

Indigenous Ecocentrism, Extraction and Environmental Injustice: Re-reading Sheela Tomy's *Valli* as Responsive Literary Text

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Abstract

Sheela Tomy's *Valli*, published in Malayalam in 2019 and translated into English by Jayashree Kalathil in 2022, is an important eco-fictional narrative that narrates the history of the Wayanadan peoples' intricate and spiritual connection to and reliance on the land and forest by emphasizing the river Kabani, the Wayanad flora and fauna, and the hamlet of Kalluvayal. Set in the hilly region known as 'Wayanad' in the state of Kerala in southern India, *Valli* is a story of a place and its people and environmental injustices through the memories of the characters, which traverses across four generations, from the 1970s to the present. The narrative illustrates how anthropogenic activities like deforestation and land encroachment have resulted in displacement and environmental migrants' impacts on their means of subsistence. This paper examines how the destruction of the Wayanad forest causes forced displacement and dispossession of the Indigenous people from their immediate environment and how capitalist extraction of natural resources and ecological commodification cause an existential crisis in marginalizing the Indigenous epistemologies of nature. The paper analyzes how the novel *Valli*, as a responsive literary narrative, calls for an epistemic revival by convalescing the indigenous knowledge system that upholds the ethical connection between humans and the environment. Finally, the paper assesses how the steady encroachment of indigenous land and forest, and abrogation of their rights make *Valli* a responsive literary text against capitalist subjugation and sustained violence on the environment and people of Wayanad.

Keywords: Indigenous ecocentrism; environmental injustice; capitalist extraction; development; displacement

Sheela Tomy's debut novel *Valli*, which was shortlisted for the 2022 JCB Prize for Literature, and winner of the 2021 Cherukad Award for Malayalam Literature, significantly contributes to the growing corpus of Indian eco-fiction by narrating the history of Kalluvayal, describing its transition from a deep, dense forest to a concrete jungle with a dry river and nearly devastated greenery and ecosystems.

The novel introduces the reader to the mystical land of Wayanad and its beautiful forest, alongside the land's turbulent history, ongoing encroachment of tribal land, the abrogation of tribal rights and the destruction of natural environment. The novel is a true living record of the atrocities that human beings have committed towards nature and one another, owing to the greed for resources and power. Set in the region Wayanad, a rural district in Kerala's Western Ghats and home to Adivasis and indigenous communities, the novel tells us the stories of the land and its people, of interdependence and abuse, repression and resistance, despair and contentment - stories as deep and mysterious as the forest itself used to be.

Sheela Tomy by her poetic and artistic description of the Wayanad landscape tells the story of four generations who have lived on this land, spanning from the 1970s until the present. The story is narrated through a diary that Susan, the daughter of two teachers, Thommichan and Sara, leaves for her own daughter, Tessa. In her novel, divided into thirty-six chapters and an epilogue, she weaves together different narrative devices such as letters, diary entries, myths, folklore, Biblical quotations, and foreshadows of events to address historical, socio-political, cultural, and environmental disparities and injustices. In Tomy's writings, the reader could feel, touch, smell, and see the landscape as she skillfully interweaves regional myths, folklore, and stories, and uses them as powerful storytelling devices throughout the novel.

Indigenous Ecocentrism and the Ecological Sustainability

Translated from Malayalam to English by Jayasree Kalathil, Sheela Tomy's *Valli* is a very personal story for the author because it derives largely from her Wayanad roots. Tommy spent her childhood in the lap of the nature, by the bank of the river Kabani and the forest of Kalluvayal, along with the land's joy and sorrows that made her to tell the story of Wayanad. To her, *Valli* is an organic telling of "the stories that had become part of her body and mind" (Tommy, 399). In the author's remarks section of the book, Tomy acknowledges this:

"I wanted my first novel to be about my land, my people and their untold stories.... In a way, Susan's childhood is my own; the stories she heard are from my childhood....I wanted to reflect something of the changes in Wayanad over the last five decades: the history of the transformation of Kalluvayal from a densely forested land to the one that was denuded, its rivers thin, its paddy fields gone; the Adivasi people who once fought for valli (wages), and now were still fighting for valli (earth)" (399-400).

