

# Marginality and Identity Crisis in Shivaji Sawant's *Mrutyunjaya* and 'Karna: The Great Warrior'

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## Abstract

As every book is incomplete without tragedy '*Mrityunjaya; the conqueror of death*' and '*Karna: The great warrior*' are no exceptions to that law.

"Karna, your life was in tatters. Go, tell them it wasn't tattered or torn, it was a rich gold bordered royal silk. Only- only it ripped into thousand shreds in the entanglements of circumstances. Whoever came across these shreds, made whatever use of them they wanted. Why then are you so enamoured of your royal garments?" [Sawant,1]

The theme of marginality and identity crisis are prominent in both the books which play any significant role in Karna's tragedy. The third essay of Frye talks about tragedy and explains it in the phases. This paper will talk how the themes contribute to the phases.

**Keywords:** Marginality, Identity Crisis, War, Revenge

## 1.1 Marginality

Marginality played a major role to construct the character. Even though he was son of the sun god but raised in the house of charioteer, hence he was treated differently from the princes of Hastinapur.

This theme affects the innocent Karna when he comes with his to admit himself to learn archery alongside the other princes in '*Mrityunjaya*' "with prince? Adhiratha, war skills are for a Kshatriya's prerogative. You can get your son admitted here, but you cannot expect him to learn with the Kshatriya princes." [Sawant,42]

While in Karna the conversation with Krishna when Krishna was staying in Champanagari "The low-born do not have same the Luxury of Guru meant for Princes. When Dronacharya refused to teach me Bramastra, I sought to learn to with Gurudev Parshuram. When I falsely claimed to be a Brahmin's son". [Desai, 11]

Later when he challenges Arjun in arena Krupacharya refused him to do so due to his lineage. In *Karna* it is expressed during the conversation with Krishna that when he challenged Arjuna with the confidence that he can beat him but Krupacharya who was unable to bare that someone had the audacity to challenge his favourite disciple, he refused Karna for the duel and purposely asked to spill his parentage. While in *Mrityunjaya* Krupacharya denies any knowledge of his class.

"[B]y the time Archarya Kripa had risen from his seat and hurriedly ascended the platform. He glanced at me with bitter scorn. After paying homage to the Maharaj, he said, "I am Acharya Kripa, Gurudev of Karna's class. It is true, Maharaj, that Karna is my disciple. But I have no information about his family.

Nor has he breathed a word about his lineage to anyone. Prince Arjuna is born in kshatriya family. According to the war-craft dharma, only those of the same caste are allowed to dual. First Karna must reveal his brilliant background to this assembly of Hastinapur citizens. Then only will Arjuna decide if and when to duel with him, because the end result of a duel is always victory or death” [Sawant, 96]

This incidence is much more elaborate than that in *Mrityunjaya* than in *Karna* however the focus being marginality his caste obstructs him from having duel with Arjuna. He is insulted due to his caste during his training years by his teachers. There is an instance when Dronacharya tell he must learn things from Princes as he won't be able to learn as a charioteer's son is incapable to these skills. Dronacharya didn't let him acquire the knowledge of Bramha astra saying he was a Sutputra and is not eligible to do so.

“Step back, Radheya! A Charioteer is not blessed with the single- minded focus required to learn the art of archery. Watch the princes and follow them. You just might learn something.” [Sawant,10-11]

“How will he ever be able to study with prince” [Sawant,59] this made him bitter towards his teacher and acted as fuel to his jealousy towards Arjuna who was everyone's favourite and eventually became obsess with him. Even though he was always pull down by the society he learnt archery and became a warrior and a great one which justifies the third phase of Fyre's mythos of tragedy.

He further was insulted by Draupadi in her Swayamvar to prevent him to participate in the competition. When Draupadi refuse to marry him saying that he is from lower caste and she cannot be a wife of a charioteer and tells her brother, to convey him that a crow should not dream of marrying a swan. This is how Ranjit Desai's *Karna* displays this scene.

