Existential Crisis and Identity Struggle in the Character of Karna: A Reading through Devdutt Pattanaik's Retellings of the Mahabharata

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Abstract

This paper examines the character of Karna in the Mahabharata as a figure of existential crisis, focusing particularly on Devdutt Pattanaik's modern retelling of the epic. While traditional scholarship often interprets Karna as a tragic hero bound by fate and loyalty, this study argues that his psychological turmoil reflects an existential struggle grounded in alienation, identity fragmentation, and the tension between freedom and determinism. Drawing upon existential philosophy particularly the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger. This research analyzes Karna's abandonment, caste-based humiliation, moral dilemmas, and unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana as manifestations of existential anguish and the search for authentic selfhood. Furthermore, Pattanaik's narrative reframes Karna not merely as a victim of fate but as a self-conscious agent navigating the absurdities of social hierarchy and dharma. By situating Karna within an existential framework, this paper contributes to comparative literary studies by bridging Indian epic tradition and Western existential thought, highlighting how myth can articulate modern psychological crises of identity and agency.

Keywords: Karna, Mahabharata, Devdutt Pattanaik, Existential Crisis, Identity Struggle, Alienation, Dharma, Authenticity, Absurd Hero, Caste and Selfhood, Myth Retelling.

INTRODUCTION AND THE ORETICAL FRAME WORK: EXISTENT IALISMAND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Mythology is not just a way to tell old stories; it is a living collection of culture, identity, memory, and human experience. In India, mythological figures are part of everyday life, and we often understand ourselves through their stories. Every character offers a different way of seeing the world, which shapes how we think about duty and existence. Because myth and identity are so closely linked, modern literature now focuses on the psychological depth of these ancient heroes. This approach creates an inclusive space where ancient traditions meet modern questions, making sure our analysis stays culturally rooted while being relevant to the world today. Within this view, psychological interpretation is a helpful tool that shows the depth of human struggle without losing the historical value of the original text.

At the same time, modern retellings have started to change how we study epics. Authors like Devdutt Pattanaik have opened new ways to humanize and study mythological figures. These works allow us to look closely at a character's inner feelings and personal "truth" rather than just the rules of society. However, this depth is not the same for every character. While heroes like Arjuna are supported by divine help and social respect, figures like Karna still struggle with secrets about their birth and social rejection. This difference in how characters are treated raises important questions about fairness and identity. As Rai and Manjula (2021) point out, looking at Karna today requires a "renewed perspective" that sees the deeper solitude behind his traditional image.

From an existentialist viewpoint, identity is not fixed but constructed through conscious choice and responsibility. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that individuals are free to define their own existence and must take ownership of their identity in the face of uncertainty, anxiety, and social expectations. Existential philosophy therefore links identity crisis with the broader human condition, where individuals question the meaning, purpose,

and authenticity of their existence. As discussed in Navigating Identity Crisis: A Sartrean Perspective on Existential Philosophy, existential crisis emerges when individuals begin to doubt their self-perception and social roles, compelling them to confront questions such as "who am I?" and redefine themselves through freedom and responsibility. This theoretical position resonates with Sartre's broader claim in Existentialism Is a Humanism that human beings are responsible for creating meaning through their actions.

This study addresses these issues by looking at how Karna represents a deep existential crisis through Heidegger's concept of thrownness and Camus' notion of the absurd. By comparing Indian tradition with Western philosophy, the paper explores how Karna's search for identity matches our modern search for meaning. Using a human-centered approach, the research argues that Karna is a self-aware individual caught between fate and freedom. Rather than being a helpless victim, he becomes an existential subject who defines himself through loyalty, choice, and resistance in a world that often refuses to recognize his worth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of identity has increasingly been examined through an existential framework that foregrounds subjective experience over socially imposed definitions, emphasizing that existential crisis emerges from the lonely individual's self-reflective encounter with his own life, his own goals, his own values, or their absence (Cebik, 1969). In this view, concepts such as guilt, despair, commitment, and decision derive meaning from lived experience rather than abstract theoretical frameworks, suggesting that individuality is realized through a continuous struggle between social belonging and personal authenticity (Cebik, 1969). Such a perspective aligns with existentialist thought by presenting identity as a conscious response to alienation and exclusion, thereby offering a relevant framework for interpreting mythological figures such as Karna beyond deterministic moral categories.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To examine Karna as a representation of existential crisis shaped by social rejection and caste-based marginalization through Devdutt Pattanaik's retelling.
- To interpret his internal conflict using existential concepts such as freedom, alienation, authenticity, Camusian absurdity, and Heideggerian thrownness, including his loyalty to Duryodhana as self-definition.
- To investigate how Pattanaik reframes Karna as a self-aware individual negotiating social duty and personal identity by bridging Indian epic tradition with Western existential philosophy.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study examines how Karna in the Mahabharata embodies an existential crisis related to identity, duty, and selfhood. It explores how his alienation and internal conflict reflect modern concerns of choice, belonging, and meaning, while also analyzing how Devdutt Pattanaik's retelling reinterprets his character through an existential lens.