During colonial and post-colonial periods, many Adivasi communities were dispossessed of their ancestral lands due to various policies and practices. The landowners and Jenmis often took advantage of these dispossessions by exploiting indigenous people as bonded labour, which is a deep-rooted social and economic injustice in India. India's Bonded Labour System Act, 1976, faces weak enforcement due to corruption, political will, and socio-economic imbalances. But

the Adivasi communities continued to fight for land rights, fair wages, and bonded labour abolition, and different grassroots movements and non-governmental organizations play a critical role in advocating for their rights. Padmanabhan spoke out against the atrocities that Jenmis had committed on the native people of Kalluvayal: “Landowning farmers and jenmis take Adivasi people on lease as laborers and make them work on their lands. It’s called ‘vallippani’ – laboring in return for valli, a share in the crop. Bonded labor, that’s what it is. Slavery has been abolished, and there are laws about minimum wages, but here this happens even now” (31). During the Valliyoorakaavu temple festival, Adivasi people, both men and women, were sold like cattle in the slave market because the practice of ‘vallippani’—bonded labor in exchange for a portion of the crop—was widespread, and the ‘share’ usually amounted to no more than a piece of coarse cloth, seven and a half seers of paddy, five rupees in exchange for a whole year of labour, and a daily wage of two seers of rice. There was also a severe punishment for breaking the bond. This circumstance gave rise to resistance organized by the Naxal movement in Wayanad under the most prominent leader, Comrade Varghese, who organized an agricultural laborers’ union to eradicate vallippani and establish fair wages.

The people of Wayanad are constantly battling one thing or the other throughout the novel; first, it is the Jenmis (landowners) who refuses to pay the wages for their labour, second, it is the timber merchants who try to illegally cut down trees from their forest and much later, it is the exploitative tourism businesses that displaces them and encroaches on forest land. The title of novel is, therefore, significant as the Malayalam term ‘valli’ encapsulates the essence of the novel in four different ways; first, it alludes to a vine or multiple clusters of vines that make up the dense and lush forest of Kalluvayal; secondly, it suggest earth; thirdly ‘valli’ serves as a metaphor for a young woman, representing numerous female characters who see themselves as living extensions of the forest in which they situate themselves; fourthly, it denotes a system of daily wages (an amount of paddy given as wages) paid by the landed class (Jenmis) to the enslaved indigenous people through exploitative agricultural services. It is an oppressive feudal practice that exploited and deprived the indigenous Adivasi people of Kerala of their rights which lead to become Wayanad a key center of direct action and uprising against exploitation, and a bastion for the Naxalite movement.

Valli is a fascinating tale of the Wayanad people's history that explores the intricate relationship between humans and the natural world. Wayanad was a land that belonged to indigenous tribes, the Adivasi, who lived a life in harmony with the forest and its creatures. This land of Wayanad was also used to be known as Bayaland, land of the paddy, and Vananad, land of the forest. The lives of the people who reside in the hamlet of Kalluvayal, which is located in a part of the Western Ghats in northern Kerala, are mutually coexisted with their forest. In the novel, the Adivasi communities are depicted as being deeply intertwined with the forest ecosystem. Their entire ways of life, including their livelihood, cultural

practices and subsistence economy, relies heavily on the direct access to the forest. The forest provides them with food, medicine, materials for shelter, and other essential resources. Their cultural rituals, traditions, and community gatherings are often centered on the forest, reflecting their profound connection to the natural environment. This relationship underscores their dependence on the forest for both their physical survival and their cultural identity. These Adivasi people's cultural traditions are a reflection of their ecocentric vision and unique recognition of the interdependent relationships between different species of life and the natural order in a specific environment. Most of Adivasi cultural and spiritual practices in India are strongly originated in the indigenous communities' environmental experiences, possibly because of their close vicinity to and surviving within or around their immediate forest environs. They considered that nature is only the source of food and shelter; they stand as nature's guard: "They never poisoned the waterways to catch fish....They only took just enough honey and left the rest for the bees, just enough fruit and jungle roots to survive" (8).