“You are not a Kshatriya; I cannot agree to become the wife or the daughter-in-law of a charioteer. I am a Kshatriya's daughter, not the daughter of a low-born charioteer”. [Sawant,252] His caste and lineage became his tragic irony of his fallen world of marginality that give importance to lineage more than Karma. Always called as Sutputra was like hammering needle in his heart that dugs deeper with every insult and becomes his life tragedy.

The third phase of the tragedy talks about the downfall of the hero. Even though he went against society, He always has to step back due to his parentage. It wasn't just the instance of Draupadi's Swayamvar or the duel between him and Arjuna. He was also prohibited to enter the war by the Grandsire Bhishma due to his lineage. As a result, his parentage became his downfall.

“Kuhara, Karakasha, Ambashtaka, Arjava, Kratha, Gavaksha, and Karna are ardha-rathis. You will all be surprised to hear me name Karna as an ardha- rathi, but bereft of his flesh- ear- rings and skin armour and afflicted with curse, Karna today is not more capable then an artha-rathi”. [Sawant,601]

Furthermore, in the second book explains the incident as Bhishma leave him out of the discussion, hence Duryodhan inquiries about the same where Bhishma tells him that he considers Karna as Ardha rathi therefore he left him out of the discussion.

This was not the only instance he was insulted before during Mayasabha Draupadi insulted him while he was “A beggar should know better than look in the eyes of his benefactor.” [Desai,56]

When Karna visits Bhishma; Bhishma confesses that he knew who Karna was a Kaunteya but still insulted him occasionally out of jealousy and to satisfy his own ego.

His marginality was his greatest misery that is displayed in both the novels he was feed up of continuous insults even though he has proved himself on various occasions that he more than a charioteer's son by his skill and greatness of heart by giving away his armour to Indra when disguise himself as a beggar and asked for it even though he was warned by sun god he did.

“He will come to asking for them because he known that they protect you and that on one can defeat you as long as you have them on. How will the Pandavas win if you continue to have your protection? Karna, your earrings are made from amrit, the nectar of the gods. If you wish you live you must protect them” [Desai,154]

He defeated Jarasandh, abducted Bhanumati for Duryodhan, he fought against Pandavas knowing that they were his siblings, his valour his bravery all the virtues were over shadowed by his lineage of being a Sutputra. Even though he has fulfilled his duty of being a king he was still considered as Sutputra Hence it became his utter misery which resulted his tragedy.

“They don’t think much about you. They respect only the royal power of Duryodhana. You may. You may be Kshatriya in Duryodhana’s eyes. But in the eyes of the world, you are just the son of a charioteer- a low person. A dog whose beat is a village should not try to be equal of the king of the jungle. You can go.” [Sawant,527]

Even though both the novels narrate the story of Karna and shows the theme of marginality *Mrityunjaya* depicts it’s in a deeper level. for instance, it should teachers’ negligence towards Karna due to his cast and continues taunting by him while the novel *Karna* doesn’t talk in detail about his time in training. For example, *Mrityunjaya* narrates that due to biased opinion of Dronacharya Karna changed his teacher and he became student of the sun god and learnt from him. However, this is not mentioned in the novel *Karna*. “Buddhadeb Basu’s modern verse-drama, Pratham Partha displays an evocative treatment of Karna’s mental agony at his own marginalised status while he envisages the inevitability of combat with Arjuna in the forthcoming war.” [citation <http://www.springmagazine.net/marginalization-versus-empowerment-in-the-mahabharata/>]

Karna’s deprivation and victimization narrative comes to the fore only after his death and his acceptance as the eldest Pandava post-Kurukshetra War; in other words, after Karna is resurrected in favourable memory by the Pandavas. To be precise, Kunti and the Pandavas (Yudhishtira as foremost because other brothers are silent) and Vyasa of course (and Krishna) establish Karna in all his glory after his death. [citation <https://www.boloji.com/articles/50268/karna-masculine-mask>]

## 1.2 Identity crisis

The other major theme in the novels is identity crisis which brought along the sense of abandonment. In *Mrityunjaya* the first instance when identity crisis is display is in his childhood when he used to put his hand on fleshed earring. When he enquires his mother about if he and Shon were brother, she would end up giving him an unsatisfactory answer and told him to ask his father, further when he asked the same to his father, he told him to ask Ganga but ended up asking Shon. “I had flesh- ear- rings that no one else had! who I am? I shook Shon by his shoulders an asked, ‘Shon, who am I?’” [Sawant,23]

The next time when the theme of identity crisis is observed in the novel is after the incidents with the bulls, where bulls were agitated due to noise and were running and when a bull came towards him, he

holds his horn and tried to control him then more of them came at him and tossed him there again he asked himself who he was, which he knew nothing of. When he notices he wasn't even scratched, he was curious.

