature is a space created by Dalit writers to record their grief-stricken life forced by the so called high caste treatment. Educated and enlightened dalits are still unfortunately driven in search of identity in the society wherein they are not recognized even though they are equipped and talented. They need to struggle and fight a lot to salt away their foot prints in the world. Such a recognition search is schemed through describing a Mahabharata epic hero, Karna in the novel *Karna's Wife*. In an article, "The Development of Theoretical Principles of Dalit Literature" written by Vikas Singh and Vikas Jain, it is explained that a Dalit is one who has suffered *dalan* and *daman*, oppression and

victimization; one who has been suppressed; one who has been oppressed; one who has been exploited; one who is on the margins of society; one who is considered abhorrent; one whose human rights have been denied (par.3). So, Karna's life can be studied under Dalit context since he is judged and marginalised by pointing out his brought up as a Sutaputra.

### Humiliation to the Passionate:

Karna is ready to participate in the competition held in Swayamvara of Draupadi when the novel opens but he is restricted to participate just because he "is Sutaputra – the son of a suta – one who is born a brahmin woman and a kshatriya father" (Kane 19). The sutas will serve kings as

charioteers. Since Karna belongs to such community, he is humiliated a lot in the place surrounded by Kshatriyas. Comparing Arjuna who is wished to win the hands of Draupadi, Karna is forced to tell who is his father. Kripacharya spoke to him,

According to the rules of the game, only kshatriya, a high-born warrior, can fight another kshatriya in a tournament. Arjuna, whom you challenged, is a prince, the worthy son of King Pandu and Queen Kunti, the scion of Kuru dynasty. Pray, who are you, son? (4)

To the outmost denunciation, he is rejected even after Duryodhana, the close friend of Karna declares him as a king of Anga by Bhima saying derisively, "King of Anga indeed! You are but a son of our charioteer" (5). Karna is even more ridiculed after getting a kingdom. This kind of mean treatment is followed in Britain among Indians even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An Interview data presented by Metcalf & Rolfe in a research paper "Caste discrimination and harassment in Great Britain" has shown that caste awareness and differentiation transfers from the Indian subcontinent to the UK. In one of the interviews a victim states, "My brother used to get sworn at because of his caste when he was at work – with comments like 'You are not even equal to our shoes'" (35). Though a low caste man gets opportunity to work in foreign, his ability is not at all recognised. He is compared with 'shoes'. In the novel, Duryodhana speaks in favour of Karna, "Look at Karna - his golden armour, his shining earrings, his built, his confidence and the way he carries himself. He must be of royal blood." (7) but the so-called high born people are not ready to accept Karna though his looks are like that of celestial ancestry with his Kavach and Kundals. Karna is thus forced to leave the place. Such humiliation hurts Karna a lot and he keeps this insult in his heart.

#### **Dalit consciousness**

Karna calls himself as "I am a cursed man" (189). As a low born, his life lies on Curses cast by high caste people. It is very sad to hear from Karna that by curse he is a "dead man already" (191). Karna's reasonable desires are restricted start from his childhood just for the community he belongs to.

Guru Dronacharya rejected Karna's plea to teach him archery that he did not want Karna, the Sutaputra to be the rival for Arjuna, the Kshatriya. Discouraged Karna sought the guidship of Guru Parshurama, the warrior sage who taught martial arts except kshatriyas. It made a depressed class man to consider himself as low by shutting doors wherever he knocked. Karna feared he would face rejection again if he admitted his caste and so he lied. One day when Parshurama rested his head on Karna's lap, a bee burrowed into his thigh. He bore it for his master. On waking up, seeing Karna's patience, he suspected him as a Kshatriya and cursed him that he would forget Brahmastra when he needed it most. Dalit Consciousness is found in Karna who faces humiliation frequently in his life. He was not dare enough to claim him a Sutaputra but introduced him as a Brahmin boy and devoted himself to learn how to use the Brahmastra. Here, the novelist throws light upon the psychological status of a zealous young man who wants to achieve in life. He was again cursed by a Brahmin for he killed his cow by mistake that he would die a death like the helpless cow. Third time it happened with Bhoomadevi, the earth goddess. Karna, helping a girl who spilled milk on the earth and feared her step mother would beat her for the action, squeezed milk from the wet soil back into the pot. So, Bhoomadevi for her part spelt out a curse that one day at the most crucial battle of his life, she would trap his chariot's wheel with the same deathly grip. Of all the curses no fault is found on Karna. He is very passionate, determined, spirited and kind hearted. Unfortunately he carries all the curses for his death which he does not deserve in any of the way. Karna after all humiliations does not give up. He knows that he will die but he strenuously work out for excellence in archery. Paul Ghuman in his "Reaching out to the 'Untouchables'" enunciates that the karmic and Dharma dimentions are being joined – replaced, even – by a new form of casteism, which blames the 'victims' themselves for their in the caste hierarchy because of their low abilities, lack of zeal and hard work. These negative stereotypes justify high-caste people's conscious/subconscious prejudice and discrimination (565). Karna cannot be blamed by such accusations, as a victim of caste he

is a revolutionary. He admits, "All I wanted was the dignity and honour I think I deserved" (233). The questing hero fights till he breathes his last that he proves that heroism lies not in caste and community but in human spirit.