These forest-dwelling indigenous communities have a symbiotic relationship with their natural environment. The worship of 'Vanadurga and Jaladurga'¹ reflect their deep respect and dependence on the forest and water. The veneration given to Jaladurga and Vanadurga highlights these Adivasi people's responsibility to protect their environment. Their practices often advocate sustainable living and conservation of natural resources. The worship of Malemragaru is also integral to the Adivasi cultural identity. Malemragaru represents the sacredness of the mountains embodying the spiritual essence that the Adivasi people believe, resides in their natural surroundings. The relationship between the Adivasi people and Malemragaru, the god of the mountain, is deeply spiritual and rooted in their cultural and religious beliefs, highlighting their unique traditions, rituals, and the deep bond they share with the land they inhabit. This connection exemplifies the Adivasi community's reverence for nature and their environment, ensuring that their activities do not harm the natural balance. These mythological elements are woven into the narrative to highlight their religious, cultural and ecological wisdom as their deities serve as symbols of resilience, identity, and the intricate bond between humans and nature.

Basavan, depicted as "the protector, the hugger of wild trees" (42) in the novel, embodies the indigenous knowledge and wisdom of the forest, reflecting his deep connection to nature and his commitment to preserving the environment. His resistance against deforestation, timber extraction and other destructive activities emphasizes the importance of preserving the natural world, indigenous cultures, and the interconnectedness of all living beings: "It was the language of the forest that Basavan spoke, the language of the countless living things in the forest....when he roared, the forest roared with him..." (150). His character and actions are significantly influenced by the environment he inhabits. Salomi regrets for losing connection with Pakkathaivam, the 'God of the Fields', highlighting how their identity and religious practices were so integrally connected to the land and forest.

“When the fields were born, there was only one god for humans, animals, birds and all creatures alike. He was Pakkathaivam, God of the Fields....When He ruled over the land, there was plenty of everything – forest, rivers, orchards, fruits...But slowly, humans decided to become gods, and everything changed. The rivers and ponds dried out, and Pakkathaivam began to feel very thirsty...” (117).

The celebration of the annual day at the Kadoran School is an important episode where Padmanabhan addresses the students about forests, animals, and the environment. These stories stimulate children’s imagination and they envision about the importance of protecting the environment. They can understand the consequences of deforestation, pollution, and climate change, fostering a sense of responsibility towards the planet. These stories can teach Paniyar tribal children about indigenous knowledge, traditional ecological practices, and the cultural significance of different natural elements. In the study camp organized by the Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parisad, Padmanabhan points out the importance of forest from ancient periods: “The forest. The sacred place of rejuvenation. The abode of countless creatures....Sages would come into the heart of the forest - the *kananam* - to experience God.” (146). In Indian philosophical and cultural traditions, the forest, or '*kananam*', holds a profound significance, especially in the context of sages and their relationship with nature. Forests are seen as living entities with their own wisdom and human beings lived in harmony with nature, understanding the interdependence of all life forms. Padmanabhan as a true social and environmental crusader took every opportunity to spread the lessons about earth, water and air among the people of Kalluvayal. Peter and Padmanabhan are doing street plays which are a powerful tool for spreading awareness about social issues and environmental concerns among the indigenous people. When the soothradharan begins the story and pressed his palms together and addresses mother Goddess of Earth, it is Ruku who appears in the shape of Mother Earth dancing in a frenzy feet and warns:

“I must settle here...
Here, as Vanadurga, goddess of the forest
There, as Jaladurga, goddess of the water
And over there, as Bhadrakali, the protester...
Who will build the roof for my house?
A roof that opens to the four oceans...
The sky is my roof,
The green canopy is my roof,
Don’t you cut it down, don’t you dare touch it...” (142).

