



Marginalised or Empowered: Subverting Traditional Portrayal of Karna in Chandra Prasad Saikia's *Maharathi*

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Original Article

Abstract

Reimagining the epic figure Karna as a symbol of both social exclusion and social resistance in fictional mythological texts reaffirms the dialogic continuation of the *Mahabharata* in the contemporary context. In postcolonial discourses, Karna has been re-imagined as an emblem of social resistance to caste-based marginalisation. His social exclusion is read as an allegory of systemic discrimination, while his alliance with Duryodhana is redefined as a political statement against caste-based hegemony. *Maharathi* by Chandra Prasad Saikia is a very popular Assamese fictional retelling of the *Mahabharata* through Karna's perspective. Like other Karna-centric retellings, Saikia's *Maharathi* also foregrounds Karna's continual struggle for identity and social recognition, scrutinising societal discriminatory norms that limit individual agency. But Saikia's portrayal of Karna as a modern man navigating self-identity through self-scrutiny makes him more of a human than a mere epic character. The article intends to interpret how *Maharathi* subverts Karna's traditional portrayal as a mere victim of fate and projects him as a modern man who negotiates identities through personal growth and self-discovery, reframing the epic framework in the present-day context. There will be attempts to validate through relevant evidences how this fictional retelling of the *Mahabharata* has purposefully deviated from the epic, and fashioned a contemporary narrative where Karna redefines his identity through action and performance.

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1. Introduction

With a universal appeal as a tragic hero, Karna is a recurring figure in fictional representations of the *Mahabharata*. Highly skilled, extremely powerful, extraordinarily generous, yet defeated by fate, Karna has a place in the soft corner of every reader. Karna's predicament as a victim of rigid, discriminatory societal norms resonates across time and culture. His tragic fate underscores the vulnerability of human goodness to circumstances.

“No one achieves complete success in life; but even partial fulfillment is attained by but a few. Unfulfillment, the *Mahabharata* tells us again and again, is the normal condition of man. Dharma after defeating all his enemies said, “This victory does not feel like victory at all.” To some extent each major figure in the *Mahabharata* is defeated by life, but none so completely as Karna.” (Karve, 1991, p. 69)

Social exclusion of Karna owing to his apparently low birth is one of the central issues in contemporary discourses of marginalisation. A victim of caste-discrimination, Karna well represents the human predicament in a class/caste-based society. Against the backdrop of societal discriminatory norms, Karna's continual struggle within himself in search of a meaning of the 'self' forms a major part in many of the fictional retellings of the *Mahabharata*. There has been an attempt to foreground Karna as an emblem of social resistance to systematic discrimination, transcending social injustices through personal worth and valor.

Among the contemporary retellings of the *Mahabharata*, Sivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya: the death conqueror*, originally written in Marathi, is a present-day Karna narrative that exposes the rigid societal norms of Indian society by depicting Karna as a victim of caste prejudices. In *Mrityunjaya*, Karna has been depicted as a tragic figure who suffers not for his own fault but for circumstances. The polyphonic structure of the novel, deriving perspectives of different characters along with Karna's own, highlights that an individual's identity and psychological landscape are shaped by social conditioning based on lineage. By deviating from the original epic, Sawant introduces many imaginary episodes in his narrative to justify Karna's actions in contemporary contexts. However, Sawant's portrayal of Karna as a mere victim of fate delimits the individual agency of his protagonist in resisting caste prejudices to some extent.

Karna's marginalised identity has been a recurring subject in many contemporary feminist re-imaginings of the epic as well. While challenging patriarchal hegemony in the representation of women within the epic framework, these writers deliberately highlight Karna's predicament as a manifestation of structured societal discriminatory norms of a casteist society. In this regard, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen* are worth mentioning. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a Draupadi-

centric modern narrative of the epic from gendered perspectives. However, Divakaruni's re-imagination of Draupadi's secret longing and admiration for Karna recurs as a central motif throughout the novel. A feminist retelling of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, the novel not only delves into the female psyche but also exalts the magnanimity of Karna's personality by introducing a passionate love angle between Draupadi and Karna. Similarly, Kane's *Karna's Wife: the Outcast's Queen* tells us the unheard story of Uruvi, Karna's second wife. Moreover, it is not merely Uruvi's story that the author records in her revisionist narrative; rather, it unfolds Karna's extraordinary story through Uruvi's lens. Choosing 'sutaputra' Karna over Arjuna, Uruvi, the princess of Pukeya, not only renounces societal pressures but also reconfigures Karna's social position through validation of his personal worth against caste prejudices.

