
**STITCHING SECRETS: GOSSIP, EMBROIDERY, AND ORAL
STORYTELLING AS FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGIES IN MARJANE
SATRAPI'S *EMBROIDERIES***

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Abstract:

Introduction: Weaving Hidden Histories

Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries* (2005) complements her celebrated *Persepolis* by shifting its focus from overt political history to the intimate sphere of domestic life. Set over a single afternoon tea, the narrative gathers Iranian women across generations, including grandmothers, daughters, aunts, and friends. Their candid conversations about sex, marriage, betrayal, and bodily autonomy initially appear to be idle gossip. However, these exchanges gradually reveal themselves as a radical form of feminist knowledge production. Through humorous and vulnerable storytelling, illustrated in Satrapi's minimalist black-and-white style, the domestic space becomes political, and the private realm emerges as a site of public resistance.

Although *Embroideries* is often read as light confessional literature or a humorous memoir, it warrants deeper analysis as a feminist epistemological project. The text constructs what Michel Foucault refers to as "subjugated knowledge," which includes informal, affective, and embodied ways of knowing that challenge institutionalized truths (Foucault 81). This article argues that Satrapi transforms gossip, embroidery, and oral storytelling into a counter-archive of female experience. In doing so, she creates a communal knowledge system rooted in affect, memory, and bodily testimony.

The argument draws from feminist literary theory, particularly Elaine Showalter's concept of "gynocriticism," which seeks to validate women's cultural expressions that have long been dismissed as trivial or non-literary (Showalter 36). In addition, bell hooks' exploration of voice and spatial politics frames the subversive power of intimate conversations, while Foucault's theories of confession and power help to explain how these voluntary narratives resist surveillance. Furthermore, material culture studies by thinkers such as Jane Schneider and Roland Barthes provide insight into embroidery as both metaphor and material form of knowledge. Affect theory, especially the writings of Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai, helps to trace the emotional dynamics—such as shame, desire, and envy—that bind the women in collective solidarity. Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* also contributes a spatial reading of the home as a charged site of memory and resistance.

This article is organized into six sections: embroidery, gossip, oral storytelling, domestic spatiality, affect, and feminist epistemology. The concluding section reflects on the politics of listening. In a culture where sexuality and dissent are taboo, *Embroideries* presents women reclaiming narrative authority through storytelling, laughter, and stitched secrets. It ultimately celebrates feminine resilience, intimacy, and the transformative power of shared memory.

Threads and Text: Embroidery as Feminist Semiotics

The title *Embroideries* immediately invites a multilayered reading. At a surface level, embroidery suggests domesticity, leisure, and feminine ornamentation. However, the term also implies embellishment or narrative exaggeration. This duality—thread and tale, textile and text—frames Satrapi’s project, where embroidery becomes both literal and metaphorical. In *Embroideries*, stitching emerges as a symbol of feminine creativity, resistance, and storytelling itself.

Satrapi reclaims embroidery as a feminist semiotic—a visual and linguistic system that encodes lived female experience while subverting dominant narratives. The title serves as an ironic euphemism for hymenoplasty, colloquially called “getting embroidered” by Iranian women. This idiom, simultaneously humorous and grim, conceals trauma and surveillance under the guise of propriety. “What? There are a lot of women who do it!” one character exclaims (Satrapi 79), normalizing the absurd lengths to which women must go to uphold patriarchal notions of virtue.

Roland Barthes’ theory of semiotics helps illuminate this strategy. Barthes describes myths as “second-order semiological systems,” where signs carry ideological meanings beyond their denotation (Barthes, *Mythologies* 113). In *Embroideries*, the act of stitching operates as such a myth, linked to domestic labor and sexual regulation. Satrapi repurposes this myth through the graphic narrative to undermine its conventional meanings. Rather than symbolizing compliance, embroidery becomes a medium of sly subversion.

The memoir’s visual structure mirrors the act of stitching. The fragmented, overlapping stories flow like thread across fabric. Each woman’s tale forms a patch in a collective quilt of memory. Satrapi’s minimalist black-and-white drawings evoke thread on cloth, and her repeated use of close-ups, silence, and gesture creates a visual rhythm akin to sewing: deliberate, intimate, and contemplative.

Material culture studies, especially Jane Schneider’s “The Anthropology of Cloth,” offer further insight. Schneider writes that “textiles are not merely functional objects but symbolic and narrative forms that encode social values, ideologies, and identities” (Schneider 409). Textile work, long devalued in art history, carries a distinct language. In *Embroideries*, storytelling is a form of textile labor, where speech stitches emotional and historical content into shared fabric.

Elaine Showalter's concept of "gynocriticism," which calls for reclaiming undervalued female traditions such as letters, diaries, and crafts (Showalter 131), resonates strongly here. Satrapi elevates embroidery as a feminist practice of meaning-making. By foregrounding women's conversations over stitching and tea, she asserts that domestic spaces and feminine arts are not only narrative-worthy but epistemologically rich.

