

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM

# OF HOMES AND THE WORLDS:

## Women, violence, and the domestic space

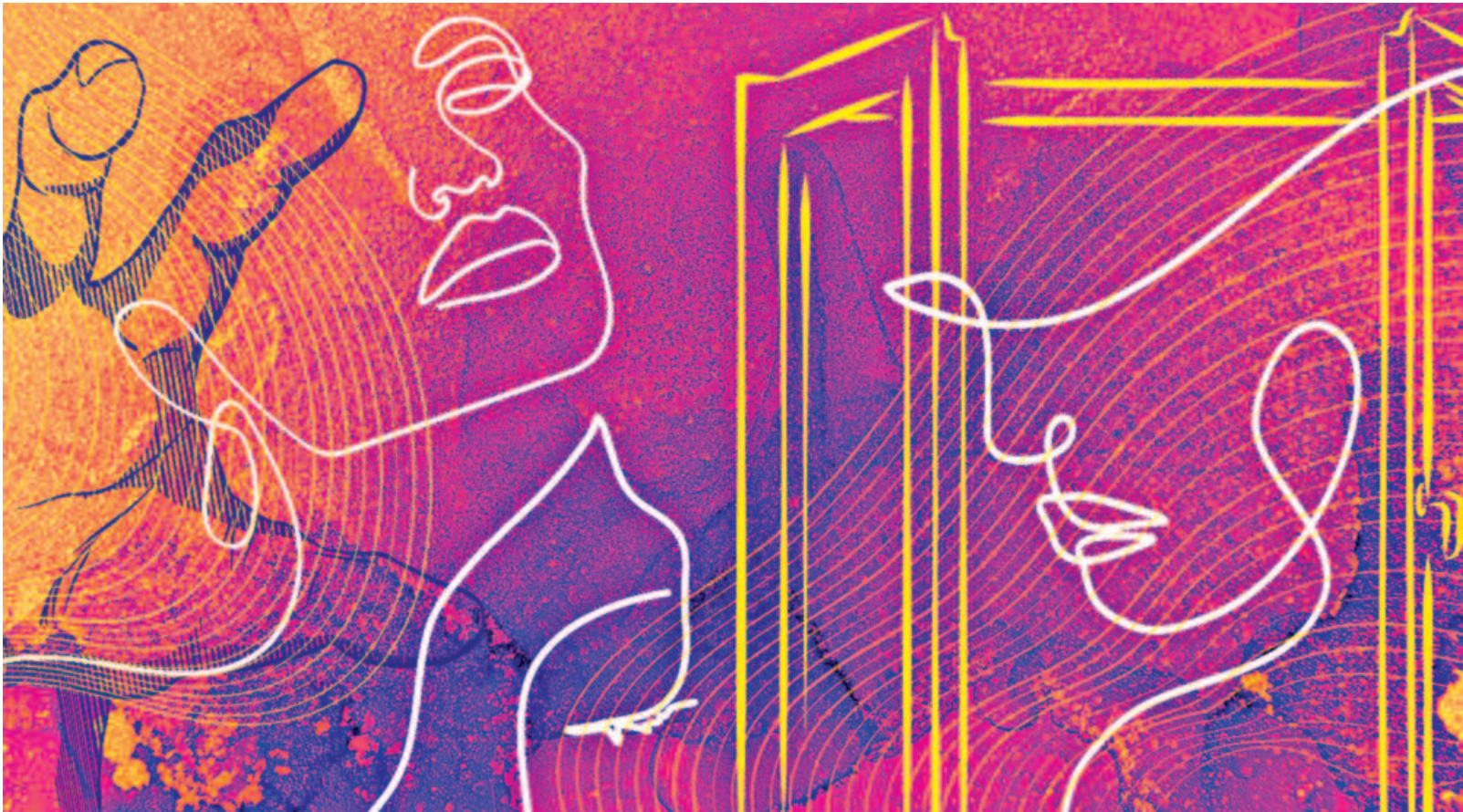


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

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November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, marks the beginning of 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence which goes until December 10, Human Rights Day. Here at DS Books, we pondered long and hard over the kind of books that help us process, understand, and mull over the complex subject of gendered violence. GBV is a complex and layered issue and when done right, fictional accounts often lay bare the horrors and intricacies of the subject with nuance and care. For a country still reeling from the public violence of July unleashed upon its citizens and the renewed vigour with which its female citizens have been subjected to harassment and violence in recent months, it seemed, to us at least, urgent to turn inward—to the site of private gender-based violence. For every day, our newspapers report grisly tales of domestic violence, of homes being unsafe spaces for women and girls, of girls being forced to leave home, of a woman's perpetual search

for a home that is her own. For these 16 days then, here is a list of novels and a short story that address the complex interplay of violence and empowerment in the domestic space and the ways in which women navigate its confining and often liberating potential.

