

ESSAY

# FROM WHISPERS TO ROARS: The changing voice of women's fiction

From Wollstonecraft's rights to Kang's rebellions, women's writing has moved the battle from the public sphere to the private body



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

NAZMUN AFRAD SHEETOL

I've always been fascinated by what stories can tell us about the inner lives (what men like to call the private sphere) of women throughout history. As I took a little dive into women's fiction from the last few centuries, what struck me most was the dramatic shift in what female authors said—or could say. It was like the difference between a whispered conversation in a drawing room and a roar in an empty space. This piece explores the literary works of female authors who moved from writing about social rights to exploring private desires,

hunger, and the body.

The early feminist writers' battle was for a place in the world, in education, legal rights, and being seen as human beings. Their writings desired recognition and equal footing in society. Moving into the 21st century, the conversation has turned inwards and downwards, into the body itself. Contemporary novels don't just ask for a room of one's own; they boldly explore what a woman does in that room alone—her hunger, desire for intimacy, and often other taboos. This is the journey from the societal to the carnal.

The first wave of feminism can be

dated from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, beginning with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention and culminating in the 19th Amendment in 1920 in the United States. This wave primarily focused on securing fundamental rights for women, including property rights, education, and most notably, the right to vote, which we call suffrage. The earliest work of feminist texts is considered to be Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), who is considered the pioneer of feminism, or what we know today as 'liberal feminism'. If you still have not figured it out, Mary Wollstonecraft

was the mother of Mary Shelley, who wrote the famous Gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818). The earliest works here couldn't tackle bodily desire head-on because the social price was too high. Instead, they masterfully laid the groundwork by arguing for a woman's right to a mind and the foundation of a self. Wollstonecraft's work is pioneering literature. Her argument was revolutionary yet practical: giving women a proper education will make them capable partners in life and society. While she doesn't talk about physical desire explicitly, her manifesto is about desire in a broader sense, which is hunger for knowledge, purpose, and a life beyond the separate spheres. By insisting women were rational beings, she was quietly challenging the idea that they were merely bodies designed for reproduction and pleasure.

Jane Austen, in her book *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), is a sharp critique of a system that forced women to marry for security, not love, in Regency England. Austen's genius was her subtlety. Elizabeth Bennet's desire is for intellectual and emotional compatibility; her rejection of Mr. Collins and initial rejection of Darcy are considered acts of profound boldness—a radical idea at the time. Even the disastrous little sister Lydia Bennet shows a different side. Her "desire" is reckless and physical, leading to scandal. Austen uses her as a warning of what happens when a woman's hunger for excitement isn't approved by society's strict rules. The message was clear: a woman's personal desires, even misguided ones, had immense power to disrupt the entire social order.

Virginia Woolf's seminal essay work *A Room of One's Own* (1929) acts as a crucial bridge between the two eras. She made the direct link between material reality and creative freedom. The "room" is both literal and metaphorical. It represents the financial independence and the private space a woman needs to think, create, and explore her inner world. She moved the conversation from

"we need rights" to "we need a space to be creative, to be our full, complex selves." She opened the door for the next generation to walk through and start exploring what those 'selves' truly wanted.

This foundational need for a room—a sanctuary for the self—found a powerful and poignant echo in the Bengali literary world through the work of Selina Hossain. In her landmark novel *Onnhubon* (1987), she builds an entire inner universe for her protagonist, Moyna. The universe is set against the strictures of rural Bangladeshi society. Moyna's battle is not for the vote or property rights, but for what can be termed the suffrage of the soul: the right to her own intellectual passions, profound emotional attachments, and a unique way of seeing the world. Her fierce intelligence and emotional depth chart a "hunger" that is entirely her own—a craving for knowledge and self-expression that defines her interiority. *Onnhubon* carefully details the work of building an "inner room" brick by brick, long before one might own a physical door. Selina Hossain, like Virginia Woolf, moved the story inward, proving that the space to nurture a complex and desiring self was the essential next frontier to intellectual freedom.