Embroidery also critiques conventional historiography. Patriarchal history often overlooks women's intimate lives—love, shame, betrayal. *Embroideries* offers an alternate, affective archive. Its stories are not linear or factual in the traditional sense. They are emotional, subjective, and metaphorically "embroidered." As Satrapi's grandmother quips, "When the snake gets old, the frog gets him by the balls" (Satrapi 120), capturing the inversion of patriarchal power through metaphor rather than direct rebellion. These women stitch their resistance not with weapons but with stories.

The temporality of embroidery further reinforces its feminist potential. Stitching is slow, repetitive, and embodied, contrasting with the rational, goal-oriented pace often associated with masculine productivity. Julia Kristeva conceptualizes "women's time" as cyclical and layered, aligned with bodily rhythms (Kristeva 17). The structure of *Embroideries*, with its digressions, flashbacks, and narrative detours, mirrors this nonlinear temporality. The tea-table becomes a heterotopic space—a pocket outside patriarchal time where memory, emotion, and storytelling flourish.

Embroidery also foregrounds the female body as both subject and site of resistance. The metaphor of "embroidery" for hymenoplasty illustrates how the body is regulated yet remains a space of agency. Stitching is tactile and embodied, involving hands, vision, and care. Women in Satrapi's narrative reclaim authorship over their bodies through storytelling. Consider the anecdote of Nahid, who stabs her husband after his betrayal: "To think, poor Nahid! If she had been born in this epoch, she would have been able to have herself embroidered instead of cutting her poor husband" (Satrapi 82). The irony underscores the violence born of denied autonomy and the absurd remedies imposed on women.

Thus, embroidery operates as both healing and violence, concealment and revelation. Each embroidered story is a survival strategy, resisting obliteration and forging emotional solidarity. These tales, unlike institutional archives, are mutable and ephemeral—whispered across generations, like thread capable of unraveling or binding anew.

As feminist art historian Rozsika Parker writes, "Embroidery...was one of the few forms of cultural expression available to women, and as such, it carried the dual burden and potential of both compliance and rebellion" (*The Subversive Stitch* 11). Satrapi seizes that potential, transforming embroidery from a sign of domesticity into a tool of insurgent expression.

In doing so, *Embroideries* insists on the epistemological legitimacy of feminine storytelling. These are not simply gossipy tales over tea but acts of feminist theory in practice. Embellishment becomes a form of resistance. Satrapi's characters speak not with manifestos, but with metaphors, anecdotes, and punchlines—producing a body of knowledge rooted in lived experience.

Ultimately, Satrapi invites us to view embroidery not merely as a decorative or domestic task, but as a method of meaning-making. Through needle and narrative, she constructs an alternative historiography—crafted by women, for women, and about women. These stories are stitched not to please but to persist. They are threaded with desire, pain, humor, and defiance. And like all good embroidery, they are meant to be passed on.

Gossip as Counter-Archive: Knowledge, Confession, and Power

In *Embroideries*, Marjane Satrapi reclaims gossip as a form of epistemological resistance. Rather than portraying it as trivial, malicious, or idle—as it is often derided in patriarchal discourse—Satrapi elevates gossip into a space of intimate knowledge production, mutual validation, and quiet subversion. The act of sharing secrets across generations, within the safety of the domestic sphere, constructs what Patricia Meyer Spacks identifies as a “counter-discourse”—a repository of unofficial truths that contests dominant patriarchal narratives (*Gossip* 3). Through seemingly mundane conversations about sex, marriage, cosmetic surgery, and betrayal, Satrapi's women construct an alternative archive of experience, memory, and resistance.

The setting is deceptively simple: women gathered around a samovar, sipping tea, lounging on cushions. Yet this spatial intimacy creates a psychological safety zone for affective vulnerability and epistemic sharing. In the absence of men, state censorship, or religious scrutiny, the women in *Embroideries* enact what Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* describes as “the confession”—a voluntary disclosure that is not only an act of self-expression but also a form of subjection within systems of power and knowledge (Foucault 58). Satrapi's women, however, subvert this traditional structure. Their confessions are not delivered to priests, doctors, or state agents, but to each other. These peer-to-peer disclosures transform the dynamics of power, decentralizing authority and cultivating mutual recognition.

Take, for example, the moment when Marjane's grandmother recalls advising a young woman, Nahid, to fake her virginity using a chicken's liver. The absurdity of the act is undercut by the gravity of the stakes. Nahid, abandoned by her first love and under pressure to perform purity for her new husband, had no other recourse but to simulate virginity. “A woman must protect herself,” the grandmother explains (Satrapi 77). The other women laugh, but their laughter is laced with recognition. They understand that gossip, here, is not idle chatter but a mode of survival—a way to pass down unofficial knowledge about how to navigate patriarchal expectations.

