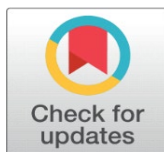
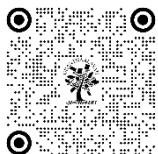


STUDYING THE STRUGGLES OF WOMEN FARMERS IN KOTA NEELIMA'S *SHOES OF THE DEAD*

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ABSTRACT

Literature largely reflects life. Literary genres examine various relevant issues pertaining to social, environmental, political, gender-based and cultural problems. Considering the need of the hour, this paper makes an effort to highlight literature that tends to raise consciousness about the need to realize the current despicable situation of people living in India, particularly those who struggle to make their living by relying on agriculture as their primary means of survival. In many spheres of society including agriculture, the roles, contributions and struggles of women most often remain undervalued. They undergo a lot of unspoken struggles in their daily lives. This paper titled "Studying the Struggles of Women Farmers in Kota Neelima's *Shoes of the Dead*" attempts to present the complex issues surrounding the life of farmers especially the struggles that are undergone by women in the field of agriculture.

Keywords: Agriculture, Environment, Women Farmer, Struggles

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has often been considered as representation of life. It portrays and discusses various events that take place in life. There are various genres of literature dealing with a variety of themes like social, regional, political, environmental, gender based, cultural, theoretical and so on. India is primarily agrarian and farming remains a very crucial occupation for generations of Indians. Traditional agricultural methodologies help sustain the environment without causing any

disruption or disturbance to earth's ecological balance. More than 50% of Indians are still employed in agriculture and have contributed to 9 % of the country's GDP in 2020-21. The inherent features of Indian farming include respect for earth's natural resources such as soil, water, animal and plant life. According to statistics, India continues to be one of the world's leading producers of rice, wheat, banana, lemon, guava, dry fruits, millets, vegetables, spices and castor oil seeds to name a few. The hardships faced by farmers are seldom reflected in mainstream media. Popular media such as films portray romanticised and at times unrealistic images of farming. The cinema lens captures beautiful imagery of green farm lands, rivulets and crops ripe for harvest to add to the aesthetic quotient of the visual impact. There is a tendency to neglect harsh realities connected to traditional farming. Corporatisation of farming is the death knell for the country's age-old occupation. "Corporatization of agriculture is very crucial issue not only for India's but for most of the world and specifically developing countries like India where more population involved in primary sector of production" [Meena \(2016\)](#). Women play a vital role in many farming households. Their rarely discussed sweat and struggle presents a different picture of Indian farming. This paper focuses on issues pertaining to that of women farmers in India. [Alagh \(2014\)](#)

2. OBJECTIVE

The theme of this paper is selected based on the need of the hour. This paper throws light on various issues concerned with agriculture and especially the struggles that women farmers undergo. [Dubey \(2011\)](#)

3. AGRARIAN ISSUE

Food, being one of the basic essential needs for any living organism to survive, – agriculture, which is the main source of food production, should have been held in a prime status among all the other professions. But in reality, especially in the present situation, it is denied any significance. We are aware of the pitiful state of farmers, the pathetic situation of agriculture, how corporate and other new policies in the name of development barge into agricultural land. [Goswami & Bordoloi \(2013\)](#) There is a rapid decrease in the number of current and future generation who show interest in agriculture as their profession. Climatic change, drought, floods, crop failures, hike in the usage of chemicals and other toxic pesticides lead to the depletion of fertility of the soil, degradation of agricultural land, the fluctuating price levels for the produces, farmer debts accelerate the problem. Most of the farmers who still tend to undergo all these hardships, yet manage to produce the food that we all eat, but end up having no proper food for themselves and their families. [Gurjar \(2015\)](#) These persistent troubles and bleak future force them end their lives or sell their agricultural lands and migrate and settle elsewhere seeking other jobs for survival. On the other hand, the role, contribution, and the struggles faced by women as farmers also continue to remain unnoticed. [Kaur \(2008\)](#) "They play a major role in food production and processing, even though this fact has remained invisible and neglected" ([Shiva 2010, 231](#)).

4. KOTA NEELIMA'S *SHOES OF THE DEAD* AS THE TEXT IN FOCUS

The novel that is selected for this paper is *Shoes of the dead* which is written by a contemporary Indian author Dr. Kota Neelima. She is one among the prominent

contemporary writers whose concerns include agrarian issues, farmer suicides and gender. Some notable works of Dr. Kota Neelima include *Riverstones*, *Death of a Moneylender*, *Shoes of the Dead* and *The Honest Season*. All these works revolve around the theme of agrarian crisis. [Kistaiah & Srinivasalu \(1993\)](#) The select novel *Shoes of the Dead* is a work of fiction that deals with various issues faced by a family after one of their family members who is a farmer commits suicide. The novel is about the suffering undergone by the widows who are rejected compensation for their husbands' suicide. The author portrays the various instances through which the district suicidal committee members reject the compensations that are allotted to the families of the dead farmers in the village of the protagonist Gangiri Badra. He makes 'Bringing justice to their families' as a mission of his life. After all the struggles and success in his mission, the protagonist kills himself with pesticide as he feels responsible for the death of his dead brother's little son in the midst of his other troubles. [Le \(2016\)](#) The novel concludes at the phase where the district suicide committee is reconstituted with a few new members. [Singh \(2022\)](#)

