

# Representation of Women Farmers in Foreign and The Long March

Prachi Pal

Bachelor of Arts English (Honours with Research), Department of English, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College for Women, University of Delhi

## Abstract

This paper examines the representation of women farmers in Indian Writing in English, mainly in the Vidarbha region, focusing on the literary texts Sonora Jha's *Foreign* (2013) and Namita Waikar's *The Long March* (2018). Sociological research indicates that women farmers are crucial contributors to the agricultural labor force. Around 80% of the labour is women while only 13% of the women own land. Because of this, they are erased culturally as well as politically and often merely categorised as "farmers wives" or "invisible workers".

Through the close reading of two fictional novels, this study will show how fiction performs a "corrective function" by countering the struggles and experiences of women like Gayatribai Andhale and the collective resilience of female protesters. Through literary analysis and feminist political economy, this paper will show how these stories of modern India confronts the notion that farming is a man job. These texts also highlight the violence of globalization and argue for feminist reimagining of agrarian policy that gives recognition to the women's work, knowledge and leadership.

**Keywords:** Indian Writing in English, Corrective Function, Feminist political Economy, Literary representation and Vidarbha, Invisible workers.

## Introduction

The farmer is a term mostly applied to men and is an indirect elimination of the women who form a larger part of the agricultural labor force than men do. In Indian context this invisible act is true in language and in reality. As Ameeta Motwani explains in her research, the term "women farmers" is almost treated as an "oxymoron" with women who are instead treated as "agricultural labourers" or "farmers' wives" (Motwani 8). The marginalization of women farmers is reinforced by cultural stories that present the farming landscape as a man's space, indirectly linked with power and ownership that enforces the strict gender rules that give access to who will get knowledge and resources.

Despite all these things, the "feminisation of agriculture" is growing faster because of the migration of men and worsening agrarian crisis (Motwani 8). More than 50% of the Indian workforce are in agriculture and rural women are as dependent as 84%. Researchers in their research confirms that the women in agriculture have been "actively engaged in farming activities throughout the history" instead of all above mentioned their efforts are still "overlooked and underestimated". Also, there are many roles that are "underexplored in academic literature", particularly in large movements where the narratives are mainly talks about male leads. As Mandlik explained in her studies that literature plays a very important role, acting as a "social mirror" with the "corrective function" that shows people their fault so they can "realise

its mistakes and make amends" (Mandlik 30). Focusing on the experiences of women such as Gayatri Bai, and the strength that women protesters have in numbers, Foreign and The Long March support a feminist reevaluation of rural survival by contesting the erasure of the rural economy as a feminist enterprise. Sonora Jha's *Foreign* (2013) and Namita Waikar's *The Long March* (2018) are the strong narratives that reflect as an example of this corrective function, designed to make the "unseen heroes noticeable to the world" (Mandlik 30). Reading these novels along with sociological and policy research indicates how these narratives not only depict emotionally but also the struggles of invisibility of women farmers. *Foreign* and *The Long March* challenges this stereotype of structured based socio-psychological factors that makes women farmers invisible. This paper will reveal how Jha and Waikar challenges the patriarchal narratives, uncovering the invisible link between the narratives with masculinity, power, ownership and power of making decisions and challenging traditional gender roles in patriarchal society and reaching the gender equality in agricultural sector is critical for "securing a sustainable future" (Dharamshi et al. 1).

### **Feminism in agriculture sector : The crises of identity, power and gender roles**

For understanding the depth of the literary representation of women farmers, it's important to study feminist theory of the political economy of rural India and the feminist framework that crucially connects with traditions of identity and knowledge. The invisibility of women farmers is from decades specially in India. This cultural representation of establishing man as a decision maker, provider, owner and risk taker makes women work invisible. The social institutions study of agricultural sector emphasizes these roles as male dominant, giving roles of crop production and marketing to men, while women are less researched and limited to what are called as labour-intensive, undervalued tasks (Motwani 8). This identity crisis happens because of less

researched and less economic data of women farmers works. Researchers like Shailza and Sharma argue that even though there is a massive labour force, a large number of women farmers remain "invisible workers" even if they perform "multidimensional roles" in this sector (Shailza and Sharma 615). Motwani cites in her work the data which shows the representation of women who perform in this sector nearly 80% but they own only 13% of the land (Motwani 9). This deficiency makes the situation worse because women's pre- and post-production like seed selection, processing and storage often "do not fall under any official category" (Devi and Nimbarte 110). By giving women domestic duty, they are just recognised as merely "Farmers wives" that's why they are just limited their access to institutional resources and not having professional identity as farmers.

