

KARNA: HERO OR ANTI HERO? IN THE EPIC THE MAHABHARTA

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KARNA

Karna is one of the tallest characters of the epic the *Mahabharata*. His birth begins with mystery and death ends with controversy. The sections- 'The Dicing', 'The Sequel to the Dicing' and 'The Temptation of Karna', present several hidden facets of Karna's character. His character invites criticism as well as admiration. It is difficult to deliver a final opinion on the character of this mighty man. Though he was following the path of *adharma* but he was forced to follow it against his own will. He deserves praise because he always challenged the colossal forces. He accepted the friendship of Duryodhana and sacrificed every pleasure of life to keep his friendship intact. The character of Karna in the section 'The Dicing' and 'The Sequel to the Dicing' may invite criticism but the section 'The Temptation' presents him as the royal and the real son of lord Surya. Karna was the friend of Duryodhana. He knew the jealousy of Duryodhana against his enemy Pandavas. He did not want to hurt the pride of Duryodhana but tried to keep him happy. This may be called the moral lapse of Karna but one should have to keep in his mind that when Karna was struggling for his identity, Duryodhana declared him *Anga Naresh*. (The King of Anga). He never came out from this dept of Duryodhana. He remained indebted to Duryodhana till his last breathe. Karna was foul tongue against the Pandavas and the queen Draupadi. His words were harsh and did not suit the status of a mighty warrior. He was one of the conspirators against the Pandavas. He was instrumental in the humiliation of the Pandavas after the defeat of king Yudhisthira by Sakuni. Sakuni provoked Yudhisthira to stake Draupadi. Sakuni once again defeated Yudhisthira. Duryodhana wanted to bring Draupadi in the Assembly Hall. Draupadi denied to go with the usher. She wanted to know her position. When Yudhisthira staked Draupadi, he had lost freedom. He was a slave. This prompted Duryodhana to send Duhshasana to bring Draupadi. Duhshasana brought Draupadi by force and physical violence. He physically mauled Draupadi and also molested her. The mighty warrior like Karna did not speak a single word against this injustice because everything was done at the behest of his friend Duryodhana. When the status of Draupadi was debated in the Assembly Hall Karna spoke against her. He knew that Draupadi was a helpless meek woman and without her own fault she became victim. Vikarna, the younger brother of Duryodhana defended Draupadi and spoke against the game of dicing and supported Draupadi's cause of for her freedom. Karna opposed it to soothe the ego of his friend Duryodhana. This is a serious blemish on his character. He had the deep knowledge of *Vedas*. Moreover, he was a man of outstanding courage. He should have shown the mercy towards the helpless woman. He supported the claim of his friend Duryodhana and told that Draupadi was won by the Kauravas. Vaisampayana has depicted the opinion of Karna on this matter.

I hold that Draupadi has been won, and so do
they hold How, son of Dhrtarastra, can you
hold that Krsna has not been won when the
eldest Pandavas staked all he owned in the
assembly hall? Draupadi is part of all he owns,
bull of Bharatas, then how can you hold
that Krsna, won by Law, has not been won?¹

The debate continued and Duhsasana was ordered by the Kuru scion Duryodhana to bring Draupadi in the Assembly Hall. Duhsasana pulled the hair of Draupadi in a very cruel manner. He mauled her. She was molested by Duhsasana before the people in the Assembly Hall. Karna's truthfulness evaporated from his heart because he was in the company of Duryodhana. He resisted to hear the helpless voice of a meek woman whose husband had turned into a helpless slave. Karna had a grudge against Draupadi because he was debarred to become the participant of *herswayamvar*. He was *suta* and hence *sutaputra*. Bhimasen became very angry to witness the plight of Draupadi and he took oath to break the chest of Duhsasana. He oathed to drink the blood of this fiend. Bhimasen was only treading the path of *dharma* otherwise the Assembly Hall would have turned into battle field. The sage Vaisampayana has narrated the anger of Bhimasen.

“...But if the king of Dharma unleashes me, I shall crush the evil band of Dhrtarastra with the sword like flats of my hands, as a lion flattens small game!” (150)

Bhisma, Drona and Vidur pacified enraged Bhima. Karna came to the rescue of the Kauravas. Karna called Draupadi a slave's wealth. She was the wife of the Pandavas who had become a slave.

Karna said:

The wife of a slave, you are *his* now, my dear:
A masterless slave wench, you are now slave wealth!
.... Now quickly choose you another husband
Who will not gamble your freedom away:
For license with masters in never censured :
That is the slave's rule, remember it! (150)

Karna crossed the boundary of royal rules and civility. He forgot his position as *suta's* son. Bhimasen though himself a slave reminded Karna the rule of serfdom.

