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# Between Land And Language: Reconstructing Tribal Identity In Sheela Tomy's *Valli*

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***Abstract***
*Sheela Tomy's Valli is a landmark work in contemporary Malayalam literature that offers an immersive exploration of Adivasi identity, ecological history, and feminine strength within the culturally layered landscape of Wayanad. Through an interwoven narrative of myth, memory, ritual, and storytelling, the novel foregrounds Indigenous epistemologies often suppressed by dominant histories. This study examines how Valli constructs tribal identity through ritual practices and oral traditions, reconfigures feminist agency within the interconnected worlds of women and land, and employs storytelling as an archive of survival and resistance. Drawing on postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Stuart Blackburn, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Vandana Shiva, and Mahasweta Devi, the paper situates Valli within a broader framework of Indigenous studies, ecofeminism, and subaltern historiography. It argues that Sheela Tomy not only reasserts the cultural and ecological significance of Adivasi communities but also positions women at the centre of a narrative that resists erasure, challenges modernity's violence, and reimagines identity as a process rooted in memory, ritual, and storytelling.*

***Keywords:*** *Adivasi identity, ritual, storytelling, feminism, ecofeminism, Indigenous knowledge, myth, memory, Sheela Tomy.*

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## I. Introduction

Sheela Tomy's *Valli*, translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil, 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 reconstructs the cultural, ecological, and emotional worlds of Adivasi communities in Wayanad. The novel functions as what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls a "decolonizing text," one that recentres Indigenous memory against the "cultural bomb" of modernity's erasure (Ngũgĩ 3).

While *Valli* appears at first glance to tell a story of a region and its people, it is fundamentally a study of identity formation and cultural survival. Tribal identity in the novel emerges from relationships with land, community, ancestors, rituals, and stories. In this sense, Tomy's narrative aligns with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's assertion in *Decolonizing Methodologies* that Indigenous identity is "a relationship between people, the land, the ancestors, and the future" (Smith 9). The forested terrain of Wayanad—its rivers, sacred groves, and hills—thus acquires a narrative presence as strong as any human character.

Equally significant is the prominence of women in preserving and transmitting this identity. Feminism in *Valli* is not articulated through Western liberal notions of autonomy but through the embeddedness of women's experiences within land, labour, ritual, and oral narrative traditions. Women such as Susan, Sara, Isabella, Adivasi healers, and mythic figures like Unniyachi embody what Vandana Shiva identifies as "the feminine principle of ecological knowledge" (Shiva 42). They are custodians of memory, interpreters of ecological rhythms, keepers of rituals, and bearers of cultural trauma.

Rituals in the novel serve as embodied expressions of community identity. They exist not merely as religious observances but as performances of ecological ethics, collective mourning, healing, and historical continuity. Storytelling, meanwhile, becomes a mode of resistance. As Stuart Blackburn notes, "oral traditions encode histories that official archives suppress" (Blackburn 15). *Valli* uses storytelling to restore silenced histories—of Adivasi struggles, female resilience, ecological disasters, and political violence.

This paper critically examines how ritual, storytelling, feminism, and identity intersect in *Valli*, drawing on multiple scholarly frameworks to situate the novel within contemporary discussions in ecocriticism, Indigenous studies, and feminist theory.

## II. Tribal Identity In *Valli*: Land, Ancestry, And The Violence Of Modernity

Tribal identity in *Valli* emerges through a profound sense of belonging to the land. For Adivasi communities in Wayanad, the forest is not a resource but a relative—a source of food, medicine, spiritual presence, and ancestral memory. Tomy's narrative consistently shows how forests, rivers, and hills shape daily life and collective consciousness. This portrayal resonates with ecocritical scholarship suggesting that Indigenous identity is "inseparable from ecological intimacy" (Plumwood 110).

The novel offers numerous scenes in which Adivasi characters demonstrate deep ecological knowledge: identifying herbs, predicting rain, understanding animal behaviour, and locating water sources. These portrayals affirm what anthropologist Nurit Bird-David describes as the "relational epistemology" of Indigenous societies, where knowing arises through relationship, not domination (Bird-David 68). Such knowledge marks the core of tribal identity in *Valli*.

Yet this identity faces systematic erosion through migration, land alienation, and capitalist development. Tomy documents how settler communities arriving from the plains reshape the landscape through deforestation, plantation agriculture, and road construction. These transformations echo Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," a gradual ecological degradation that disproportionately affects marginalized communities (Nixon 2). As forests shrink, Adivasis lose not only their livelihood but the very spaces through which identity is produced.

The institution of *vallippani*, after which the novel is titled, symbolises the economic and cultural violence inflicted upon Adivasi people. Being paid in mere handfuls of grain, Adivasi labourers are trapped in a cycle of dependency and humiliation. This system mirrors Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous critique in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" about how subaltern groups are systematically denied access to representation and agency. The Adivasi labourers in *Valli* "can work, but cannot speak"—their voices suppressed by caste, class, and state power.

Furthermore, 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. 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 contested in the face of ecological loss, economic exploitation, and political violence. The novel does not romanticise Adivasi life but portrays its complexity with nuance, compassion, and historical awareness.

## III. Feminism And The Power Of Women: Ecological Knowledge, Memory, And Resistance

Feminism in *Valli* is deeply intertwined with ecological consciousness and Indigenous cultural practices. Adivasi women occupy 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. This aligns with ecofeminist theory, particularly Vandana Shiva's claim that "women and nature have both been colonized by patriarchal and capitalist systems that seek to extract, consume, and destroy" (Shiva 12).