Patricia Meyer Spacks identifies gossip as a “female social ritual that functions as both a coping mechanism and a vehicle for emotional solidarity” (Spacks 5). In *Embroideries*, the ritualistic nature of gossip—its circularity, digression, repetition—mirrors the social fabric of feminine solidarity. Each woman’s story becomes a confession that invites others to share in turn, building a rhythm of storytelling that is both therapeutic and political. As one tale ends, another begins: about forced marriages, broken hearts, hymenoplasties, and sexual awakening. The cumulative effect is a mosaic of experience, a tapestry of hidden truths, and, crucially, an archive of the affective life of women.

Foucault’s formulation of confession also emphasizes its disciplinary function: “Western man has become a confessing animal,” he writes, describing how individuals are compelled to speak their truths within institutional settings (Foucault 59). But in Satrapi’s domestic circle, confession is reappropriated. These women are not confessing to be punished, reformed, or documented; they are confessing to be heard, to find empathy, to laugh at their pain, and sometimes to rage against their helplessness. Their stories resist the surveillance and moral judgment of the Iranian regime by creating a hidden transcript of feminine desire and critique, accessible only to those inside the circle.

One particularly powerful example is the story of Azzi, a young woman tricked into marriage by a man who wanted to flee Iran for Switzerland. Seduced by his apparent liberalism and good looks, she gives herself to him, only to be abandoned and divorced after he steals her wedding jewels. Her story exposes not only personal betrayal but also the economic vulnerability and romantic illusions women endure. The women around her respond not with moral condemnation, but with laughter, rage, and advice. One quips, “Now that you’re married and divorced, it’s normal that you’re no longer a virgin! You can make love whenever you want, without anyone knowing!” (Satrapi 111). It is a moment of bittersweet liberation—pain shared becomes pain lessened. This is gossip not as judgment, but as balm.

The subversive power of gossip lies in its ability to document the undocumented. It gives voice to stories that remain absent in official records: failed marriages, sexual awakenings, bodily interventions, betrayals by family and state. In this sense, *Embroideries* constructs what Ann Cvetkovich calls an “archive of feelings”—a collection of affective responses to trauma, desire, and memory that resists the impersonal, masculinist structure of traditional archives (Cvetkovich 7). The gossip of Satrapi’s women becomes a feminist archive: ephemeral yet enduring, unofficial yet resonant.

Moreover, these gossipy confessions frequently circulate around what remains unspoken in public discourse—especially female sexuality. The women speak of sexual dissatisfaction, cosmetic surgeries, and infidelity not as isolated issues, but as structurally induced conditions of their cultural milieu. Consider the story of the woman who undergoes breast augmentation using fat from her lower back to rekindle her husband’s sexual interest. She jokes, “Of course this idiot doesn’t know that every time he kisses my breasts, it’s

actually my ass he's kissing" (Satrapi 67). It's a crude joke, yes, but it is also a sharp commentary on the absurdities women endure to maintain male attention. Such gossip both mocks and critiques the performative femininity demanded by a patriarchal culture that values youth and beauty over companionship or mutual respect.

Even more revealing are the discussions around hymenoplasty, referred to by the women as "getting embroidered." The euphemism encodes trauma, sexual repression, and resistance in one stitched phrase. Hymen reconstruction is not simply a medical procedure; it is a cultural performance of purity demanded by a society obsessed with female chastity. The women talk openly about it, laughing at the absurdity, yet acknowledging its necessity. One woman, Nahid, realizes too late that being a mistress to a married man in Europe was still better than being a mistress to a minister in Iran. Another undergoes the procedure to secure her marriage prospects, while another scorns the need for it. These confessions chart the moral cartography of a culture in flux—caught between religious orthodoxy and modern desires.

Furthermore, gossip functions pedagogically within this female circle. The older women instruct the younger ones on how to navigate sex, relationships, and societal hypocrisy. The knowledge shared is experiential, anecdotal, and deeply embodied. It defies institutional knowledge systems and constructs what feminist theorist Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledges"—partial, embodied truths produced from specific social locations (Haraway 581). The truths spoken in *Embroideries* are not universal claims but situated insights: fragments of wisdom stitched from lived experience, collective pain, and accumulated defiance.

Satrapi's visual storytelling complements this epistemological function of gossip. Her illustrations often show the women in symmetrical, repetitive positions—circling each other like participants in a ritual. Their gestures, facial expressions, and moments of silence speak volumes. Panels showing quiet tears, laughter with closed eyes, or hands placed on hearts deepen the emotional resonance of their words. These visuals act as affective annotations to their confessions, turning gossip into performance, and performance into testimony.