By integrating environmental themes within the familiar framework of local folklore, culture, myth, and traditions, Sheela Tomy makes the message more accessible and resonant by enhancing the emotional and psychological impact of the story on the audience. The audience can see their own stories, beliefs, and values reflected in the narrative, which can lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the environmental issues being addressed. Folklore and mythology can also be used to illustrate how traditional wisdom can provide insights into current issues, which can bridge the gap between the past and present by creating a sense of continuity and connection to the land and nature, making the environmental message not just a modern concern, but a timeless one that is deeply rooted in cultural identity. The spiritual connection between these people and the environment is also evident in the conversation between Padmanabhan and Prakashan :

“Prakasha, do you know, in Japanese folklore there is a forest spirit named Kodama. If you cut down the trees in which Kodama resides, the whole land will be cursed. So, they tie these ropes around such trees as a warning, and elders pass on the knowledge about such trees to their young ones, so they are protected through generations. You might also want to tie a rope around the trees that are the abodes of forest spirits” (252).

Valli chronicles the lives of the Wayanadan Adivasis in vivid detail, from their folklore and gods to their medicine and funeral rites. Padmanabhan uses the Japanese folklore to convey a message about the sanctity of nature and the consequences of disturbing it. The Kodama in Japanese mythology are indeed spirits that inhabit trees, and it is believed that cutting down a tree where a Kodama resides can bring a curse. The practice of tying ropes called ‘shimenawa’² around such trees is a way of marking them as sacred and protecting them. By using this metaphor, Padmanabhan seems to draw parallels between different cultural practices that emphasize the importance of respecting nature and preserving sacred spaces. The suggestion to “tie a rope around the trees that are the abodes of forest spirits” (252) can be seen as a metaphor for protecting nature and respecting the wisdom passed down through generations.

Indigenous medical practices are usually based on a deep respect for nature and the knowledge that environmental health is directly linked to human health. This holistic approach encourages the sustainable use of natural resources, as the degradation of the environment is seen as detrimental to human health. Indigenous women are vital custodians of traditional knowledge about local plants and their medicinal properties, passing it down through generations as healers, midwives, and caretakers. Pembi is the local healer in Kalluvayal who plays a central role in preserving and transmitting medical knowledge within their communities. Thommichan got wounded, and instead of not going to the hospital, he went to Pembi for treatment. But when it has been reported that a mafia connected to the tourist industry has been exploiting the traditional medicine of the Adivasi people

and its everyday practices, the people of Kalluvayal went on a hunger strike to protest the lack of action, especially in looking into the role the owners of the local tourist resorts might have had in the disappearance of Pembi. They demanded the modification of some of the laws that could protect traditional medicine through patents because the tourist industry and the mafia who are associated with it destroyed the forest and the habitats of untold numbers of wild herbs and medicinal plants. The exploitation of forests often leads to the displacement and marginalization of indigenous communities, whose lives are deeply intertwined with these ecosystems. As forests are cleared for commercial purposes, such as logging, mining, or agriculture, the people who have traditionally lived in harmony with these environments are forced to abandon their lands, and their way of life comes under threat. This disruption has profound impacts on their culture, traditions, and languages. The loss of the forest often means the loss of resources that are central to their cultural practices, such as medicinal plants, food sources, and sacred sites.

Colonial-Capitalist Resource Extraction and Environmental Injustices

The land and forest of Kalluvayal is subject to the greed of human beings for its richness of natural resources. Historically, Wayanad was a key post along ancient trade routes that connected Mysore and other parts in the east to the Malabar Coast in the West. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Wayanad witnessed several struggles against the British East India Company and its colonizing activities. British colonialists had cleared the vast stretches of forest and established commercial plantations of species like tea, coffee and rubber which led to the clearing of forests and the displacement of local communities. With the arrival of traders and migrants, the landscape of Wayanad changed drastically. As time passed on and India as a newly independent country raced to prosper, the people of Wayanad witnessed the gradual destruction of the terrain. Wayanad's forests and paddy fields started to disappear, the farming became unsustainable, and the granite mining and tourism businesses occupied an unprecedented proportion of land.

