

**‘TO BE OR NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION’: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON  
KARNA’S ETHICAL CONUNDRUM ABOUT DHARMA AND KARMA IN SELECTED  
WORKS**

**Princy Macwan** Assistant Professor Department of Communication & Skill Development Kadi  
Sarva Vishwavidyalaya Gandhinagar, Gujarat.

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?*

Willaim Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act III, Scene I

**Abstract**

*The Mahabharata is an epic narrative from the ninth century BCE written and compiled by Ved Vyas. The epic is highly relevant in the Indian context. It has taught our civilization the significance of the principles of Dharma and Karma. The story explores morals, humanity, divinity, spirituality, deceit, and detestation. The Mahabharata also includes the Bhagavat-Gita, which describes Arjuna's predicament and queries before the Battle of Kurukshetra, as well as Shri Krishna's responses to them. Throughout the Mahabharata, readers confront several ethical quandaries that the epic's characters face. This paper attempts to explore and interpret the Surya Putra Karna's dilemma about different ethical issues faced by him in Ranjit Desai's 'Karna-The Great Warrior' and Shivaji Sawant's 'Mrityunjay-The Death conqueror.' The study also addresses the implications and ramifications for Kauravas, Pandavas, and the fate of Hastinapur in general.*

**Keywords:** Indian mythology, ethics, predicament, repercussions, contemporary literature

**Introduction**

The Gita and Mahabharat are the core of the Upanishads. The fundamental subject in the Mahabharata, is heroic actions and the desire to be credited as the greatest warrior. This culminates in the biggest war of all time, the Kurukshetra war. Aside from the great Kurukshetra conflict and its aftermath, the epic is largely focused on *purusharthas*, or four aims of life, the concept of dharma, or responsibility, and the teachings of the Bhagvad Gita. With a collective cast at its core, the epic does identify and depict certain characters as its heroes, but it carefully ignores other characters who are the subject of only one *parva* or chapter; in other *parvas*, these characters are barely mentioned, and even if they are present throughout the entire epic, they are cleverly cornered. In the epic, Karna is one such marginalized and frequently derided character due to their low caste.

The paper examines Karna, a prominent figure in the Mahabharata. He showed courage, honesty, kindness, benefaction, austerity, oblation, and emancipation for oppressed people. Karna embodies these attributes when pushed to their utmost. The study explores the timeless dilemma of doing what is right versus doing one's duty through the eyes of Karna. Throughout the Mahabharata, readers meet a variety of ethical quandaries confronting the epic's characters. The epic encounters Pitamah Bhishma's oath of *Bhramacharya* (celibacy) and promised never to take the kingdom for himself out of respect and affection for his father Shantanu. Then there is Pandavas' ethical quandary in deciding whether to obey their mother's unwittingly given directive to divide Draupadi among the five brothers. Furthermore, Yudhisthira's ethical quandary as he chooses deception to overcome Dronacharya, his rival and teacher. The study focusses precisely on the character of Karna and his significant relationships with other characters in the narrative and how those relationships affected his choices and the outcomes that followed. It also addresses the ethical dilemmas faced by him and its repercussions as well.

**Objectives:**

- To examine Karna as the Mahabharata's tragic hero, including his characteristics, actions, and the events that contributed to his tragic fate.
- to shed light on the complexities of Karna's personality, expressing the essence of his gray character status in the Mahabharata.
- To explore the significant emotional and moral predicaments that Karna faces, and to showcase his positive aspects, honesty, and bravery, even when he opts for adharma.

**Literature Review**

Srija Sanyal in her paper “Marginalized yet Empowered: A Study of Ekalavya and Karna from Mahabharata” 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. In the paper she portrays Karna as a tragic hero by quoting Aristotle’s definition of a tragic hero in his poetics and tries to relate it to the character of Karna in The Mahabharata. According to her Karna was doomed from the very beginning which led him to the constant dilemma of choosing between the two situations and sides throughout his life. His loyalty to his friends genuinely calls for saving his friend from aggressively achieving disaster, but Karna ended up on the wrong side of what loyalty means, driving not only his friend but also himself to a hopeless conclusion.