The structure of the book itself mirrors the nature of gossip—episodic, digressive, and nonlinear. The narrative jumps from one woman's story to another without transitions, as one anecdote triggers the memory of another. This narrative fluidity is reflective of how gossip operates: informally, associatively, in fragments. Yet cumulatively, the effect is coherent. What emerges is a collective autobiography of womanhood under surveillance, stitched together by confessions passed from mouth to mouth, like inherited patterns in a family quilt.

This communal aspect of gossip also forges intergenerational bonds. Satrapi's grandmother, mother, aunt, and friends all share the same space, regardless of age. The

stories of failed marriages, affairs, surgical interventions, and disappointments are not isolated anecdotes but chapters in a larger, interwoven narrative of female struggle. They gossip not to destroy reputations, but to preserve them—to remember, to teach, to caution, and sometimes simply to laugh. As the grandmother concludes in the final pages: “Let her air out her heart. There’s nothing better than talking” (Satrapi 97). In this deceptively simple statement lies the heart of Satrapi’s feminist epistemology: talking is healing, and gossip is resistance.

Thus, gossip in *Embroideries* becomes a counter-archive—a subversive and affective mode of documentation that preserves feminine knowledge outside institutional control. In contrast to the state-sanctioned discourses that police women’s bodies and silence their desires, Satrapi offers an oral, affective, and embodied epistemology that privileges confession, solidarity, and survival. The tea-table stories in *Embroideries* are not just entertainment; they are epistemic events that produce truth, challenge authority, and affirm the collective wisdom of women.

Oral Storytelling and the Intimate Space: The Domestic as Political

The act of storytelling in *Embroideries* is deeply rooted in the domestic sphere, where private spaces become fertile ground for public critique. Marjane Satrapi stages her narrative almost entirely within a single home—her grandmother’s living room—where women gather over tea to exchange secrets, share memories, and unburden their hearts. While the world outside enforces silence, surveillance, and moral scrutiny, the domestic interior emerges as a space of candid self-expression and epistemological agency. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*, this section explores how Satrapi transforms the intimate spaces of Iranian domesticity into political arenas of feminist resistance, where storytelling operates not merely as a leisure activity but as a counterhegemonic act.

In Bachelard’s phenomenological reading, intimate spaces—attics, bedrooms, corners, and drawers—are imbued with memory, emotion, and imagination. They are “the nests of our thoughts,” spaces where the psyche can unfurl and daydreams become possible (Bachelard 6). Satrapi’s narrative choreography builds on this philosophy. Her spatial organization resists grand public arenas of political speech and instead favors the cozy interiors of feminine life: sitting rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. These are not simply the backdrop of the narrative; they are the very condition of possibility for the stories that unfold. In *Embroideries*, the domestic is not apolitical; it is the crucible of cultural negotiation, affective transmission, and gendered resistance.

The circular arrangement of the women in the graphic panels reinforces this intimate geometry. They lounge on cushions, sip tea, and pass around gossip in a rhythm that mirrors embroidery itself—repetitive, meticulous, and patterned. The samovar at the center functions almost as a ritual object, anchoring their stories in the shared experience of female sociability. In this spatial choreography, storytelling becomes an embodied performance. Voices are not abstract narrations; they are tethered to gestures, sighs, sideways glances, and even silence.

The domestic space allows for this rich multi-sensory expression that would be censored or curtailed in public.

This spatial intimacy functions as a shield against patriarchal intrusion. In the streets, women are policed for their dress, behavior, and mobility; at home, they disrobe not only their veils but also their emotional restraints. The home thus becomes a Foucauldian heterotopia—"a space of otherness" that challenges and inverts the norms of the external world (*Of Other Spaces* 4). Within these walls, the women of *Embroideries* construct their own moral codes, re-evaluate their desires, and validate each other's experiences. Their private conversations resist the state's public silencing, offering instead a subversive sonic landscape filled with laughter, profanity, confessions, and critique.

Indeed, feminist geographers like Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose have long argued that the private/public binary is a false dichotomy. The domestic, far from being apolitical, is a site of ideological production and reproduction. In Iran, where gender segregation is institutionalized and female agency severely restricted, the home becomes one of the few arenas where women can speak freely, experiment with ideas, and challenge dominant discourses. Satrapi's living room becomes a microcosm of this feminist possibility. Here, issues like hymenoplasty, marital rape, sexual dissatisfaction, and infidelity are discussed not with shame but with candor and wit.

The story of Sideh, for instance, unfolds almost entirely within this shared space. Her failed relationships, her attempts to win back a lover through "white magic," and her disillusionment with societal expectations are all narrated within the comforting walls of her female circle. The absurdity of her experience—boiling tea with a vaginally-inserted key to secure love—elicits laughter, but it also reveals the extent to which women internalize and perform cultural myths in their pursuit of affection and legitimacy. This oral testimony, while humorous, critiques the irrational demands placed on women to "perform" worthiness in intimate relationships. As Sideh's story is shared and reshared, it becomes part of a collective memory—a kind of mythopoetic truth passed from woman to woman.

