

Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay*: An Ultimate Analysis of Karna as the Man of Loyalty, Sacrifice and Death Conqueror

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Abstract: Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay: The Death Conqueror* is one of the most important modern retellings of the Epic, The Mahabharata in Translated Indian Writing in English. The novelist tells the story of the great warrior, Karna. It is narrated from a deep psychological, philosophical and humanistic understanding. Traditionally, Karna is always portrayed as a tragic anti-hero, but Shivaji Sawant elevates into the height of loyalty, sacrifice, dignity and existential fight at the end of the story. The title, *Mrityunjay*, means "The Death Conqueror" portrays Karna's spiritual victory over death. This research paper analyses the character Karna and how Sawant portrays him as the embodiment of heroism and the winner of morality. This study focuses on different themes such as social discrimination, loyalty to friendship, destiny, sacrifice, identity crisis, and spiritual victory. This research paper also examines Karna not only as a warrior but also as a universal symbol of human spirit and his ethical commitment to loyalty toward the friendship with Duryodhana.

Keywords: Karna, Death Conqueror, loyalty, identity, sacrifice, tragedy, existentialism.

Introduction

The Mahabharata is one of the greatest epics in world literature (Lal; Bhattacharji) that explores the deepest morality, politics, profound human emotions and greatest human dilemmas. Karna is a unique character among other important characters and occupies an important tragic position. Even though he was born with divine qualities, he was humiliated by social prejudice and a twist in his destiny. Karna exemplifies the eternal conflict between merit and the



hierarchical structure of society. The novel, *Mrityunjay*, was written in the Marathi language, and it was translated into various Indian languages. It has made a widespread literary significance because of its psychological depth and philosophical acumen (Sawant; Mukherjee). Shivaji Sawant has reconstructed the character, Karna, not only as a warrior but also as a multidimensional human being, who is fighting against injustice, the loneliness of life and its destiny. The title *Mrityunjay* has great symbolic significance as he becomes the “conqueror of death” even though he faces physical death; he rises above the fear, humiliation, and his woes through boldness and self-sacrifice. The writer, Shivaji Sawant, promotes Karna as a human being extremely loyal to his principles, even if he faces severe rejection and final tragedy. The purpose of this research paper is to present Karna in *Mrityunjay* as a symbol of loyalty, sacrifice, and spiritual triumph. This research paper also examines the novel’s philosophical aspects and its substantial significance to contemporary society and its ethical concerns.

In *The Mahabharata*, Karna is introduced as one of the most complex and tragic characters (Lal; Bhattacharji). He was born to Kunti by the blessings of the sun god before her marriage. Therefore, Karna was abandoned by his mother, Kunti, at birth due to fear of dishonour in society. Later, he was adopted by a charioteer family, and he grew up in that family and faced all types of humiliation and discrimination, even though he had extraordinary talent and boldness in life.

The real tragedy of Karna begins with the contradiction between his inner greatness and his social identity. In fact, he was either equal or superior to all the Pandavas in valour and his skill in battle; he was always insulted and humiliated due to his supposed low birth as the son of a charioteer. The continuous denial in society had created his psychological struggle throughout his whole life. Shivaji Sawant had deepened these tragic aspects in *Mrityunjay*. Karna’s pain is not on the physical or political level but on the existential level. He always seeks identity, dignity and society’s acceptance from a society magnificently obsessed with caste and lineage. Shivaji Sawant presents Karna as a heroic person fighting against his own destiny (Sawant). Even though he was born with celestial blessing and protection, Karna confronts continuous suffering and loneliness, but he refuses to surrender his self-respect and generosity. This tragic



heroism in his life elevates him into a world literary figure comparable to all other classical tragic heroes like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Homer's Achilles or Sophocles' Oedipus.