**Subarnalata**  
**Ashapurna Devi**  
**Mitra & Ghosh Pvt Ltd., 1967**  
This novel follows the story of *Subarnalata*, a girl born into a middle-class Bengali family of the 20th century. As a daughter, Subarna is expected to remain confined to the domestic sphere, with limited freedom and autonomy. She is initially a naive and idealistic girl who dreams of a more independent life but as she grows up, she finds herself caught in the web of marital and maternal responsibilities, all the while grappling with her personal desires and aspirations. The novel traces Subarna's life unfolding in her domestic spaces—first, in her maternal home, and then, in her in-laws'.

While Subarna's domestic life represents limitations, it also becomes a site for her personal growth. Here,

Subarna exhibits a rare show of agency, in questioning the restrictions placed upon her and on middle-class women as a whole, who are expected to be meek and domesticated. She reflects on how the women at her in-laws' are all happily confined within the four walls of the kitchen: "They don't know the taste of the open air, don't know how to read books, or remember prose", she thinks to herself. Later we see that she, too, dedicates her life to raising her daughter Bakul and taking care of the family. She never, however, loses her voice to the oppressive forces of patriarchy and fights to gain equal rights for her daughter, herself, and the women in her household, uplifting the place of women in society.

*Subarnalata* is a fascinating tale of equity because Ashapurna Devi shows, through Subarna, an intellectual and emotional evolution taking place in the context of domesticity while the character gradually seeks ways to carve out her own space within the family unit. This space is not always physical in the novel but is more about claiming an emotional and intellectual space for

herself within the constraints of her environment.

**The Bluest Eye**  
**Toni Morrison**  
**Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970**  
Early on in this classic tale about Black girlhood, racial self-loathing, and racial resistance, the novelist makes a distinction between being "put out" and being "outdoors". "Put out", for Morrison has some saving grace—here one goes somewhere else. But if one is "outdoors", one has no place to go back to. The child protagonist at the heart of the novel has been left outdoors by her father who has done the unfathomable and unspeakable twice: Raped his own child and left the family outdoors after burning down the home. For a black family, a home is what stands between having a life and not having one during the Great Depression-era Ohio. Morrison's depiction of the Breedlove's family home, a home reeking of neglect and joylessness, of broken furniture and memorylessness, of physical and psychical violence—further testifies to the link she draws among poverty, gendered violence, and the domestic space. That Pecola's mother painstakingly, adoringly cares for the white household where she works as a domestic worker and neglects her own home and children demonstrate that "home" in the novel is both a fantasy and a site of terror. The domestic landscape thus compels us to rethink socially-sanctioned ideals of domesticity particularly with regards to black girls and indeed, their mothers.

**Nervous Conditions**  
**Tsitsi Dangarembga,**  
**The Women's Press, 1988**  
In his introduction to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (François Maspero, 1961), Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that "The status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonised people with their consent." An exquisite study of gendered division of labour, race, coloniality and a coming-of-age, Dangarembga's novel is set in the 1960s postcolonial Rhodesia and follows Tambu, the female protagonist who at the opening of the novel is not unhappy to hear of her brother's passing. As the girl child who has so far been denied education and restricted to doing domestic chores, Tambu is pleased when her influential uncle decides she should replace her dead brother at the missionary school where he used to study. Thus begins Tambu's foray

into spaces that has historically been made inaccessible to her. A product of the colonial encounter and bound by older notions of patriarchy as well as the changing socio-cultural norms of postcolonial ideals, the domestic space is a heavily contested site in the novel. On one hand, central female characters face extreme marginalisation in decision-making processes and experience sexual and gendered violence in homes. On the other, women such as Lucia and Maiguru challenge notions of sexual autonomy and female respectability.

**Sultana's Dream**  
**Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain**  
**The Indian Ladies Magazine, 1905**  
Set in 20th century Bengal, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's seminal text, "Sultana's Dream", constructs an imagined community where women are not necessarily given, but rather demand and take access to power and education from the men who ruled before them. As a result of this flipping of the script, where men are subjugated and secluded to the zenana to which women where previously relegated, and women instead tend to the intellectual, administrative, and judicial matters of the land, "Sultana's Dream" is popularly hailed as a feminist techno-utopia. However, Hossain's Ladyland perhaps lends itself less to this utopian conceptualisation on account of it being a new world order built primarily along gendered lines; its subversions can default to gender essentialism, ultimately reproducing many of the same repressive structures it had sought to counter. Instead, through its satirical meditation on the occupation of domestic space and the world beyond, "Sultana's Dream" serves as a stark reminder of the absurdity of a society governed and rationalised on the basis of gender, pointing out and deconstructing misogynistic arguments popularly deployed against the empowerment of women and their participation in society.

