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ANALYSING RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S KARNA THROUGH THE LENS OF EXISTENTIALISM

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Abstract

The epic Mahabharata is seven times the length of the Iliad and Odyssey combined. The main plot of the epic centres around the war of Kurukshetra fought between the two groups of cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. In eighteen parvas the epic chronicles the events that eventually lead to the destructive war, starting from the creation of the world. These tales constitute our cultural and religious myths about interpreting creation as a community. In the course of the epic Karna plays a crucial role and emerges as a tragic hero. Rabindranath Tagore in "Karna Kunti Sangbad" (1900) has humanised the tragic hero Karna of the epic Mahabharata. The emotional plight of Karna portrayed by Rabindranath Tagore reflects the existential thoughts of M. Buber, M. Heidegger, S. Kierkegaard, and Albert Camus. This paper will provide an existential analysis of the themes and complexity of emotions portrayed by Rabindranath Tagore through his recreation of Karna.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Karna, Existentialism, Identity, Self, Absurdity, Existence

The *Mahabharata* is an ancient, revered epic composed of approximately 2,00,000 verses and a vast array of complex characters. Veda Vyasa's grand epic depicts the war between the two groups of cousins the Pandavas and Kauravas, over the inheritance of the throne. The epic ends with the victory of the Pandavas over the Kauravas which culturally symbolizes the victory of good over evil. Although Karna was Kunti's son and thus a brother of the Pandavas, in the war of Kurukshetra, Karna joined the Kauravas and died on the seventeenth day of the war. Karna was the firstborn of Kunti, before her marriage. Kunti had disowned Karna who was found and adopted by a charioteer, Adiratha and his wife Radha. Rabindranath Tagore in "Karna Kunti Sangbad" recreated the conversation between Karna and Kunti on the eve of the Kurukshetra war when Kunti divulges the truth of Karna's birth and requests him to join the Pandavas. The life and death of Karna in the epic Mahabharata trace a quest for identity. In declining the chance to pursue archery and compete with the

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royal princes when he had the might, society transformed Karna into an 'Other'. He was unable to be content in his station and he was simultaneously barred from being recognised for his talents due to societal norms. Rabindranath Tagore in his recreation of Karna in "Karna Kunti Sangbad", showcases the plight of human existence and the quest for identity in an uncertain world. The very answer that had initially dragged Karna to Hastinapur leaves his conscience torn on the eve of the Kurukshetra battle. The existential themes of a search for Self, a quest for identity, the gradual alienation of a being and the eventual realization of the meaning of human existence or the lack thereof, can all be meticulously traced in the dialogue of Rabindranath Tagore's dramatic poem, "Karna Kunti Sangbad".

Towards the beginning of "Karna Kunti Sangbad" when Karna first learns his mother's identity, he mentions his one frequent dream where he sees his mother had come to see him, but before he could see her face, she would vanish leaving him in a state of utter despair. With the line, "at once the figure has vanished, tearing apart my greedy thirsty dream", Tagore has portrayed the depth and urgency of Karna's yearning to meet his mother. But it also showcases the despotic nature of fate that the one he had been waiting so long for, comes to him in the form of "Pandav mother". The pain of being unable to accept the glory and warmth his mother was offering, due to his stark awareness of how the reality of his acceptance brought along the confirmation of wilful ignorance of his sufferings, on his mother's part. Through these lines, Tagore depicts the way people psychologically react to the states of 'having' and 'not having' what they intensely desire, and how these reactions shape their course of life. His unveiling of the face of his mother in his dream represented his longing to unveil the face of the truth of his own identity and understand the reason for his abandonment. It also embodied his yearning for reconciling with the mother who once abandoned him. His real-life encounter with his mother changes his attitude towards this very situation. He no longer wants to find peace in his mother's embrace. Her very identity of being the mother of Arjun, of being a royal lady, of the part she played in his destiny made him realise he could not go back to her loving embrace. This change in attitude can be understood in terms of the concept that the key instigator in this situation is the face-to-face encounter, which according to M. Buber, carries the potential of changing one's attitude toward the unknown.

Rabindranath Tagore's Karna repeatedly attempts to integrate reason and passion, as he learns about the truth of his identity. He states "The violence of war, a hero's fame, triumph, and defeat/all seem false. Take me. Where should I go?" While the Karna of the epic is portrayed as sure of his reasons without being tormented by his emotions, Tagore's Karna is shown momentarily aching for going along with his mother's affectionate call. This ache constitutes the existential notion of choice in Tagore's Karna. Karna is not only a wanderer on a quest of finding his Self and forging his identity, but he also echoes the

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experiences of modern man in his reliance solely on himself amid the uncertainty and despair that life offers. It is at this very moment that he finds his true Self, bereft of all desires, driven by his need for forging a certain identity. The message that the plight of Karna carries echoes the words of Jean-Paul Sartre “Human life begins on the far side of despair’ (p.123). Karna finds his Self not through the revelation of his bloodline or his princely status but through his realization of the coarse irony of fate.