HYPOTHESES

This study hypothesizes that Karna's ambiguous birth status and persistent social rejection create an existential condition of alienation that results in a profound identity crisis, while his loyalty to Duryodhana functions as an act of self-definition to overcome marginalization. Devdutt Pattanaik's retelling reconstructs Karna as a conscious agent negotiating personal authenticity and societal expectations, suggesting that mythological narratives like the Mahabharata can explore existential dilemmas of identity, responsibility, and selfhood.

KARNA'S ALIENATION AS EXISTENTIAL CONDITION

Karna's feeling of being an outsider is the core of who he is. From the moment Kunti abandoned him, Karna lost the basic human right of being "recognized." This left him with a deep sense of insecurity. As Mohan and Abraham (2019) suggest, navigating an identity crisis requires an individual to confront their "anguished freedom" and the lack of external validation. Unlike the Pandavas, who were anchored by their family name, Karna was alone. He started in a state of "nothingness" and had to work twice as hard to feel like he belonged.

His life was filled with moments where society tried to erase him. At the great tournament and Draupadi's wedding, he was told he couldn't participate because of his low caste. These were attempts to tell him he didn't count as a person. This led to "identity fragmentation." Karna became a split person: a proud warrior inside, but a servant on the outside. This created a psychological crisis where his true self was always under attack by societal labels.

In Pattanaik's version, this alienation is worse because of the silence of those who knew the truth. Karna's life was built on a secret he didn't even know, and he was the one punished for it. This created a deep bitterness. His anger was directed at a world that allowed such unfairness to exist, or what Heidegger might call the "falling" into a world that denies one's true potential.

LOYALTY TO DURYODHANA AS EXISTENTIAL CHOICE

People often argue about whether Karna was "wrong" to be loyal to Duryodhana. But if we look at it as an existential choice, it becomes a way for Karna to define himself. When everyone else rejected him, Duryodhana

66

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gave him a kingdom and respect. To the world, Duryodhana was evil; to Karna, he was the only person who treated him like a human being.

This loyalty is an example of Sartrean freedom. Karna chose to be loyal not because he was blind to Duryodhana's flaws, but because that choice gave him a sense of belonging. As Sartre (1948) argues, "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself." Karna created his own identity as a "loyal friend" to replace the "charioteer's son" label.

By acting as a loyal friend, Karna gave himself a purpose. He traded the "accident" of his birth for the "choice" of his loyalty. Even if this led him to a "bad" side, it was his own decision. Pattanaik shows that Karna was fully aware of the cost. He chose to be "wrong" with a friend rather than "right" with a family that abandoned him. This is the ultimate form of freedom: choosing your own path.

KARNA AND THE ABSURD (CAMUSIAN READING)

The most "absurd" moment in Karna's life is when he finally learns the truth: he is the oldest Pandava brother. This discovery makes his previous struggles seem meaningless. If he joins the Pandavas, he gets the royal status he always wanted but he would have to admit that birthright matters more than personal choice. By staying with Duryodhana, he chooses to remain a warrior defined by his actions.

Karna knows that fighting against the Pandavas is a losing battle. But like Camus' Sisyphus, he keeps going. As Camus (1955) wrote, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy," because the struggle itself is a victory over a meaningless fate. Karna doesn't fight for a happy ending; he fights for the integrity of his own story. Choosing to die as a "charioteer" despite being a "prince" is the highest level of self-awareness.