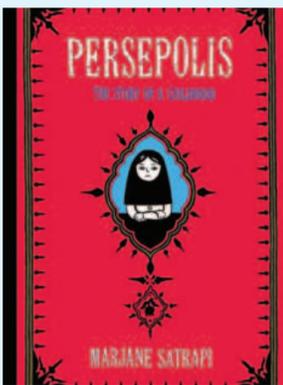
With that inner space claimed in literature, however tentatively, the stage was set for the contemporary exploration of what fills it. The authors of the 21st century did not just walk through Woolf's door; they began to document, with terrifying and glorious detail, exactly what a woman does in that room alone.

This is an excerpt. Read the full essay on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature's* websites.

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## THE SHELF

# 7 graphic novels to read on International Women's Day



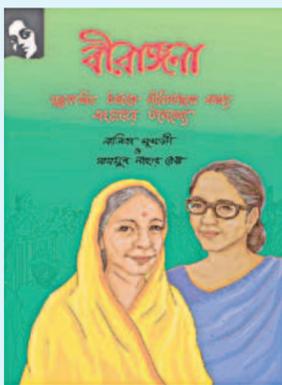
TIASHA IDRAK, SABRINA SAZZAD

Graphic novels or comics are a unique medium where art and literary prowess converge through both prose and imagery and bring them to life, thus giving the space for authors and artists to illustrate their stories. Sometimes these stories directly critique patriarchy, and feature feminist themes; sometimes they simply offer a mirror and the chance to reflect on women's everyday struggles.

This International Women's Day, we feature author-artists who choose to tell the stories of everyday women—their dreams, obstacles, and their constant battle with patriarchy and how deeply it is woven into the fibre of our society.

**Persepolis**  
Marjane Satrapi  
Pantheon Books, 2000

An autobiographical graphic novel, *Persepolis* recounts the story of Marjane throughout her life as she grows up against the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. With evocative black and white comic strips, Satrapi's story illustrates gender discrimination and the loss of women's autonomy under patriarchal rule. Her struggle for autonomy amid the political crisis in Iran, and later the exclusion, the loneliness she faces in Europe



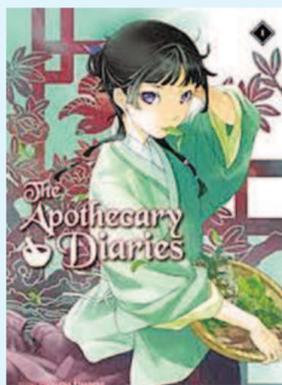
as an immigrant illustrates her experiences in a manner that feels universal.

**Birangona: Towards Ethical Testimonies of Sexual Violence During Conflict**  
Nayanika Mookharjee, Najmun Nahar Keya  
Nokta, 2019

When Labony, a school student needs to complete an assignment on her family's memories of the Liberation War of 1971, she hears of her grandmother, Rehana's account of sexual violence during the war. Her grandmother recounts the horrifying ordeal and the stories of the Birangonas slowly unfold. This graphic novel is written in accessible format centring conversations around representing the stories and experiences of the Birangona women with empathy and nuance.

**The Apothecary Diaries**  
Natsu Hyuga, Touko Shino and Minoki Kurata (Illustrator)  
MontShogakukan, 2017

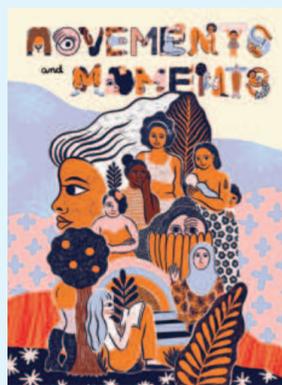
Based on the light novels by Natsu Hyuga, *The Apothecary Diaries* has two versions of the graphic novel series; one by Touko Shinou, another by Nekokurage. The Japanese graphic novels are set in a fictional country based on Imperial China, as the story follows Maomao a sharpwitted young woman working



as an apothecary in the redlight district. Her life changes forever when she is kidnapped and sold to the imperial palace as an indentured servant. The story has a cast full of compelling characters, especially the women, both in the inner palace and the ones in the redlight district. The story does not shy away from showing how the reality of these women are essentially the same despite the class differences. This is a story about women who quietly challenge the limitations imposed on them.

