

October 2022

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### Recommended Citation

Choudhury, Jharna (2022) "Telling Trauma: Resisting through Embroidery Stories," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 24: Iss. 6, Article 21.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss6/21>

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## Telling Trauma: Resisting through Embroidery Stories

By Jharna Choudhury<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

As a contemporary mode of subversion, the art of needlework has been revived from the category of the merely “aesthetic” to the expansive category of the “powerful.” Freestyle hand embroidery enables the socially disabled women of South Asia and other regions of the world to vent their trauma within the walls of their households. The select set of embroideries displayed here is expressionistic in art-style, presenting three micro-stories on bride burning, female foeticide, and Eve-teasing, as part of my personal project named “Embroidery Stories.”

*Keywords:* Embroidery, Trauma, Female Foeticide, Bride Burning, Eve-teasing

### Introduction

The scope of embroidery is immense if this art is studied as a narrative form, beyond its obvious decorative presentation. The scholarship that reads into the prospects of archiving personal and collective histories through embroidery stories extends to samplers reflecting crisis situations like immigration, violence, social adaptation, or dynamic changes. Embroidery is an intertextual art form, and it can be used as a tool in confessional or autobiographical writings or in documenting alternative histories.

Cloth-stories have been framed varyingly as “memory work” (Giunta & Sciorra, 2015, p. 4), and “a weapon of resistance for women” (Parker, 2019, p. xix). Historical examples of such tapestries are found in the indigenous Hmong community of China and Southeast Asia that “testify to the combat, destruction, and loss of life” (Peterson, 1988, p. 6) during their exodus. Other examples are the pictorial representations of war in the Afghan rugs and those of warriors in the Ao Naga shawls of Northeast India. Storytelling is also intrinsic to the traditional Kantha stitching of West Bengal and Bangladesh. It can be reiterated that “traumatic experiences could be stitched onto cloth” (Segalo, 2018, p. 2). In the words of Rozsika Parker, the concept of “subversive stitch” (Parker, 2019, p. xix) can unshackle the art of embroidery from its traditional feminization and solely “aesthetic” performativity. The use of threads as a contemporary narrative medium has the power to “tell” and “show” trauma, not only as therapy but also as a socio-political voice of resistance.

### The Necessity of Embroidery Storytelling

The practice of embroidery has been widely associated with slow-fashion and intergenerational emotion. In the contemporary world of fast-fashion, hand embroidery opens ventures of upcycling clothes with patchwork designs, hyperrealism, experimentation with

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stitches, and the use of exciting techniques using mediums like reused plastic, wood, metals, etc. Its eco-friendliness goes hand-in-hand with its capacity as a craft to be customized according to the needs of the creator, buyer, audience, environment, and purpose. From the adaptation of anime scenes in canvas shoes to hairstyle designs, from architectural images to realistic landscapes, from bridal attires to Covid face masks, from hoop wall hangings to calendars, the acceptance of this “slow art” has been a key factor in indicating its impact. It is deliberately “slow,” and this embodies the actuality of its long-term effect on human lives.

With varied types of stitches like satin, running, chain, bullion knot, whipped web or darning, the embroiderer aims to create natural textures. The intention is not necessarily to mend a fabric but also to mend the mind, instilling lessons of patience and mental absorption, or *dhyana*. I have been studying the process of expression of traumatic and claustrophobic feelings. I call it “release” through the medium of threads. Embroidery is cathartic and communicative. Those negated emotions or unarticulated thoughts that take the form of nightmares and imagination in extremis when threaded out on a canvas act as meditation or medication. It is significant to make queries about the “domestication of female ghost” (Karmakar & Pal, 2022, p. 3) and challenge the patriarchal shackles that shape ghosts out of female sexual desires and everyday voices. I am focused on threadworks about unconventional themes like mental health, disease, body positivity, and maternal and filial raptures. The motive behind such a rendition is to allow the body to narrate the deepest and darkest emotions. In the process, the body heals, speaks, and re-historicizes both mundane and serious lived experiences.

