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Decoding 'Cheerharan': Accounting Gender-Based Violence in  
Chitra B. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Being a woman is a subversive political position even in this contemporary, modern setting of today's world. It would not be an exaggerated remark that rather than being just an innocent natural phenomenon, this existence of the other sex has over the years transformed into a complicated socio-political position, well within the societal hierarchies, which paves the path for receiving a series of direct and indirect acts of violence. Harsh or mild, mental or physical, domestic or societal, such acts include some sort of forced conditioning often driven by socio-economic or socio-political hierarchies. Gender-based violence, thus, ceases to be a purely patriarchal hegemony and turns out to be a suffocating combination of factors which prompt inequality. As the most common way to condition a woman turns out to be controlling her body, the most heinous of crimes like public stripping, naked parade, honour killing, rape continue to exist even today in all spheres and spaces, particularly in our country. And the only question that violently bothers the mind is- when did it all begin? Enters the strongest and most ferocious of Indian mythological heroines Draupadi, whose 'Cheerharan' or public stripping not only became the reason for the most gruesome of wars, the war of Kurukshetra- Mahabharata, but also set the fateful course that her successors have to succumb to even today. Women writers, like Chitra B. Divakaruni, have tried to bring such acts of violence under contemporary light. This paper is a sincere attempt to decode the shameful act of Draupadi's 'Cheerharan' and other such acts reflecting GBV based on the readings of Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, the modern *Mahabharata* told from Draupadi's perspective.

**Key words:** Subversive political position, Gender-based violence, Patriarchal hegemony, Socio-economic hierarchies, Cheerharan/ public stripping.

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## Introduction

"The bards sing of what occurred when Dussasan took hold of my sari to pull it away, exposing my nakedness to all eyes...I had shut my eyes. My body would not stop trembling though I willed it to. I clutched my sari in my fists- as though I could save myself with that futile gesture! The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me- I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time!" (193)

Needless to explain the context, the aforementioned lines point to one of the most heinous of crimes recorded in the entire history of womanhood; the 'Cheerharan' of Draupadi, the daughter-in-law of the mighty Pandu clan, the wife of the invincible Pandavas, and the then empress of the glorious Indraprastha!

'Cheerharan' or public stripping or forced nudity is one of the intrinsic elements of what is known as gender-based violence in the modern civilized world. As per an official report of United Nations Human Rights published in October 2014, gender-based violence can be defined as:

"... any harmful act directed against individuals or groups of individuals on the basis of their gender. It may include sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced/early marriage and harmful traditional practices." On the basis of this definition, it would not be wrong if one opines that often gender-based violence becomes synonymous to sexual violence. In the same report, sexual violence is defined as " ...a form of gender-based violence which encompasses any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. Sexual violence takes multiple forms and includes rape, sexual abuse, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual enslavement, forced circumcision, castration and forced nudity." Thus, forced nudity or public stripping lies somewhere on the threshold between gender-based violence and sexual violence. It serves as a medium of imposing the gravest insult and utter humiliation to a woman mostly to take revenge over petty issues. Often it is done as a mode of punishment for practising witchcraft or crossing over the so-called boundaries; and sometimes, even in the name of disciplining a difficult woman! Such practices prevail mostly in patriarchal setups where women's modesty and virtue are considered to be her most important assets. Furthermore, the husband or the man is entitled to practice ownership over the wife's life, her conduct and her body too. So, in order to humiliate the husband, one just needs to outrage the modesty of the wife. Silently, often these practices get transferred from one generation to the next like a prized heirloom and become a part and parcel of the everyday life.

The question that looms large is when did it all start, especially, in an ancient civilization like India where women had been considered as deities since the time immemorial. One obvious answer can be some episodes from the ancient myths where women characters have been shown facing catastrophic consequences over pettiest of issues. For instance, Sita in the *Ramayana* crossed the threshold marked by Lakshmana. As a result, she got abducted by Ravana, had to go through the fire-test, was mocked at by a commoner, and ultimately was abandoned and exiled by her own husband.