**Movements and Moments: Indigenous Feminisms in The Global South**  
Sonja Eismann, Maya, Ingo Schöningh  
Drawn and Quarterly, 2022

An intersectional feminist comic anthology with beautiful art-styles centring the stories of indigenous women, *Movements and Moments* shares a glimpse into the resistance and histories across many cultures from Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, India, Nepal, Peru, and Thailand. It spotlights struggles often faced by indigenous communities across the globe, particularly with accounts of sexual violence, colonialism, and the art of resistance by recounting stories of women who led mass movements of the global south in order to protect their lands, culture,



and economic freedom.

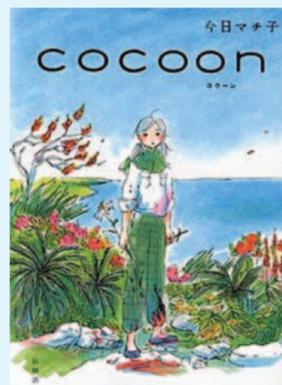
**Grass**  
Keum Suk Gendry-Kim  
Drawn & Quarterly, 2019

*Grass* is a Korean graphic novel created by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim that portrays the true story of a Korean comfort woman as it documents the horrors that women face in war. The anti-war story recounts the experiences of "Granny" Ok-seon Lee, who was forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese Imperial Army during WWII. The term "comfort women" itself is controversial because of how the language only reflects the perspective of the Japanese military and not the victims (many of whom were minors), which the author mentions in the story.

*Grass* shows historical events that lead up to the war, all from a child's perspective while showing the everyday lives of Korean civilians under the Japanese occupation. It shows how patriarchal societies deprive girls from education, how families, when facing starvation, abandon their daughters to fate worse than death, and the cost of war.

**Cocoon**  
Machiko Kyou  
Akita Shoten, 2009

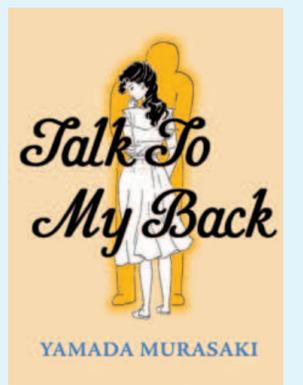
*Cocoon* is a story of war, told



through the eyes of a young girl. It is a heartbreaking chronicle of loss and resilience in the face of devastation. Based on the true story of the Himeyuri (Lily) Corps of student nurses in WWII, this Japanese graphic novel by Machiko Kyou follows San, who attends a prestigious boarding school for Girls in Okinawa. However, her regular life is disrupted when she, along with other students are recruited to help the war effort as assistant nurses.

The actual Himeyuri Corps were a group of young girls and their teachers, conscripted into the war effort as a nursing unit in 1945 by the Imperial Japanese Army. Just like the real Himeyuri Corps, San and her classmates are assured safe during an easily won battle, only to be used and deceived, eventually abandoned. San herself is excited to serve their country as a nurse, thinking she'll be helping the wounded in a hospital—only to be sent to the frontlines. As bombs fall from the sky, San and her peers are stuck working in the caves of a field hospital, facing carnage, abuse, sexual violence, starvation and death.

There is an uncanniness through which we see brutality, hunger and death in the book, especially since it is told from the perspective of a teenager; where the horrors of war and matters of friendship and girlhood coexist, and yet a strange



separation between the two is felt. The minimal dialogue and simple artstyle does not minimise the brutality; rather, it amplifies it. An animated movie based on the story was released in 2025.

**Talk To My Back**  
Murasaki Yamada  
Garō, 1981

Set in the 1980s, this graphic novel explores the dreams and realities of Chiharu, a housewife and her relationship with both her family members and herself. Yamada is one of the first authors to use comics as a way to address domesticity and womanhood in a realistic, critical way. The graphic novel shows how the erasure of personhood happens to women within nuclear families and how they toil in domestic labour without any appreciation.

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**Tiasha Idrak is drowning in a swamp of her own thoughts at the moment. She writes and daydreams, the latter is more applicable most of the time. She is still trying to come up with a proper author's bio. Tell her to stop procrastinating at [tiashaidrak27@gmail.com](mailto:tiashaidrak27@gmail.com).**