One of the important qualities of Shivaji Sawant's Karna is his loyalty to his friend, Duryodhana (Sawant), and his steadfast friendship with Duryodhana is a significant central quality of his personality. When the Pandavas humiliate Karna at the time of the martial exhibition, Duryodhana instantly recognizes his talent and immediately crowns him as the King of Anga. Duryodhana confers on him dignity and social status as the King of Anga. Karna also instantly devotes his remaining life to Duryodhana in return. In *Mrityunjay*, Shivaji Sawant presents this loyalty of Karna not as blind obedience but as gratitude and emotional commitment. Karna knows Duryodhana's defects, but Duryodhana is the person who recognizes and welcomes him without any prejudice regarding his social status as the son of a charioteer. When Kunti tells the truth about her motherhood before her marriage and requests him to join the Pandavas, Karna declines to betray his friend, Duryodhana. Shivaji Sawant portrays the meeting between Karna and Kunti as the most emotionally powerful scene in the novel. Here, also Karna sacrifices his personal benefits, royal legitimacy and even victory for the sake of loyalty and refuses to become the royal king of the Pandavas. Shivaji Sawant portrays his loyalty as an important moral virtue in his personality, deeply rooted in his gratitude towards Duryodhana. Karna's loyalty elevates him to the height of immense ethical dignity even though he fights from the frontline, ultimately associated with the injustice. The complexity in his character brands Karna as one of the most important tragic heroes in Indian literature.

One of the important aspects of his personality is his generosity and sacrifice in his life (Sawant; Lal). Shivaji Sawant is another important theme in *Mrityunjay*. In this novel, Karna continuously sacrifices his happiness, his ambitions, and even his own survival for other people. His legendary generosity made him known as "Danveer Karna". Those who seek charity from Karna, he never disappoints them. The novelist presents the quality of generosity not as an external virtue but as a natural expression of Karna's inner nobility. When Indra approaches Karna disguised as a Brahmin, he seeks Karna's divine armour and earrings; Karna's generosity and sacrifice merge together here, although he knows that the removal of these things will



definitely weaken him on the battlefield. Despite knowing the deceptive approach of Indra, Karna willingly offers them away. This act of Karna epitomises the supreme sacrifice because Karna values honour and charity as higher than his personal safety. Here, Karna prefers moral greatness to physical survival. Therefore, Karna's life itself is a great sacrifice and becomes the symbol of supreme sacrifice. He sacrifices everything deserved in his life, including his right to royal identity, his relationship with his younger brothers, and ultimately his own life. But these sacrifices are not presented as indications of weaknesses. Shivaji Sawant portrays all these sacrifices as extreme manifestations of Karna's spiritual strengths. Through the character of Karna, the novelist promotes that the real heroism is not in the conquest of the battle but in the capacity to give and give up and stand morally steadfast even though there are sufferings in human life.

Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay* is remarkable for its critique of social hierarchy and caste discrimination (Sawant; Bhattacharji). The tragedy of Karna originates from the society's caste obsession with his birth and status in the society. Despite having extraordinary talent, Karna is always faced with denial because he is supposed to be the son of a charioteer. All people, including teachers, warriors, and even the Kings offense him in publicly. The novelist focuses on Karna's experiences and exposes the cruelty and hypocrisy of the caste-based discrimination in the society. Karna's tragedy represents the sufferings of the countless untouchables marginalized by the rigid social hierarchy. Karna's identity crisis is the centre point of the novel and also the psychological depth of the novel. As a tragic hero, he is constantly in conflict between his inner worthiness and the severe insults of society. When Karna knows the truth about his birth, instead of liberating Karna from the clutches of the caste system, the truth deepens his pain. He feels that his whole life has been formed by a hidden truth and a cruel destiny in his life. These existential conflicts in the novel, *Mrityunjay*, elevate Karna as a symbol of all underprivileged people denied the dignity and recognition in life because of caste prejudice.

The title *Mrityunjay* exemplifies spiritual conquest over physical immortality (Sawant; Sharma). Finally, Karna dies on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, but the novelist, Sawant, presents Karna as the winner in a deeper sense of morality and spirituality. Through his fearless and



detached position in his life, Karna conquers death. He welcomes all types of sufferings and humiliations with courage and remains faithful to his principles until the last moments of his life. Physical death on the battlefield never diminishes his moral greatness. Death is the zenith of his spiritual journey in life. Sawant promotes certain great principles through the character of Karna that true immortality is, in fact, in the character, sacrifice, and ethical integrity in human life. The novelist also approaches death very philosophically. By accepting the destiny of life, Karna follows the Indian spiritual philosophy of life and mortality. He never tastes death many times like a coward, but he tastes death once in life, and he faces it with utmost dignity and serenity. In this sense, Karna really conquers death. Sufferings in his physical life strengthen the spiritual journey of his life. From this point of view, Shivaji Sawant elevates the character, Karna, beyond his physical life, and he also promotes the novel as a spiritual guide to the readers on human existence.