Oral storytelling, in this context, performs multiple roles: it is therapeutic, archival, and pedagogical. It is therapeutic because it allows women to voice trauma, shame, and longing in a supportive environment. It is archival because it records histories that will never appear in textbooks or legal documents—histories of heartbreak, betrayal, bodily violation, and emotional survival. And it is pedagogical because it teaches younger women how to navigate the treacherous terrain of love, marriage, and sexuality in a deeply patriarchal culture. This triadic function of oral storytelling positions it as a central feminist technology of memory and resistance.

The oral transmission of knowledge in *Embroideries* also counters the gendered hierarchy of textual authority. While male-dominated religious and state institutions claim the right to define morality, purity, and femininity through canonical texts and fatwas, the

women in Satrapi's circle create a parallel textuality—unwritten, affective, and embodied. As Walter J. Ong explains, orality is not merely a primitive mode of communication but a rich and complex epistemological field, especially in communities marginalized from written authority (Ong 9). Satrapi's women operate within this field, their narratives forming a chorus of situated truths that challenge the legitimacy of institutional discourse.

Moreover, the medium of the graphic novel itself accentuates this oral quality. While Satrapi writes and draws the book, the voices she renders are polyphonic. Each woman has a distinct cadence, a different manner of gesturing or interrupting, a unique perspective shaped by her age, class, and romantic history. The juxtaposition of text and image in speech balloons mimics the rhythm of conversation, making readers not just passive observers but participants in this intimate gathering. The reader becomes a listener, privy to secrets, jokes, and confessions that would otherwise remain hidden. In this way, *Embroideries* transforms its readers into eavesdroppers—complicit, curious, and ultimately transformed by what they hear.

This invitation to listen is itself a political act. In a culture where women are often spoken for—by fathers, husbands, religious leaders, and even state media—*Embroideries* demands that women speak for themselves and be heard. It offers what bell hooks calls a “liberatory voice”—one that breaks the silence imposed by domination and affirms the value of female experience (*Talking Back* 12). These voices are not monolithic; they disagree, interrupt, and even contradict one another. But their multiplicity is precisely what constitutes their power. They do not claim universal truth; they offer fragments of situated knowledge that, when woven together, create a robust epistemology of female life in contemporary Iran. Additionally, these oral narratives resist linear temporality. The stories jump back and forth in time—adolescence, marriage, midlife crisis, widowhood—suggesting that women's experiences are cyclical, recursive, and often unresolved. This nonlinear temporality aligns with what feminist theorist Julia Kristeva describes as “women's time”—an alternative conception of time that values repetition, delay, and simultaneity over progress and closure (Kristeva 17). Satrapi's women do not tell their stories to arrive at a moral; they tell them because the telling itself is cathartic, relational, and politically meaningful.

In the end, the domestic space in *Embroideries* becomes a heterotopic archive—a repository of forbidden knowledge, affective truth, and radical empathy. It is a site where oral storytelling functions as epistemic resistance, challenging both state censorship and patriarchal morality. The laughter, gossip, confessions, and silences that fill this space are not trivial noises; they are political utterances. As the grandmother wisely says, “Let her air out her heart. There's nothing better than talking” (Satrapi 97). In that simple line, Satrapi encapsulates the revolutionary power of domestic storytelling—a power rooted not in confrontation but in communion.

Desires, Taboos, and the Unspoken: Psychoanalysis and Affect

Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries* functions as a vivid tableau of female intimacy, where the intersections of bodily desire, cultural repression, and social taboos are confronted

with disarming candor and humor. While the women gathered around the tea table exchange laughter and scandalous anecdotes, beneath their words lies a fraught landscape of repression, psychic trauma, and affective charge. This section draws on Freudian psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, and affect theory—especially the work of Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai—to examine how *Embroideries* stages the negotiation of unspoken desires and forbidden pleasures within the psychic and social fabric of Iranian womanhood.

Sigmund Freud's theory of repression posits that desires deemed unacceptable by societal norms are pushed into the unconscious, only to resurface in distorted or symptomatic forms. In *Embroideries*, many stories illustrate this psychic mechanism—especially those dealing with sexual dissatisfaction, marital infidelity, and surgical manipulation of the body. The women, while speaking freely among themselves, are clearly navigating a culture that deems their pleasures dangerous or deviant. The laughter that punctuates their confessions is not merely comedic; it is cathartic. As Freud observed, jokes often function as “the return of the repressed,” a socially sanctioned outlet for forbidden impulses (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* 110).