In M. Buber’s words, “Man becomes an I through a You. What confronts us comes and vanishes, relational events take shape and scatter, and through these changes crystallizes, more and more each time, the consciousness of the constant partner, the I consciousness” (p.80). Karna’s life exemplifies how encounters with the world and relationships with others define our being, both positively and negatively. Through his relationship with Duryodhana, the Kaurava prince who made him the king of Anga and offered friendship, Karna found acceptance. But in the same event, the scornful words of Bhim and the privilege of Arjuna as a prince, made Karna feel insulted and swear upon revenge. Thus, both strong drivers of his conscience, loyalty, and revenge, were found through his relations with others. Just as how J. P. Sartre in his play *No Exit* has mentioned, “hell is other people”, it is Karna’s encounter with the societal norms and rigid customs that were reinforced by the royals and powerful, changed his perception of the world and eventually entrapped him in a doomed quest for justice. M. Buber (1970) mentions how society should not only be evaluated in terms of accomplishments but also in one’s ability to relate to others. Karna’s life is full of accomplishments and achievements, yet he experiences a lack, a lack that drives him to the contest in Hastinapur where he challenges Arjuna, the Pandava prince. On being insulted by Bhim and other royals for belonging to the lower caste and contending against a prince which was forbidden at that time, the public humiliation and the unfair set of rules made Arjuna his sole rival. Both S. Kierkegaard and M. Heidegger asserted that the inauthentic life is directed toward distractions, transitory excitements, and empty if not dangerous activities (Heidegger, 1962; Kierkegaard, 1987). This keeps the Self, preoccupied and away from a confrontation with its naked truth as one does in the face of death. Similarly, Karna becomes obsessed with defeating Arjun. In ‘Karna Kunti Sangbad’ he addresses Kunti as “Arjun’s mother”, repeatedly stressing that his enmity is not with the Pandavas but with Arjun alone. This is mostly because Karna finds a sense of temporal meaning and purpose through this challenge, he sees it as the only way to establish his identity. The recognition that was denied to him, even after all his endeavours, due to his status and bestowed upon Arjun without any perils for the same reason, made Arjun the very personification of all those social discriminations. Defeating Arjun became Karna’s way of challenging the dominant societal narrative. Despite this animosity, Tagore’s Karna on the revelation of this new truth, the truth about his bond with Kunti, his emotions reign heavy on his senses, and he feels the pull to call “brother” the

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very person he has always wanted to defeat. Karna declines Kunti's offer and declares his wish to continue to fight for the Kauravas. His decision though rigid and backed by his reasons but the emotional strain portrayed in "Karna Kunti Sangbad" reflects the words of H.W. Cohn (1997) "If human existence is 'being-in-the-world,' it means that there is a constant involvement with all there is—interaction is inevitable, and detachment is impossible" (p. 15). The decision of Karna remains the same as depicted in the epic, but Rabindranath Tagore's recreation brings forth the plight of the mythical character in the face of emotional persuasion from his mother.

Karna: Then why
did you discard me so ingloriously –
no family honour, no mother's eyes to watch me –
to the mercy of this blind, unknown world? Why did
you
let me float away on the current of contempt
so irreversibly, banishing me from my brothers?

The above excerpt phrases the central question that Karna had for his mother. "Before the question is asked, we live in a state of innocence. But once the question becomes a question, once we ask whether life is meaningful, there is no turning back. The possibility that our lives may be pointless leaves us naked and vulnerable." (Ford, 2007, p. xi & p.4). The happiness that Karna had before this encounter, his hope of finding an answer to his predicaments, at once became a mere delusion. He could no longer distract himself with victory and material comfort, as he observes, "A mother's love is God's first gift on this earth/ why that sacred jewel you had to snatch from your own child". His realization of the meaningless absurdity of his life comes with realizing that the Pandavas all along had their mother's love and even if Kunti accepted him now, he would only be sharing what was "theirs". Karna's confrontation with the truth of his identity, that he all along belonged to a royal family but yet he had to experience the hardships that led him to the current situation leaves him too vulnerably aware of the unpredictability of life. With the knowledge came his understanding of his true Self, of the inherent helplessness that strips him of any faith or longing for material pleasures.