Bhima said:

I do not anger at *asuta's* son,
For the Law of serfdom is surely upon us: (151)

Karna's character had a touch of arrogance. He behaved in callous way. He had become devil in his words. He hurt the Pandavas and queen Draupadi by his filthy words. The Pandavas had landed to slavehood and Karna got the opportunity to assault them verbally in the Assembly Hall. Vaisampayana has depicted his ugly behaviour. Karna's shameful behaviour which came out from this utterance.

“...The Gods have laid down that a woman shall have one husband, scion of Kuru. *She* submits to many men and assuredly is a whore!....”

“Duhsasana, this ViKarna is only a child, blabbing of wisdom! Strip the clothes from the Pandavas and Draupadi!” (146)

Duhsasana became very bold after getting the support from Karna. He knew that Karna was the trusted friend of his elder brother Duryodhana as well as a mighty warrior. There was no difference between Karna and Duryodhana. He immediately went to Draupadi and tried to

stripe her clothe. The honour of the Draupadi was at stake. She was saved and her honour was restored by the almighty lord Krishna. Duhsasana became fried but he failed to stripe the clothe from the body of Draupadi. The people hailed the decision of almighty. Vidura immediately narrated the story of Asura king Prahlad to Kuru king, who took decision against his own son Virochan to restore justice in the world when there was a debate between his son and the son of Angira. The story of Vidura was directed to Kuru king Dhrtarastra to give verdict. He wanted to bring morality and justice in the Assembly Hall. The king had forgotten his royal duty and deviated from his path. There was a chaos and pandemonium in the Assembly Hall, when Bhimsen took oath to break the thigh of Duryodhana when the later showed his bare thigh to Draupadi. Vidura and Gandhari charged the Kuru king for his silence at this crucial juncture. The king was blind in love for his son. Vidura told that the people will laugh to Kuru king on his indecision. At last, the Kuru king called him a fool. He failed to give respect to a woman before the people in the Assembly. Though these words were against his own wishes. Further to amend the outrageous behaviour of the Kauravas and his sons, the Kuru king granted two boons to Draupadi. She utilised these boons judiciously. In the first boon she secured the freedom of her husband. In the second she restored the previous status of the Pandavas. Karna appreciated Draupadi for her wisdom.

Karna said:

Of all the women of mankind, famous for their beauty,
Of whom we have heard, no one have we heard
accomplished such a deed! Krsna Draupadi
has become the salvation of the Pandavas! When they
were sinking, boatless and drowning, in the plumbless
ocean, the Pancali became the Pandavas' boat,
to set them ashore! (153)

These words of Karna deserve appreciation. He praised her virtues but the words he employed against her character had done irreparable damage to Karna's own reputation. The Pandavas after retaining their previous status returned to their kingdom. When they were on their way to home, once again the conspirators gathered and compelled the Kuru king Dhrtarastra to invite them for the game of dice. The Kuru king had weakness for his son. He forced the Pandavas for the game of dicing. Karna was also one of the them. The character of Karna in 'The Dicing' and 'The Sequel to the Dicing' is not praiseworthy. The Karna of the section 'The Temptation' has appeared in different incarnation.

In the section 'The Temptation', Karna-deserves praise for his extra ordinary qualities. He triumphed the weakness of human flesh. He appeared as a towering personality to whom god also failed to tempt for beauty and power. He surrendered his material benefits for the sake of his friendship with Duryodhana. His mother Kunti failed to deviate his son from his path of his own self principled life.

Krishna knew the importance of Karna. He failed in his mission to bring peace between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Krishna saw the ray of hope for peace only lied with Karna. Karna was the friend of the Kuru scion Duryodhana. Duryodhana relied heavily on Karna. He wanted to dissolve the friendship between Karna and Duryodhana to avoid the battle between brothers. He went to Karna and explained the mystery behind his birth. He was in fact the elder brother of the Pandavas. He was first born of virgin Kunti. He was unwedded child of Kunti. Krishna told that he was the rightful heir of the kingdom which belonged to the Pandavas. It was robbed by the Kauravas. He requested Karna to fight for the cause of the

Pandavas. Karna was offered the kingdom of the Pandavas and also Draupadi as his wife. He was not tempted by this offer of almighty god. Krishna told him that he was not a son of a wagoner. The almighty told that he would be accepted by the Pandavas. The god says;

I myself shall perform your consecration.
You will be king, with Yudhisthira
as your younger deputy. (3/31)

Karna heard everything. He had faced humiliation through out his life. He was denied the opportunity to participate in the marriage of Draupadi because of his caste. He was called *sutaputra*. The same Draupadi was offered to him as his wife.

