
Subversion of Patriarchy in Marjane Satrapi's Graphic Novel *Embroideries*
Nandini Maity & Priya Das

Link : https://santiniketansahityapath.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/10_Nandini-Maity-Priya-Das.pdf

Abstract: Women fiction writers, throughout the world portrayed the manifold issues such as “patriarchy”, “gender inequality”, and “sexual objectification” in their works. Besides liberating women from the age- old constrains of the society, these writers tried hard to subvert the stereotypical gender roles and images of women. This paper aims to explore that how Marjane Satrapi subverts the images of Muslim women framed by Islamic socio- cultural practices in her graphic novel *Embroideries*. It focuses on how Satrapi’s *Embroideries* seeks to give voice to a particular group of people, especially women, who have been previously silenced by the nationalist historiographies of Islamic oppression. Satrapi recovers and celebrates in her silence breaking graphic novel *Persepolis* and then *Embroideries* the experiences of the Iranian women, and her own, previously unacknowledged in the historical meta-narratives and always marginalized in the official history of Iran.

Key words: *Gender, Graphic Novel, Gynocriticism, Patriarchy, Stereotype*

The term Gynocritique emphasizes the role of woman as a writer. It attempts to spot the zone of departure between male and female ingenuity and creativity. In this context, Satrapi not only questions the male / female hierarchized binary but also through the innovative format of graphic novel, based on visual and verbal interface, she questions the word / image hierarchized binary. This study focuses on how Satrapi’s *Embroideries* seeks to bestow voice to women, who have been previously silenced by the nationalist historiographies of Islamic oppression. Satrapi, in her novel shows a completely new viewpoint of the image of several progressive Muslim women who covertly rebel against the traditional practices and finally emerges successfully to establish her identity despite being veiled. It pulls down the veil of a culture which forms an essential part of the world but about which we know very little. In *Embroideries*, the picture of women in veil rejects the stereotype of the Muslim voiceless women because Satrapi’s female figures are humane and full of character and individualism, even in ‘hijab’(veil).

The writer aims to destabilize the sinister and overtly vicious and patriarchal manner with which history, culture and women are sought to be conquered. Through her graphic novel, she manages to reduce man, his potent aspirations, his excessive greed and his defective social order, the price for which is paid by the freedom and even the precious lives of the masses, especially women to nothing but pretence and buffoonery. A detailed study of Satrapi’s work would bring into limelight the subject matter of the female authors under consideration and their attempt to re- write all that they deem as unduly historicized and canonized. Appropriating power to articulate, Satrapi has the ability to question the gendered identities and also the roles that have been deliberately imposed on women no matter where they belong to.

Marjane Satrapi's Graphic Novel Embroideries

She offers an alternative version of what was already in tradition and thereby she manages to problematize history and amend it. This process of amending the history becomes far more intriguing when the genre adopted is not a traditional poetry or prose but a graphic novel which itself is comparatively a much contemporary genre, itself is in a state of flux.

The graphic novel Embroideries depicts Satrapi and a group of women getting together to spend an entire afternoon conversing freely about love, sex and vagaries of men in Iran. Maurin Freely view about Embroideries in Guardian is as follows:

A daring and brilliantly calculated illumination of a secret space...Though Embroideries is not a continuation of the Persepolis story, it sits at the heart of the same world- a brutally policed society where an extraordinary rich and inventive culture still prevails, if only behind closed doors, where women are wildly subversive, funny, free- thinking and sexy (Freely, Guardian).

Embroideries, exactly like the two well known volumes of her famous graphic memoir Persepolis, deals with her, her family and the women folk of Iran and particularly shows in an explicit and funny way, how women survive and flourish in an orthodox culture that regards them as second class citizens. As soon as they are free of the need to play their respective roles as wives and daughters, the women drop their veils, let their hair down and talk freely about their love lives and sexual experiences. It seems as if each woman present there has her own strange stories about the men, in their lives to share it with others whether it involves neglectful and indifferent boyfriends, arranged marriages or just miserable worthless lovers. The women share one captivating horror story after another of cheaters, psychopaths, dirty old men etc. The most important female character worth noticing in her novels is the character of her grandmother whose full potential is perceived in the Embroideries. In her novel series, Persepolis, Marji's grandmother was the ultimate guiding force behind her success or failures. In Embroideries, which, in the truest sense of the term, is a deeply insightful women- centric graphic novel, she takes the center of the stage. The readers witness the strength and unity of this group of women in his confined space where they freely speak out their minds to one another giving vent to their voice and feelings towards the patriarchal society that would otherwise have remained suppressed. While each of them discloses horrific or outrageously funny secrets about premarital sex, infidelity, heartbreaks, conjugal relations, there happens to be no condescension or any harsh opinion passed. These women have learned the skill of developing a coordinated association of a coping means to defend their identity, rights and individuality from the inflexible patriarchal order. And in get- togethers such as we find here encompassing the whole length of this graphic novel, Embroideries, the women sought out a way of acquiring a cathartic relief and the readers begins to realize the heterogeneity of the experiences of women which challenges the Western monolithic discourses encircling Muslim women.