5. WOMEN FARMERS' UNSPOKEN STRUGGLES

The hardships that women farmers face is unfathomable given how poorly agriculture is doing overall. They struggle in many different ways to get by and provide for their family. "The role that women play and their position in meeting the challenges of agricultural production and development are quite dominant and prominent. [Sontakke \(2015\)](#) Above all, she faces ignorance, financial constraints, non-availability of adequate educational facilities, sexual harassment, low payment etc." [Pandey \(2018\)](#)

6. INEQUALITY IN PAY

Inequality in the workplace is one of the main issues that women in agriculture encounter. Even if they put in just as much effort as men do in farms, women are always viewed as wage labourers and receive lower pay than males. Nevertheless, most often men spend their earnings on alcohol and use of other harmful substances. Women shoulder heavy financial responsibilities to manage various expenses and manage the household single handedly. [Sunitha et al. \(2018\)](#)

"In the third world, most small farmers are women, even though their role has remained invisible and has been neglected in official agricultural developmental programs" ([Shiva 2010, 231](#)). Women play a vital role in sustainable agriculture. Traditionally they are the caretakers of the cattle, nurturers of the soil and mediators of safe farming practices. According to Vandana Shiva, the household and domestic food economies in which women play a significant role is marginalized by focusing on international trade in food. Their efforts of the Indian women farmers go unnoticed and unappreciated. [Swaminathan & Vijayamba \(2022\)](#)

7. SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Additionally, they frequently face sexual harassment when working for landlords. Some landowners belong to higher social classes and have a lot of land. They employ people from lower social classes as wage workers who work for their daily bread. Those female wage workers are frequently treated like slaves by them. Women at most instances refrain from speaking up because they do not want to lose their jobs, which would cause them and their families to go hungry. They need that work for their mere survival and this makes it easy for sexual predators to abuse

and exploit poor farming women. "Agriculture and related activities are the most important source of livelihood for third world women" (Shiva 2010, 231).

8. SUFFERING UNDERGONE BY WIDOWS AS PORTRAYED IN 'SHOES OF THE DEAD'

Dr. Kota Neelima in her novel *'Shoes of the Dead'* portrays the various suffering that a woman as a widow undergoes after her husband commits suicide due to various issues pertaining to agriculture especially the distress due to debts and successive crop failures. "Poverty, indebtedness, land fragmentation, private money lending, technological stagnation, and the lack of follow up on welfare schemes are some of them. Other than these, there are also specific reasons for suicides by farmers." (Neelima 2016, 7). The protagonist 'Gangiri Badra' gets appointed in the district suicidal committee which rejected his brother's death as 'apatra' (ineligible) for the compensation. He acts as a catalyst in changing the unfortunate fate of several widows by influencing the district suicidal committee and getting the compensation for the widows by risking his own life and the life of his family members. He is portrayed to be struggling to satisfy himself on the want for something that was denied – Justice.

In chapter three, the author portrays the scene of two widows who get compensation for the suicide committed by their respective husband. She points that it was the first time that the compensation for the widow was distributed in the last seven years. She mentions that no Local Sarpanch would be brave enough to take up the issue with the district suicidal committee and get the compensation in the hands of the widows. This clearly indicates that how the cases of suicides must have been rejected or found ineligible for the compensation and the various external factors which might have influenced the committee and made those widows suffer for those many years. Thakur (2020)

As soon as a man commits suicide or when he passes away due to any reason, the next question that would arise in the minds of everyone is 'Who will take care of the family and on whom will they depend on for their survival?' The sense of the need for dependency as though women cannot lead a family singlehandedly is found to be common. In the novel, the same scene is highlighted when Padma reluctantly agrees when Gangiri decides to sell all their land and settle somewhere for job so that his brother's family could survive. In the same way, in most of the cases, people tend to sell their land and incline themselves towards some jobs in town as they are not ready to face the humiliation and tortures that moneylenders inflict on them to repay the debts. The author portrays the same in the tenth chapter where Rawat's wife reiterates her husband's reason for the suicide. "She said he was distressed that recovery agents of a local moneylender had threatened to disgrace him and his family before the entire village if he did not clear the dues by the end of the month" (Neelima 2016, 108).