Maharathi by Chandra Prasad Saikia is a very popular Assamese fictional retelling of the *Mahabharata* through Karna's perspective. Saikia's *Maharathi* is fashioned as an autobiographical novel where his protagonist Karna speaks from his heart with the aim of historicizing his life story. In the process, he attempts to scrutinize societal prejudices that limit individual agency in social hierarchy, evaluating his own situation as well as that of others who are victims of systematic social exclusion. Saikia's Karna is a modern man navigating own identity through self-scrutiny and self-realisation. Ananda Bormudoi (2018) opines that Karna in *Maharathi* is a modern man. The intensity of his inner turmoil and identity crisis is heightened because they are viewed from the perspectives of a modern man and modern consciousness. (p. 512) Karna's relentless pursuit of finding out the meaning of life makes him more of a human than a mere epic character. He has been rendered adequate individual agency in Saikia's narrative to realise his 'self'. The present article intends to analyse how Chandra Prasad Saikia subverts Karna's traditional portrayal as a mere victim of fate by projecting him as an individual navigating self-identity in this vast social setup.

2. Theoretical Framework

Portrayal of Karna as a symbol of social resistance in contemporary retellings not only destabilises his traditional image of a mere tragic hero, but also projects him as a subject of identity negotiation in the context of social marginalisation. Karna, with his multifaceted identities in contemporary discourses, emerges as a cultural space where modern identities are contested and negotiated. The present article attempts to highlight how Karna's traditional portrayal has been subverted in retellings, especially in Chandra Prasad Saikia's *Maharathi*, and project him as an individual negotiating identity in contemporary cultural contexts, through the poststructuralist theoretical lenses of Judith Butler's identity theory of

performativity and Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory. Challenging essentialist notions of identity formation, Butler's (1990) assertion that identity is not innate, but produced through repeated performances in social contexts, exemplifies Karna's self-validation of his position as a warrior through his actions, speech, and allegiance. His identity is not granted by birth or caste but enacted through his valour, generosity, and loyalty. Similarly, Hall's (1990) statement that identities are "fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions" (p. 277) provides newer insights to scrutinise Karna's multifaceted identities as depicted in the selected retelling.

3. Caste Prejudices and Karna's Marginalised Identity

Analysing Karna as a marginalised hero, it is imperative to undertake a dispassionate inquiry into the very nature of marginality and the state of being marginalised. Marginalisation is a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon that can never be explained with a standard common definition due to its varied nature in different historical, cultural, social, political and economic contexts. In the essay "Defining Marginality?", Jonathan Crewe (1991) is of the view that "the discourse of the marginal is not governed by any single, pure, or abstract logic. The very term logic is suspect in this context on account of its logocentric taint, and every case of the marginal is a complex special case" (p. 121). Marginalisation, in its broadest sense, is rooted in inequality and deprivation that persist across societies and historical contexts. As such, being marginalized entails social exclusion from mainstream society on certain grounds. From a sociological point of view, it is a process in which certain individuals or groups are systematically pushed to the edges of society and denied equal access to resources, rights, and opportunities. Iris Marion Young (1990) opines that among many modes of oppression; marginalisation is perhaps the most dangerous one. According to him, marginalisation results in expulsion of a whole category of people from useful involvement in social life and thus inevitably they are subjected to acute material hardship and even elimination (p. 53).

In the context of Indian society, caste has historically been one of the most significant determinants of social stratification as well as of social exclusion, creating a rigid hierarchical social order. It not only regulates occupation, marriage, social relationships, and access to resources but also serves as a marker of social status, which is both hereditary and inescapable. The caste system was rooted in notions of ritual purity and pollution. As such, it institutionalised inequality in society leading to the systematic marginalisation of certain groups, particularly Shudras and Dalits. Those marginalised groups were denied property,

education, dignity, and equal participation in public life and subjected to untouchability, social exclusion, and economic deprivation. In *Annihilation of Caste*, B. R. Ambedkar (1936) argued that caste is not merely a division of labor but a division of laborers. It functioned as a powerful mechanism of oppression that curtailed rights, opportunities, and self-respect. As such, it could be argued that caste has simultaneously served as a system of social organization and as a tool of exclusion. It has been responsible for shaping persistent patterns of inequality and marginalisation in Indian society.