“When Shon gets hurt, he bleeds. My body, when hurt, should bleed too. I rose abruptly and went straight to Parnakuti, where a cache of bows and arrows was arranged in a row. Swiftly I pulled out one arrow. Its sharp head shone like a ray of moonlight. I lifted the arrow above my head. Yes, its sharp point was aimed at my foot. I let go the shaft. It will pierce my foot, but I felt no more than as if a grass blade had pricked me. The shaft's point had not penetrated my skin. I thought: My aim was wrong. I threw it at my foot again and again. Not once did the point pierce my flesh. I gazed intently at my foot. Not even the tiniest starch!” [Sawant,30] furthermore the tried to plunged the arrow to his entire body which remained impenetrable. He thought was he an immortal. “Only me- why is it only me who received all of this? Who am I? Who am I?” [Sawant,30]

Even though he was raised in the house of a charioteer he didn't know who he was, was he even a human or an immortal or was he even biological son of Radheya and Adhirath. During his training even though doing enough he was ignored by his teacher. Hence, felt out of place. Later knowing his true identity didn't change a thing for him. When shri Krishna told him about his true identity he was in denial and couldn't accept the truth. This brings us the feeling of abandonment in the novel Karna the great warrior this feeling rather theme can be observed. The question why did his mother left him? Is a major question he enquires in the novel.

“Krishna, your childhood was a bad dream which soon got over. You did not have to live with the mystery of not knowing who your mother was. But me? Who I am? why was I discarded at birth? These thoughts never leave me. It is not easy to get over the agony of a motherless childhood”. [Desai,4]

Not knowing his true identity, he never was able to defend himself whenever he was called Sutuputra or a low- born.

“Madhav, why do you ask a question which has tormented me since birth? I have spent my entire life trying to answer these questions. Where do I come from? Who am I? Who abandoned me the moment I was born? Neither my knowledge nor my penance have given me the answers, and I have not yet met anyone who has the answers and I have not yet met anyone who has the answers either.” [Desai, 158]

It seems the abundance love only feed his identical crisis to the point of frustration. ““who am I?’ Wasn't I Shon's loved brother? Now I had deep-as-life friends like Ashvatthama and Duryodhana. I had loving parents, an understanding and lovely wife, the untrammelled kings ship of Anga.” [Sawant, 191]

His abandonment rage was displayed in his conversation with his biological mother Kunti. He wasn't able to accept the truth at first, he was in denial. The denial can be observed in *Mrtyunjaya* majorly.

“‘Is that so?’ Karna asked, his patience evaporating. ‘Recall the day you left your newborn son to his fate. That helpless infant was left to the vicissitude of nature in a mere wicker basket. The child, barely able to see the world he was born in, was supposed to navigate his way looking at constellations above? What crime had he committed for him to be abandoned? Where was your motherly love then? Did you not realize that the helpless infant may not survive the journey?’ Karna paused to take a breathe before continuing, ‘How I wish that’s what had happened! I would not have had to endure the insults, the unending journey of my life, mother! For what crime was I being punished?’” [Desai,176].

“‘Revenge! Retaliation! Insult! Scorn! Mockery! Neglect! Trickery! Such is your life, Karna. Can a living death be called life? You were killed ten years ago by the word -arrow of a woman- how can you today protect any woman? Don’t rise, Karna. Whatever’s happening is just. The injustice done to you has been revenged in full by unfeeling Time- most cruelly and fiercely. Accept this, Karna. This is the side you should be on.’ Again this, the charioteer started whipping me. The Sun-disciple searched for a place to hid, running here and there.