With the sudden realization that there is no meaningful answer for his circumstances, that both his mother and the universe have been indifferent to his sufferings, he encounters the absurdity of human life. As Albert Camus explains "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten" (Camus, p. 20). With a stoic acceptance of life's cruelty, Karna thus states, "You don't have to explain why you cast me aside". "Hope of another life one must "deserve" or trickery of those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it,

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refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it” (Camus, p. 7). Just as Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) urges an individual to accept the meaninglessness and absurdity of human existence in general and yet to continue living without hoping or expecting anything. Karna reflects a similar stoic attitude. When Karna realizes that his life could have been different, that his hardships were all irrelevant as he belonged to the royal family and the one, he intends to defeat is his brother, they should have had a bond of affection and not enmity, he accepts the arbitrary nature of events, and he no longer feels that the reason why his mother abandoned him matters. His acceptance reflects how the “Absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them” (Camus, p.21). He could finally see his mother not as a source of coherence or meaning for his understanding of himself but as a mere human, lost and tangled in the web of events life threw at her. The philosophy of existentialism heavily dwells on the importance of choice. Sartre has explained how a man is made by his choices; his life is a series of actions propelled by his own choices which are dictated by his subjective social and emotional factors. Karna finally could see the importance of choice; he no longer wanted to be the best archer by defeating Arjun, which he realized would not provide him coherence. But he simultaneously realised his freedom and that his own choice would help him define himself and create meaning and thus he chooses to cease chasing his essence in his past but adapts the existential notion that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre) through his conscious choice making.

Karna’s experience of knowing the truth of his birth brings with it a sense of melancholy. He observes, “I can see the end, full of peace and emptiness”. With his realization of the inevitability of the future comes an acceptance that brings out his moral resilience, “Everything that is possible has already happened. Life is ruled by the shadow of loss—a loss which is not just anticipated but is already fact” (Cohn, 1997, p. 110). In the end, when the moment comes of deciding amid all the uncertainties, Karna finally finds his true individual self. He no longer could find himself chasing revenge or glory; the illusions were stripped from his eyes. The truth made him relies on him to accept his responsibilities and make a choice. He no longer seeks the answer he had been chasing all his life or the victory in the upcoming war, he declares that “Let me predict: it’s the Pandavas who will win”, this makes him truly accept his authentic self and provides him the power to choose to not to go with his mother. In the face of acknowledging the inevitable defeat and “dire results of war”, he chooses his relations and his friendship. Unlike Tagore’s Karna, Karna of the epic hopes to defeat Arjun on the battlefield or be killed by him and thus die like a warrior. The existential transformation of Tagore’s Karna is highlighted in his refusal of being pacified by any such hope. He accepts the bleak reality and yet persists like a modern man. He thus had experienced an emotional transformation of a sort and could not simply return to his old self.

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Karna chooses his friendship and his very own sense of morality that guided him towards his sense of duty of standing by his friend when he is losing. His loyalty towards his bonds serves as the newfound purpose of his life. Karna's individuality shines through this final realization that his victory would not be able to give his existence any real meaning. In Kierkegaard's words, "For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal and it is only in equality that an understanding can be reached" (Oden, 1978, p. 42). he thus asks his mother to leave him again in a similar "ruthless" manner as she did back then, to leave him "nameless". Karna chooses to not run or change what has happened to him but be content and find happiness in the bonds that accepted him as he is. As Solomon (2005) describes, "Once one becomes self-conscious, he cannot go back, no matter how he denies himself, drugs himself, leaps or falls away from himself" (p. xiv). He chooses to be "lustreless" in his defeat but to stay a "hero", which implies him being true to his authentic self.

The words of S. Beauvoir (1976) capture the existential transformation of Karna at the end of the dramatic poem, "...since the individual is defined by his relationship to the world and other individuals, he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him" (p. 156). Karna thus finally accepts his past as part of his life and discovers a newfound freedom. Kierkegaard (1987) has explained two modes of existence, 'aesthetic mode' and 'ethical mode'. In the 'aesthetic mode' of existence, an individual is driven by immediate gratifications. Be it in terms of power or pleasures this mode helps evade despair temporarily but eventually, it catches up. According to Kierkegaard, the ethical mode shifts an individual's focus from satisfying solely one's own needs to that of others. Instead of focusing on how to be loved a person focuses more on how to love others. At the end of 'Karna Kunti Sangbad', Karna moves from his desire of defeating Arjun and proving his might, to being a loyal friend of Duryodhana who he knows is going to lose. He prioritizes his wholehearted commitment and friendship over his interests and in this choice, he finds contentment, thus shifting from the aesthetic mode to the ethical mode of existence.

Conclusion

Rabindranath Tagore's 'Karna Kunti Sangbad' is a dramatic poem that captures the emotional transformation of Karna. At the end of the poem, Karna reaches certain realizations about himself that he was not aware of at the beginning. At the beginning of the poem Karna acts as an insurgent who bravely stands against the conventions of society, but in the course of the poem when he becomes aware of the truth, he transforms into a tragic hero. Karna finally embraces his reality. In his loneliness and his philosophical questions about the meaning of existence, Karna echoes the plight of modern man.

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