The major reason for this invisibility is the system that does not acknowledge women's practical knowledge and concerning key resources like water and soil. An Ethnographic study on women farmers in Maharashtra highlights thus "it matters whose practices and knowledge are foregrounding in understating and managing groundwater" (Leonardelli et al.134). Women have more knowledge of farming because they manage all household works like water needs and also perform the most complex work in the fields, that's why they have detailed knowledge of local ecological conditions which includes soil moisture, seed viability and the effect of climate. There are mainly women who do not acknowledge women work but the main reason is the strict gender roles which means they are not allowed to make decisions and also excluded from many agricultural training, despite having a broad ecological expertise. Feminist political economy is fundamentally associated with the oppression of women and the agrarian distress, which is explicitly connected to the struggle of women farmers. The central

elements that affect women farmers due to agrarian crises are the failure of the monsoon, drought and the use of harmful pesticides. As Dharamshi et al. assert, for securing a sustainable future in Indian agriculture. It's very important to focus on the issue of gender inequality that acts are "significantly more likely to inherit land as widows than as daughters", highlighting a gap as a major structural barrier. Moreover, their risk is complicated by the land inheritance issues. Although laws do grant daughters equal rights, social realities equal to men means that women between legal rights and social legitimacy (Devi and Nimbarte 110). Both novels use the crisis of land in Vidarbha region, whether it is lost to debt or inherited through suicide that demonstrate how women have restriction, whether its accessing resources or power, increases the need for corrective actions that give voice to women's land rights.

### **The Representation of Women Farmers in Foreign by Sonora Jha**

Foreign (2013) by Sonora Jha is a cautionary piece that attempts to bring out the human price of globalization, which is mostly observed in the misery and eventual self-claim by the women.. The novel is not a pure fiction it is fictionalized account of the fieldwork of a real journalist. As Sonora Jha used her background in reporting to represent the factual details of vidarbha region crises like suicide rates, BT cotton failure and debt cycles. Foreign, reveals the horrifying extent of agrarian distress through the objectification of the male body and the following burden placed on women.

Bajirao Andhale is an example of the character taken as a representative of the farmers of the Vidarbha region. As Mandlik described him as a "typical Vidarbha farmer". He was burdened by crop failure, unmanageable loans and oppressive social expectations . The hopelessness of his financial situation compels him to sell his kidney for his daughter's wedding, sacrificing his physical body to buy "pleasure and comfort" for his daughter in her in- laws home (Mandlik 31). Jha uses the character of Bajirao to expose how poverty reduces the human body. She highlights the tragedy of the male body traditionally associated with strength being reduced for survival and social standing. His unfortunate suicide, through ingestion of pesticide, is a summation of years of displacement and systematic obliteration. His suicide note, states , "A man is only alive if he has land to stand upon" (Jha 257 as cited in Mandlik 32). The note he leaves behind, capturing the harsh truth of society that land ownership is a symbol of masculine identity in rural India. When a man loses their land, he loses freedom, respect in society. Bajirao's death is not only an individual tragedy but also the representation of many farmers who are the victim of structural violence that systematically erases farmers from India's economic imagination. His death does not end the sufferings of his family, instead transferring the entire burden of survival on to his wife, Gayatribai.

Gayatribai Andhale becomes the centre of the novel. She personifies the "heart - rending" (Mandlik 31) reality of widows who work on farms, forced to navigate grief with the intersection of profound grief, economic instability and patriarchal operation. Throughout her journey, she fights from "injustices and insults mutely for the sake of her family"(Mandlik 32) , showing how rural women are expected to survive in silence without any recognition or support. Her struggles pushed her to an absolute limit, when "she is raped brutally by the men of moneylenders" (Mandlik 32), an act showing that how a women suffers differently when farms fail. This violence is not simply personal but it reflects the way women's body become the primary target when poverty, debt and caste collide transforming the violation in a political strategy that humiliates Gayatribai for send a message to the farmers who are planning to protest that if they try to rebel against them, their women will not be safe. It narrates :

“His men had decided that humiliating Gayatribai would send a message to the village, to Bajirao, to the farmers planning to protest. One of the men left and the other man stayed behind to do the job. Gayatribai didn't struggle because she wanted to live. She didn't fight back because she didn't want cuts and bruises on her body. He had punished her as a threat. He said that if the farmers' rally wasn't cancelled, the next time she would pay with her life instead of with her shame.”(Jha 132)

In spite of all the trauma, Gayatribai refuses to be called a victim. This courageous transformation presents as an example in this sector where women were traditionally and culturally marginalized, now asking for their rights and strongly demand for recognition and reshape the narrative of rural survival.

By the end, her journey is evidence to the resilience of women who refuse to be silenced by systems that continuously exploit them.

### **Representation of women farmers in The Long March by Namita Waikar**

Namita Waikar's *The Long March* (2018) expands the focus from individual suffering to collective resistance, powerfully portraying the triple burden of women labor. The protagonist and the surrounding women bear the responsibility of crop production, animal husbandry and domestic reproductive labor. A sociological analysis confirms that this “joint involvement” in agriculture and animal activities is common, still far disproportionate to the credit or the recognition they received (Devi and Nimbarte 109).