Psychological complexity in the character of Karna is the greatest achievement of the novelist (Sawant; Mukherjee). Sawant presents the character Karna in multiple narrative perspectives and lets the readers understand this character from the voices of other characters such as Kunti, Duryodhana, Karna's wife, Vrushali, and Krishna. This strategic narrative of the novelist adds emotional richness and psychological depth. Therefore, Karna is presented not only as a flawless hero but also as a human being with anger, pride, compassion, loneliness, and vulnerability in nature. Karna's inner conflicts present him as a tragic hero. He always longs for acceptance and love from all people, but his circumstances forced him into an endless fight. Sawant's psychological realism differentiates this novel from other works. Most of the characters in the novel appear emotionally authentic and existentially complex. The narrative techniques of the novelist enable contemporary readers to connect emotionally with Karna's humanity. Apart from the literary significance, *Mrityunjay* consists of certain profound philosophical and existential aspects (Sharma). Karna's life points out certain fundamental questions about destiny, free will, justice, and identity. Even though Karna has divine qualities, he is stuck within the circumstances beyond his limits. Karna's sufferings remind us of the existential dilemmas discovered by the modern philosophers and writers. Here in this novel, Sawant also looks into



the existential loneliness of Karna and his struggle against social denial and cosmic injustice. At the same time, the novelist emphasizes human dignity and resilience. In this situation, Karna's destiny seems cruel and unjust; he refuses to surrender his principles. This novel also connects Indian philosophical concepts like karma, dharma, and sacrifice. Karna's tragedy surfaces from the inner conflicts between personal morality and social duty. From these philosophical dimensions, Mrityunjay exceeds from mythological storytelling to a universal exploration of the human condition in the world.

Therefore, the themes in the novel, Mrityunjay, are highly relevant in contemporary society, such as the problems of caste discrimination, social exclusion, identity crisis, and moral conflicts of the individuals in the Indian society. Karna's fight for dignity in life reminds us that individuals in Indian society are evaluated on the basis of birth, caste, class, religion, and social status. The novel also emphasizes the importance of loyalty to friendship, gratitude for help, and ethical commitment in an extremely materialistic and cut-throat competitive world today. Karna's emotional struggles and sufferings highlight modern psychological struggles of individuals in relation to alienation, loneliness, and their search for identity. Humanistic presentation of Karna in the novel motivates the readers to look beyond the superficial threshold and recognizes the complexity of human beings. Due to this reason, the novel, Mrityunjay, is not only a literary masterpiece but also a highly socially, psychologically, and philosophically very relevant literary work.

Conclusion

Shivaji Sawant's Mrityunjay is one of the greatest reinterpretations of Karna's life (Sawant). He transcends Karna into a universal model of loyalty to friendship, sacrifice of life for the sake of dignity by keeping his principles of life, and also becomes the hero of spirituality. Karna is not merely a tragic hero and a great warrior of *The Mahabharata* but also a human being who struggles against destiny, social prejudice, and existential sufferings. Ultimately, the title, Mrityunjay, symbolises Karna's conquest over fear, humiliation and death. Perhaps he may be physically defeated, but he attains immortality through ethical integrity and self-sacrifice. Sawant blends the traditional epic with modern psychological realism; he elevates this novel as a



timeless literary masterpiece to continue motivating readers across the generations and also across the globe. Shivaji Sawant's Karna reminds the entire humanity that the real greatness of life is not in victory or power but in moral courage, compassion, loyalty in friendship, fidelity to one's own principles, even in the situation of inevitable tragedy of life, for the moral and spiritual victory.

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