This paper too, as discussed before, aims at unravelling the episode called Cheerharan from the epic *Mahabharata*, keeping in mind the perspective of Panchali aka Draupadi as discussed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. During the game of dice (chaupad) episode, Yudhishthira is seen keeping Draupadi at the stake. This happens after he has lost all his empire, his materialistic possessions, his brothers and his own self to the opponents. This is no ordinary game; the hall is full of all the distinguished members of the Kuru clan, scholars, noblemen, and mighty warriors. Towards the end of the game, it is decided that final closure can happen only if Draupadi, the wife of the Pandu-putras, is also kept at the stake. Messengers are sent to her room. She does not comply and asks whether she was lost after her husband, Yudhishthira, lost himself. She never receives a reasonable

reply to her question; rather she is dragged to the court by Dushhashna where she is humiliated and stripped off her modesty. However, the empress of Indraprastha knows her rights and most courageously tries to exercise them before the blind court. Her fuming statements echo even today:

1. I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhrishtadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. (190)
2. She was no unlettered girl, ignorant of the law. She remembered the words of the sacred Nyayshastra: if perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife. However, all her pleadings and arguments went in vain and she found herself in court, "a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disordered sari around me, I demanded help from my husbands. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralyzed." (191)

Later when the episode gets over with Lord Krishna's help, Draupadi learns the hardest truth possible:

"All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands...but there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honour, their loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought. And that's why, I would no longer depend on them so completely in the future." (193)

This is how Divakaruni through the mouth of her Panchali lays bare the fact that sexual violence or gender-based violence is something which can be found in all strata and sections of any society at any given time. It is something which often is used as means to show a woman her place in the societal setting and this malpractice continues even today.

### **Rationale and Research Questions**

Gender is not a natural or fixed identity but a social construct shaped through cultural norms, institutional practices, and ideological conditioning. Simone de Beauvoir famously asserts that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, emphasizing how femininity is produced through sustained social training and restriction (Beauvoir 18). Within patriarchal systems, this constructed identity is carefully regulated in order to preserve male dominance, and violence emerges as one of the most effective tools for enforcing this regulation. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global issue that has existed in different forms in women's lived realities across cultures and throughout history and is a major public health concern that impacts women's health and well-being. As noted by Jeni Klugman in a 2017 World Bank report, one in three women has experienced GBV in her lifetime globally which highlights the social position and the structural inequalities endured due to entrenched gender-based inequalities. It continues to be one of the most persistent means through which patriarchal societies exercise power over women. It is not limited to physical aggression but functions as a culturally sanctioned system of control that regulates female bodies, desires, and identities. Despite legal reforms and growing social awareness, the female body remains a contested site of authority, surveillance, and symbolic violence. Across history and literature, narratives have functioned as powerful carriers of social values, often legitimizing unequal gender relations through repeated representation.

Judith Butler further argues that gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being (Butler 43). When women resist prescribed roles or threaten male authority, their bodies often become the primary sites of control. Violence, in this context, does not function merely as personal cruelty but as a political strategy that restores hierarchical order.

Michel Foucault's analysis of power relations helps to explain how the body becomes an object upon which authority is visibly inscribed. According to Foucault, the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (Foucault 25). Public acts of humiliation such as stripping, parading, or sexual violation serve not only to punish the individual woman but also to communicate collective warning to society regarding the consequences of female transgression.

Kate Millett describes this process as sexual politics, which attempts to prove that sex is a status category with political implications. Something of a pioneering effort, it must be both tentative and imperfect. Because the intention is to provide an overall description, statements must be generalized, exceptions neglected, and subheadings overlapping and, to some degree, arbitrary as well (Millett 24). GBV therefore operates at both physical and symbolic levels. It injures the body while simultaneously reinforcing cultural narratives of female inferiority, shame, and silence.

This theoretical framework is crucial for understanding Draupadi's Cheerharan not as an isolated episode of cruelty but as a structured act of patriarchal discipline. The attempted disrobing in the royal court represents the conversion of political defeat into bodily punishment, where a woman's honor is sacrificed to restore wounded male pride. Divakaruni's retelling exposes this mechanism by allowing Draupadi to articulate the psychological devastation that accompanies such violence, thereby transforming a mythic spectacle into a testimony of gendered suffering. Mythological narratives in India have historically served as cultural blueprints that shape moral values, social conduct, and gender relations. Among these narratives, the *Mahabharata* holds a central position in constructing ideals of duty, honor, and obedience. Within this framework, women are largely portrayed as carriers of family honor and moral virtue, while men occupy positions of authority and decision making. Such narrative positioning reinforces patriarchal hierarchies and creates a cultural climate where control over women's bodies is normalized. However, Draupadi stands out as an exceptional figure who unsettles this established order. Born from sacred fire and gifted with intelligence and strong will, she resists the passive feminine ideal traditionally celebrated in epic literature. Her polyandrous marriage to the five Pandava brothers further disrupts conventional patriarchal expectations of female chastity and submission. This deviation marks her as a challenge to male centered codes of honor.

