

## Reflection of the Plight of Farmers in Literature

With Special Reference to 'Foreign', 'Shoes of the Dead' and 'Widows of Vidarbha-Making of Shadows'

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### Abstract

Literature mirrors the life and reflects the realities in a way they exist. The said phenomenon of literature can be seen in the works collated for this study. Sonora Jha's debut novel 'Foreign', and Kota Neelima's two works 'Shoes of the dead' and 'Widows of Vidarbha-making of the shadows' are the recent works that depict the very status of farmers at present. Farmers, the providers to the world are stressed up to such a frightening extent that they find life tough, and believe that it is easier to die! It is time to make these unseen heroes noticeable to the world so that more support could be gained for them to help them live. The present paper underlines a trio of such works that bring out the reality to bring in the change.

**Key Words:** literature, phenomenon, collated, debut

Literature indeed reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of the society with a view to making the society realise its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues of good values in the society for people to emulate.

The above stated role of literature is universally acknowledged, also it is ascertained that different strata and sectors of the society are immortalized in literature in its numerous forms like poetry, drama and novels.

Farmers, the backbone of Indian economy, now weakened, and the 'son of the soil' is too immortalised in literature with his plight and pain. Several poems, plays and novels recorded the lives of farmers time and again. To mention a few, American novelist Pearl S, Buck's 'The Good Earth' in 1931 or Indian novelist Kamala Markandaya's 'Nectar in the Sieve' in 1954 have unmistakably depicted the agony of the farmers of that time. With the

passage of time, with several social, environmental, political and economical upheavals, the condition of the farmers, particularly of Indian farmers worsened. Aftermaths of structural development, monsoon failure, lack of irrigations facilities, natural disasters like flood, drought, use of genetically modified seeds, use of lower quantity pesticides, unfavourable government policies, the feeble constitutional support, indebtedness, humiliation at the hands of private moneylenders, personal and domestic problems, alcoholism are some of the reasons aggravating the agrarian distress, resulting in its most appalling aftermath – suicides of Farmers.

The statistical data provided by National Crime records Bureau, an Indian government agency responsible for collecting and analysing crime data, and farmers' suicide records, and other agencies may be varied but we can't ignore the harsh fact that our feeders die for want of food.

The selected works for this research paper, i.e. 'Foreign' by Sonora Jha and 'Shoes of the Dead' and 'Widows of Vidarbha-making of shadows' by Kota Neelima have placed the Indian farmers, more specifically the Vidarbha farmers on the centre stage and thereby brought to the world the shocking realities in brilliantly engaging way. The peculiar fact about the works are that, written by women novelists and journalists, these works are based on explicit research carried out at Vidarbha, the region of Maharashtra once famous for 'white gold' and now known for farmers suicides. All the works are contemporary, written between 2013 and 2018, making the overlooked visible, unheard audible and unspoken expressed!

#### **About the Novelists:**

Born in India, and now settled at Seattle as a professor of journalism and the Chair of the Department of Communication, Sonora Jha had earned her doctoral degree in Political Communication from the US. Before moving to Singapore and then the US, she had a successful career as Chief of Metro Bureau and Special Correspondent for the Times of India.

Kota Neelima, the multifaceted personality is an Indian author, novelist, journalist, political commentator, and an artist. Neelima's works deal with the condition of women farmers, farmers' suicides, peripheries of democratic societies, rural distress and gender. Her selected novel 'Shoes of the Dead' has been optioned to be adapted into a movie.

#### **Foreign by Sonora Jha:**

Sonora's debut novel 'Foreign' is a literary fiction based on the true stories of farmers' suicides in Vidarbha. Shortlisted for the Hindu Prize for Best Fiction 2013, Foreign is all about the plight of farmers who

struggle for existence and yet find solace in death. The novel juxtaposes two stark contrasting worlds- the world of Seattle, the very posh, luxurious world wherein 'it rains nine months a year' and the bleak, mundane world of Dhanpur, a small village in Vidarbha always in want of monsoon, the absence of which makes farmers quit living and embrace death. Chronologically speaking, the novel begins with the arrival of Katya Misra, Indian basically but now settled in Seattle, to India, and then her visit to Dhanpur in pursuit of her only son, a teenager, Kabir. Kabir has been to India, Mumbai to visit his grandparents, but he leaves Mumbai to seek his father Ammar Chaudhary. Katya meets in her sojourn the farmer couple, Bajirao Andhale and Gayatribai Andhale that strives relentlessly to make both the ends meet fail to do so. Bajirao Andhale, the typical Vidarbha farmer, heavily indebted, thereby humiliated publically by the moneylenders, has to sell his kidney in order to make financial arrangement for his daughter, Meera's wedding. By selling the kidney, he has to buy the pleasure and comfort of his daughter. For the elder daughters to get married off, Bajirao has sold the land, now left with nothing more to sell for the last wedding in the family, he prefers selling his precious organ. Unfortunately such compromises do not improve the conditions. The distressed farmer Bajirao is compelled by the dire poverty and helpless situations, to commit suicide by consuming the pesticide and drowning himself. The picture is heart-rending but unfortunately real. Dhanpur is portrayed to be a village where every eight hours a farmer, a man kills himself.

