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By Disha Mondal
Visva-Bharati University

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Triumph of Destiny in the lives of Karna and Achilles

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Introduction

Both in the Indian and the Geek mythologies, two characters, Karna and Achilles, stand out dramatically, putting everyone else in the shade. We cannot think of *The Mahabharata* without the valiant, stoic Karna and the Trojan war without Achilles. The interesting factor is the common thread of destiny weavng through their lives, distinguishing them from other heroes.

Karna and Achilles share a lot of similarities. Honour is the pivot on which the whole world of them balance. Achilles cannot withstand any kind of disrespect done to him. Similarly as Karna becomes a man, he is fired by a thirst for honour, respect, name and fame. But in course of life, to his dismay, he receives exactly the opposite.

Karna makes his first nominal entry into *The Mahabharata* in the *Adi Parvan*. He is described as a tree trunk.

Duryodhana is a great tree, filled with resentment, Karna is the trunk…"(I,1,65)

From the very beginning of the poem, Karna is cast in somewhat shadowy light. His life is full of tragedy. Karna is the son of Kunti and Sun God. Thus, he is as much a prince as any of other five Pandava Princes. He is distinguished by his innate breastplate and glowing ear-rings. But as Karna is born to an unmarried mother, Kunti was forced to expose the child to the river Ganges. He is retrieved by an *adhiratha*, a charioteer,and his wife Radha, and taken as their own. So, Karna is unaware of his true lineage.

River plays an important role in both Karna and Achilles' life when they were child. Achilles is the son of sea Goddess Thetis and the king Peleus. In order to make Achiles immortal, Thetis dipped him in the River Styx, holding his heel. While she was performing this ritual, Peleus interrupted her and Thetis was so agitated that she forgets to dip Achilles' heel in the river. Thus, the heel becomes the weakest part of Achilles' body and in the Trojan war, he was killed by an arrow of Paris that injured him in the heel.

Achilles is an archetypal tragic hero and so also is Karna. Though he is a born hero, a *ksatriya* he has to pass through various insulting situations. He has been labeled as *suta-putra* (son of a charioteer), a *non-ksatriya.* He is brought up as a commoner and therefore humiliated. Teachers would not teach him. His equals shunned him. He received no honour despite his brevity. Only Duryadhana, the Kaurava Prince, accepted him as his best friend and gave his due honour. Even on the eve of great battle, Bhisma enumerates the names of *Ardharathas, Rathas and Maharathas* (hierarchy of warriors) among the Kauravas, and he places Karna in a lower rank because he is a *suta-putra*.

Both Karna and Achilles are made of such stuff that they would willingly prefer to sacrifice their lives instead of passing through a situation in which they were insulted. For instance, when Agamemnon robbed Achilles of his prize of pride, the beautiful Briseis, immediately Achilles was filled with an overwhelming sense of outrage. The wrath of Achilles is the ignition point where the entry and death of Patroclus at the hands of Hector, and the climax of the epic, the Achilles-Hector encounter take place.

Achilles is a *man of short life*, as he says in his prayer to his mother. He is aware of his choice but sees the promise of glory eluding his grasp. *The Iliad* does not represent the enactment of Achilles' choice. He has already made it when the heroic world first beckons to him in the form of Nestor and Odysseus on a recruiting mission and he literally jumps at the opportunity. Upon his arrival to Trojan lands, Achilles has quickly proven himself in the battle.

Achilles is not thirsty for any material gain and apparently similar is the temperament of Karna who is also not tempted by any worldly possession as such. Compared to Achilles, the king Agamemnon's psychology is bound and limited by a thoroughly material gain. Agamemnon had an eye on cash value of things.

Similarly, compared to Karna, Duryodhana is devoted to achieve material greatness. Karna supported

Author: M.A. English, Visva-Bharati University, India.
e-mail: dishamondal871@gmail.com

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Duryodhana only to avenge his dishonor and to earn heroic glory. Likewise Achilles also has joined the Trojan expedition in order to earn great glory. Achilles is totally devoted to the heroic achievement for its own sake, not for what it brings with it in the way of material possessions, social positions, a just revenge or defense of the loved oones. He chooses a short life of glory to a long one without fame.

Karna too chose the life of honour and glory. His heroic life shines because he remained true to his word. Before the battle of Kurukshetra begins, Krishna meets Karna and reveals the truth about his birth. Karna asks Krishna to keep the circumstances of his birth a secret because he knows that the Pandavas would be demoralized. Karna says that it is Duryodhana who saved his honour when others disrespected him. So, it was the time to pay back Duryodhana's debt. Thus he remained loyal to Duryodhana.

Karna is unique from others for two qualities he exhibits-the first being loyalty and the second being charity. His character deserves sympathy because of the strange play of fate that denies him his rightful place. Irawati Karve writes about Karna's life: *Karna has no definite position in society. He struggled all his life to gain what he thought was his rightful status and his bitterness lay in not having got it.*(Karve 1991,139). He suffered greatly due to his surging ambition and is not prepared to spend his life as a mere *suta.* Even his association with Duryodhana and his subsequent anointment as the *Anga-raja*, fails to elevated his social rank. Karna is thus, a classic example of the cruel play of destiny.

Indra, disguised as a Brahmin, approaches Karna before the battle of Kurukshetra and requests the ear-rings and the breastplate. A true *ksatriya* cannot refuse such a request and Karna cuts off his divine attributes. In return he receives a missile which is guaranteed to destroy its target, divine or human.

It is interesting to note that both Achilles and Karna did not have any personal intention to fight the Trojan or Kurukshetra war respectively. Trojan war was fought because Paris eloped with Helen. Menelaus then declared war against Troy and all the Greeks were expected to participate. After being insulted by Agamemnon, Achilles declared that he would not take part in the battle. When Duryodhana is hard pressed by Ghatotkaca, the son of Bhima and Hirimba, he asked Karna to use *sakti,* the boon granted by Indra, the one which he had reserved to kill Arjuna. But Achilles is sincerely much worried about his beloved friend, when Patroclus alone goes to he battlefield. Thus, he prays to Zeus for the safety of his dear friend.

But when Patroclus is dead, Achilles is fully prepared to accept and embrace his own death. He talks now not of glory but fate.

On the other hand, Karna fights with Arjuna and perishes. Just before he dies, Karna made several claims as to how destiny had triumphed. Karna merges into the sun since he cannot be ground to dust. He returns to the Sun, his original source.

To sum up, we may say that both Achilles and Karna are born great but both suffer their evil destiny. They know what is good from evil and yet finally like Adam and Eve of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, embrace what is evil, what they actually wish to hate. Achilles nourishes his wrath, and Karna is driven by his egotism. Both these heroes are in the true sense of the term tragic: they both are involved in terrible action, they earn recognition but they meet inevitable doom. However, Achilles and Karna are finally restored to themselves and to their heroic stature.

Notes

1. V.S.Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Bombay: The Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957).
2. E.V. Rieu, trans. *The Iliad, Introduction,* (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1950).
3. Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (Hydrabad:Orient Longman Ltd., 1993).
4. Kevin Mc Grath, *The Sanskrit Hero: Karna in Mahabharata.*

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