## Results/ Discussion

The incident of Cheerharan takes place in the royal court, a space that symbolizes political authority and masculine order. When Draupadi is staked and lost in the game of dice, her body becomes the final object through which male rivalry is settled. The command to disrobe her publicly transforms her into a spectacle of punishment, asserting control over her body to restore wounded male pride. This moment reveals how women's bodies are employed as instruments for negotiating power among men, while women themselves remain excluded from systems of justice.

The continued circulation of this episode in cultural memory demonstrates how myth legitimizes gendered violence by embedding it within narratives of destiny and moral necessity. Draupadi's humiliation is often justified as a turning point that leads to the great war, thereby overshadowing the ethical violation inflicted upon her. This narrative strategy normalizes the idea that women's suffering can be sacrificed for larger political or moral causes.

Divakaruni's retelling challenges this inherited structure by shifting attention from the outcome of war to the lived experience of humiliation. By allowing Draupadi to narrate her own story, *The Palace of Illusions* exposes the emotional and psychological trauma erased in traditional tellings. The novel thus reopens the mythological archive to question how ancient narratives continue to authorize control over female bodies in contemporary society. The episode of Cheerharan in the *Mahabharata* is not merely an instance of individual cruelty but a carefully staged act of public discipline. The royal court

in which Draupadi is brought for disrobing represents the highest seat of political and moral authority. By ordering her public humiliation in this space, the Kaurava assembly converts violence into a spectacle that asserts patriarchal dominance. Foucault explains that the public execution is to be understood not only as a judicial, but also as a political ritual. It belongs, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested (Foucault 47). Draupadi's body in the court thus becomes the visible site where masculine power is performed and reinforced.

The act of attempted disrobing transforms private violation into collective experience. Draupadi is stripped not in isolation but before kings, elders, and warriors who remain largely silent witnesses. This silence of the assembly is significant, for it reveals how patriarchal systems sustain themselves through complicity. The spectacle is designed not only to shame Draupadi but also to issue a warning to all women who might challenge male authority. The punishment of one body becomes a lesson for an entire society. Cheerharan exemplifies such normalization. Though the act is deeply unjust, the narrative tradition often presents it as a necessary consequence of fate or destiny. This framing dulls ethical outrage and allows the violation of a woman's body to be absorbed into accepted moral order. The public nature of Draupadi's humiliation also reveals how female honor is treated as a commodity owned by male guardians. Her disrobing is not seen as a violation of her autonomy but as an attack on the prestige of her husbands. This shift of focus from the woman's suffering to male honor demonstrates how patriarchal cultures erase female subjectivity even in moments of extreme trauma.

Divakaruni's retelling disrupts this erasure by giving narrative space to Draupadi's fear, anger, and humiliation. Instead of presenting Cheerharan as a dramatic turning point for war, the novel repositions it as a deeply personal wound that defines Draupadi's consciousness. By restoring emotional interiority to the spectacle, Divakaruni exposes how public punishment functions as an enduring tool of gendered control rather than as a justified episode of epic destiny. Often the traditional retellings of the *Mahabharata* largely present Draupadi as a figure observed from the outside. Her thoughts, fears, and desires remain unexplored, while her humiliation is narrated through the perspectives of male witnesses. Such narrative treatment reveals the historical marginalization of women's voices in literary tradition, where female characters are discussed and represented by others rather than allowed to articulate their own experiences. Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* intervenes in this tradition by reimagining the epic through Draupadi's first person narration. This shift in narrative voice transforms Draupadi from an object of storytelling into a conscious subject who interprets her own experiences. By allowing Draupadi to narrate her life as Panchaali, Divakaruni restores a sense of individuality and emotional depth that traditional versions overlook. The novel presents her not only as a queen and wife but as a woman with aspirations, insecurities, anger, and longing. Her inner monologues expose the psychological burden of living within rigid patriarchal structures. This narrative strategy challenges the epic's tendency to prioritize masculine heroism and war while minimizing the suffering of women. The Cheerharan episode in Divakaruni's text gains renewed ethical urgency because it is filtered through Draupadi's own consciousness. The reader witnesses her terror, humiliation, and rage rather than merely observing the dramatic consequences of the event. Divakaruni thus shifts the focus from external spectacle to internal trauma. This narrative relocation is significant because it reclaims moral authority for the violated subject rather than for the patriarchal order that frames the event as destiny.