Caste as the fundamental determinant of the stratified social order of the ancient Indian society is reflected in the *Mahabharata*, along with the *Ramayana* and other Hindu scriptures. The grand narrative of the *Mahabharata* not merely depicts a dynastic struggle between two clans or ethical conflicts between good and evil. Rather, it provides a panoramic view of the ancient Indian society with its complex hierarchical social order based on the 'Varna' system. The *Mahabharata* granted the 'Varna' system a divine sanction by perpetuating the concept of the 'Purusha Sukta' hymn, which outlined how the four 'varnas' (castes) originated from different parts of the body of the cosmic being 'Purusha'. According to this myth, Brahmins originated from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs, and Shudras from the feet of Purusha. As such, by virtue of that divine plan, Brahmins were provided the highest rung in social hierarchy, while Shudras were placed at the lowest, prescribing their duties and responsibilities as well.

Against the backdrop of the rigid caste system of the ancient Indian society, Karna's marginalised identity becomes complicated due to both his genealogy and the magnanimity of his personality as portrayed in the *Mahabharata*. Within the epic framework, Karna has been placed in an inherently advantaged position. Karna's divine origin as the son of Surya, the sun god, and Kunti, a Kshatriya princess, even though the secret of his birth remains masked for much of his life, apparently grants him additional privilege by birth. At the same time, the narrative space provided to him in the canonical texts is sufficient enough to showcase his unparalleled skill in warfare. His physical and mental prowess, along with his extraordinary generosity, make him one of the greatest warriors of the Mahabharata War. As such, it is inherently problematic to evaluate him as a marginalised figure within the epic framework. However, it is not birth that determines Karna's social position; rather, it is the normative claim of belonging to a caste. In Karna's case, his upbringing in a charioteer's family is the primary determinant of his caste identity as a 'sutaputra'. It not only excludes him from the Kshatriya circle but also places him in highly disadvantaged situations despite his extraordinary personal

worth. In this regard, Karna's marginalisation emerges from caste prejudices, a result of caste-based social conditioning, where valour and merit remain subordinate to social status.

4. Analysis of Chandra Prasad Saikia's *Maharathi*

Chandra Prasad Saikia's *Maharathi* is considered to be one of the pioneering modern Assamese novels based on the *Mahabharata*, for which Saikia was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademy Award in 1995. It received adequate critical acclaim from both readers and critics for its unique treatment of epic themes in a present-day context, with a certain amount of artistic craftsmanship, which Saikia is well known for in Assamese literature. The novelist places Karna at the center of his narrative, highlighting his life story and offering commentary on the events of the great Kurukshetra War from Karna's perspective. Scrutinising the ideological stance of the epic, Karna has been projected in the context of contemporary time and culture. Despite the derision of fate and his alliance with Duryodhana, how Karna, with his extraordinary physical and mental prowess, ascends to the level of 'maharathi' (great warrior) accounts for the central theme of the novel. The novel is divided into 69 chapters across 426 pages, and the novelist attempts to present all the significant events of the Mahabharata War from Karna's point of view. Karna's psychological reactions to various incidents and situations form the central outline of the narrative. Karna, standing in the middle of the Great Kurukshetra War, seeks answers to several questions relating to his birth and the societal discriminations that he had to face due to his apparently 'low birth'. In fact, the secret of Karna's birth and its impact on his future life governs the central motive of Saikia's narrative.