For instance, the repeated discussions of hymenoplasty—referred to colloquially as “embroidery”—serve as a critical point of convergence between sexual repression, bodily anxiety, and patriarchal control. The physical reconstruction of virginity speaks volumes about the psychic toll exerted on women who must perform chastity to secure social acceptance and marital prospects. One character reflects on her experience with bitter irony: “It's better to sew it up again than to die of shame” (Satrapi 76). The surgery becomes a grotesque solution to a problem manufactured by societal obsession with female purity. But on another level, it also becomes a metaphor for the silencing and stitching shut of female desire itself—made to appear intact while irreparably altered.

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection is particularly useful in this context. Kristeva defines the abject as that which disturbs identity, system, and order—especially as it pertains to bodily fluids, filth, or the maternal body (*Powers of Horror* 4). The female body, especially in the context of sexuality, is often treated as abject within patriarchal cultures—either fetishized or shamed. In *Embroideries*, women internalize this abjection when discussing sexual pleasure and genital surgery with embarrassment, even disgust. One woman recounts her breast augmentation by remarking: “Of course this idiot doesn't know that every time he kisses my breasts, he's kissing my ass” (Satrapi 67). The comment is comic, but it also conveys an acute sense of bodily alienation. Cosmetic surgery, in this case, becomes a grotesque attempt to regain the husband's attention, symbolizing how women must mutilate or mask their bodies to remain desirable.

This bodily alienation is not just individual but collective. The visual form of the graphic memoir enables Satrapi to depict facial expressions—grimaces, tears, smirks—that convey the affective charge beneath the stories. Affect, as Sara Ahmed argues in *The Cultural*

Politics of Emotion, is sticky; it attaches itself to bodies, spaces, and narratives, moving between subjects and creating affective economies (Ahmed 4). In *Embroideries*, shame, envy, desire, and frustration flow among the women, shaping the sociality of their gathering. One woman's humiliation becomes another's empathy; one's joy, another's resentment. This affective circulation turns the group into a living archive of emotional intelligence, built on shared wounds and collective survival.

Take, for example, the tale of Azzi, who is tricked into marrying a man in Switzerland based on romantic promises and false sophistication. Her story is marked by a series of affective turns—initial excitement, trust, betrayal, and finally, grief. When she learns that her husband has stolen her bridal jewels and abandoned her with a divorce notice, her emotional breakdown becomes a communal experience. The women comfort her, listen to her tears, and offer wry wisdom. Azzi's sister encourages her to “cry enough to get over it,” and Marjane's grandmother gently reminds her, “There's nothing better than talking” (Satrapi 97). Azzi's affect is not contained within her body; it moves through the room, altering the mood and deepening the bonds among the women. Such scenes testify to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “reparative reading”—the idea that queer or marginalized subjects often build affective networks as a form of healing and resistance (*Touching Feeling* 123).

Moreover, the circulation of affect among these women is not always healing. Envy and rivalry also surface. When one woman reveals her sexual satisfaction with her lover, another complains about her husband's lack of libido. When a story ends with empowerment, others reveal their own disappointments. This mixed affective register—what Sianne Ngai might call “ugly feelings”—prevents *Embroideries* from devolving into a feminist utopia (Ngai 3). Instead, it presents a textured emotional landscape, where solidarity is real but not unproblematic, and where emotional labor is a condition of communal knowledge-making. The recurrent motif of secrecy and the forbidden also deepens the affective intensity of the narrative. Stories are prefaced with lines like “Don't tell anyone,” or “This stays between us,” creating a structure of intimacy that is both fragile and powerful. The sharing of secrets generates what Foucault would call a “technology of confession,” a practice through which subjects produce themselves through speech under the gaze of an intimate other (*The History of Sexuality* 61). However, unlike confessions to a priest or psychiatrist—figures embedded in male-dominated institutions—these confessions circulate among women, displacing power from the vertical (institutional) to the horizontal (communal). The power of this structure lies not in judgment but in mutual recognition.

Satrapi also explores how women internalize cultural taboos around pleasure and bodily autonomy. One woman is shocked to learn that others have had premarital sex, saying, “And why is it the women who have to be virgins? Why suffer torment to satisfy an asshole?” (Satrapi 83). Her anger, though comedic, taps into a deep well of affective dissonance. The ideology of virginity, as the text repeatedly shows, is a psychic burden that leaves scars even after surgery. Women carry the affective residue of shame, fear, and inadequacy, all of which

are reinscribed through societal rituals such as arranged marriages, family honor, and male sexual entitlement.