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 *sutapautra* 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 relying on his karmic past to achieve his dream of become the greatest archer of all time, it is his karma that ultimately marginalizes him and empowers Arjuna. Karna should possibly aspire to shine in his own right rather than trying to outshine Arjuna, which doomed him for the rest of his life. Despite all the retellings and the original version of the epic attributed to sage Ved Vyasa, Karna and Eklavya remain two characters with ample room for critical analysis and discussion; they are as significant as any other lead character in the epic, open to various interpretations from vivid perspectives. However, it serves as a universal fact that they remain marginalized characters despite being strong in their circumstances.

Priya M, Dr. M. John Suganya in their paper “Demystifying the Archetypal Role of Karna in Related to Karna- The Great Warrior by Ranjith Desai” symbolizes Karna, the iconic character from Ranjith Desai's novel Karna-The Great Warrior. According to the Hindu epic Mahabharata, Karna is characterized as an enemy solely because he selects Duryodhana. Karna was Duryodhana's faithful and sincere companion, and he fought on his behalf against the Pandavas (his brother) during the legendary Kurukshetra war. He fought adversity throughout his life and kept his word under whatever conditions. Karna is renowned for his fearlessness and kindness.

*Karna-The Great Warrior* is a story narrating the life of Karna, the eldest of all Pandavas. It speaks only about Karna and his most haunted question "who am I?" This question troubles him all through his life. His whole life seems to be entrapped in the answer. His ambitious, his majesty, his destination -they all seemed connected to entrap. This irony was that the truth, instead of liberating him, had made him rudderless. Karna is the classic tragic hero. In Mahabharata, Karna is known to be the only warrior who could match Arjuna. Born of a God and a mother who abandoned and mistreated him at birth. Rejected by Drona, provoke by Draupadi, insulted by his blood relations, misunderstood by many. Desai gives voice to the angst and loneliness of Karna.

The character of Karna gives us a pragmatic message that, do not give up on how society looks on you or how awkward the situation you may fall or you may not get what you deserve, just stick to the principle, and strive for greatness in dispatching their duties. Here Ranjith Desai keenly explains the character Karna and the struggles faced by him and how he came to know his identity and removes his loneliness and how he led his life with his own morals and ethics. Here was a culture where Karna is a kind of anti-hero, but he became the hero of the oppressed of all those who fight against an unjust

society. Today Karna stands as a role model for the fight against discrimination. And where he proved to be a protagonist in the epic Mahabharata.

C. Vidhya, S. Gomueswari in their paper “Karna: The Dark Hero of the Mahabharata” aims to shed light on the intricacies of Karna's character, capturing the essence of his dark hero status in the Mahabharata. The portrayal of Karna as a dark hero highlights the complex and flawed nature of his character. He embodies the eternal struggle between personal honour and societal norms, loyalty, and righteousness. Karna's identity as a dark hero brings forth the exploration of human complexities, moral dilemmas, and the consequences that arise from misguided choices made in the face of adversity. It provides an overview of Karna's character as a dark hero, emphasizing his complex identity, tragic fate, and moral dilemmas. It highlights the significance of his role in the Mahabharata and the exploration of universal themes such as loyalty, righteousness, and the duality of human nature.

Karna, a central character in the Mahabharata, possesses a complex and multi-faceted identity that adds depth to his portrayal in the epic. Born to Kunti, but abandoned as an infant and raised by a charioteer family, Karna struggles with his identity throughout his life. His complex identity shapes his character and influences his actions. Karna possesses remarkable warrior skills and unparalleled valour, making him a formidable force in battle. However, societal prejudices and his perception of being an outsider contribute to his feelings of anger, resentment, and a desire to prove himself. Karna's loyalty is unwavering, particularly towards his dear friend Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas. Despite knowing his true lineage and rightful place among the Pandavas, Karna chooses to align himself with the Kauravas due to his sense of indebtedness towards Duryodhana.

Karna's complex identity is further highlighted by his moral dilemmas and conflicting principles. He possesses a strong sense of duty and upholds his word, but often finds himself torn between his loyalty to Duryodhana and his own moral compass. This internal struggle is exemplified when Karna hesitates to engage in battle with his own brothers and when he is faced with the dilemma of revealing his identity to his eternal rival, Arjuna.