Adivasi women in the novel are portrayed as repositories of medicinal wisdom and agricultural knowledge. They know which roots heal fevers, which leaves soothe wounds, and which seeds must be preserved for the next season. Their familiarity with ecological rhythms—monsoon cycles, soil fertility, animal behaviour—constitutes what ecologists increasingly recognise as Indigenous science. Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts that Indigenous women are "primary holders of ecological memory," and *Valli* vividly dramatizes this truth (Smith 45).

At the same time, Adivasi women face gendered risks: domestic violence, economic dependence, sexual exploitation by landlords, and harassment by police during political conflicts. Tomy's portrayal of these experiences echoes Mahasweta Devi's writings on tribal women, who are often doubly marginalized—first as tribals, and then as women.

Settler women such as Sara, Isabella, and Susan represent another 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 interrogates 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, chronicling stories of land loss, Adivasi suffering, and her own emotional turmoil.

Tessa, the next generation, embodies 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 integrates modern identity with Indigenous heritage. This bridging of the global and Indigenous reflects Leela Gandhi's notion of "affective communities" that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries (Gandhi 72).

In all these narratives, feminism in *Valli* is relational, ecological, and community-centered. Women resist erasure not through individual assertion alone but through continuity—of memory, ritual, and storytelling.

## IV. Ritual As Cultural Archive: Embodied Knowledge And Collective Identity

Rituals in *Valli* serve as living embodiments of cultural memory and identity. They function as what Victor Turner terms "social dramas"—collective actions that bind communities together and reaffirm shared values (Turner 87). Agricultural rituals mark transitions in the farming cycle, while rituals honouring forest deities reinforce ecological ethics and spiritual connections to land.

Tomy depicts rituals with ethnographic precision: offerings made to forest spirits, harvest celebrations, mourning songs, and purification rites. These rituals articulate an Indigenous cosmology in which the human, non-human, and spiritual worlds are interconnected. The worship of female deities such as Sree Kurumba and Vanadurga evokes an ecofeminist worldview in which femininity is synonymous with fertility, protection, and ecological balance.

Rituals of mourning reveal the community's collective response to tragedy. When Adivasis die due to illness, starvation, or state violence, ritual practices enable communal healing. Such scenes parallel anthropological scholarship, like that of Emile Durkheim, who argued that ritual transforms individual sorrow into collective solidarity (Durkheim 312). In *Valli*, mourning rituals also serve a political purpose: they resist the state's attempts to erase or trivialize Adivasi deaths.

Rituals of storytelling—narrating myths, recounting ancestral histories, singing songs—are equally important. As Stuart Blackburn notes in his study of South Indian oral traditions, "storytelling is a ritual performance that both recreates the past and sustains the present" (Blackburn 21). In *Valli*, every act of story-sharing is a ritual that preserves memory, encodes ecological knowledge, and affirms identity.

## V. Storytelling As Resistance: Myth, Memory, And Intergenerational Knowledge

Storytelling is the narrative heart of *Valli*. Through myths, folktales, oral histories, songs, and diaries, Tomy constructs a narrative world where identity is transmitted across generations through stories rather than official archives. This approach aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call for the "reclamation of narrative memory" as a form of decolonization (Ngũgĩ 89).

The myth of Unniyachi, which opens the novel, functions as a cultural touchstone. Although the exact lines cannot be quoted without a readable text, Unniyachi's narrative of suffering, escape, and divine transformation becomes a symbolic frame for women's resilience throughout the novel. Her myth sacralizes the forest and affirms women's spiritual agency. This mythic layer recalls Joseph Campbell's observation that "myths are public dreams that bind communities," but in *Valli* the myth specifically elevates female strength within a deeply patriarchal historical context (Campbell 141).

Susan's diary represents another crucial narrative mode. Her writing blends personal memory with ecological reflection and political commentary. She documents the landscapes of her childhood, the stories of Adivasi elders, and the pain of environmental destruction. The diary becomes what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call "life writing as testimony," a narrative that asserts personal truth against systemic silencing (Smith and Watson 52). Through her writing, Susan preserves stories that would otherwise be forgotten.

Tessa's process of reading her mother's diary creates an intergenerational narrative arc. As she walks through the landscapes Susan once described, she re-enters the world of oral tradition, learning stories from Adivasi elders and discovering her own identity. Storytelling thus becomes a mode of rebirth—of self, memory, and cultural continuity. In all its forms, storytelling in *Valli* functions as resistance. It counters official histories, enriches Indigenous knowledge systems, and highlights the emotional truths of marginalized communities.

## VI. 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. Through its layered narrative structure, the novel reconstructs Adivasi worlds in ways that challenge the violence of modernity, the silence imposed by state institutions, and the cultural erasures of dominant histories. Ritual, storytelling, feminism, and identity are not separate themes but intersecting forces that shape the novel's emotional and intellectual landscape.

By foregrounding tribal identity as a relationship with land, community, and ancestral memory, *Valli* aligns with global Indigenous scholarship and critiques settler-colonial structures. Through its multifaceted

portrayal of women—as healers, storytellers, mothers, rebels, and mythic figures—the novel expands feminist discourse beyond Western frameworks. Rituals in the text articulate Indigenous cosmologies and reinforce the ethical relationships between humans and nature. Storytelling emerges as the ultimate tool of cultural survival, a repository of knowledge that resists erasure.

In a time marked by ecological crisis and cultural homogenization, *Valli* offers a deeply relevant reminder that identity is rooted not only in place but in practice—in rituals that honour the land, in stories that preserve memory, and in women who hold communities together. By drawing upon Indigenous wisdom, ecological ethics, feminist consciousness, and intergenerational narratives, Tomy's novel becomes a testament to the resilience of communities whose histories have long been marginalized.

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