

Valli's Echo: A Tale of Adivasi Harmony and the Perils of Exploitation in Wayanad

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Sheela Tomy, a novelist and short story writer, made her debut with the novel *Valli*, originally written in Malayalam and later translated into English. The novel is set in 'Wayanad', Kerala, a region inhabited by Adivasis and indigenous communities. It beautifully portrays the serene 'Kulluvayal' village, nestled deep within the Western Ghats of northern Kerala. However, it also serves as a poignant narrative about the relentless exploitation and gradual depletion of natural resources due to excessive human greed. At its core, *Valli* delves into the rich mythologies and cultures of the Adivasis, who maintain a profound connection with the natural world.

In this novel, the indigenous people, or Adivasis, depict nature as the centre of the earth. They hold Wayanad in the highest regard and adoration. Their relationship with nature is organic and genuine, in contrast to outsiders who exploit it for capitalist gains. In this narrative, Adivasis rely on nature for their survival, they follow the ethics of the environment but the exploitation of the forest by colonizers and the atrocities committed by Jenmis result in suffering in their lives. Environmental ethics interrogates human relationship with the environment and refers to the moral duty of humans to protect the environment. Wayanad is converted into luxury retreats for the affluent. Naxal activity in Wayanad hums in the background of the novel. This exploitation is intertwined with the violation of tribal rights, social conflicts, and cultural erosion, manifesting through murder, meager wages, displacement, and various other injustices. Nevertheless, the Adivasis maintain their unwavering spiritual faith in nature. Their tender feelings for nature still remain in their memories after displacement.

Introduction

Valli is Eco fiction written by a Malayalam writer Sheela Tomy. This novel is set in “Kulluvayal” village of Wayanad forest in the Western Ghats of northern Kerala. In Malayalam “Valli” means land, plant, women and daily wages. Wayanad as valli weaving the multilayers of the tales of indigenous people and illustrating its social complexity. This place is rich with the culture of indigenous people, or Adivasis. The peaceful environment of this forest is shrine for Adivasis. This novel is portrayal of Adivasis’ faith and relations with nature. It is not only deal with the piece of land but also an ecosystem of social, political and ecological violence. Adivasis depend on the specific lands of the forest for their traditional livelihood and cultural practices. Their Ethics for the environment prevent them to exploit the nature. Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson in a manifesto *The Humanist Manifesto II* proclaim, “We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human needs and interests”. (17) Similarly, environmental ethics also emerge from the experiences of human interaction with the environment. Environmental ethics may be seen as an effort to protect the environment from the destruction by humans. Adivasis’ livelihood affected by the exploitation of the forest after facing the colonial effects. The exploitation the forest led to the exploitation and enslavement of the Adivasis. Adivasis people has immense faith in nature that they thought flood and fire are response of nature toward the unethical harm caused by outsiders. Colonization oppresses the Adivasis by casting discrimination, snatching their lands, offering meager wages, murders.

Baruch Spinoza writes, Nature “is always the same and oneeverywhere”(84). Indian literature is abundant with the theme of nature as Sheela Tomy presents the nature relationship with Indigenous people particularly Adivasis. According to Adi-dharma the term “Adivasi” refers to the foundations, origins, and beginnings of spiritual practices of India’s first settlers. Fikret Berkes’ work on *Traditional Ecological Knowledge* defined as “A cumulative body of knowledge,

practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” Early in the 20th century, a social worker in India, Thaler Baba, or Amritlal Vuthaldas Thakker, coined the term “Adivasis.”

Sheela Tomy is a Novelist and Short story writer from Kerala. *Valli* is her debut novel originally written in Malayalam and later translated into English in 2022. Her latest novel is *Aa Nadiyodu Preu Chodikkaruth*. Tomy utilizes the original letters and diary written by Susan, a character in the novel set against the true event of Kerala. Susan recounts flashbacks of Wayanad in her diary, documenting her struggles with cancer and other life issues. She wrote this diary for her daughter, Tessa. The narrative begins with the arrival of Susan’s parents, Sara and Thommichan, in Kulluvayal during the Naxal activity of 1970. They have a relationship with the landlord, Peter, and his wife Lucy, expressing their love for the forest and their efforts to help the Adivasis, particularly the Paniyars who live in harmony with the forest. The Adivasis in Kulluvayal suffer from the exploitation of the forest.

In the beginning of the novel, Thommichan writes in a letter to his granddaughter (Tessa), “All are gone now. . . . Only reviving vehicles and chattering tourists left” (7). This statement indicates that the Adivasis were forced to migrate from the village, and the natural place was left solely for economic gain. The reason behind this is not only the exploitation of the environment but also their bondage to the system of “Vallipani.” According to Tomy, “Vallipani was the contract labor system in Wayanad where the workers and their families were forced to work for the Jenmi (a landowning class) for a year in exchange for a certain measure of rice called Valli”. This system originates from the rituals of Valliyoorkavu, a famous Bhagavathy temple of Wayanad near the Kabani River, where landlords such as Nayars, Nambiaris, Warriors, Gowndars, and others would buy Paniyas and Adiyas as agricultural labor.