The author also depicts two other characters who are Lambodar and Durga Das who are the biggest private moneylenders in the district as well as they are the members of the district suicidal committee. They are portrayed to be the big fishes in the village as nothing would happen without the knowledge of them. They both always voted for 'apatra' (ineligible) for any case that came to the committee for compensation. As they would know the history of the family and with their cunning plan of making the family lose the land or any other property, jewels etc which were pledged to them earlier.

“Gangiri had argued that by denying compensation to the widows of the other twelve farmers, Durga Das wanted to seize their land to recover his dues. But by approving the compensation for the two who had no land, he could force their widows to repay debts in cash. The moneylenders would win both the ways” (Neelima 2016, 69).

The author highlights various lamentations and defenses that widows make when the suicidal committee denied the compensation for the suicide committed by farmers when the MP, Gangiri and team visited the widows who were denied compensations. Padma, wife of Sudhakar Badra (Elder brother of Gangiri Badra) argues that the reason stated by the committee that her husband was an alcoholic is false. She questions the village officer saying that how will they afford to drink when they do not have money to get food. Then comes the portrayal of Bimala bai who grieves that her husband was not an alcoholic as declared by the committee. She says that he drank only to stand the smell of pesticide, to gather courage and commit suicide. She adds that he used to cry in the dark unable to withstand the humiliation and harassment by the moneylenders. Next comes Varada Amma arguing that her husband was not dead due to domestic quarrel as stated by Suicide committee and the land was lost to Durga Das as the harvest was not sufficient enough to repay the debt that was got at once. In the next house, the team finds Sujata complaining that her husband did not commit suicide due to stomach ulcer. She states that they were forced to lease an infertile land which was owned by Lambodar's friend and also to get three loans from Durga Das to dig bore wells. When all the efforts failed and when the lenders came asking the repayment, the mishap took place. The author portrays the heavy heart of that woman by mentioning the way she went inside directly after the statement and shut the door. Following, the author portrays Seetal Amma who argues that the committee denied compensation stating that her husband was spending all the borrowed money for luxuries that we couldn't afford and Laxmi who laments that her husband did not die due to malaria as stated by the committee but due to the intolerance to the harassment made by Durga Das.

All these case studies that the author portrays are the clear evidence of the trauma that the widows carry in their mind and the inability to accept the false verdicts that they kept hearing about their husbands' suicide. As stated by the author in eleventh chapter through the thoughts of Gangiri, “The farming families are perpetually in danger of going impoverished. The farmer's widow has little time to even grieve because she is already drowning in debt. In addition to generating financing, planning farm inputs, and selling the crop, she also needs to maintain the home and the family. The widow that a farmer leaves behind is forced into a fight that she has no choice but to only win. In the long term, Gangiri knew the compensation would be insignificant, but in the days following the passing of a farmer, it would be everything to his family” (Neelima 2016, 123).

9. LOSING THEIR VALUABLES FOR THE FAMILY'S SURVIVAL

When a family is facing a financial crisis, it is invariably the woman who steps forward on her own or is compelled to give up her jewels in exchange for money to solve the problem. There are still numerous instances of women who have lost their nuptial chain because of similar problems, even though they consider it to be sentimentally valuable. Such scenarios are also portrayed in the novel. “Nowadays he was dealing with a lot of women too, because most of the pledged items were their ornaments” (Neelima 2016, 242). There are also looting that happen with the pledged ornaments like a farmer in the novel accuses Durga Das of a missing bead from the Mangala Sutra of his wife.

10. PHYSICAL BODY, FEMALE EXPERIENCE AND THE WOMAN FARMER

Unspoken physical pain is yet another important problem that affects female farmers. Typically, males can maintain an upright posture while working on a farm, such as when they sow fertiliser, irrigate, plough, or ride bullock carts or tractors, among other activities. Women, on the other hand, perform a lot of labor-intensive tasks while bending over deeply to remove weeds, plant, sow seeds, harvest, transplant, and other tasks, which can result in serious back pain and other related physical problems. This can lead to serious physical challenges, especially for women working on farms during their menstrual periods, pregnancy, or while nursing babies as they work in the farms.

11. CONCLUSION

The author reiterates the fact that women farmers and women in farming households bear severe physical and psychological trauma and struggle for the mere sustenance and survival of their family. Owing to subjugation due to class and gender, women farmers are doubly oppressed. As Vandana Shiva (Neelima 2016, 232) rightly points out in her essay by quoting Vir Singh's assessment in Himalaya, "A pair of bullocks work for 1064 hours, a man for 1212 hours and a woman for 3,485 hours a year on a one-hectare farm: A woman works longer than men and farm animals combined!". Even though farming women perform multiple tasks such doing laborious field work, assist men in the agricultural land and do physically taxing chores their contribution is seldom recognised acknowledged or appreciated. Kota Neelima's *Shoes of the Dead* is a stern reminder to uplift farming women by addressing the issues that limit and oppress them.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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