Your nephews will fall down and clasp your feet,
and you will share Draupadi as your wife.
“you are not the son of a wagoner,
you are a kshatriya. This very day,
you will be crowned. (3/31)

The picture of glorious future was shown to Karna. He was passed aspersion by these Pandavas and Draupadi, throughout his life. He did not get what he deserve. He was compelled to follow the path of life which the fate offered to him. He was abandoned by his mother Kunti. He was flowed in the river. He was reared by wagoner Adhiratha and Radha. He loved his this identity. He did not want to dilute his identity. Now he was a *suta* and he had accepted this identity very gladly. He had immense love and respect for his foster parents. He did not see any hope to become one with the Pandavas. Karna did not want to hurt his foster father and mother by attaining new identity.

Kunti abandoned me. She cast me out
Adhirtha found me, and he and Radha
loved me from the first. Out of love for me
Radha's breast poured forth milk immediately. (4/13)

Karna made it clear that he had no problem in his identity of *sutaputra*. He was married to *suta* girls. He had fathered children with his *suta* wife. He was the friend of Duryodhana and who had cherished high hope from him. He did not want to desert Duryodhana because he gave him identity to challenge the Pandavas. He was declared *Anga Naresh* by Duryodhana. Now Duryodhana's army was ready to fight. He had prepared for the war. Karna told that he knew that he was following the path of *adharm*. He had decided to support *adharm* and Duryodhana. Krishna was in the side of the Pandava. *e.dharma*. The defeat of the Kauravas became almost certain. He told that his death is waiting for him. He had no remorse for it. He knew the result of the war Karna told that even if he will be given the kingdom by the Pandavas, he will surrender it at the feet of Duryodhana. He further told that he kept his enmity with Arjuna only. He will never hurt the other Pandavas. Karna told that he had a different dream for the Pandavas. Karna told Krishna about his dream.

I had a dream – Yudhisthira ascending
steps to a huge palace – with his brothers (5/31)

When Karna was not tempted by the material benefits and beauty of Draupadi, Kunti tried to bring Karna on the side of the Pandavas. But Karna had a serious complaint against his

mother Kunti. When he was left by her mother, she had serious compulsion. But when she became dignified queen, she should have accepted him as her son. For Karna nothing is important in his life except honour.

“So I have no illusion. But my honour
is more precious to me than life itself.
I have pledged to die, if die I must.” (6/31)

She met Karna early in the morning. She had disguised herself. She told Karna about the mystery of her birth. She told him that he was not a *suta*'s son. Kunti told that he is her son. It was endorsed by lord Surya.

that came from the sun :*Kunti speaks the truth;*
obey your mother and you will benefit. (7/31)

Karna never deviated from his path and principle. He scolded his mother for not coming to his help. He was sneered, mocked and humiliated by the Pandavas and other as *suta puta*. But he promised his mother that she will always remain the mother of five sons. He told that only Duryodhana qualifies his love and honour. He gave words to his mother that he will not harm his brothers except Arjuna.

“But here is my word- only Arjuna,
not his brothers, will meet death my hands. (8/31)

Kunti sobbed and departed from the place.

The character of Karna has touch of pathos and pity. He struggled throughout his life against the odd forces but remained true to his own self principled life. He had the quality of hero but for wrong purpose he was challenging his opponent. He had the quality of anti-hero.

He was left by his own mother. He lost his own identity of kshatriya. Karna was called *sutaputra*. His own brothers teased him because of his caste. He got the novel identity by Kuru scion Duryodhana when he declared him *Anganaresh*. (the king of *Anga Pradesh*). He remained indebted to his friend till his last breath. He very politely declined to accept the new identity offered by lord Krishna. He was above from material and mundane pleasure of life. His character attracts our attention because of his selfless instinct. His character is in no way inferior to other heroes of epic the Mahabharata.

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1. *The Mahabharata*, 2. *The Book of the Assembly Hall*, 3. *The Book of the Forest*. Translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen (The University of Chicago Press, Ltd. London, 1975) p.145 All subsequent references to the book will be incorporated in the text.
2. The temptation of Karna-Mahabharata: A Modern Retelling <https://erenow.com/common/mahabharata-a-modern-retelling/33.html> (13/13) All subsequent references quoted in the text