Although Saikia's *Maharathi* is based on the *Mahabharata*, the epic character Karna has been recreated by the novelist, probing into his psyche. The storyline of *Maharathi* is autobiographical, with Karna narrating his life story. Saikia's protagonist, Karna, is trying to write down all the significant incidents of his life before his destined death in the Kurukshetra War, which he foresees with farsightedness. As per the storyline of *Maharathi*, the great Kurukshetra war has come to a temporary halt for one night. At this juncture, Karna is engaged in a War inside his mind, trying to find a way to the labyrinth that shrouds his life. He feels the urge to replicate his past life, which is buried in vagueness. He says that the Great War has come to a temporary halt for one night only. Now another all-pervading war begins inside his mind. He will be able to pass the real war if he passes this one. (Saikia, 2019, p. 1)

This inner war in Karna's mind is based on self-reflection and self-realisation through which he tries to relocate himself in this vast social setup as an individual entity. Through Karna's

mouth, Saikia tries to explain the reasons behind this inner conflict at the beginning of the novel. It is Karna's apparently illegitimate birth that makes him a second-class citizen despite having all the qualities of a Kshatriya. It is the secret of his birth that sets the tune of his life, and the revelation of the truth behind it brings all the impediments that he has to triumph over to realize his 'self'. Now, in the middle of the battlefield, standing against his kin, Karna not only introspects his past but tries to understand the very nature of 'Dharma' against which he has taken his stance by taking the side of evil. Here begins Karna's inner conflict seeking answers to many questions related to his identity, both personal and social. He has to navigate his identity through profound self-discovery and personal growth. Simultaneously, the societal discriminatory norms that are instrumental in marginalisation of Karna have been scrutinized through interrogating the system itself.

The central motive of Saikia's narrative is to search for the identity of his protagonist, Karna. This quest for identity is triggered by the dilemma that Karna faces, standing against his kin on the battlefield. He has to ask himself what and whom this war is for. The circumstances that led him to this predicament are to be navigated to get these questions answered. Beginning with the secret of his birth, he scrutinizes every event of his past life. How he was abandoned by his biological mother and looked after by his foster parents, Adhiratha and Radha, cursed by Parashurama for concealing his true identity, humiliated by Guru Kripa and Drona with the Pandavas and others at the Hastinapur Archery competition, dejected by Draupadi at the Swayamvara for being 'sutaputra', and supported by Duryodhana at his tough time by crowning him as the King of Anga. Being the son of the Sun God and Princess Kunti and the eldest of all the Kuru princes, he has genealogically and legitimately all the rights to be the heir of the throne of Hastinapur. But it was his destiny that placed him in such a position that even his own people stood against him in his tough time. Karna is torn between the search for his identity and the dilemma of differentiating between right and wrong. It necessitates that Karna must tell others his true story before his death, because he could speculate on the far-reaching impact that the *Mahabharata* will have on the human psyche in the coming days. He believes that all aspects of human fate will be described in this vast story. What will be there in this story may sometimes be found somewhere, but what will not be in this story will not be found anywhere else in this world. The best that has the golden-most glitter about this era is envisaged to have been closely ingrained into this epic story. (Saikia, 2019, p. 5) Karna wants the story of his life to be recorded appropriately without distortion of the truth, because only he knows how he was deprived of dignity, property, and honor in his lifetime. As he comes to know from

Bhishma that Vyasa is going to write down the history of the *Mahabharata*, he becomes dubious about the veracity of Vyasa in depicting him.

Here, Saikia tries to highlight how Karna was deprived of due dignity and recognition in his lifetime, and thinks redemption for it can only be vindicated when his true story is retold by divulging the societal discriminatory norms that were instrumental behind his social marginalisation. With that motive, it is not Karna but a revisionary writer, Saikia, who reconstructs Karna to emancipate him from social injustice. To recuperate Karna's lost identity, Saikia foregrounds Karna in his narrative and compels him to retell his life history through his own mouth. In the process of searching for Karna's identity and delving into the truth, the role of society in the marginalisation of Karna has been re-scrutinized by providing validation to Karna's actions in different situations.

Saikia portrays Karna as a character of compelling personality, who is both human and resilient. Accepting his humble origin as a charioteer's son, Karna emerges with a self-assured sense of identity as a warrior. He is a proud, resolute, and reflective individual who confronts life's challenges with steadfast self-confidence. Affirming his self-confidence, Karna considers himself to be extremely fortunate to control his own destiny, for very few warriors are capable of doing so (Saikia, 2019, p. 1). Here, Karna's identity is constructed not through societal validation but through his self-earned worth and inner potency. Challenging the rigid caste hierarchies that seek to define his culturally sanctioned identity, Karna transcends societal constraints and reconstructs his personal identity, which is based on individual achievement and self-reliance. Karna's perspective on his alliance with Duryodhana, which has traditionally been considered as one of his moral blunders, underscores his assertion of self-worth. He is sympathetic toward Duryodhana, as he considers that Duryodhana is unable to comprehend his true character. He affirms that it is not by virtue of Duryodhana's patronage, but by the strength of his self-earned merit alone, he has become renowned in this land as a mighty warrior (Saikia, 2019, p. 5). Karna's assertion of self-worth not only shatters Duryodhana's delusion of being his proud patron but also destabilizes the conventional depiction of Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana as his blind support of evil.