### **What is Ethical dilemma?**

An ethical dilemma is a moral predicament in which a decision must be made between two equally bad alternatives. Dilemmas can occur because of a variety of behaviours or attitudes. For example, they could be caused by a lack of personal character, a conflict between personal and social principles, individual aspirations versus social ideals, and so on. An ethical dilemma, also known as a moral difficulty or ethical conundrum, occurs when a person is forced to choose between two options, none of which is entirely ethically acceptable. Most of the ethical and moral dilemmas we experience in life have quite straightforward solutions, albeit we encounter many of them. The ethical quandary is not new; it may be traced back to our ancient Indian texts.

### **Ethical Dilemmas and Moral quandaries of Karna**

Karna, the tragic hero of the Mahabharata, faces several moral quandaries and internal problems throughout his journey. The protagonist has challenges and conflicts due to his complex personality and circumstances. Karna's moral quandary stems from his loyalty to Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas. Despite learning the truth about his birth and his proper place among the Pandavas, Karna chooses to align with the Kauravas. This kinship puts him at odds with his own brothers and raises concerns about his moral character. Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana stems from his gratitude for the latter's acceptance and respect, despite Karna's humble origins. However, this allegiance blinds him to the moral ramifications of supporting a side that is not completely just in the grand scheme of things. Furthermore, Karna's internal conflict stems from his sense of righteousness and societal expectations. He has a strong moral compass and follows ideas of honour and duty. However, his devotion to Duryodhana frequently puts him in morally ambiguous positions. For example, when the Pandavas' wife, Draupadi, is publicly humiliated in court, Karna is divided between admiring her and remaining loyal to Duryodhana. Despite knowing it is unlawful, he maintains silent and does not interfere in her defence, causing significant emotional conflict. Karna's psychological difficulties are also worsened by society stereotypes and his own sense of being an outcast. Throughout his life, he endured

discrimination and rejection because of his humble birth. This persistent societal pressure instils tremendous animosity in Karna, increasing his quest for fame and the urge to prove himself. His mental conflict stems from the strain between striving to meet societal expectations and following his own path. Karna fights to accept his identity and overcome societal restraints.

These moral quandaries and internal tensions lead to Karna's tragic character. Despite good characteristics and a sense of righteousness, the protagonist's dedication to Duryodhana, societal prejudices, and internal difficulties ultimately lead to tragedy and demise. Karna's failure to reconcile his conflicting loyalties with the weight of societal expectations lends his story a terrible feeling of inevitability. His internal conflicts reflect the intricacies of human nature and the difficulties encountered when negotiating moral quandaries in an imperfect world. Karna's internal conflicts and moral quandaries also provide an opportunity for the audience to think on their own decisions and the difficulties of sticking to one's values in tough times. Karna's internal problems have global significance since people face conflicting loyalties and moral decisions in their own lives.

Shivaji Sawant's '*Mrityunjay-The Death conqueror*' tells the story of Karna from the moment of his birth until his death from the perspectives of many characters, including himself. These characters include those who were close to Karna, such as his mother Kunti, brother Shon, wife Vrushali, and friend Duryodhana. The fiction concludes with the perspective of Krishna, which adds to its appeal both as a war story and as a treat for philosophical insights. It contains an abundance of metaphors and similes, lengthy and rich phrases, vivid and dramatic details.

It raises very staggering philosophical issues, such as what it means to live, the importance of Dharma and Karma, the inevitable nature of politics and business, and the goal of humanity. The author provides some really nuanced responses to it in the shape of Ashvatthama and Krishna, the knowledgeable ones. Karna lost the war but the most important lessons are usually learned from the stories of the losers.

In '*Karna -The Great Warrior*' author Ranjeet Desai examines the age-old dilemma of upholding one's duty vs doing what is right, as seen through Karna's perspective. Desai aims to raise awareness of the fact that, while victory is typically the goal in any conflict, they should also be prepared to suffer defeat against the backdrop of the Mahabharata. The author builds up the background knowledge of Karna and the events that led to his noteworthy position in the Mahabharata through Radheya. Karna has not had affection from her family from an early age. He endured suffering at the hands of people all his life. In addition, he felt abandoned by his own mother Kunti and was made fun of by many for coming from a lower social status.

