The Criterion: An International Journal in English
Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed Open Access e-Journal
(ISSN: 0976-8165) Vol. 17, Issue-VIII, September 2026
Special Issue: World Literature
www.the-criterion.com

Voicing the Margins: Foregrounding Forest and Indigenous Community in Sheela Tomy's *Valli*

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https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n8.7

Abstract:

Sheela Tomy's award winning novel *Valli* takes us on a journey of the indigenous communities trying to fight issues of marginality, gain resistance and strength in the forests of Wayanad exploited by capitalism and colonialism.

The novel articulates the natural bond between tribals and nature observed through diaries, letters, and folklore reminiscent of land, memories, and the community. For the natives, the forest stands as a testament of history of the lives of the original settlers and later inhabitants describing the pain and agony of losing nature, struggles of gender inequality, and the challenge of keeping traditions alive.

Valli is a thought provoking and poignant novel tracing the troubling paradox of indigenous settlers- nature over culture, resistance and identity. It also allows us to introspect about the anthropocentric attitudes regarding nature and environment, marginalizing the identity of the indigenous settlers and creating a space for environmental justice. The novel attempts to create respect and care for nature, and remembering people at the margins oblivious to mainstream, emphasize protection of the abused land and defending the original inhabitants of the land. Sheela Tomy's novel irresistibly foregrounds the Wayanad forest with its flora and fauna by turning around the novel as a site of resistance towards the advances of commercialization, capitalism and profit- making corporate giants.

Keywords: Postcolonial environment, margins, resistance, strength.

Article History: Submitted-29/04/2026, Revised-30/06/2026, Accepted-20/07/2026, Published-30/09/2026.
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There must come a time when each of us is able to hear the forest weep, a time when the languages of the forest and the humans will become one. 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…

The above lines reflect the feelings of Tomy from her debut novel *Valli* (2022), recently translated from Malayalam to English by Jayasree Kalathil. Valli shortlisted for the 2022 JCB Prize for Literature is a deeply personal book for its author, as it is primarily inspired by her roots in Wayanad. Told across and passed to many generations, Valli introduces the reader to the mystical land of Wayanad and its beautiful forest, along the land's complicated and violent history, and the many people who call it 'home' today. Valli is a reminder of the atrocities humans have committed towards nature, and one another, due to greed for resources and power. At the same time, it is a prayer, as Sheela Tomy puts it, occupied with hope for change and a better future. The novel puts the spotlight back on ecology, land, indigenous people and women facing issues of marginalization and displacement.

Writers like Sheela Tomy have broadened the horizon and expanded the discipline of ecocriticism to include power and privilege (90). Ecocriticism as the term suggests 'is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. . . ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty xviii). Ecocriticism since its inception was more of a North American concept of the study of American nature writing and wilderness in the first wave moving on the current wave of environmental racism, environmental justice and postcolonial ecocriticism. Postcolonial ecocriticsm is a portmanteau word combining the study of environment through colonization, imperialism, marginality and resistance. As Swarnalatha Rangaranjan puts it, "Postcolonial ecocriticism builds on the insights of diverse domains such as environmental justice, ecofeminism,

political ecology and other discourses of decolonisation. Its main objective is, however, to resist and critique the homogenisation of spaces, which is a result of the practices of colonialism as well as global capitalism"(90). As we grapple with burgeoning environmental issues and climate change, it is important to question the patriarchal, cultural and anthropocentric practices leading to ecological catastrophes and disasters. The climate summit negotiations only articulate the concerns of the capitalist nations whereas the poor countries suffer silently under the wealth of accumulated garbage consumerism of the rich countries leading to Rob Nixon's "slow violence" (2011).