Feminist rewriting functions as an act of literary recovery that challenges male centered traditions and corrects historical distortions in the representation of women. Divakaruni's retelling performs precisely this corrective function. By giving Draupadi narrative agency, the novel interrogates the moral legitimacy of the structures that enabled her humiliation. Draupadi is no longer a symbolic cause of war but a speaking witness to injustice. Through this reclaimed voice, *The Palace of Illusions* becomes more than a retelling of myth. It becomes a counter narrative that challenges the authority of inherited cultural memory. Divakaruni demonstrates that revisiting myth through women's

perspectives can expose long concealed patterns of gendered violence and open new possibilities for ethical re-reading of tradition. Patriarchal power sustains itself not only through visible acts of violence but also through subtle processes of conditioning that teach women to accept inequality as natural and inevitable. Beauvoir observes that femininity involves learned behavior in which "The girl is supposed not only to primp and dress herself up but also to repress her spontaneity and substitute for it the grace and charm she has been taught by her elder sisters." (Beauvoir 402). Such training ensures that women participate in maintaining the very systems that restrict them. In the *Mahabharata* and in Divakaruni's retelling, this internalization of patriarchal values is evident in the behavior of several female characters who counsel endurance rather than resistance.

Characters such as Kunti and Gandhari embody this inherited culture of submission. They have learned to equate suffering with moral greatness and silence with dignity. Their advice to Draupadi often emphasizes restraint and acceptance rather than protest. This reveals how patriarchal norms are passed down through generations of women, ensuring continuity of gendered control without constant external enforcement. Gender regulation functions most effectively when social norms are internalized and individuals learn to monitor and discipline themselves in accordance with accepted expectations. Women thus become both subjects and agents of patriarchal discipline.

Draupadi's struggle in Divakaruni's narrative lies in her refusal to fully accept this inherited conditioning. She questions the injustice of her situation and expresses anger at being treated as property in political negotiations. However, even her resistance is shaped by the limits imposed upon her by tradition. She cannot walk away from her marital obligations or reject her role as the bearer of family honor. This tension illustrates how deeply patriarchal control penetrates female consciousness, restricting the possibilities of action even when awareness of injustice is present.

The Cheerharan episode further intensifies this internal conflict. Draupadi's humiliation is not only inflicted by external aggressors but also reinforced by the silence of those who should protect her. The lack of protest from elders and relatives conveys a powerful message that endurance is expected and justice is conditional. This collective acceptance of injustice demonstrates how violence becomes normalized when moral outrage is suppressed by social convention. By portraying these psychological struggles, Divakaruni reveals that gender-based violence is sustained not only through overt acts of domination but also through inherited habits of silence and compliance. The novel exposes the emotional cost of such conditioning and highlights the urgent need to question traditions that demand female suffering in the name of duty and honor.

The persistence of gender-based violence in contemporary society demonstrates that the cultural logic underlying Draupadi's Cheerharan has not remained confined to mythological time. Instead, it has evolved into modern forms of bodily control, public shaming, and symbolic punishment. The continued relevance of Draupadi's humiliation lies in its reflection of enduring attitudes that associate female honor with bodily purity and male authority. The myth of Cheerharan functions as an early narrative template that continues to shape social responses to women's bodies in modern contexts. In present day India, incidents of public humiliation such as forced stripping, naked parades, and custodial abuse reveal striking parallels with Draupadi's experience. Although legal frameworks and constitutional protections formally condemn such acts, cultural beliefs regarding shame, honor, and punishment continue to enable them. Women who challenge social norms or resist male control are often subjected to public discipline intended to restore communal order. This repetition of ancient patterns in contemporary settings indicates that patriarchal power has merely adapted its strategies rather than dismantled its foundations.