Nature’s Tapestry

“Valli” is replete with a fervent portrayal of nature, depicting the Wayanad forest covered with paddy fields, coffee, and black pepper. The novel

delves into the myths and folklore, entwined with the hidden secrets of the indigenous people, echoing the myth of Uniyaachi. Uniyaachi, a devadasi and Adivasi girl, was killed by her community for engaging in a love affair. Sara and Thommichan arrive in the Kulluvayal village amidst the Naxalite movement oppressing the forest people. The narrative highlights the greenery of the Wayanad forest, symbolizing the wild energy of Mother Earth, with the Kabani River as the river of life, animals as companions, and trees providing shelter for Adivasis. Thommichan becomes a victim of both the oppression faced by the Adivasis and the exploitation of the forest. Long after, in a letter to his granddaughter Tessa, he says, “See our indigenous people, Adivasis, were also nature’s guard; they never poisoned the waterways to catch fish, and yet their bamboo basket brimmed with vaala, Kuruva, snakehead, catfish, and whitespot” (7). Thommichan mentions how Adivasis guard nature, celebrating their connection through cultural activities like folk songs, enchantments of forest goddesses, and their struggle for Valli (earth).

Mooppan from the Paniyar community pays tribute to nature with a song: “Rain, come, come, rain like never before, rain . . .” (21). This harvest song is dedicated to nature because it helps them enjoy cultivation. The Paniyar community celebrates their happiness with these songs, which serve as a tribute to nature. Indigenous people have a softer heart for nature compared to outsiders who do not belong to Wayanad. Basavan, a person with a kind heart, is the son of the adiyaan, a serf bound to the land. Once, “Basavan had hugged the tree to protect the hornbill’s nest on its topmost branch, and he did not allow anybody to disturb the birds” (43). This statement resonates with the tender feelings of this adiyaan’s son. Indigenous women are an important part of a community’s social capital. In literature, women and the environment are studied as Ecofeminism. Francoise d’Eaubonne in her book “*Le Ecofeminisme Ou La Mort*” defines Ecofeminists as those who believe that women interact with the environment in a spiritual, nurturing, and intuitive manner. As a result of women’s close association with the environment, their domination and oppression have occurred in conjunction with the domination and degradation of the environment.

The status of women in this novel is portrayed as eco-friendly with nature, although they are also increasingly oppressed in many ways. Kali, an Adivasi girl, is considered the daughter of the forest. She is “The one who does not know fear. The one who knows the language of the forest. The one who blows with the wind” (47). She enchants the spiritual environment of the forest, spending her entire day roaming in nature and sleeping under the burial palace. Their closeness to nature is evident from the names of places. Wayanad is not just a place; they have faith in it as their protector. The forest environment educates the Adivasis on how to survive with natural objects. Once, when a flood ravaged the whole village, uprooting Adivasis from their daily lives, Ummithara, one of the Adivasi women, lost her shelter. In the flood of Wayanad, she used bamboo to create a new shelter. These activities with nature highlight the life-sustaining virtue of the Adivasis. They consider the forest as a living thing, which reflects in Thommichan’s words: “Plants are just like children, he told Susan. ‘Both need care, nutrition, pampering. . . . They being friends with the paaval and the Kovel, they will be full of fruits before you know it’” (118).

The forest reminds them of their herbal remedies (from bark, roots, leaves, flowers, and fruits), housing materials (timber, bamboo, grass, and creepers for rope and thatching), and food (edible roots, mushrooms, leaves, shoots, flowers, fruit, and honey), as well as tough leaves for plates and bowls.

Tears of Wayanad

The story unfolds in the year 1970 when Sara and Thommichan arrive in Kulluvayal. Comrade Varghese is killed in a police encounter, and Naxal activities in Wayanad hum in the lives of indigenous people. “Naxals strike again in Wayanad; six houses attacked, two killed” (17). They killed two people: Vasudeva Adiga, a farmer, and Varamangalath Chekku, a merchant. They also looted jewelry and weapons. The motive behind these killings was the abolition of the Vallipani system. All the Vargheses want proper wages for their work and believe that all the Adivasis who toil on the land are humans who should be treated well.

The Jenmis were behind Varghese's murder, and the police are their agents. This brutal incident terrified the Adivasis, making their nights in Wayanad filled with fear.