Postcolonial ecocriticism emerged as an interdisciplinary field examining the relationship between literature, environment and culture in the context of colonialism and engages with the dominant colonial conquests that proved detrimental to the ecology, land and marginalized communities of the region. Postcolonial ecocriticism in its early days was researched by scholars like Graham, Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literature of the Environment* (2011), Robert Marzec, *An Ecological and Postcolonial Study of Literature: From Daniel Defoe to Salman Rushdie* (2007) and Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (2010) have stimulated and chartered a genealogy of ecocriticism towards the marginalized human, colonized and the non-human. Similarly, the turn of animal studies in environmental studies also activated the inclusion of postcolonial within ecocriticism. The growing field of postcolonial ecocriticism only adds to the engagement of the environment situated and embedded in politics and culture of the place, land and resources. As Shubhanku Kochar and M. Anjum Khan in their book titled *Environmental Postcolonialism: A Literary Response* (2021) elaborate, "Environment is both material and biological. It is available in the form of resources. It becomes a commodity

which is used, spent and consumed. Human experience cannot be devoid of nature"(8). Like postcolonialism draws on the binary of colonizer and colonized, postcolonial ecocriticism attempts to study the interrelationship between the human- animal dichotomy and body and language as "the indigenous culture and nature go hand in hand. . . the natives who also form part of the environment have a body but no expression or voice or at least not important and worth listening" (8). Thus postcolonial ecocriticism becomes the voice of the agency necessary to facilitate the powerless to raise their power and the marginalized environment with its people to be consideredas foundation of human society.

Sheela Tomy's eponymous novel *Valli* acts as the agent and the site where the disciplines of postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice and ecocriticism meet and engage the reader through images of colonial history, exploitation, resistance and resilience of environment and its indigenous people. Valli unfolds in the idyllic town of Kalluvayal, nestled deep within the Western Ghats. It is a story of the migrants who settled in the erstwhile place known as Bayalnadu (the land of rice paddies, now called Wayanad), the true and selfless caretakers of the forest, Adivasis. The novel's conscious engagement with nature, environment and land enables a deep understanding of environmental and social justice. Spread over a span of four generations and narrative voices the reader finds Tessa, daughter of Susan and granddaughter of Sara and Thommichan who migrate to Kalluvayal as newlyweds in the 70s.

Tomy evocatively writes about the loss of land of her growing up years and its sustained exploitation in a chronologically documented manner. These lines act as a warning to all those who wish to become caregivers and custodians to an abused land and its people. Set in Wayanad, a rural district in the Western Ghats in Kerala and home to Adivasis and indigenous communities, describing the daily routine of a woman of the land of Wayanad, Tomy writes," She watched the Wayanadan women who scurried around sowing, planting,

weeding, harvesting, threshing, preparing the harvest, cleaning, washing, grinding spices, pounding paddy until she, too, learned how to do it all."(*Valli* 69). In Tomy's writings, the reader could feel, touch, smell, and see the landscape and beauty of their motherland as she skillfully interweaves regional myths, folklore, and stories, and uses them as powerful storytelling devices throughout the novel, "Sometime much later, somehow, as the hills began to withdraw into the earth and the paddy fields began to disappear, far-hill and near-hill became strangers. But Kalluvayal remains, even today, its rivers thin, its forests bald"(Valli, 2).

Environmental Injustice and Indigenous Ecocentrism in Tomy's *Valli*

One of the contestations of postcolonial ecocriticism is the articulation of the marginalized especially the indigenous communities and their relationship with their environment. Not only is the environment colonized but so are the inhabitants who are abused, exploited, displaced and finally evicted from their land causing the erasing of their identity. Ecocriticism being white man's movement eventually moved to understanding and representing the indigenous people and the global south negotiating the tightrope between rich and poor nations. Joni Adamson edited with Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein's *The Environmental Justice Reader*: Politics, Poetics and Pedagogy ((2002) is a definitive book that changed the course of ecocriticism towards environmental justice and including within the realm of postcolonial studies.

Valli is set against the backdrop of Wayanad, home to her growing up years. She spent her childhood amidst nature, by the bank of the river Kabani and the forest of Kalluvayal sharing its joys and sorrows culminating in the narration of Wayanad's story. To her, Valli is an organic telling of "the stories that had become part of her body and mind" (Valli, 399). She remarks:

> "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)" (Valli, pp 399-400). The changes sweeping Wayanad hold a strong impact on Tomy as she navigates these twists and turns in the novel through her tight plot and realistic characters.