The exhaustion of the women in the novel is pervasive because men in the narrative do not share women's never ending day work and continuity labor. This gendered inequality in resilience is directly recognised in the novel: “I guess men seem to lose hope faster than women” (Waikar 105). While women are forced to survive, the men struggle with the breakdown of their traditional identities. The distinction of struggles of men and women labor represents as while men labor is intrinsic to their identity and spirals into hopelessness when that identity fails, women labor is continuously surviving. It narrates: “They look upon themselves as the earners and providers and when they cannot fulfil their roles, they take their own lives. It's very tragic” (Waikar 106). The novel powerfully represents the farmers' distress, exposing how the system fails the agricultural communities and forcing them to become “vulnerable” to the unpredictability of the market, nature and the government policies (Patond 547). Waikar shows clearly that the social and economic anxieties results from this unpredicted showing that many families are driven to. This very shocking instance, reveals in the narrative that a “woman put her daughter up for sale, to raise money for a bribe” (Waikar 194). It highlights that relations don't matter when it comes to extreme poverty.

However, the story of the novel moves from suffering to highlighting their power to change. The very important part of *The Long March* is that the women participate in the protest themselves. The “disillusioned attitude” of the agrarian community (Patond 547) is transmitted by

the women farmers into collective action. While patriarchal norms often restrict “women's decision making power” (Devi and Nimbarte 111), Waikar's novel shows that the agrarian crisis is forcing a political realization. This literary depiction is powerfully validated by contemporary sociological studies of agricultural sector struggles in North India. The research on 2020-2021 farmers protest highlights the active involvement of the women farmers as “crucial actors” (Dutt and Subharwal 1). By participating in the protest, these women proved that farming or the term farmer is not only associated with man and that their experiences are essential for solving agricultural problems.

## Conclusion

The literary representation of women farmers in *Foreign* by Sonora Jha and *The Long March* by Namita Waikar highlights a broad difference between the idea of farmers and the reality of the workers who work on the field and remain unrecognizable. In Indian culture, society and language has defined the term farmer associated with man, but in reality, it is women who have been doing major work of agricultural labor without recognition. These novels exposes that how literature can uncover the hidden lives of these women farmers in the same ways that presents romanticised images . The stories in both the novels move beyond sad statistics about debt and suicide to show the real humans cost of the agrarian crisis.

This study reveals that women in agriculture carry the triple burden in society. These women work tirelessly in the field, raising livestock and running the household continuously without being recognised as a real worker. However, the important finding in these texts is that these women are not just victims. When the male farmers lose hope and the traditional male dominating system fails, there are women who never lose hope and show profound endurance.

These stories show the feminisation in the agriculture sector by representing women leaving their home to lead protests and demand for their rights.

Ultimately, this research concludes that *Foreign* and *The Long March* fills the gaps that have been under exploration, establishing that these crises can not be resolved only through economic measures. It demands a radical change in the understanding of gender roles in the sector. The agriculture sector will remain unstable if women are seen as only helpers and wives.

## References

1. Devi, M. Rajeshwari, and G. N. Nimbarte. "Status of Women as Farmers in India: A Review." *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, vol. 7, no. 7, 2023, pp. 108-11.
2. Dharamshi, Khyati, et al. "Securing a Sustainable Future: A Path towards Gender Equality in the Indian Agricultural Sector." *Sustainability*, vol. 15, no. 16, 2023, p. 12447. MDPI, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151612447>.
3. Dutt, Baleshwer, and Desraj Sabharwal. "The Role of Women in Contemporary Farmers' Movement in Haryana: A Critical Analysis." *South India Journal of Social Sciences*, vol.23, no. 3, 2025, pp. 1-8.
4. Jha, Sonora. *Foreign*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2013.
5. Leonardelli, Irene, et al. "A Feminist Analysis of Women Farmers Navigating Groundwater Qualities in Maharashtra, India." *Water Alternatives*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2023, pp. 134-52.
6. Mandlik, Deepti Pravin. "Reflection of the Plight of Farmers in Literature." *Research Chronieler*, vol. 7, no. 12, 2019, pp. 30-34.
7. Motwani, Ameeta. "Women Peasants in India: Farmers or 'Farmers' Wives?'" *Journal of Gender, Culture and Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2024, pp. 8-19.
8. Patond, Rekha Mahadeorao. "Farmers' Distress in *The Long March* and *Shoes of the Dead*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 16, no. 5, 2025, pp. 2-5.
9. Shailza, and Latika Sharma. "Feminism in Indian Agriculture." *Economic Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2019, pp. 615-19.
10. Thakur, Arti. "The Role of Rural Women Farmers in Economic Development." *International Journal of Innovative Research in Engineering & Multidisciplinary Physical Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 6, 2014, pp. 88-91.
11. Waikar, Namita. *The Long March*. Speaking Tiger Books, 2018.