‘Revenge! Retaliation! Is it ever honourable for a warrior to take revenge against a woman? Doesn’t man’s glory lie in protection of woman’s honour? Karna, don’t let a single moment go to waste. Your silence today will be a permanent blot against your good name. Rise. Step forward. Run and twist Duhshasana’s hands. Are, the real man is he who remains firms in adversity.’ The Sun-disciple concentrated all his energies in the final attempt.” [Sawant,354]

here it can be seen that there is fight between two of his identities one as a charioteer’s son and other as a disciple of Sun-God. In the first paragraph of the quotation, it is observed that the charioteer side of his identity over power the Sun disciple side whereas in the next paragraph, sun disciple overshadows charioteer.

I will argue and show that Karna’s identity and self-perceived identity is not just defined by his confusion of *Purusharthas*, but more by a secret dimension relating to his *Body* and *Location* that lies in the Queerness in what he wants to *Become* and how he loses his *Essence* in the process. That secret dimension is actually how he wants to emulate and identify with his arch rival Arjuna, with an *Arjuna-Ideal* constantly in his consciousness and how he actually pursues that *Ideal* throughout his life and indeed wants to be subsumed in that *Ideal* to *Become* that *Ideal*. [citation <https://www.boloji.com/articles/50268/karna-masculine-mask>]

In the novel *Karna* the great warrior the identity crisis is displayed during his adolescence while in *Mrityunjaya* it is shown from the childhood of Karna. The theme is majorly in the initial part of both the novels. His identity crisis was always on the back of his mind that are displayed in the novel and as per Frye’s mythos of tragedy a “tragic hero is wrapped in the mystery of their communion with that something beyond which we can see only through them, and which is the source of their strength and their fate alike.” [Frye, page 208]

Identity crisis is his inner most secrecy that is seen through his thoughts and sometimes through his conversations. His fate always plays game with him the truth about his birth presented itself when he has

gone through a lot in his life and was devoted his loyalty of Duryodhan. It presents itself to make him weak, to weaken his resolution. Even though his identity was revealed. Identity crisis creates a light sombre mood in the novel as in one novel it presents itself as sadness and rage in other. In the *Mrityunjaya* the author takes us to the journey of identity crisis with him while in Karna, Karna talks about his identity crisis. In *Mrityunjaya* Karna didn't know that he wasn't biological related to Adhirath and Radha until told by Krishna however he suspected it, whereas in Karna he knew that he was not Radha and Adhirat's son. What so ever identity crisis helped to portray Karna as a tragic hero. It provides the pitying sense of wrongness to his character and the sense of fear that the this is the time for his downfall. Sombre atmosphere, wrongness, sense of fear, pity, fate creates a great tragedy according to Frye.

### 1.3 Youth

Majority of incidents in Karna's life took place during his youth. Whereas the second phase of tragedy talks about the journey of a hero from his innocence to experience. The continuous taunting and insult made him grow bitter towards the people that insulted.

“Everything became lured, shattered by time's assault. Youth's charioteer now gripped the reins of life's chariot. A five-horsed Chariot: effort, desire for glory, fearless pride, compassionate involvement.

Youth means dynamism. Can light ever be dark? Only youthful dynamism inspires and adds to people's dignified aspirations.

Desire for glory is the sole is the sole stable attribute of youth. I'll be famous! I'll take what is- and bend it underfoot! This thought alone is what makes a young man rise in life.

Fearlessness is the highest note in the rhythmic scale of youth. Fear is when this note is broken and out of tune. Can sounds from a cracked bamboo flute ever please anyone? The world longs for the high note, not the cracked.

Pride is the very soul of youth. A man without principles is no man, and a youth pride of youth. A young man always prides himself on his principles, and will becomes a martyr for them if the need arises.

Compassionate involvement is youth's ornament. A constant readiness to use strength to protect the weak. A priceless dedication to live oneself- and to let others live also.