The Jenmis oppress the Adivasis and seize all the land, treating them as slaves and branding them as uncivilized. At the worship of Valliyooramma temple, a young man appeared and demanded, "Tell us, how did we become slaves?" (143). The Jenmis celebrate the murder of Varghese, which is indicated in their discourse: "All we have is the bit of land our ancestors worked for, fighting with malaria and jungle fever and what not. Good that their leader Varghese is gone" (29). The landlords brutally mistreat the Adivasis: "The Jenmis who own the land can mistreat the adiyaans who work on the land with impunity, beat them and kick them to death" (31). Indigenous people struggle for the forest and land, facing oppression that erodes their culture. The exploitation of the forest impacts their social and cultural practices. This novel evokes strong emotions, especially regarding female Adivasis who endure double oppression. Kali, an Adivasi girl, is portrayed as a nature lover who wanders in the forest, sings with nature, sleeps in the lap of the earth, and sits in the river's embrace. Alongside the theme of forest exploitation and Adivasi struggles, the novel recalls past events and myths, including the story of Uniyaachi, a beautiful dancer from Salem who suffered due to love. The exploitation extends to Adivasi children at Kadoram School, where they face discrimination for their culture and clothing. Padmanabhan, inviting them for Onam festivals, notices their isolation as classmates refuse to sit with them. He said, "These children are scared of everything, the strange language that assaulted their ears, the generous scolding . . ." (138). These Adivasi children may not understand the discrimination, but they suffer due to unethical acts against them. Despite facing oppression, Kali teaches them to love the forest. They present their harmony with nature through Kali's song: "Forest, river, sky, and a school by the forest fringe . . ." (139). The first lesson they are taught is "Equality – that was the first lesson taught at Kadoram School. And then so many lessons, taught by the seed that loses itself to sprout, to leaf, to flower . . ." (145). These lessons were needed to teach because

Wayanad faces several challenges following the actions of the Jenmis. They said, "Greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes had already made their stealthy entrance into the forest, but those days, it was still a sacred place. Tender mist had fallen over the forest" (35). Tomy considers the forest as a protagonist who presents itself as a character in its own right, for example, in Amitav Ghosh's *The Living Mountain*. After the imbalance of the human-nature relationship, Adivasis face the problems of imbalance in nature: first, drought, and then fire uprooted the balanced life in the forest, symbolizing the forest's tears. During the flood, Umminithara's hut floated into the big canal, and this poor old Adivasi woman just prayed to God to help. Tomy indicates that nature responds whenever it is exploited by humans. Fire, which burns the maximum wealth of the forest, is described as, "Fire was a curtain to hide the poaching, the cutting of trees, and the ousting of people. Fire was revenge" (153).

Echo of Unity

It was a time when Adivasis were raising their voices for their rights. Padmanabhan decided that they would protest against those heartless creatures. "A procession disturbed the peace of the forest as Kurukumar, Paniyar, and tenant farmers who leased Maniyan Chetty's hilltop land shouted slogans and followed Peter and his friends. Women joined in, led by Susheela and Rukku" (173). This revolution involves not only the participation of men but also women and children. Before her death, Kali called children through a song. "Protect the forest, children. . . . Protect the streams, children. . . ." (194). The social system of Kulluvayal bound them to revolt, but they ignored the whispers of some communities, putting their hands on their hearts to protect even the smallest tree of the forest from axes. This fight was waged by both Adivasis and forest creatures, hand in hand, challenging the power that oppresses them, as Tomy indicated. They mention:

With Basavan at the helm- Javanan, Kariyan, Mathan, Maran, Jogi, Chomi, Bavu – would take up their responsibilities. Locusts were waiting to lay bare the fields? Creatures that loved the darkness

more than light waited in the wings, making plans, annoyed that the protectors of the forest were challenging their power. (Tomy 216)

The Adivasis, deeply connected, engage in every activity in unity, using Basawan's whistle that echoes from hill to hill, known as 'hela Maru.' Thommichan recalls their ancestors' method of protecting the forest from ecological harm. "See a Fire Belt with which to avoid a forest fire. Something that your ancestors have been doing for centuries to protect their forest" (246). After enduring brutalities against both the forest and the Adivasis, villagers believe that the forest, in an act of self-destruction, brings an end to the devastation caused by outsiders. "The forest forgets how to cry, as animals scrambled to find shelter and birds flew madly around looking for roosts. The day the dance of the bulldozers ended" (310). Adivasis scream, "This earth is not yours; it belongs to those who have lived here from time immemorial" (310). The only thing that is understandable is that Sheela Tomy presents the real oppression of Wayanad. She emphasizes the discrimination between Adivasis and other people. Through Thommichan, she said: "Two groups shared a language, skin color, texture of hair, but their mind was far apart" (313).

This difference highlights how Adivasis continue to protect nature even after losing their land, shelter, and migrating. This enduring commitment is evident in their minds, and their love for nature shines through the pages of Susan's diary.

Conclusion

Sheela Tomy's *Valli* intricately explores the relationships between Adivasis, their environment, and oppressive forces in Wayanad. The novel delves into the Adivasis' deep connection with nature, their resistance against exploitation, and the complex web of social, political, and ecological challenges they confront. Through characters like Sara and Thommichan, the Vallipani system's impact on Adivasis' livelihoods is unveiled, emphasizing their harmonious coexistence with the forest. Tomy vividly portrays Adivasi struggles against colonialism, Naxal activities, and exploitation by the Jenmis, particularly highlighting the double oppression faced by women and children.

The forest itself becomes a character, responding to ecological imbalances caused by exploitation, leading to a united protest by Adivasis and forest creatures. Despite environmental destruction, the novel underscores an enduring connection between Adivasis and their land. Tomy emphasizes the Adivasis' unwavering commitment to protect their environment, turning the forest into a battleground against external threats. "Valli" transcends traditional ecological narratives, offering a profound exploration of Adivasi life, resilience, and their unyielding bond with the natural world, as documented in Susan's diary.

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