The Colonial-capitalist exploitation of the forest in India regarding the usage and accessibility of natural resources has a long history of colonial past. From the colonial period, the process of resource extraction from the land and forest was a systematic process that center on the politics of power, control and profit. The British colonial powers established a system of forestry management that prioritized the extraction of timber for their own benefits without any sustainable forest management. The British administration recognized the commercial value of Wayanad's dense forest and implemented systematic logging operations because the revenue generated from timber extraction contributed significantly to the colonial economy. This extraction-oriented approach of British colonial forestry management was driven by the empire's insatiable demand for timber for ship building, construction and railway expansion. The primary objective of colonial forestry was to maximize timber extraction to fuel the empire's industrial and military machinery. More importantly, in colonial India,

the construction, expansion and operation of railways necessitated enormous quantities of wood for sleepers and fuels. The colonial state introduced and enacted Forest Acts, various policies and mechanism allowing the colonial powers to extract, on a large scale, the crucial natural resource timber from the colony.

The British colonial government implemented the Indian Forest Act in 1927, bringing total state control over the nation's forests and causing significant deprivation of forest-dwelling communities. According to critics such as Guha, Gadgil, Sakaria, and Rangarajan, the British colonial forest management policies were formulated to strengthen the “strategic and revenue interests of the British Empire” (Chakrabarti 2007, 21). But the forest dweller communities, who had historically relied on the nearby forest for their subsistence needs, were denied access to the forest, leading to a conflict between the forest administration and the local indigenous forest-dwelling Adivasi people. The forest-dwelling people started protests in both violent and non-violent ways against this extraction of common natural resources by transforming it into commodity. Sumit Sarkar points out that these protests are “reassertions by poor peasants and tribals of traditional customary rights over forests “reserved” by the colonial state” (Sarkar 1985, 77).

The Indian Forest Acts gave the British the power to declare forest to be “reserved forest”, “state property” (Beinart and Hughes, 112) effectively disenfranchising the local and indigenous communities that had relied on these forests for centuries. Indigenous communities, who had lived in harmony with their immediate environment for generations, were denied access to the forest resources and suddenly found themselves labeled as encroachers and poachers on their own land. This colonial ecological violence of empire over its colonies poses a severe threat to the life, livelihood, shelter, survival and security of forest-dwelling communities. The establishment of state controlled forestry and the emphasis on timber extraction had severe repercussion for indigenous communities leading to extensive deforestation and disrupting the region's ecological balance. The timber extraction in India during the colonial period had severe environmental and social-cultural impacts, including deforestation, habitat destruction and the displacement of local communities. Many indigenous communities that relied on forests for sustenance, survival, and shelter were forcibly removed from their land and immediate environment. The destruction of forests and the displacement of indigenous communities also led to the erosion of their traditional ecological knowledge and cultural practices tied to forests and land.

Both in colonial and postcolonial times in India, the struggle over natural resources forms a central issue of Indian environmentalism that is centered on material conflicts between the state-capitalist sector's reckless resource extraction and the poor ecosystem people's³ struggle to meet their livelihood needs. But after independence, it is “the state-sponsored, resource-intensive, top-down development” (Ali, 8) that has taken the place of colonial resource exploitation and environmental degradation for monetary benefits. Huggan and Tiffen point out this process of development as something, “little more than a disguised form of neo-

colonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed to serve the interest of the West” (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 27). During the postcolonial period, the indigenous people continued to face the challenges of developmental politics and the profit-making interests of the state, and they continued to raise their voices against the devastation of their immediate environment by the state’s interests. Vandana Shiva rightly points out that this unsustainable way of development is akin to “new colonialism, draining resources away from those who needed them most” (1998, 2). In postcolonial India, this approach of resource extraction under the guise of developmentalism, which only “panders to global-corporate interests”, has an adverse impact on the native ecology and their economy (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 77).