The affective stakes are perhaps clearest in the visual depictions of silence and hesitation. Some of the most powerful panels in *Embroideries* contain no dialogue at all—just a pause, a frown, a downcast eye. These silences are not empty; they are full of affect. They signify moments when words fail, when desire exceeds articulation, or when shame momentarily chokes confession. Such visual cues force the reader to reckon with the limits of language and the surplus of emotion that accompanies it. As Kristeva argues, the unspeakable—the object—always hovers at the edge of speech, threatening to erupt but never fully contained (*Powers of Horror* 6).

Additionally, the medium of comics enables Satrapi to represent the fragmentation of subjectivity. Panel by panel, identities are reassembled, contested, or suspended. The act of “reading” a face, gesture, or story becomes a form of affective labor, requiring the reader to piece together the emotions that drive each woman’s narrative arc. This aesthetic strategy aligns with affect theory’s emphasis on “noncognitive” or pre-linguistic modes of knowledge—those feelings and impressions that resist rationalization but shape experience nonetheless (Gregg and Seigworth 2).

In *Embroideries*, the unspoken becomes a force of narration in itself. Whether it is the unspeakable trauma of a broken marriage, the shame of surgical manipulation, or the yearning for erotic fulfillment, these affectively charged silences generate a feminist epistemology rooted not in certainty but in sensation. This kind of knowledge is felt before it is understood, lived before it is articulated. It is, as Ahmed describes, “sticky knowledge”—adhering to bodies and histories, difficult to shed or ignore (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 11).

Thus, the interplay of repression, confession, and affect in *Embroideries* constructs a deeply textured account of womanhood in contemporary Iran. Desire is never singular; it is mediated by taboo, shaped by shame, and negotiated through community. Through psychoanalytic depth and affective surface, Satrapi renders the emotional life of women as complex, contradictory, and constitutive of feminist knowledge. It is in these moments—when a joke masks sorrow, when shame turns into laughter, when silence says everything—that *Embroideries* achieves its most powerful epistemological insights.

Stitching It Together: Toward a Feminist Epistemology

In *Embroideries*, Marjane Satrapi transforms casual storytelling, scandalous gossip, and humorous sexual anecdotes into a powerful feminist epistemology rooted in collective memory, affect, and embodied experience. Through her interweaving of embroidery, oral storytelling, domestic spaces, and bodily confessions, Satrapi constructs what Michel Foucault calls a “subjugated knowledge,” which challenges the dominant patriarchal, religious, and national archives (Foucault 81).

Rather than privileging linear, rational discourse, Satrapi's epistemology emerges through emotion, memory, and interpersonal dialogue. This aligns with feminist theorists like Donna Haraway, who insists all knowledge is "situated" and shaped by one's embodied and socialized context: "Situated knowledges are about communities, not isolated individuals" (Haraway 581). The women in *Embroideries* speak from their lived positions—as divorcees, widows, mothers, and lovers—forming a counter-archive of Iranian womanhood grounded in personal truth and emotional resonance.

Embroidery functions as both practice and metaphor in this counter-archive. While it alludes humorously to hymenoplasty, it also symbolizes how fragmented experiences are stitched into coherent narratives. These stories, though intimate and localized, collectively reflect structural oppression, shared resilience, and gendered survival. As Elaine Showalter notes, the goal of gynocriticism is to recover "a female literary tradition" within domestic and cultural expressions (Showalter 36). Satrapi literalizes this by using the comic form to "embroider" meaning visually—each panel stitched with facial expressions, pauses, and silence that carry epistemic weight.

This form of feminist knowledge is inherently communal. It arises from dialogue—women talking, laughing, confessing, contradicting—around the samovar. Here, Satrapi mirrors Patricia Hill Collins' assertion that "Black feminist epistemology values lived experience as a criterion of meaning" and affirms dialogue as essential to truth-telling (Collins 275). The women do not rely on external authorities but on one another, enacting knowledge through relational and emotional exchange.

This dialogic structure also acts as counter-memory, resisting state-controlled narratives about gender and sexuality. In stories of forced marriage, genital surgery, and infidelity, Satrapi exposes truths usually censored by religious or cultural norms. Foucault defines "subjugated knowledges" as those "disqualified as inadequate," yet they hold historical substance when surfaced outside official discourse (Foucault 81–82). *Embroideries* restores these suppressed experiences to cultural legitimacy.

Satrapi's feminist epistemology is also deeply spatial. The domestic spaces—sofas, beds, tea tables—become sites of emotional and intellectual exchange. Gaston Bachelard describes the home as a space of "intimate immensity," rich with psychological and affective potential (Bachelard 183). Within these private spaces, the women speak freely, safe from public judgment. The spatial intimacy enables epistemological intimacy—a relational, affective mode of knowing rooted in shared vulnerability.

The narrative structure of *Embroideries* mirrors the logic of oral storytelling and trauma. Rather than moving linearly, the memoir follows associative memory—looping, digressing, returning—mirroring how trauma and desire manifest. Judith Herman observes that trauma persists "in the unconscious, reappearing in intrusive images and sensations"

(Herman 37). The non-linearity thus reflects emotional truth more than chronological fact, aligning with the rhythms of affective recall.

