

The righteous anti- hero



Anil nodded in agreement. The cat said, “ Let me enlighten you on something. An already married man doesn’t object to the objectification of a woman. Rather, he leverages a minuscule gaffe from his mother to sleep with his brother’s legal wife. I’m talking about sharing Draupadi with Arjuna. Does it not bother you?”

Anil frowned again. Before he could say yes or no, the cat went on, “ Or consider the watershed surrounding the game of dice. A losing player lays his so-called wife’s chastity at stake to assuage his fascination for leaving a mindless game as victor. Is it not exasperating?”

Anil grimaced. The cat resumed, “ And he cried fair game at length during the war. Was it fair game that saw his mother peel off Karan’s shield? Was it righteous that Arjuna shot at an unarmed Karan while dementia emasculated the latter’s arsenal?”

Anil blurted out, “ Listen. Since you’ve already dragged me into this, let me try to place a couple of bucks here and there. So, I do agree on whatever you said about Yudhisthira’s so-called rights on Draupadi. However, I have different thoughts on the war. Say, do you really think Yudhisthira was supervising Arjuna’s attack on Karan? Or do you really think he had any say or even he was aware of the injustice at all when Kunti messed with Karan’s protection? A war was going on. Some thousand men were fighting. Yudhisthira must have been busy fighting someone else while Arjuna killed Karan. Also, Kunti approached Karan secretly that morning. Without letting anyone else know. So it wasn’t up to Yudhisthira to prevent the unjust shift of balance in power or fighting capacity.”

The cat replied, “ You’re right. Yet wrong. The war was supposedly between good and evil. Between just and unjust. Despite being buttressed by an upright personality all throughout, someone like Bhishma had to lose and ultimately die because he sided with the wrong. Let me know what was Karan’s fault? What misdemeanour was he being penalised for? Yet, our supposedly righteous man Yudhishthira devoured a victory garnered by treachery and deceit. This is what I want to enlighten you on.”

“ Hmm. So I take my words back. Karan and Bhishma were the most ...err... righteous characters of the Mahabharata.”

“ Again, even that’s fallacious.”

“ What?”

“ You heard it right. Karan and Bhishma had their shares of transgressions that ultimately brought their downfalls. Remember Indraprastha? Draupadi had ridiculed Karan there. Perhaps that egged him to cheer Duryodhana and Dushasana when they attempted at disrobing Draupadi after the dice disaster. While I admire Karan’s valour, I denounce those few seconds’ blunder in an otherwise spotless life and I agree that he deserved his downfall. About Bhishma – you’ve heard of Amba, also known as Shikhandi, haven’t you?”

“ Hmm. That sounds about right. So, back to your question, then. Who was the most righteous guy amongst them all?”

“ Of course, it was Vikarna.”

“ Bi... V... sorry, come again?”

“ Vikarna. He was one of Gandhari’s sons.”

“ And what fits him in the righteous boys’ club’s president’s seat?”

“ Let’s go back to the dice game again. Once Yudhishthira blew everything and Draupadi was presented to the Kauravas in a plate, it was Vikarna who exhibited a marked recalcitrance against his own brothers. When questioned why, he stated that it was his dharma. In fact, on that very day, he actually foretold that they would all perish as a consequence of this grave offence.”

The room went silent for a few seconds before Anil said, “ Sounds nice.”

The cat resumed, “ In fact, midway into the war, Vikarna and Bhima faced each other when Bhima stated that he didn’t want to fight the ever so righteous Vikarna and that the latter should walk away. Vikarna simply replied that he was performing his dharma again and that he knew his last was round the corner.”

There were a few seconds’ silence again. Anil sighed as his head nodded in unison with the opinion that the cat had painted so far. He asked, “ So, I’ve a last question if you don’t mind.”

The cat asked, “ And that will be?”

“ Why do you care?”

The cat looked around the room. It then stared at the spinning fan before opening its mouth, “ Observation. I was part of the tussle. And I was quite close to both Vikarna and Yudhisthira.”

“ You mean you were part of the Mahabharata?”

“ Yes.”

“ Stop kidding. None of the versions talks about a cat. Besides, your lot lives only six or seven years. Twelve or fifteen at most.”

“ Your postulation has just one aberration, youngman. I’m not a cat. I’m Ashwatthama. Not the elephant.”

Anil rolled his eyes. The fan slackened its rotation. The rhythm and tune of its hum changed.

Anil asked, “ So, Mr Ashwatthama, why do you look like a cat then?”

“ It’s a long story. You’re already aware of the fact that I was blessed with immortality, aren’t you? Having attacked Draupadi’s sleeping children a few days after conclusion of the war, I drew disapprobation and was alienated from the human community. I went to dwell in a rock where I made alliance with some feline and canine companions. In the ensuing centuries, weary of my dilapidated body, I summoned the skill to ferry my soul to different bodies. That’s what makes me a cat now.”

Anil blinked a f