Through this portrayal, Saikia subverts traditional representations of Karna as a victim of fate and projects him as a modern man navigating external circumstances with self-determination and confidence to realize his self-image. His modern identity is fluid, self-determined, and resistant to social categorization. He emerges not merely as an archetype of caste victim but as

a symbol of individual agency, showcasing how identity can be reconfigured in defiance of societal pressures. Judith Butler's (1990) idea of fluid identity, that identity is not innate or fixed, rather it is shaped by repeated performances, exemplifies Karna's shifting subjectivity within Saikia's revisionist narrative. Karna's birth itself destabilizes essentialist notions of caste and legitimacy. Born of divine parentage as the son of Surya and Kunti and raised in a charioteer's family, Karna finds himself entangled between the status of a Kshatriya by birth and a Shudra by social conditioning. This dual positioning exemplifies what Butler describes as the instability of identity, where social categories fail to fully contain lived subjectivity. Karna's continuous performance of martial valour, generosity, and loyalty constitutes his identity as a warrior, even as social structures deny him recognition. In this sense, his selfhood mirrors Butler's notion that identity is performatively produced rather than pre-given.

Saikia's interpretation of Karna is intensely humanistic. Unlike the epic *Mahabharata*, where Karna is primarily represented in relation to his loyalty to Duryodhana and his role in the war, *Maharathi* foregrounds Karna's inner world—his struggles, self-reflections, and personal assertions of dignity. Saikia reimagines Karna not merely as a tragic hero bound by fate, but as a man who consciously claims agency over his destiny. His assertion that he is “fortunate” to possess the right to control his own fate demonstrates Saikia's attempt to modernise Karna's image, presenting him as a self-determining individual rather than a passive victim of circumstances. In doing so, Saikia's Karna becomes a symbol of resilience and self-worth, transcending his social marginalisation. His sympathy towards Duryodhana, despite the latter's failure to recognize his true worth, reflects his magnanimity and depth of character which elevate him beyond the limitations imposed by birth and circumstances.

In *Maharathi*, Karna is depicted as a reflective and rational human being seeking the ultimate truth of life. His quest for truth is triggered by the maze that began with his abandonment at birth. While searching for his origin and true self, Karna scrutinises the societal pressures that compelled Kunti to take such a cruel decision. Karna's stance challenges the rigid norms of social functioning that not only shrink the social mobility of an individual but also diminish the worth of human life itself. Instead of blindly accepting the rigid societal norms, he persistently seeks the true meaning of life to comprehend the essence of being human. With profound philosophical introspection, his understanding of life transcends society's shallow concerns like caste, status, or honor, and elevates him to a height from where he questions and scrutinises the place of man in this vast cosmos. Standing at the threshold of right and wrong, he examines every incident he encounters in his life journey. While evaluating various events

and other characters, Saikia's Karna has been depicted as taking utmost care to maintain a fair inquiry into every detail through a rational and transparent lens. Karna's stance on other characters, ranging from Duryodhana to Arjuna, from Krishna to Bhishma, from Eklavya to Dronacharya, and from Kunti to Draupadi, is claimed to be unbiased, as he shows considerable understanding of human conditions by expressing either sympathy or protest against injustice.