In this light, Karna's death is the finish line of his struggle against the absurd. He dies knowing he lived as "Karna," the man he made himself to be, rather than the "Prince" he was born to be. His refusal to change sides at the last minute proves that an individual's chosen path is more important than their biological origins.

IDENTITY STRUGGLE AND AUTHENTICITY: BEING YOURSELF

Using Heidegger's ideas, we can ask: was Karna "authentic"? For most of his life, he was trapped in roles defined by others. He was always reacting to what people said about him. He was the "rival of Arjuna" or the "warrior with something to prove." This is often "inauthentic" because it is a life lived for the sake of others' opinions (Heidegger, 1962).

However, his final decision to stay with Duryodhana is a moment of total authenticity. He stops trying to win over a society that doesn't want him. He accepts his "thrownness" he accepts that he was raised in a humble home and that those people are his real family. He stops chasing the "false" future of being a Pandava prince. By choosing a path that leads to certain death, he becomes a self-defined person. He transcends all the labels Suta-putra, Kshatriya, Enemy and becomes simply "Karna."

PATTANAIK'S RETELLING AS MODERN LENS: THE SELF-AWARE SUBJECT

Devdutt Pattanaik, in his retelling Jaya (2010), narrates Karna as a very self-aware character. Pattanaik suggests that "Dharma" is often different for the society than it is for the individual. In his stories, characters often feel like they are playing roles in a play, and they are aware of the unfairness of those roles. Karna's dialogue,

"The source of a river and the lineage of a hero are often unknown. Does a lion's cub need a certificate of birth to prove its strength?"

In Pattanaik's world, Karna is a negotiator. He thinks deeply about his suffering and sees the irony in his life. Pattanaik also points out that Karna's legendary habit of giving everything away (Daan) was his way of creating a heroic image that no insult could touch. In a world where he had no control over his birth, his "word" was the only thing he truly owned.

Pattanaik also shows Karna's interactions with the divine. When Krishna tells him the truth, Karna responds like a modern person,

"Identity is not what is given by a mother who abandons you or a god who forgets you. Identity is what one earns through the choices one makes. To the world, I am a Suta. To Duryodhana, I am a friend. Those are the only truths that exist for me."

He values the parents who raised him over the "divine truth" of his biological parents. This aligns with what Rai and Manjula (2021) call the "reinvented Karna," who prioritizes personal authenticity over traditional social expectations.

COMPARATIVE INSIGHT: WHY KARNA MATTERS TODAY

Karna's struggle is very similar to the identity crises people face today. His experience of being judged by his caste is like modern struggles with racism or class barriers. Just as Karna was kept out of the tournament, many people today are kept out of opportunities because of where they were born.

Karna represents the universal search for belonging. His "imposter syndrome" feeling talented but not belonging in the room is something many people feel today. Whether it's a student from a poor background or an immigrant in a new country, Karna's story is their story. As Cebik (1969) notes, the quest for a stable self is often a process rather than a destination. Karna's life proves that identity is something we create.

CONCLUSION

Karna is not just a tragic character from an old book. He is a modern subject who shows us the struggle between our freedom to choose and the fate we are given. By using existential ideas to look at this Indian epic, we see that Karna's "failure" in the eyes of society is actually his"triumph" as a person. This interpretation supports the study's hypothesis that Karna's social marginalization and ambiguous identity create an existential condition in which his choices function as acts of self-definition rather than mere submission to fate.

Devdutt Pattanaik's retellings help us see this by focusing on the human, emotional side of the myth. Ultimately, Karna's life teaches us that while we can't choose the world we are born into, we can choose how we face it. He remains a powerful symbol of the right to define yourself, proving that our identity is not something we are given by birth, but something we must have the courage to create.

The scope for further research lies in extending this existential reading to other marginalized characters within Indian epics, thereby exploring how mythological narratives can serve as sites for examining modern identity crises across cultural contexts. Future studies may also investigate comparative frameworks between Eastern mythological figures and Western existential philosophy to deepen interdisciplinary understanding of selfhood, agency, and authenticity in literature.

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68

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