### Art and Description

I have chosen three embroideries that inscribe the internal trauma of Indian women, threaded and circulated for awareness.

**Figure 1: The Bride (Size: 4 x 5.2 inches)**



“The Bride” (Figure 1) is a minimalistic thread rendition of domestic violence and bride-burning from the demands of dowry and other gender-related issues such as childlessness. Here, the face set ablaze shows how the female identity is marred and the voice crushed. Despite Section 304B of the Indian Penal Code, which has taken strict measures against dowry deaths, violence of this sort is a prominent headline in everyday journalism. This embroidery screams out, with the dismantled female face as a highlight, where a woman is subject to torture and policing from the masked society. The base fabric is a brighter and more positive shade (yellow), which is a paradox to the precariousness of the female body. The nakedness contrasts with the use of gold bangles and gold anklets. While the body occupies a zone of void, the gold weighs it down, signifying commodification.

**Figure 2: Popped Out (Size: 8 x 8 inches)**



Figure 2, titled “Popped Out,” uses the mixed medium of threads and acrylic colours to voice the trauma of female foeticide. From abandonment in *nullahs* (drains) and roadside shrubs



due to negligence in the family after their birth, the problem of unwanted girl children in India is a growing concern, despite the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act (PCPNDT) of 1994. This embroidery projects the internal conflict of a biological mother, where social pressure disturbs her mental health. The symbolic outburst questions the tenderness associated with the idea of a mother, where the procreative takes a fatal turn. This micro-story is an internal scream—of a child being in bondage from the foetus stage and that of the constraints imposed on an adult-body about the “right” kind of birthable “product.” The concept’s ideation deliberately attacks the viewer’s complacency on the subject. This is expressed by producing the effect of horror, creating a social spectre.

**Figure 3: Hyenas on the Road (Size: 4 x 8 inches)**



Figure 3, “Hyenas on the Road,” is an outline embroidery (with a comic-strip look) that figures the lolled-out and grotesque tongues of lustful “predators,” deliberately stitched in striking red. Acts of eve-teasing and sexual abuse on the road are so common in India that it is considered a social malfunction. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, No. 32, 2012, legally protects the rights of children in such precarious situations. This embroidery embodies the trauma of a girl-child, numb in the face of harassment. The missing mouth of the child is indicative of her silent suffering and humiliation. The running “a” is a non-negotiable cry. Her teardrops flow on the road, and this image sketches a direct picture of the unfortunate commonplace abuse that needs to be rectified. Cases of depression from inappropriate touching are frequent in India, and this is an escalating problem.

Using a modulation of concrete and abstract bodies, my embroideries project crime and trauma. These artworks have been circulating on social media handles (Instagram, Facebook). In the process, the message reaches the audience, and the visual impact largely lies in the shock value that daily and ordinary realities can create. By using and experimenting with the century-old medium of hand embroidery, I try to voice the events of violence and its aftermath—an invisible mental and social disability. It essentially rewrites male mythologies and indulges in resisting through loose ends of the threads, tight knots, and expressive stitching. Contemporary embroidery storytelling empowers women by putting common household items to use, creating a link between art and real-life struggles, and, as I say, “releasing” pent-up emotions. From a cultural point of view, these embroideries can be seen as voicing national and regional gender issues and personal crises. With the vibrant threads and base materials, both beauty and terror are captured in effect. The functionality of embroideries expands their creativity and enables a woman to become a narrator and to make a difference through storytelling. Such reflection is essential to change one’s approach to life and social rights. By entwining threads with narratives, one can wander through multiple versions of the past, present, and future.

### Conclusion

Keeping in touch with the lineage of historicizing through threads, my project “Embroidery Stories” is a storytelling platform dedicated to the socially reduced and suppressed marginal voices (especially of women). This space is for exteriorizing internal trauma or trauma that cannot be seen—a trauma that meets with disbelief, which is often called “hyper” in terms of expression.

I raise the question: why can’t embroidery be affective, narrative, and subversive as an art form? If I thread, my needle should make a point!

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