Emotions are central to this epistemology—not as distractions but as knowledge themselves. Sara Ahmed argues, “Emotions do things. They align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (Ahmed 119). In *Embroideries*, emotions like grief, shame, joy, and anger create an affective commons through which feminist knowledge circulates. These shared emotional textures forge solidarity and deepen mutual understanding, becoming the fabric of epistemological production.

Humor, too, plays a critical role. Satrapi’s women laugh—not to trivialize their pain, but to reclaim it. As bell hooks asserts, laughter can be “a gesture of resistance” against oppressive systems (hooks 126). The humor in *Embroideries* disrupts patriarchal solemnity and allows the women to critique cultural absurdities while retaining their agency. Humor becomes both a survival mechanism and a critical tool in the feminist archive Satrapi constructs.

Yet this feminist epistemology is not idealized. The women contradict, tease, and judge one another. They are not a unified collective, but a complex community negotiating difference. This messiness enriches rather than undermines the knowledge-making process. As Nancy Fraser points out, feminist public spheres must accommodate “contestation” as well as consensus (Fraser 123). The women’s disagreements, like their agreements, produce knowledge through dialectical tension.

Ultimately, the memoir functions not only as remembrance but as **re-membering**—a reintegration of silenced voices, fragmented bodies, and buried histories. The metaphor of embroidery—stitching, mending, embellishing—reflects this reparative process. Just as torn fabric can be made whole, *Embroideries* suggests that feminist knowledge can piece together what patriarchy attempts to unravel. The stories, confessions, and laughs shared in Satrapi’s domestic setting comprise a radical epistemology of care and survival.

Importantly, Satrapi offers no blueprint for liberation. The women in *Embroideries* are not presented as heroic archetypes but as flawed, complicit, defiant, and enduring. Some find agency through cosmetic surgery, others through affairs or quiet resignation. These are not idealized feminists—they are real women making sense of oppressive structures with the limited tools available to them. This resonates with transnational feminism’s call to recognize localized forms of resistance, rather than impose universal narratives of emancipation.

In a global feminist moment marked by movements like #MeToo, Women’s Marches, and Iranian women’s uprisings, *Embroideries* reminds us that some of the most powerful acts of resistance begin in whispers, not war cries. It affirms that gossip can be theory, that laughter can be resistance, and that storytelling can be epistemology. These

everyday practices, especially among marginalized women, hold radical potential for transforming how we know, remember, and relate.

In conclusion, Satrapi's *Embroideries* is more than a graphic memoir; it is a feminist, affective, and political intervention into the production of knowledge. It enacts a tactile and intimate form of epistemology—crafted in textile metaphors, enacted in domestic spaces, and transmitted through emotional bonds. It invites readers and scholars alike to rethink what constitutes legitimate knowledge, to value emotion and embodiment, and to listen deeply to the whispered truths of women's lives. As Satrapi's panels suggest, the revolution may not always be televised—but it will be stitched, spoken, and survived.

Conclusion

Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries* reclaims gossip, oral storytelling, and embroidery as feminist modes of knowledge-making, crafting a counter-archive of lived female experience. Through informal conversations filled with humor, pain, and intimacy, Satrapi challenges patriarchal assumptions that dismiss women's talk as trivial. Instead, she asserts that women's private narratives are theoretical, resistant, and epistemologically valuable. This article has argued that Satrapi constructs a feminist epistemology through domestic spatiality, affect, and embodied storytelling. The memoir enacts, rather than simply represents, the reclamation of narrative authority. In doing so, it aligns with feminist thinkers like bell hooks and Sara Ahmed while speaking to the specific cultural and political contexts of Iranian women's lives.

Embroideries positions listening as a radical act. To hear these women's stories—about sexuality, trauma, and desire—is to validate their knowledge and resist systems that silence them. Emotions, gestures, silences, and laughter are not merely expressive—they are central to the epistemological labor. Satrapi's minimalist illustrations further enhance this affective storytelling, allowing the visual form to capture nuance that transcends textual explanation.

Moreover, the memoir disrupts traditional notions of what constitutes an archive. Here, knowledge resides in bodies, textiles, shared spaces, and whispered confidences. It refuses the universalizing gaze of liberal feminism, presenting instead a textured portrait of resistance shaped by cultural specificity. These women are not idealized revolutionaries but complex individuals navigating a deeply patriarchal society through everyday acts of survival.

In a world attuned to feminist resistance—from #MeToo to Iranian protests—*Embroideries* reminds us that knowledge often simmers in kitchens before it erupts in the streets. It is a political, affective, and epistemological intervention that demands we listen—not only with our ears, but with our whole selves.

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