

## **From Hero to Outcast: Marginalization and Social Exclusion in Bhasa's Karnabharam**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Mahakavi Bhasa's play Karnabharam offers a profound exploration of the theme of marginalization through the tragic figure of Karna, whose journey from celebrated warrior to social outcast serves as a powerful commentary on caste-based exclusion. The play explores the psychological torment and inner conflict experienced by Karna as he struggles with the revelation of his true identity and the social denial. Rather than being solely a personal tragedy, Karna's downfall reflects the broader systemic injustice faced by individuals marginalized due to their birth, irrespective of their virtues or accomplishments. Bhasa presents Karna not only as a heroic figure torn between loyalty and self-worth, but also as a symbol of the countless individuals who are denied dignity and recognition because of rigid social hierarchies. The emotional depth of Karna's character is marked by anguish, dignity, and resilience that magnify the evaluation of a society that privileges heredity over merit. Through Karnabharam, Bhasa foregrounds the human cost of exclusion, appealing to audiences to reflect on the enduring consequences of discrimination. The play ultimately serves as a timeless narrative that resonates with contemporary struggles for equality and social justice, making Karna's plight a universal metaphor for the marginalized. By portraying the intersection of personal valour and societal prejudice, Karnabharam not only humanizes the outcast but also challenges the notions of hierarchy and forces audiences to reconsider the values by which individuals are judged.

### **KEYWORDS:**

marginalization, hierarchy, societal prejudice, identity, politics.

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**Introduction:**

The Mahabharata is an ancient Indian epic that presents a multifaceted narrative, exploring complex themes of fate, dharma (duty), and identity. In Bhasa's play Karnabharam, one of the key figures in the epic, Karna, is portrayed as a tragic hero whose journey from hero to outcast embodies the deep themes of marginalization and social exclusion. Bhasa's adaptation highlights the emotional and psychological nuances of Karna's character, focusing on his alienation, struggles with identity, and the societal constraints that marginalize him.

Karna, despite his noble qualities, remains marginalized due to his birth as the son of an unmarried woman (Kunti) and the Sun god (Surya). In Bhasa's interpretation, the play focuses on Karna's inner turmoil, where he hesitates between the role of a loyal friend to Duryodhana and the societal rejection he faces due to his origins. Through his dialogue and actions, Bhasa highlights the brutal effects of caste discrimination, social exclusion, and the role of fate in shaping a man's life. This research paper will explore how Karnabharam serves as a critique of social injustice, using Karna's marginalization to question societal values.

**Birth and Identity as the Root of Exclusion:**

Karna's identity is marked by his birth, which is a significant factor in his social exclusion. Born to Kunti before her marriage, Karna is abandoned by her and raised by a charioteer's family, a lower-caste family. In the caste-ridden society of the time, Karna's birth determines his worth, despite his many qualities. The trauma of his origins is a constant theme throughout Karnabharam, and Karna's status as an outsider shapes his personality, his relationships, and ultimately, his downfall. In the first Act of Karnabharam, Karna's self-awareness of his social position is made clear in the following dialogue:

Karna: "Though I am the son of a king, I wear the armour of a charioteer. My birth is both my crown and my burden. To the

world, I am nothing more than a mere son of a lowly caste. My valour, my pride...do they matter?"

This dialogue encapsulates the contrast between Karna's inherent nobility and the social constraints imposed upon him due to his birth. Despite his talents and virtues, he is relegated to the fringes of society because of his origins.

### **Loyalty and Duryodhana's Acceptance:**

The friendship between Karna and Duryodhana is portrayed as a poignant example of how marginalization pushes individuals into loyalty with those who accept them unconditionally. Duryodhana's recognition of Karna's worth, irrespective of his birth, is a counterpoint to the rejection Karna faces from the Pandavas and others in the Kuru court. Duryodhana's acceptance provides Karna with a sense of belonging and purpose. In second Act, Karna expresses his gratitude and loyalty to Duryodhana, Karna said that "You are the only one who did not see me as the son of a charioteer, but as a warrior. Your friendship is the only kingdom I need."

This loyalty, while genuine, also underscores Karna's marginalization. His friendship with Duryodhana is not based on shared ideals or moral alignment but on mutual need. Here, you can see that Karna seeks acceptance, while Duryodhana seeks a powerful ally.