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, a deep-rooted social and economic injustice in India. India's Bonded Labour System Act, 1976, faces weak enforcement due to corruption, lack of 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 promoting 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 labourers and make them work on their lands. It is called '*Valli*ppani' – labouring in return for Valli, a share in the crop" (Valli 31). During the Valliyoorkaavu temple festival, Adivasi men and women, were traded like cattle in the slave market because the practice of 'vallippani'—bonded labour 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 sentence for breaking the bond. These circumstances propelled Comrade Varghese prominent leader of Naxal movement in Wayanad organized an agricultural labourers' union to eradicate vallippani and establish fair wages.

Tomy projects the people of Wayanad to be constantly in a state of conflict throughout the novel; firstly, the Jenmis (landowners) who refuse 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 invades on forest land. The title of novel is, therefore, significant as the Malayalam term '*Valli*' summarises 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 suggests 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 practices depriving them of their land rights making Wayanad a key site of direct action and uprising against exploitation, and the Naxalite movement.

Valli is a moving tale of the Wayanad people's history exploring the harmonious relationship between adivasis and the natural world of Wayanad within the forest ecosystem. Their entire life, livelihood, cultural practices and subsistence economy, was heavily dependent on the forest that provided them with food, medicine, shelter, and other essential resources. The cultural rituals, traditions, and community centered on the forest reflect the profound connection to the natural environment highlighting the role of forest as essential for their physical survival and cultural identity.

Sheela Tomy incorporates and integrates environmental themes within the familiar trope of local folklore, culture, myth, and traditions, strengthening the message by enhancing the emotional and psychological impact of the story on the audience. Through a nuanced narrative, audience witness their own stories, beliefs, and values reflected in the narrative, leading to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the environmental issues being

addressed. Folklore and mythology combined with traditional wisdom can create a sense of continuity and connection to land and nature, not just a modern concern, but a timeless one deeply rooted in cultural identity. The interaction between Padmanabhan and Prakashan in the novel throws light on the spiritual connection between these people and the environment as:

> "Prakasha, do you know, in Japanese folklore there is a forest spirit named Kodama,' he began. '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" (*Valli,*252).

The love, pride and honour of the land is reversed as the forest of Kalluvayal is subject to human greed for abundance of natural resources. Historically, Wayanad was an important port in the ancient trade routes connecting Mysore and other parts in the east to the Malabar Coast in the West. By the end of the eighteenth century, Wayanad saw several struggles against the colonizing British East India Company as they had cleared vast swathes of forest and cultivated commercial plantations of tea, coffee and rubber disrupting the natural growth of forests and eventually displacing local communities. With the arrival of traders and migrants, the landscape of Wayanad changed extremely. Post independent India and its dream of modernization resulted in the gradual demolition of the terrain of Wayanad's forests and paddy fields, farming became unsustainable, and granite mining and tourism businesses occupied unprecedented proportions of land.

The indigenous people fighting over wages and bonded labour practices, turned into environmental warriors fighting for earth. Thommichan, Peter, and Padmanabhan aware and respectful of their land rights wish to bring change through education. Thommichan and Peter start to consolidate the local youth into 'Army of Forest' to guard and protect the forest

against corrupt people. Ivan Kachouseph, his eldest son Luca, and Sunny Paulose are mercenary timber merchants spreading false notion of development causing 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" (*Valli*,153).

Reconstructing Feminine Indigenous Identity in *Valli*

Sheela Tomy's *Valli*,is a novel that refuses to present history as a linear, state-authored chronicle. Instead, it offers a mosaic of experiences—oral traditions, Indigenous cosmologies, myths of feminine deities, childhood memories, letters, diary entries, environmental laments, and stories of land loss. Through this narrative plurality, Tomy restructures the cultural, ecological, and emotional worlds of Adivasi communities in Wayanad.

Tribal identity in *Valli* appears through a profound sense of belonging to the land. For Adivasi communities in Wayanad, the forest is a source of food, medicine, spiritual presence, and ancestral memory. Tomy's narrative steadily shows how forests, rivers, and hills shape daily life and collective consciousness. The novel approaches numerous scenes in which Adivasi characters demonstrate deep ecological knowledge: identifying herbs, predicting rain, understanding animal behaviour, and locating water sources.