Karna, the Mahabharata's dark hero, is an incredibly deep and nuanced figure. The author's account raises moral and philosophical problems about human nature, highlighting its complexities. Karna's life teaches valuable moral lessons, including the importance of truth and integrity in relationships. Kunti's decision to conceal his identity teaches us the dangers of withholding knowledge and the value of honesty. Karna's everlasting allegiance to Duryodhana demonstrates the strength of friendship and the complexity of loyalty, even in moral difficulties.

At a deeper level, Karna's story presents important philosophical problems. It challenges our understanding of social hierarchies and prejudices, prompting us to consider the moral consequences of discrimination based on birth or social rank. Karna's tenacity and self-worth, despite confronting abandonment and public derision, encourages us to consider the nature of identity and the elements that shape our sense of self. Karna's tragic destiny also explores the concepts of inevitability and free will. The concept of agency in moulding one's existence raises questions about individuals' ability to change their fate. This prompts us to consider the balance between predestination and personal choice. To summarize, Karna's persona represents the complexity and inconsistencies of human nature. The story of the Mahabharata's tragic hero teaches valuable lessons about truth, loyalty, and honesty. This poses philosophical problems regarding societal hierarchies, human identity, and the relationship between fate and free will. Karna's journey prompts us to reflect on our own ideas, values, and actions, highlighting the grey areas inside us. His story highlights the complexities of human existence, reminding us that heroism and morality are not always easy to define.

### **Conclusion**

The Mahabharata, written by Ved Vyasa, is the greatest timeless epic of all time. The Mahabharata story teaches us about ethical difficulties, and most of the epic's major characters faced ethical dilemmas at various stages in their lives, forcing them to choose between dharma and duty. Karna is one of the characters who confronted an ethical quandary shortly before the Battle of Kurukshetra began. Karan's issue was not an easy one because he had to decide between his mother, brothers, and a friend. He did not want to betray his obligation to either. However, it is impossible to choose both. As a result, Karna experiences a traumatic event.

In conclusion, Karna's path as the Mahabharata's tragic hero is fraught with moral quandaries and internal struggles. His tragic fate is caused by his loyalty to Duryodhana, a conflict between personal morality and community conventions, and bigotry. Karna's internal battles serve as a painful reminder of the complexities of human nature and the difficulties involved in navigating moral quandaries. The representation of Karna's moral issues and psychological struggles urges the viewers to reflect on their own choices as well as the universal struggle between personal values and societal influences.

### **Works Cited**

- C. Vidhya, S. Gomueswari. *Karna: The Dark Hero of the Mahabharata*. International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews, 4(10), 114-116 October 2023.
- Desai, R., *Karna the Great Warrior*. (Trans. Pande. V.) Harper Collins Publishers. Noida. 2019.
- Gandhi, M. *The Bhagavad Gita*. Delhi: Orient Books. 1983.
- Jayakumar, Prema. *Mahabharata*. DC Books: Kottayam, 2009. Print.
- Kane, Kavita: *Karna's Wife, The Outcast's Queen*, Rupa Publications, 2013.
- Narayan, R. K. *The Indian Epics Retold: The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, Gods, Demons, and Others*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000. Print.
- Nath, M. R. R., *Ethical Dilemma of Karna in "The Mahabharata": A Critical Study of Karna's Character in The Light of Episode "The Temptation of Karna,"* IJESR, 10(3), 1-6. 2020.
- Priya M, Dr. M. John Suganya., *Demystifying the Archetypal Role of Karna*. JETIR, 8(12). <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIRFG06011.pdf>. 2021.
- Rai, I. S., *Delving Deep into Karna: Search of Self of a Divine Solitude*. International Journal of Research in Social Sciences, 7(12), 710 -717. 2017.
- Sanyal, S., & Lane, K. B., *Marginalized yet Empowered: A Study of Ekalavya and Karna from Mahabharata*. IJELLH, 3(4). 615-622. 2015.
- Sawant, S., *Mrityunjay: The Death Conqueror*. Bharatiya Dnyanpeth. 2017.
- Shakespeare, W. *Hamlet*. Peacock Books. Print. 2008.