Wayanad continued to resist the colonial rule even after all of Malabar came under direct British rule. Wayanad’s Adivasi people, the true inheritor of the land and forest, fight against outsiders who took over their land, culture and rights. The region is, therefore no stranger to violence and atrocities on its people. The extraction of timber and other natural resources affected the indigenous communities living in Wayanad. Traditional forest dwellers including tribal populations were displaced from their ancestral land. Padmnanabhan articulates: “There was a time when this forest was yours, when this soil was yours, only yours. Then they came, cheated, and took it for themselves” (Tomy, 162). These forest-dwelling communities faced many challenges, and encounter the complexities of modernization in the name of development. The arrival of traders and timber merchants identified as “greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes” (35) robs these people of their environmental rights. They “...cut down the forest and send it to the timber mills in the cover of darkness.... the ones, who are dangerous...” (30)

The indigenous people, who had been fighting for wages and bonded labour practices, are now fighting for the earth and the environment. Thommichan, Peter, and Padmanabhan are aware and respectful of their land rights, and they want to bring about change through indoctrination and education. Thommichan and Peter started organizing the young people in the area as the ‘Army of Forest’ to defend the forest and to keep guard over its edge against those who betrayed the people of Kalluvayal and robbed the forest. Ivan Kachouseph, his eldest son Luca, and Sunny Paulose are such timber merchants who form the group that adheres to the false notion of development, which necessitates excessive exploitation of the land’s natural resources. For them, Kalluvayal turned into a long scream as Luca set fire in the forest because “Fire was a curtain to hide the poaching, the cutting down of tress, the ousting of the people. Fire was revenge” (153). Susan, in one of her letters to his daughter Sara, narrates the incident as “A giant octopus came out of the river Kabani and walked into the forest, destroying everything green in its path” (155-156). The forest and land in the Western Ghats was entirely ravaged by both timber merchants and British colonists. Tommy puts the question through Thommichan “Was it humans that created gods who murdered and burned down the forest in

order to justify their own cruelty? Or was human cruelty a mistake that gods made?" (154). Thommichan's question highlights the ambiguity of whether it is human beings who create destructive gods to justify their actions or whether the cruelty humans inflict on the environment and each other is a divine mistake.

But finally nature strikes back in reaction and take its revenge on humans for its reckless exploitation. Tomy effectively and skillfully depicts the whims of nature that causes devastation on the land and people of Kalluvayal. The novel ends with the flood that wreaks havoc on the land and destroys the babel tower of human greed: "It was as though nature, in *Valli*, that was being rendered helpless, had dug in her heels and turned back to face us, wrathful" (400). The image of nature responding to human actions with a sense of wrath and defiance suggests that nature, once perceived as passive or subdued, has reached a breaking point and is now pushing back against humanity's exploitation or harm. This resonates with the notion of environmental degradation and the consequences of human impact on the natural world. The idea of nature as an active force, rather than a passive backdrop, is a poignant reminder of the delicate balance between humanity and the environment. Through Susan's voice, Tomy conveys the idea that these natural calamities are an appropriate price, or 'valli' that nature has imposed on humanity. But the narrative of *Valli*, in contrast to dystopian works, is intertwined with many hopeful instances. Thommichan inspires James as he says "Your mustard seeds will grow as high as the sky one day, and all the birds in this world will come to nest in it. Just be patient" (323). The ending of the novel clearly points out that the flood washed away the sins of the land, and the people of Kalluvayal hope that "There must come a time when the language of the forest and the humans will become one, a time when axe and the chainsaw will disappear from the face of the earth. When that time comes, human beings will learn to love the earth and one another. In that time, the forest will bloom to the sound of human laughter..." (401).

Notes

1. Vanadurga and Jaladurga are significant deities in the folklore and mythology of Adivasi communities in India, representing the natural elements of forest and water.
2. In Japanese mythology, Shimenawa is a sacred rope that is used in Shinto rituals to mark the boundaries of sacred spaces or objects.
3. See Gadgil and Guha (1995).

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