Chapter 21, 'I grinned at her' has the suicide note of Bajirao mentioned. It reads:

“..... I have lost everything. You must understand this- the pain of living is worse than the pain of my death. A man is only alive if he has land to stand upon. And I am losing more and more with each passing year. This has to stop.....”  
(Sonora Jha, 257)

This letter is the representation of unexpressed feelings of all the farmers who could not bear the loss of their land and feel pain of living is worse than that of death.

Gayatribai Andhale, the wife and later the widow of suicidal farmer Bajirao is one of the battling women in Vidarbha who undergoes all injustices and insults mutely for the sake of her family. Gayatribai, who looks after Kabir in his stay at Dhanpur, risks to save him. In her attempt to free him from kidnappers, she is raped brutally by the men of moneylenders. The poverty, the rape, the suicide of her husband, all befallen tragedies still do not defeat her. In the later part of the novel, she emerges as activist and a co-author of a book with Katya. This positive glimpse is ephemeral as the vicious circle of suicides continues in spite of her attempts save people around.

#### **Shoes of the Dead by Kota Neelima:**

Kota Neelima's 2013 novel 'Shoes of the Dead' is a kaleidoscopic picture of contemporary politics, media and agriculture. This novel is no doubt about the farmers in distress and their suicides, but moreover it is about the economic compensation offered to the widows who claim for it, the shabby politics in granting such compensation or denying it, and the selfish politicians who anyways aspire to retain their seats and hold by hook or by crook.

Gangiri Bhadra, the brother of Sudhakar Bhadra, the farmer who has committed suicide due to debt and distress, is a brilliant teacher, working in a city school, intends to lead a normal life like many others. Sudhakar's suicide disturbs his to the core. In order to complete the rituals after death, and clear to pending loan of Sudhakar by the compensation amount that they would receive, Gangiri comes to his hometown Gopur. To his shock, the compensation is denied to Padma, Sudhakar's widow as the claim made by her is considered by the district suicide committee to be ineligible. Gangiri, who is indeed intellectual and honest, is deeply hurt by it. To amend the situation of all the farmers and their widows in Gopur, he determines to stay in Gopur and give justice to all those who are denied of it. His inclusion into the district suicide committee changes the picture completely. More verdicts are now passed as eligible, thereby the suicide count increases. It is the threat to the MP of Mityala, the constituency in central south India. Keyur Kashinath, the budding and aspiring politician feels unsafe with the growing numbers of farmers' suicides in his constituency. Local politicians like maha sarpanch Lambodar and affluent moneylender Durga Das team up to dishearten Gangiri. Though the story of the novel seems little fantasizing, it is all about the current complexities in agriculture and politics. I feel, Gangiri is more an attitude, the spirit to stand against all the odds for the people who haven't any support, than an individual. Keyur Kashinath represents the second generation politician, born with a silver spoon in the mouth, who believes that 'working for commons won't make his common'. The contemporary media is represented by a character Nazar Prabhakar, leading

journalist of a national newspaper who uses his pen not for the powerful but for the needy.

Though Gangiri manages to make all the verdicts eligible for compensation, he can't fight the battlefield at personal level successfully. The poverty at home, the tragic death of his nephew his inability to make available the medical treatment and proper meal to his family torments him so much that he too commits suicide, with an intention that the compensation amount his family may receive after his suicide, may provide them at least some comforts of life.

### **Widows of Vidarbha- Making of the Shadows by Kota Neelima:**

This is the non-fictional work based on research Kota Neelima had executed between 2014 and 2017. 16 families in two districts of Vidarbha, Amravati and Yavatmal mainly, were interacted with. Each family has a tragic tale of suicide, yet no two stories are same. The 16 farm widows interviewed demonstrated undefeatable courage, enduring patience and the acute sense of responsibility. These widows, aging between 35 and 67, are now working as a daily wager, or a temporary anganwadi worker or a tailor. The unexpected loss of the breadwinner is still a nightmare to them. Life has been shaken to the core. With no savings in the past and no proper employment in present, the widows have to face the future, they aren't prepared for. In fact in the patriarchal Indian society, the position of a woman is always considered to be secondary, subordinating, following the man in all his endeavours like a shadow that has never its existence. Widowhood brings more hardships in the life of a woman. Widows are commonly denied the access to property, and her role in the decision making is always the neglected

one. In such adverse socio-cultural situations, it is just difficult for a widow to find her way out.

The economical compensation offered by the government is meagre one. Out of the one lakh rupees, twenty nine thousand and five hundred to thirty thousands are handed over to the widow in cash while the remaining amount, say about seventy thousand is fixed in the bank in the name of the widow. The government considers the widow only at the time of compensation. She is not paid any attention to before or after this. Commonly the cash amount given is utilized for clearing some unpaid debts. In the era acclaimed to be globalized one, rural farm widows are still leading the lives with no basic amenities like drinking water at home, electricity, and sanitary system. They are alert about the education of their children. They wish their children to have education and lead a respectful life. No mother in the book has chosen agriculture as a profession for their children, nor do the children think of it. The boys in the families have expressed their desires of becoming an engineer, a policeman, an inspector, a head master, or a government employee by clearing an MPSC exam while the girls chose teaching profession or nursing. Exceptionally one desires to cultivate the land. It is an alarming signal that the next generation of farmers is reluctant to be the one.

P. Sainath, the leading Indian journalist who threw light on the plight of the farmers has said: "How agonised we are by how people die, how unconcerned we are by how they live."

All in all, the three works collated for the study are the eye openers for those who simply after reading any news about farmers in a newspaper heave a sigh, resume the next chore.

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