



Forgotten Figures to Modern Feminists

online misogyny and representation in media are encouraging younger audiences to question how societies construct and preserve female narratives.

The renewed interest surrounding books like *An Inconvenient Widow: The Torment, Trial, and Triumph of Mary Todd Lincoln* reflects this broader cultural moment – one where literature is not only revisiting women’s stories, but also redefining how history itself is remembered.

Books like *An Inconvenient Widow: The Torment, Trial, and Triumph of Mary Todd Lincoln* by Lois Romano are part of a growing literary movement that revisits women

historically dismissed as emotional, controversial or secondary to powerful men. Romano’s portrayal of Mary Todd Lincoln examines how grief, patriarchy and public perception shaped her legacy after the assassination of Abraham

Lincoln. The book reflects a wider global and Indian effort to reinterpret women’s histories through empathy and context rather than stereotypes.

In India, this shift is increasingly visible across literature, cinema and public discourse. Historical women once reduced to symbolic figures are now being explored as politically aware, emotionally complex and socially influential individuals. Books such as *The Queen of Jhansi* by Mahasweta Devi revisit Rani Lakshmbai not merely as a patriotic icon but as a strategist and leader navigating colonial resistance and gendered expectations. Similarly, biographies and studies on Savitribai Phule highlight her role as a pioneer of women’s education and social reform rather than limiting her identity to that of a reformer’s wife.

Modern Indian nonfiction has also begun reclaiming overlooked female voices. Kavita Rao’s *Lady Doctors* explores the struggles of India’s first women doctors, showing how they fought patriarchy, caste barriers and colonial restrictions to enter professions dominated by men. Books like *Indomitable: A Working Woman’s Notes on Life, Work and Leadership* by Arundhati Bhattacharya connect these historical

struggles with contemporary conversations around workplace equality and leadership.

Fiction too has become a space for reclaiming women’s narratives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* retells the Mahabharata through Draupadi’s perspective, transforming a mythological character often defined by male heroes into a voice with agency, anger and ambition. Similarly, Kavita Kane’s novels including *Karna’s Wife* and *Sita’s Sister* revisit women from Indian epics who traditionally remained in the background.

The trend extends into present-day political and cultural discussions. Contemporary books like *The Courage to Be Free* by Kiran Bedi and memoirs by women politicians, journalists and activists reflect ongoing debates about gender representation in leadership spaces.

Discussions around women in politics, workplace harassment, mental health and public scrutiny continue shaping how readers interpret historical female figures today.

Digital culture has accelerated this reassessment. Social media campaigns, feminist reading circles and online historical discussions have encouraged younger readers to question why women in history were often labelled “difficult,” “unstable” or “ambitious” in negative ways while similar traits in men were praised as leadership qualities. This is particularly relevant in present-day India, where conversations around gender equality, representation in cinema, women in STEM fields and female political leadership are becoming increasingly prominent.

Books revisiting women’s stories therefore serve two purposes: they recover forgotten histories while also reflecting current social anxieties and aspirations. Whether through biographies, feminist retellings or contemporary memoirs, literature is increasingly becoming a tool to challenge patriarchal memory and expand the way societies understand women’s contributions across history and modern life.

Rewriting Women in History

Across history, women have often been remembered through the eyes of the men around them – as wives, muses, symbols or supporting figures rather than individuals with agency, ambition and complexity of their own. Today, however, literature is playing a significant role in challenging those inherited narratives. From historical biographies to feminist retellings and contemporary memoirs, writers across the world are revisiting women once labelled “difficult,” “controversial” or “forgotten,” and re-examining the social and political structures that shaped their reputations.

This global literary shift strongly resonates in India, where conversations around gender representation, patriarchy and historical memory are becoming increasingly prominent. Books revisiting figures such as Rani Lakshmbai, Savitribai Phule and women from mythology and politics are finding new relevance among readers eager to understand history from perspectives long pushed to the margins. At the same time, contemporary debates around women’s leadership, workplace equality,

From the hidden influence networks of Stanford University to meditations on war, language and forgotten histories, this week’s literary selections explore how power shapes institutions, identities and collective memory. The featured books move across technology,

politics, mythology, feminism and art, offering readers narratives that are provocative, emotionally layered and intellectually ambitious. Whether examining the culture of Silicon Valley, revisiting historical reputations or reinventing classical storytelling, these works reflect the anxieties and possibilities of the contemporary world.

Challenge Power, Memory and Meaning

How to Rule the World: An Education in Power at Stanford University
Theo Baker
4.5/5

Glyph
Ali Smith
4/5

An Inconvenient Widow: The Torment, Trial, and Triumph of Mary Todd Lincoln
Lois Romano
4.4/5

Canon
Paige Lewis
4.1/5

Riverwork
Lisa Robertson
4.3/5

Theo Baker’s *How to Rule the World* is described as a gripping portrait of Silicon Valley’s elite culture and Stanford’s hidden circles of influence. Reviewer Anand Giridharadas compares Baker’s work to classic insider exposés, portraying a university deeply intertwined with venture capital and technology firms. The book raises concerns about the attitudes and ambitions of the people shaping artificial intelligence and global systems, while also following Baker’s own struggle between admiration for the tech world and his growing disillusionment with it.

Ali Smith’s *Glyph* blends experimentation with political urgency, reflecting on language, symbols and the human cost of war. Hamilton Cain praises the novel for its balance of whimsy and moral seriousness, noting how Smith connects ancient forms of communication with contemporary upheaval. Rather than focusing on battle scenes, the novel examines the lives damaged by violence and empire, ultimately presenting art and storytelling as enduring forces of hope and renewal.

Lois Romano’s *An Inconvenient Widow* revisits the life and legacy of Mary Todd Lincoln, challenging long-standing portrayals of her as unstable and difficult. Reviewer Thomas Mallon argues that the book exposes how public sympathy for Abraham Lincoln contributed to the vilification of his wife. Romano acknowledges Mary’s emotional struggles while also criticizing the myths and exaggerations that shaped her historical reputation after Lincoln’s assassination.

Paige Lewis’s *Canon* reimagines classical epics within a contemporary setting, drawing inspiration from Homer, Virgil and biblical storytelling. Reviewer Kate Preziosi highlights the novel’s humour and originality, noting how it transforms familiar literary tropes into something fresh and engaging.

By revisiting the foundations of the Western canon, Lewis suggests that even recycled narratives can produce inventive and emotionally resonant fiction.

Lisa Robertson’s *Riverwork* turns toward forgotten histories and fragmented storytelling through the story of Lucy Frost, who retraces the research of her missing great-aunt along the buried Bièvre River in Paris. Reviewer Alex Tan describes the novel as experimental and difficult to classify, blending literary criticism, history and personal reflection. The work challenges traditional ideas of authorship and narrative structure, presenting fiction as an accumulation of voices, memories and forms rather than a straightforward story.

Books of the Week