Prabhu notes that the novel's engagement with the Naxalite period reveals the political vulnerability of tribal identity. Young Adivasis, often drawn into revolutionary movements out of anger against exploitation, become victims of police brutality, custodial torture, and disappearances. Mallan's disappearance and Padmanabhan's death in custody exemplify how the state criminalizes subaltern resistance (83-86). As Mahasweta Devi argues, "the tribal is always positioned as a problem to be contained, not a citizen to be

protected" (Devi 27). In *Valli*, identity is therefore not given but continually challenged in the face of ecological loss, economic exploitation, and political violence. The novel does not romanticize Adivasi life but portrays its complexity with nuance, compassion, and historical awareness. Rituals in the novel serve as personified expressions of community identity. They exist not merely as religious observances but as performances of ecological ethics and collective mourning, healing. The identification of tribal life is expressed in Valli's Chapter 16 as "The forest will bloom to the sound of human laughter, and it will tell us that every life, however small or delicate as the touch-me-not, is divine. It is for you, my children, that the forest weeps" (147).

In the course of the novel, Kalluvayal becomes an embodiment of structured community, livelihood and collective memory ingrained in the residents. The deconstruction of structured life of the natives can be witnessed through Nature/Manmade landscapes, Stories and Myths, Practices, Festivals and Language producing certain symbolic meanings. The lived experiences of Paniyar tribe for example have formed thoughtful and emotional connection with specific spaces in Kalluvayal form an integral part of their day to day lives. Such as, the Shop with its walls made of "split bamboo" is a significant recurring spatial symbol that holds meaning for all the men of Kalluvayal. The commencement of Tommichan and Sara into the lives and issues of Kalluvayal takes place here as "Appetan's chai shop awaited the newcomers holding within it the smells of Kalluvayal and the river, and friendship, news and revolutionary ideas" (*Valli* 28).

Every living and breathing facet of Kalluvayal articulates stories of Unniyachi, Veda Princess, Seetha, and several other tales that directly or indirectly narrate their own stories and acknowledge their lived realities. "Stories contain more truth than histories… Because storytellers are bound to b ring the truth in their heart to the story they tell." (*Valli*165). Myths form a fundamental part of cultural practices and collective memory of the group. The

characters in Myths form an archetype for the people of Kalluvayal itself and in their tale one can find the faces of Kalluvayal's people.

Sharing the same space and depicting the characters with similar circumstances, the stories form an intimate part of the tribal identities. Language is separate for each land and culture; Tomy by recollecting local songs and certain words has tried to keep the native spirit alive within *Valli*. Customs of marriage and the month of Meenam, joyous festival of Valliyoorkaavu for the youth recognize it as a part of their own self thus establishing a unique identity with the environment.

T. Prabhu in his research paper titled "Between Land And Language: Reconstructing Tribal Identity In Sheela Tomy's *Valli*" explores the interlinking of Feminism in Valli is with ecological consciousness and Indigenous cultural practices. He writes about the Adivasi women occupying central roles as knowledge-keepers, healers, cultivators, and custodians of ritual and story. Their identities are shaped by labour, motherhood, land-based knowledge, and communal relationships aligning with ecofeminism particularly in reference to Vandana Shiva's claim that "women and nature have both been colonized by patriarchal and capitalist systems that seek to extract, consume, and destroy" (Staying Alive 12).

Valli describes and brings out the deep bonds between Adivasi women and their environment in the novel and they contain natural information on medicinal wisdom and agricultural knowledge. They are familiar with roots and leaves healing fevers, soothing wounds, and preservation of seeds. These women display a natural affinity towards the environment by their inherent understanding of ecological rhythms such as monsoon cycles, soil fertility, animal behaviour contributing to what ecologists affirm as Indigenous science and wisdom. Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts that Indigenous women are "primary holders of ecological memory," (45) and Valli vividly dramatizes this truth. On the other hand, these

Adivasi women also encounter gendered risks through domestic violence, economic dependence, sexual exploitation by landlords, and police harassment during political conflicts