### **The Betrayal of Karna by Kunti:**

One of the most important moments of marginalization in Karnabharam comes when Karna's mother, Kunti, reveals his true identity to him. This moment is laden with emotional complexity, as Karna confronts the woman who abandoned him for the sake of social propriety. Kunti's revelation, which comes too late, leaves Karna devastated between his birthright as the Pandavas' brother and his lifelong loyalty to Duryodhana. In a pivotal scene, Karna responds to Kunti's plea:

Karna: "You tell me now, mother, of my royal blood, but did

you not cast me aside like a discarded tool, unworthy of your love or care? Is this what I am? A son you never claimed, a brother you never acknowledged?”

Karna’s dialogue here highlights his lifelong rejection and the trauma of being an outcast, even by his own mother. His alienation reaches a new depth, as he realizes that even the person who gave him life failed to provide him with the acceptance he yearned for.

### **Karna’s Final Acceptance of His Fate:**

By the end of the play, Karna resigns himself to his fate. His tragic awareness that he will always be an outsider, whether due to his birth, his allegiance, or his caste, is evident in his final speech:

Karna: “The wheel of destiny turns as it wills. Whether I am a king or a beggar, my soul remains bound by the chains of my birth. In the end, it is not the armor that defines a man, but the weight of his soul.”

This final reflection illustrates Karna’s acceptance of both his marginalization and his fate. He understands that, despite his heroic qualities, he will never be accepted into the world of kings or nobles because of the unchanging nature of his birth.

### **Caste and Identity in the Social Framework:**

Karna’s marginalization is a direct reflection of the rigid caste system that governs his society. Despite his unmatched valour, intelligence, and loyalty, Karna’s lower-caste birth limits his potential, pushing him into the role of an outsider. This mirrors how caste-based discrimination persists in society, reducing individuals to their birth identities rather than their abilities.

### **The Tragic Heroism of Karna:**

Karna’s tragic flaw lies not only in his pride but in his inability to escape the marginalization imposed upon him. His status as a hero is complicated by the systemic oppression he faces, making his actions heroic in spirit but tragic in consequence. His

noble qualities, such as his loyalty and generosity, are ultimately overshadowed by his exclusion, making him a tragic hero in the fullest sense.

### **Social Injustice as Fate:**

Bhasa's Karnabharam explores the theme of fate, but more specifically, it examines how social injustice is often seen as an immutable part of fate. Karna's life is shaped by forces beyond his control: his birth, his caste, and his position in society. In this sense, his marginalization is both a personal tragedy and a comment on the larger societal forces that shape individual lives.

### **A Critique of the Social Hierarchy:**

Through Karna's story, Bhasa critiques the superficial judgments imposed by social structures. The play suggests that heroism should not be defined by birth or social class but by one's actions and inner virtues. Karna's story becomes a tragic indictment of a society that fails to recognize the humanity of those who fall outside its prescribed boundaries.

### **Conclusion:**

In Karnabharam, Bhasa masterfully portrays Karna not only as a tragic hero caught in the turmoil of war and destiny but as a deeply marginalized character whose suffering echoes the broader societal mechanisms of exclusion. His identity crisis, triggered by the revelation of his true birth, lays bare the cruel ironies of a social order that elevates lineage over merit. Despite his unwavering loyalty, valour, and generosity, Karna remains an outsider as he was denied the acceptance and dignity he so richly deserves. This rejection is not rooted in his character or actions, but in the rigid structures of caste and social hierarchy that persistently define and confine individuals.

Bhasa's portrayal of Karna's internal conflict reveals the emotional toll of living under constant denial and societal prejudice. The weight of his armour (kavacha) and earrings (kundala), symbols

of his divine origin and strength, paradoxically becomes a burden he must shed in order to prove his loyalty, further deepening his alienation. His silence, restraint, and inner suffering are suggestive of the voicelessness that often characterizes the experience of the marginalized, forced to suppress their pain for the sake of duty or survival.

Thus, Karnabharam surpasses the personal and mythical narratives to deliver a sharp critique of the social fabric that marginalizes individuals based on birth, not worth. Karna's story becomes a metaphor for all those who remain unrecognized despite their talents, merely because they do not belong to a privileged class. The play challenges the audience to question inherited systems of power and privilege, and to reconsider how society defines honour, worth, and identity. Ultimately, Karna's tragedy is not just his own; it is a universal tale of exclusion, being neglected purposefully by society, and the enduring human quest for dignity and acceptance in a world reluctant to look beyond surface identities.

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