#### **Noble qualities from Low born**

Karna is branded one of the four bad men – "One is Shakuni, Duryodhana's maternal uncle. The second is Duryodhana himself. The third is the malicious Dushasana. And the fourth, sadly, is Karna" (19). Just because he is allied with Duryodhana, he is considered as unrighteous. Many try to make him reasonable why he should be away from Duryodhana ironically who acknowledges Karna's talent. He honours him by crowning him as a king of Anga. When he is humiliated in Draupadi's swayawara, Duryodhana, the Kshatriya stands for Karna. He argues,

I am certain he is of celestial ancestry. We are talking merit and skills, and Karna has more than proved that he is a worthy warrior. Unworthy of ruling Anga, did you say, Bhima? I consider that he is worthy of ruling this whole world. (7)

Uruvi expresses her displeasure against Karna's friendship with Duryodhana. She reasons out Duryodhana is using him that he only can combat Arjuna. Karna answers her that he may be evil but he sees goodness in him. He adds, "All I ever wanted was respect, Uruvi. And Duryodhana has given me that...I aspired for nothing else. I wanted to be recognised for my merits. Not for what I was born as. Not for my lineage – or rather, lack of it" (86-87). Even Krishna questions, "You honour your dharma so much so that you are the very epitome of it. Yet, why are you siding with the sinful Duryodhana?" (232). A gentle answer follows Krishna's question, "He is more than my friend. He is my brother who acknowledged me for what I was – an archer and a warrior. Till then, no one had recognised my worth, for I was a low-born sutaputra for everyone else" (232-233). Karna feels like he is indebted to Duryodhana and so he turns down the offer given by Kunti, who at last reveals the truth to him that he is the eldest of Pandavas, to become the King of Indraprasta. He is ready to die for

Duryodhana rather than changing his channel to support Pandavas who would accept Karna after knowing he is a Kshatriya. Karna just wants to be recognised not for his societal status as quoted above. Karna is not sole responsible for his downfall at the end. Society should take the responsibility of treating human beings poorly based on their occupations.

#### **Dalit identification:**

Karna even after knowing he is a kshatriya, he does not want to claim such status. He just wants to carry the low caste status till his death. He prepares Uruvi to take care of his parents who brought him up with a lot of love after his death. In the battle field when Krishna in the disguise of a Brahmin approaches Karna to get all his righteousness to redeem himself. Karna is so proud that as a sutaputra he can help a Brahmin. So, when he is dying he overwhelmingly accepts his identity as a sutaputra who has faced oppression and humiliation in the hands of high born people through out his life. Karna wishes that his born secret should be declared publicly by Kunti so that he can carry pride at least after his death because the afflicted soul very well knows that the society would not revere a sutaputra's passionate archery skill in future also.

Karna's outlook of the evil society is right because the elders feed the children about casteism even at their young age. They are trained to be proud about their caste and to treat badly the depressed class people. Ghuman in the same article quoted the facts that he found by studying under the research topics, "Asian adolescents in the West" and "Double loyalties: South Asian adolescents in the West" draws the facts that caste identities become salient for students who attend schools where South Asians are in a majority. In such schools, children of high caste tend to 'self-categorise' into their respective castes, thus pressurising Dalit children to seek identification with their own caste. However, caste identity remains latent when these high-caste children attend a white-majority school. In this situation, 'Asian' identity becomes active and significant: they fall back to their ascribed social identity of Asians, and

so they self-categorise accordingly and then seek to conform to the group's stereotyped behavior (567). Thus, Casteism is passed on to the upcoming generations.

#### **Inter-Caste Marriage, as a solution:**

It is a million dollar question whether casteism can be eradicated. The novelist suggests a solution to abolish casteism that she supports Intra Caste Marriages. If Intra Caste Marriages are encouraged, the adverse practices based on casteism can be reduced and as time passes it can be abolished. In the novel, Uruvi's love for Karna strengthens him personally after seeing much negligence, rejections and discouragements. Uruvi marries Karna after much fight with her parents and kinsmen though it is against their dharma. As time passes Karna is considered a bit. He is invited for Yudhishtira's Rajasuya celebrations along with Kuru family and he is entrusted with a responsibility in the celebration. Eventually this kind of social practice can be expected through Intra Caste Marriages. Though this may be a considerable solution, honour killing is also prevailing in Indian society. Human race has passed two thousand years and it is well developed in technology but the tribalism still exists through casteism. So, unfortunately there is a long way to go for casteless society.

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