There are numerous other characters such as the muchmarried aunt who differentiates between the marriages of convenience and those of love. Yet another woman shocks everybody in the group by revealing that she has never seen a male organ even though she has given birth to four children (all daughters). Irrational and perverse male demands are frequently put to shame which reaches its climax when a close friend of Marjane's grandmother confesses that she, by having pieces of her buttocks removed,

gets a breast augmentation at the request of her husband and becomes successful in drawing his attention:

At present, my breasts are my husband's sole object of attention...Of course this idiot doesn't know that every time he kisses my breasts, it's actually my ass he's kissing... (Satrapi n. p).

It is quite certain that the recurring topic happens to be virginity, the losing of it, the importance of virginity to marriage and the wedding night faking of it. The very title of this graphic novel- *Embroideries*, alludes to the well-known infamous practice of surgically remaking the hymen in order to fake virginity. These women pay no heed to the responsibility forcefully thrust upon the female body by the patriarchal society to be a container for family honour. These women enjoy the freedom to love a man, or men whom they prefer, they do everything as their men counterparts and get 'embroidered' again before marriage and thereby fool the frail, phony expectations of virginity. These women, having gathered at Marjane's grandmother's house vehemently condemn these 'essential' virtues that are demanded of women by the patriarchal society and also imagines a time in future when virginity will not be an essential requirement and such faking of it through 'embroideries' will no longer be required.

In one of the shocking discussions in the text, the women speak against the merits of 'embroidery', the Iranian rendering for the process of restoring virginity (seemingly). Such glimpses of an unfamiliar world make Satrapi's work unparallel and unique to the non- Iranian readers. Satrapi excels at recreating animated and exciting characters and circumstances out of the hazy memories of her childhood days. What becomes apparent out of the course of this novella is a kind of chamber work in the fashion in which the women chat with each other in order to experience their place in the phallogocentric world. With *Embroideries*, Satrapi has emerged successful to create a very impressive woman comic. It centers exclusively around women characters, examining minutely the ways they share their aspects of lives unique to sex and presents their humorous tales in a way that displays the ebb and flow of their lives as women of Iran.

Sometimes these sensational and at other times serious stories are an obvious reproach to the Iranian theocracy and further any orthodox right-wing Iranian government or organization which assumes that merely by enforcing their will they can keep women from acting on their sexual impulses. In this novel Satrapi presents a group of women across the age spectrum, living in a claustrophobic world of one of the most sexually oppressive governments. Yet many of them share stories of sexual escapades, having premarital sex, a number of affairs even to the extent of being someone's mistresses. And these women seem least bothered about discussing such topics blatantly. A detailed analysis however reveals how Iran's chauvinism and its repressive government and society have put a limit on women's choices. With a few exceptions, these women define themselves, their very existence, in relation to the men in their respective lives. Though present as off-stage characters and treated with derision, these men remain the pivotal point around which the lives of these women revolve. Their anxieties and worries, mostly among the younger women in the gathering are all built upon their endeavors to be an ideal Iranian woman — pure, chaste and virginal until their marriage, and an obedient, meek and dutiful wife afterwards. If these women fail to make right choices in love,

Satrapi is of the view that it is largely due to the government, society and culture that continue to view the women folk as chattel. The desperate endeavors to preserve virginity or at least to retain the illusion of purity through embroidery becomes the sole motif of these young girls in order to please the husbands into thinking she is a virgin on their wedding night.

The need to define oneself through the relation with the loved one is not a very alien concept even to the much modern western women. But the extreme lengths to which these Iranian women go in order to hide their sexual indelicacies connotes a fear of social shame and of being a social outcaste in the long run is not overtly portrayed in the text. These women, living in a phallogocentric world are forced to adopt sly means to acquire a bit of power, respect and love. As for example Marjane talks about a woman who resorted to visiting a sorceress in order to get her man to commit. Yet another woman does plastic surgery in order to attract her husband.

Taking into account that plastic surgery has mainly been an obsession of the western world, Satrapi explains that the women in Iran have taken it to the extreme in order to assert their power as a gender but in the process of doing so, they unknowingly reaffirm the possibility of turning into a sex object. But it can also be seen that as the society, the government and the misogynist men have done several wrongs to women, they have eventually sought out a way to turn the tables on them by showing their unwillingness to submit to the lust of men. What the Iranian women in Embroiderie sare trying to do is to construct a domestic matriarchy, a room of their own in this patriarchal society.

The readers worldwide are not presented with a picture of a static Iranian society rather one in which the women are active participants in the social, political and religious reforms. Satrapi's reworking of memoir in the form of the graphic novel, Embroideries, upsets the compartmentalization and categorization based on gender discrimination of Iranian female identity and female voice as one in direct opposition to the modern western female identity, portraying one as devoiced and suppressed by the patriarchy and the religious authorities and the other as the embodiment of individualism and absolute freedom.

Reference:

1. Daniel Elton L. and Ali Akbar Mahdi, 'Culture and Customs of Iran', Green Wood Press: London, 2006, Print.
2. Gamble Sarah, 'The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post-Feminism', Routledge: London, 2006. Print.
3. Sharma Priya Raj, 'Representation of Muslim Women in Marjane Satrapi' Persepolis', IJHSS 2.3 (2013): 1-8, Web. 02 June, 2014
4. Satrapi Marjane, 'Embroiders', USA: Pantheon, 2006, Print.

About the author: Nandini Maity, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Akui Kamalabala Women's College, Bankura & Priya Das, Ph.D. Scholar (JJT University), Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kabi Sukanta Mahavidyalaya, Hooghly.