Such is youth. Where you have this, you'll see youth chafing under insult, you'll see a person uprooting all forms of exploitation you'll see the true face of victory. Where this is, is light. If light is absent, darkness is present. The darkness that embraces insult, the darkness that confuses the poison of defeat with the nectar of victory the darkness that glorifies injustice, the darkness that fears attack. [Sawant,69]

This was the first stage of his youth later during the game he was not allowed to compete against Arjuna due to his caste when Duryodhan helped him by making him the king of Anga and befriend him, as a result Karna gave him his word that he will be always be by his side as he stood for him as Karna was insulted for his caste in public. Which was his first mistake and initiated his doom. He was a lotus bloomed in the mud of politics and lineage.

Happiness entered his life in form of Vrishali but it soon started to suffocate. “Enough! No more happiness!” [Sawant,185-186]and his second part of life started. He has face so much in early days that he is afraid of the arriving happiness.

“I entered the role of householder as a responsible husband. The second act of my life drama commenced, an act filled with romance and parental affection, an act that pulls a man’s mind to itself so much that the mind gets stuck in groove. Marriage makes all things and all happenings roseate.” [Sawant,185-186]

She made him forget that Hastinapur insulted him at various occasion. Her love for him made was his inspiration. “The red, black and blue colours of insult, revenge and jealousy fade and vanished when placed beside the pure white of love.” [Sawant,190]

Whereas second novel starts from his adolescence. Which displays his childhood during his conversation with Krishna as said before most of the events took place in the adolescence. His insult during the Draupadi Swayamvar, but even before that he was insulted by his friend Duryodhan.

“‘stop it Karna’, Duryodhana said, his voice taking on an edge. ‘If you cannot use your skills when required, what purpose do they serve? Do you know what Draupad has told all the invitees? That only the ones who have the courage to take up the challenge may come forward. If not, they are welcome to enjoy his hospitality and be mere spectators. We need to show who we are at the Swayamvar! You cannot sit quietly when the pride of kauravas is being challenged.” [Desai,18]

Further he has to be part of the treachery even though he wasn’t in the support of doing so for instance the burning the ‘laksha graha’ and during the game of dice. During the discussion of the dice game, he refused even though Duryodhana and Shakuni tried to convinced him for game of dice.

“Karna looked at Duryodhana and shaking his head, said, ‘ I don’t like the idea of a game of a dice. A true warrior never resorts to tricked.’ . . . If I could think of any, I would have told you. But that does not mean we that we should resort to gambling. I beg you to reconsider- don’t make a decision in haste. Gambling and a loss of character- once you treated that path, there is no way back” [Desai,73]

However, all his attempts to convince Duryodhana to not play the game of dice was a failure but later he was blamed for supporting Duryodhana in all his works which led Duryodhana to arrange the game. His father accused him for the matter. Whatever he did, he would be the one who was manipulated and used for Duryodhana’s advantage in the end. Further he became a part in disrobing Draupadi.

“Karna, unable to tolerate Vikarna’s interference, got up, saying ‘Vikarna! You have not yet achieved the stature to pronounce judgement on right and wrong. It is ironic that you consider Draupadi, after having married five men, pure! How does it matter what state she is in? you seem to forget that this is not a place for philosophical discourse. This assembly was called for game of dice, which the Kauravas have won.’

Turning towards Draupadi, he added, ‘Yajnaseni, it is beat that you move to Duryodhana’s quarters and spend your time making him comfortable. That is your dharma now!’ [Desai,92]

Later he faced his father’s death and also witness the death of his sons and brother during the war. He tries to deceive Parshuram to teach him Bhramastra and ends up getting curse. Hence, both the novel shows the journey his from his innocence to experience that is the second phase of Frye’s theory of tragedy.

## 2.4 Revenge

Revenge structure in tragedy is very simple yet powerful plot even though the device of making the revenge is not from another world that of ghost or oracles but of the same world. Revenge was for his continuous insults, prohibition to learn and negligence towards him. His rage and revenge blinded him and couldn’t think rationally.