Divakaruni's retelling highlights this continuity by presenting Draupadi's suffering not as an isolated mythic event but as a recognizable human trauma. The emotional vocabulary through which Draupadi narrates her humiliation mirrors the testimonies of modern survivors of gendered violence,

thereby bridging the temporal gap between epic and present. By drawing attention to this continuity, *The Palace of Illusions* transforms the *Mahabharata* from a distant cultural artifact into a living narrative that speaks to contemporary ethical concerns. Divakaruni demonstrates that ancient myths continue to influence modern social structures and that revisiting them through feminist perspectives can expose the persistence of injustice across time.

The movement from myth to modernity in this study reveals that Cheerharan is not simply a tragic episode that precipitated a war but an enduring cultural script that legitimizes control over women's bodies. Recognizing this continuity is essential for understanding how literature both reflects and challenges the ongoing realities of gender-based violence. Across both mythological and contemporary contexts, the female body remains the central site upon which patriarchal authority is asserted and maintained. Control over women's bodies operates as the most visible marker of gender hierarchy, regulating movement, clothing, sexuality, and autonomy. Judith Butler explains If the body is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its "interior" signification on its surface? (Butler 177).

In this sense, Draupadi's body in the *Mahabharata* becomes a symbolic territory over which political dominance is displayed.

The episode of Cheerharan exposes how bodily violation is employed to erase female agency. Draupadi is not punished for a personal crime but for the perceived failure of her husbands in a political contest. Her body becomes a substitute battlefield where masculine rivalry is resolved. This displacement of conflict onto the female body illustrates how patriarchal cultures convert women into carriers of male honor and shame.

Divakaruni's narrative emphasizes the psychological consequences of this bodily violation. Draupadi's humiliation does not end with the attempted disrobing but continues as a lasting wound that shapes her identity and relationships. By focusing on the aftermath of trauma, the novel reveals that violence against the body extends into violence against selfhood. The body becomes a memory site that carries the imprint of injustice long after the public spectacle has ended. Modern social practices surrounding dress codes, moral policing, and restrictions on women's mobility demonstrate that control of the female body remains a dominant strategy of patriarchal regulation. Although the forms of enforcement have changed, the underlying logic mirrors that of Cheerharan. Women are still expected to embody honor, modesty, and obedience, while transgression invites punishment and shame. By highlighting these continuities, *The Palace of Illusions* repositions Draupadi's violated body as a powerful symbol of resistance rather than silent suffering. Divakaruni's retelling insists that recognizing the body as a site of oppression is the first step toward reclaiming it as a site of agency. This reframing challenge inherited cultural attitudes and opens possibilities for reimagining gender justice beyond patriarchal control.

## Conclusion

The episode of Draupadi's Cheerharan in the *Mahabharata* stands as one of the earliest recorded representations of gendered humiliation and bodily violation in cultural memory. Through centuries of retelling, this narrative has remained embedded in collective consciousness, shaping attitudes toward female honor, obedience, and suffering. Rather than existing as a distant mythic event, Cheerharan functions as a recurring cultural script that legitimizes patriarchal authority over women's bodies. Its endurance reveals how violence against women is not merely an individual act of cruelty but a socially structured mechanism for sustaining gender hierarchy. Chitra B Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* challenges this inherited framework by reclaiming Draupadi's silenced voice and restoring emotional depth to her experience. By narrating the epic from Draupadi's perspective, Divakaruni

exposes the psychological trauma hidden beneath the spectacle of heroic war and moral destiny. The novel shifts ethical attention from the triumphs of men to the suffering of women, thereby questioning the moral legitimacy of traditions that normalize female sacrifice. This study has sought to decode Cheerharan as a symbolic and material act of gender-based violence that continues to resonate in contemporary realities. The analysis demonstrates that the regulation of women's bodies, the internalization of patriarchal discipline, and the cultural normalization of public humiliation remain persistent features of modern society. Divakaruni's feminist retelling reveals that revisiting myth through alternative perspectives is not merely an act of literary creativity but a necessary intervention in cultural memory.

Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* invites readers to confront the ethical responsibility of reinterpreting inherited narratives. By transforming Draupadi from an object of violation into a speaking subject of history, Divakaruni opens a space for resistance against the structures that continue to authorize gendered violence. Reimagining myth thus becomes a powerful means of envisioning a future where justice replaces silence and dignity replaces shame.

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