Karna's assessment of Duryodhana and reflection on his alliance with the latter underscore his unprejudiced understanding of human nature and relationships. While the entire society is against him and denies him due honour owing to his low social status, it is Duryodhana who comes forward and stands by him in his adversity by crowning him as the king of Anga. Although Karna is fully aware that Duryodhana's act is merely a political maneuver to counter the Pandavas, he acknowledges him as a benefactor and pledges lifelong loyalty. Karna's loyalty does not blind him; he continues to critically evaluate Duryodhana's limitations. After the death of Dronacharya in the Kurukshetra war, when Duryodhana appoints Karna as commander, he tries to probe into his patron's psyche and discerns his false assumptions. Duryodhana had long believed that Bhishma and Dronacharya were invincible and that their presence would ensure the defeat of the Pandavas. Their eventual downfall unsettles him, exposing both his arrogance and insecurity. Karna realises that Duryodhana's conviction in his own supremacy and his belief that only his allies had the right to rule the world, reflect not strength but vulnerability. Through this perspective, Karna emerges as a rational observer who, even within the bonds of gratitude and loyalty, refuses to ignore the flaws of his companion. Karna is of the view that Duryodhana is by no means, in any respect, equal to Arjuna in intellect, strategy, mentality, battle skill, or mastery of arms. (Saikia, 2019, p. 3)

It is quite remarkable that Saikia has depicted Karna's animosity with Arjuna from a fresh angle that highlights his protagonist's rational ability to acknowledge the valour and talent of his opponent. Although Karna recognises Arjuna as his adversary, simultaneously, he acknowledges Arjuna's worth and stature in the context of warfare. With his rational and fair outlook, Karna evaluates Arjuna's exceptional brilliance as a warrior for which he is renowned. Karna's atypical evaluation of his archrival Arjuna subverts the stereotypical image of Karna as the antagonist motivated by rivalry and vengeance. While asserting his own identity as a warrior, Karna expresses a profound understanding of his enemy's worth and merit. Admitting Arjuna's distinguished position, Karna confesses that everything rare, beautiful, and noble in the age of the Mahabharata finds its complete embodiment in Arjuna, who emerges as the perfect synthesis of these exceptional qualities.

Ekalavya's heart-wrenching story is probably one of the many episodes of the *Mahabharata* that demonstrates the murky caste politics in ancient Indian society, where merit was subordinate to social position. With his extraordinary talent in archery and unwavering devotion to the Guru, Ekalavya never deserved such an ordeal. It was only because of his underprivileged position in the social hierarchy, for being a Nishada, that he was not only deprived of acquiring education along with the kshatriya princes, but his aspiration was crushed by Guru Drona merely for his personal interest. Ekalavya's experience resonates across time and culture as an allegory of systematic societal discrimination that denies due recognition to talents that emerge from the margin. In *Maharathi*, Ekalavya's story has been scrutinised through Karna's eyes, drawing a parallel between both of them as victims of caste prejudices. After witnessing Ekalavya's plight, as mentioned in the novel, Karna decided not to learn from such a treacherous Guru and approached Parashurama, who, paradoxically, cursed him for concealing his true identity. Karna's assessment of Dronacharya in *Maharathi* is pointed and uncompromising. In Karna's eyes, Drona has tainted the revered seat of the Guru with his cruelest and most selfish attitude towards his pupils. Karna critiques the injustice faced by Ekalavya at the hands of Guru Dronacharya, and simultaneously expresses sympathy for him. Here, Karna's perception of human limitations discerns his rational mindset of a modern man who glorifies human dignity above caste and lineage. But Dronacharya, despite being in such a revered position of a Guru, failed to overcome the meanness of societal discrimination and his selfish interest. Ekalavya's offering of his thumb to deceitful Dronacharya cost him nothing; rather, it elevated him to a position that everybody venerates. On the contrary, Dronacharya fell from his position and would be remembered as an unjust Guru in history. Ekalavya lost nothing; he remained in his position as the son of a Nishada, but Dronacharya descended from the seat of a Guru. In this trial, the guru was defeated, not the aspiring disciple. (Saikia, 2019, p. 34)

Karna's stance as well as involvement in the most infamous episode of the *Mahabharata*, i.e., Draupadi's public humiliation in the royal assembly, is often scrutinized through the ethical lens of right and wrong, especially in contemporary retellings. In traditional representations, Karna has often been depicted as instigating Dushasana in disrobing Draupadi only to avenge his rejection by Draupadi in her *swayamvara* on the grounds of his social status. Although Karna's moral position in supporting such a heinous act can never be justified, contemporary retellings offer alternate perspectives to reassess the episode by reimagining Karna's psychological reaction to it. In Saikia's narrative, Karna is depicted as being ashamed of his involvement with such an immoral act as well as of his inability to rise above his personal