He wanted to duel with Arjuna as a revenge against Dronacharya who always neglected him and had a soft corner towards him. As for revenge against Draupadi. As Draupadi couldn’t see her husband near nudity as Yudhistira through away his clothes closes her eyes. Karna who was still silent due to his dilemma remembered how he was publicly humiliated tells Dushasana to go ahead and undress Draupadi in the court. Hearing what Karna said she was in disbelief stepped back in fear and disgust as Dushasana approached to undress her.

“Revenge! Retaliation! Insult! Scorn! Mockery! Neglect! Trickery! Such is your life, Karna. Can a living death be called life? You were killed ten years ago by the word -arrow of a woman- how can you today protect any woman? Don’t rise, Karna. Whatever’s happening is just. The injustice done to you has been revenged in full by unfeeling Time- most cruelly and fiercely. Accept this, Karna. This is the side you should be on.’ Again this, the charioteer started whipping me. The Sun-disciple searched for a place to hid, running here and there.

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Dilemma is can be clear observed in above quotes between the Dharma as Sun God’s disciple and insult that he endured as a Charioteer’s son in her marriage. The dilemma between being moral and doing the right thing or giving in to his revenge and bring the disaster.

“Which of them had kicked a hero and called him ‘Lowercaste! Lowercaste!’ while simultaneously flying the flag of family honour? Draupadi could not be described as a ‘faithful wife’. She was a courtesan, an adulteress, an unchaste woman. Like a poisonous snake hissing, the charioteer inside me rose in fury. ‘Wait, Karna!’ He placed his foot on the head of the Sun-disciple who was speaking and blindly hissed:

‘Vikarna, you are fool. Grandsire Bhishma, Maharaj Dhritarashtra, Acharya Drona, and the chief minister are all present in the assembly. They have not raised any objection. In spite of that, you are shouting yourself hoarse in the belief that the mantle of dharma has fallen entirely on you. The

women whom you are so vehemently defending a 'faithful wife' is not as faithful as you think. She revels in physical enjoyment of five husbands. She is unchaste! She is an adulteress! She is a harlot! Why five she is the kind of woman who lusts for one hundred and five husbands. A maid has atleast modesty to cover her body. She is at least humble. But an adulteress doesn't have these qualities. What does it matter, Duhshasana, if she comes dressed or undressed in the hall? How can a shameless adulteress have any shame to lose? Don't poke your nose, Vikarna, in the things you know nothing about. Sit down. Duhshasana, unsheathe the dark sword Draupadi from scabbard of her clothes. She has been dangling all this while on the hips of the impotent Pandavas. . . Revenge is not an action, it is a reaction. When two proud personalities clash, a chain reaction starts. The world describes it as revenge, or cruelty." [Sawant,363-364]

This later action of Duhshasana gave rise to the Dharmayudha that was revenge for dishonouring Draupadi. As mention above the revenge is chain reaction and a vicious circle which always end with destruction. Which in the death of Karna which describes the last phase of Frye's Mythos of tragedy, the death of hero.

In the Mahabharata, Karna's death is a poignant and significant event that occurs during the Kurukshetra war. Karna, known for his exceptional valor and unwavering loyalty, plays a crucial role in the epic narrative. His demise is marked by several key elements. Prior to the battle, Indra, Karna's biological father, approached him in disguise and requested his divine armor and earrings, which were known to make Karna invincible. Despite knowing the potential consequences, Karna fulfilled his duty as a charitable and generous individual and granted Indra's request. As a result of relinquishing his protective armor and earrings, Karna became vulnerable during his battle with Arjuna. This vulnerability ultimately led to his downfall. In a critical moment during the battle, Karna's chariot wheel got stuck in the ground. Seizing this opportunity, Arjuna, under the guidance of Krishna, delivered a fatal blow, ultimately leading to Karna's demise. Karna's death was marked by a sense of tragedy and honor. Despite facing numerous challenges and injustices throughout his life, Karna remained steadfast in his principles and displayed immense courage and resilience until the very end. Karna's death was a deeply emotional and pivotal moment in the Mahabharata, symbolizing the culmination of his complex character arc and the resolution of his tumultuous journey. It also served as a catalyst for the unfolding of subsequent events and the eventual resolution of the Kurukshetra War.

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