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### THE SHELF

## Storytelling, struggles, and reimagining identity

Regardless of context, or the pain you feel in being a woman, or the knot that tightens at the back of your throat—writing, it seems, is the only true liberation. Whether you're telling your own story or of another, writing has the power to illuminate and heal.

NAZIFA RAIDAH

Patriarchy would have you believe that women are inherently complicated—creatures who must be defined, boxed in, or reduced to stereotypes. In the technological age, social media only amplifies this, offering up an endless parade of idealised women, shaped by external expectations, each one conforming to society's narrow view of who they should be. But the true complexity lies not in these simplistic definitions, but in the myriad struggles women face every day. And I refuse to reduce this to the mere word "struggle," for all people encounter challenges.

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Writers over time have shed light on how to navigate around some key tools of patriarchy. In it, they teach us how to combat the negativity that a largely male-controlled culture imposes on us women in the guise of being our saviour.

**A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind**  
**Siri Hustvedt**  
**Simon & Schuster, 2016**  
Writing about women starts with a dismantling—a breaking away from the male gaze to reconsider how women are seen and represented. *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women* is a compass for this transformation. It weaves together art, philosophy, psychology, and literature, probing how identity is shaped by being observed. Hustvedt dives into the philosophy of perception, drawing from minds like Immanuel Kant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to untangle how our inner worlds construct the meanings we attach to what we see.

Hustvedt doesn't just question traditional frames of thought; she dissects them, challenging the audience to explore how any gaze—male or

otherwise—carves out definitions of identity. What makes this work exceptional is its ability to spin a mosaic of ideas that invite readers to push past the usual confines of understanding. How does she accomplish this? Hustvedt bravely folds her personal truths into her intellectual pursuits, creating work that is as raw as it is sharp.

For writers, this is a lesson in creative risk-taking. Hustvedt shows us what happens when we abandon silos, allowing disparate concepts to collide and spark innovation. By stepping into this space of possibility, writers can create work that not only challenges but resonates—work that forges connection while cracking open new ways of seeing.

**Anthropocene Feminism**  
**Richard Grusin (editor)**  
**University of Minnesota Press, 2017**  
*Anthropocene Feminism* seeks to shed light on how exploitation is made. In an age dominated by human impact, the book asks tough questions, like how does the same system that exploits the Earth also oppress women? How can we shift from exploitation to care and responsibility? Additionally, the book reminds us that climate change and resource depletion hit hardest in marginalised communities, especially women. It urges writers to bring these voices to the forefront, to critique the systems—patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism—that perpetuate both gender inequality and environmental destruction, consequently, priming our systems to create an environment for exploitation.

This book pushes writers towards rethinking how we tell stories—moving beyond human-centric narratives, exploring the agency of animals, plants, and ecosystems. The writing advice that is perhaps at the heart of this book is weaving a connection into the heart of every narrative. The result is something that doesn't just critique the world as it is but helps to imagine what it could become.

**Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into**



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

**Opportunity for Women Worldwide**  
**Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn**  
**Knopf, 2009**  
*Half the Sky* by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn is the kind of read that grabs you by the shoulders and takes you straight into the lives of people who have endured and defied the worst the world can throw at them. The reader is introduced to complex characters in even more complex contexts, who are their own knights in shining armour and this is perhaps what sets the book apart.

Kristof and WuDunn don't offer any easy fixes to the problems that confront these very real people because there aren't any. Instead, they ask readers to grapple with the complexity. "How can you talk about gender-based violence without addressing poverty? How can you tackle poverty without looking at healthcare, education, and

social norms?" they ask, and argue that solutions need to be holistic and context-specific.

For writers, this book serves as an important reminder—to never simplify messy realities. It compels you to explore nooks and crannies and acknowledge nuances, and helps you build an understanding that you don't need to spoon-feed the reader to handle complexity in your writing. Rather, it's in this messiness that the most meaningful insights emerge. *Half the Sky* jogs our memory with the simple fact: that stories are meant to transform, not just inform. So it works as an invitation to not just tell stories—but telling the ones that make people care. Isn't that the point of writing, after all?

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