grudge towards Draupadi. He is shown as criticising himself for his silence in such a crucial moment of his life, for which his position fell to a very ordinary level in the eyes of people, and he would have to reproach himself forever. Similarly, he critiques the stances of the wise men like Bhishma, Bidura, and the others who could have stopped Duryodhana from defaming history. Instead of justifying Karna's moral position, Saikia situates Karna within the purview of self-scrutiny and broader social criticism to highlight the circumstantial restraints to which he could not respond promptly at that moment. Although no redemption for such social injustice is possible, Karna's retrospective self-criticism of his inactivity in preserving a woman's honor from being disparaged portrays him as a morally conscious man. Condemning Dushasana's attempt to disrobe Draupadi, Karna expresses his concern and respect for women while acknowledging his own inability to prevent the injustice.

Through Karna's commentary on the infamous game of dice, Saikia evaluates the moral stance of the other characters, like Dronacharya, Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, Bidura, and the like. In analysing the dice game, Karna blames Dhritarashtra for his role and identifies that the root cause of the Pandavas' adversity was Dhritarashtra's inaction, which encouraged Duryodhana to take such a deceitful step. He holds a high opinion of Bidura, who tried to raise his voice against injustice, although it had no tangible effect. Bidura's marginalised voice remained unheard in the king's court due to his social status. Karna's rational analysis reveals the true motivations of Bhishma, Dronacharya, and others. Through his reasoned judgments and sense of justice, Karna exposes the morally ambiguous position of the key characters like Bhishma, Dronacharya and Dhritarashtra. In doing so, the novelist presents Karna as a modern, rational, and just man.

In *Maharathi*, Karna is depicted not only as a just and rational man but also as a sharp critic of societal prejudices and entrenched hierarchies. Throughout the novel, he confronts injustice and inequality with a discerning and analytical mind. He tries to evaluate every incident from the battlefield of Kurukshetra to social interactions through the lens of fairness, ethics, and rational thought. Karna emerges as a complete human being, balanced in virtue and flaw, but unwavering in his critique of social norms. Karna challenges the discriminatory structures that privilege birth, caste, and lineage over merit and morality. He recognises the injustice inflicted upon Ekalavya, who is denied discipleship by Dronacharya despite his devotion and skill. Through this reflection, Karna critiques the rigid social hierarchies that deny equality and dignity based on birth, highlighting the human cost of such prejudices.

Similarly, Karna examines the injustice faced by Draupadi during the dice game. While he is unable to prevent her humiliation, he expresses deep empathy, recognizing the cruelty of

societal structures that leave women vulnerable to exploitation. Karna also critiques the pride and false perceptions of Duryodhana, who believes that only those aligned with him are entitled to power, and who underestimates the capabilities of others based on bias rather than merit. In analysing Duryodhana's misjudgments and Dhritarashtra's inaction, Karna exposes the ways in which societal hierarchies and favoritism perpetuate injustice, leaving even the righteous and capable powerless. Through his reasoned judgments and moral reflections, Karna consistently challenges the discriminatory norms of his time—whether caste, gender, or status-based—and advocates for recognition of human worth beyond social labels.

5. Conclusion

Saikia's *Maharathi* exalts Karna as a marginalised hero against the backdrop of caste politics inherent in the stratified structure of the Indian society. In doing so, Saikia not only challenges the caste-based social prejudices that limit individual agency within the epic framework but also reframes a contemporary Karna narrative that foregrounds voices from the margin. Subverting the traditional portrayal of Karna as merely a victim of fate, *Maharathi* presents Karna as a modern rational thinker whose critique of societal prejudices underscores the enduring relevance of justice, empathy, and human dignity. He is a modern man navigating self-identity through performances. His action and speech, marked with deep philosophical insights, illustrate how identity can be performed and reconstituted against social constraints. Similarly, his fragmented identities as a modern man underscore the perceptual shift in the representation of Karna as an emblem of social resistance across time and culture. He is rather a cultural space where modern identities are negotiated, than a mere epic character. While his acknowledgment of his own helplessness underscores the systemic nature of injustice, his unrelenting struggle for social recognition establishes him as an emblem of social resistance transcending societal discriminatory norms. As such, Saikia is successful in presenting Karna as a figure of resistance who redefines identity through agency and performance rather than birthright in the contemporary context.

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