Tomy's portrayal of these experiences draws out Mahasweta Devi's writings on tribal women, who are often doubly marginalized—first as tribals, and then as women (Prabhu). Native women such as Sara, Isabella, and Susan in the novel represent a revolutionary if not rebellious dimension of feminism in the novel. Sara's defiance of her elite Christian family in choosing a life with Thommichan challenges caste and class norms. Isabella's departure from the convent questions the repressive structures of religious institutions. Susan's life, shaped by loneliness, displacement, and ecological grief, adds psychological depth to the novel's feminist discourse. Her diary becomes a feminist document, reporting stories of land loss, Adivasi suffering, and her own emotional turmoil. Storytelling, meanwhile, becomes a mode of resistance. *Valli* uses storytelling to restore silenced histories—of Adivasi struggles, female resilience, ecological disasters, and political violence.

Tessa, the next generation, represents a global feminism rooted in technology and cosmopolitanism but transformed by her reconnection with ancestral memory. Her engagement with her mother's diary initiates a feminist awakening that merges modern identity with Indigenous heritage.In all these narratives, feminism in *Valli* is relational, ecological, and community-centred. Women resist erasure not through individual assertion alone but through continuity—of memory, ritual, and storytelling (Prabhu). Kalluvayal is a rich forest area with diverse flora and fauna. It provides habitat to numerous species,and also home to the natives of Wayanad that is plundered by men appointed by the higher officials of the government for the sake of timber trade and tourism. "Greedy two– legged creatures wielding axes has already made their stealthy entrance into the forest." (Valli 35). The novel portrays anthropocentric concerns like women and nature always to be controlled, whereas, men characterized as rational, judicious and more capable of guiding women and nature

towards development. Annamkutty, one of the women in the novel suffers and grieves under exploitation by her male counterpart, Ivachan, a farmer, for her own survival at the Anjilikkunnil house in Kalluvayal. Ivachan's father Kochouseph captures the hill through fraudulent means to donate to the parish. Land is looted for men's selfish needs. He chose Annamkutty as the bride for his son, Ivachan. Tomy regards Annamkutty as a weak woman filled with immense love towards nature around her. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Valli 65).She gets mentally mistreated by her husband and mother-in-law, Theruthiyamma. She is called as machi by her mother-in-law until she conceives and begets three children, Luca, Katrina and Peter. Annamkutty is treated as a child bearing machine by her family. "Leave the fields only when your water breaks and go right back in after the baby is delivered. That is what real women did in Wayanad, said Theruthiyamma." (Valli 67).Annamkutty starts to overlook her sorrows by spending her leisure time with nature.

Conclusion

Sheela Tomy's *Valli* stands as a powerful literary intervention into contemporary debates on indigenous identity, ecological justice, women's agency, and the politics of memory. The constant demand for resources and extraction to satisfy the burgeoning needs of the world is catered by the silent sacrifices by the indigenous communities, their land and resources that negotiate ecological crises and cultural homogenization in the name of assimilation into the mainstream society. Valli firmly asserts that identity is embedded in place practice and in rituals that honour the land, in stories that uphold memory, and in women who hold communities together. In Valli, Sheela Tomy creates a patriarchal society with Wayanad and its women facing adversities in life with strength, indigenous wisdom and spiritual connection with nature and land strengthening the nurturing connection between nature and women. The environment is always compromised and adjusted to accommodate the neo-liberal economic policy and capitalist development in India. In the name of

development, forests and lands are razed disturbing the ecological balance once enjoyed by the inhabitants resulting in displacement. Tomy's Valli takes a closer look at the patriarchal practices that demean the earth and the marginalized creatures to further the capitalist agenda.

Tomy considers that women are closer to earth or nature. 'Women have historically been seen as closer to the earth or nature.' Kali is a perfect specimen of a woman who stands as a witness to rape, humiliation and dishonour in the novel. She is sexually assailed by the landlord and is banished out of home by her father. "A young woman who had lost her virginity, her honour– she had no place at home, said her father." (*Valli* 185).By illustrating upon indigenous wisdom, ecological ethics, feminist consciousness, and intergenerational narratives, Tomy's novel is a testament to the resilience of communities whose stories have long been marginalized.

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