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Article

Valli: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract: This study presents a thematic analysis of Valli by Sheela Tomy, focusing on environmental degradation, gendered oppression, cultural marginalization, and displacement in the indigenous region of Wayanad, Kerala, which is home to the state's largest Adivasi population. The paper documents the gradual destruction of a once-thriving ecosystem over time, resulting in the erosion of cultural and spiritual connections to the land. The analysis highlights significant loss themes, environmental exploitation, resistance, displacement, and the shared struggles of women. The narrative also explores the interconnectedness of women with nature, drawing on the principles of ecofeminist Vandana Shiva. By tracing these themes, this paper aims to use literature to reclaim suppressed histories and advocate for environmental and social justice.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Ecofeminism; Maldevelopment; Principle of Prakriti

Introduction

"Valli: A story of forests ravaged by fires and people rendered voiceless". A plea to save the land and those who live within, facing the grave danger of disappearing from the face of the earth, carefully written by Sheela Tomy, is not just a story but a mirror of reality. The novel explores environmental exploitation, the extinction of wildlife, the displacement of the Adivasi, the struggles of Tessa and her family, and their nostalgia, all of which are seamlessly woven into the narrative. It is the

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plight of people fighting a constant battle to coexist with nature, against authorities trying to erode their existence and silence their voices. Using evocative imagery and intriguing narratives, Tomy has attempted to portray the hindrance that adivasis and marginalized communities face, their connection to nature, and the unforeseen influences that determine their destinies. This chapter explores Valli's most significant themes and their impact on the narrative of the Wayanad region. To be or not to be.

1. Environmental Exploitation

The book opens with the critical situation in Wayanad, formerly known as Bayalnad, where Tomy vividly portrays how the march of so-called development has replaced the natural order of being and altered the sounds of nature. Ever so slowly, the forest cleared, and the porcupine, the sloth bear, the wild boar, the pangolin, the civet, the anteater, the snake, the mongoose, the hare, the peacock, the muntjac and thousands of other creatures withdrew deeper and deeper into the jungle (Tomy 1).

This degradation of biodiversity echoes Vandana Shiva's concept of Maldevelopment, where economic growth disregards ecological sustainability and instead imposes monoculture economies that displace local livelihoods and ecosystems (Hoque 133). Shiva views the destruction of biodiversity as intertwined with the marginalization of women, both considered disposable in capitalist, patriarchal frameworks (Garrity-Bond 187).

Tomy establishes a mood centred around memory and loss, as she struggles to recall the forest in its former glory. The devastation reflects the erasure of indigenous ecological knowledge systems, forests, and rivers. In ecofeminist thought, this loss is both environmental and epistemic, silencing the intimate understanding of nature held by women's and tribal communities (Tialila 357; Garrity-Bond 188). The loss is evident from the start, as the guardians and actual inhabitants of the land of Wayanad, the abode of the largest Adivasi population in Kerala, are pushed to the margins. So, in The Book of the Forest, Tomy begins to write about the forest that is on fire, for the people who have no voice, and for the language with no script (Tomy 11). Shiva insists that the drive for capitalist "development" undermines the feminine principle of Prakriti, a life-sustaining force that represents diversity, interdependence, and nurturance (Garrity-Bond 187).

When the land suffers, its people suffer too. First, the forests begin to thin. What was once a lush green expanse becoming fragmented, forcing the animals to retreat deeper into what little remains of their habitat. Cashew orchards mark the beginning of monoculture farming, where diversity is sacrificed for profit. Soon, cashew gives way to coffee, rubber, and black pepper. Each new crop demands more from the soil, stripping it of its natural nutrients. The novel captures the cyclical nature of destruction—what begins as economic opportunity inevitably leads to depletion and dependence. The river Kabani once sang through the village, reflecting the sun's rays on its waves, changing its flow. The forest people and their voice of joy faded into silence, replaced by the hum of machines.

ISSN 2349-4948

The collapse of Kalluvayal's ecosystem directly led to the villagers' displacement, poverty, and alienation (Tomy 74). The people who once lived off the land's generosity got trapped in a system that dictates what they must grow, how they must work, and how little they will ultimately benefit. Once vibrant and intertwined with every villager's life, the ecosystem has been fragmented, suffocated, and betrayed. The Kabani, the crocodile rock, the ancient forests, and even the soil itself have become witnesses to their erasure. The river that once held the joy of children's laughter as they leapt from the crocodile rock now silently carries away songs, memories, and lives. Once essential to the village's rhythm, the boatman and his boat now exist only in fading memories. The hill that once served as the village's sacred guardian, Thambrankunnu, is desecrated in a harrowing scene of ecological devastation. The description of the hill as a young woman whose breasts are torn and bleeding turns the reader's gaze not only towards environmental destruction but also towards a deeper emotional wound. Wild animals roam disoriented, robbed of their homes; birds circle madly without roosts; smoke-belching vehicles rattle across fields, severing connections between humans and the land.

2. Displacement

Displacement in Valli is more than physical; it encompasses emotional, cultural, and generational aspects as well. Tomy's depiction aligns with what Ghosh and Chaudhuri describe as the layered marginalization of Adivasis and indigenous women, whose uprooting from ancestral lands is not merely material but deeply existential. These women lose access to food, ritual, memory, and meaning (Ghosh and Chaudhuri 3- 4).

The novel examines how people are uprooted, not simply from their homes, but also from their identities, history, and sense of self. Displacement is about more than simply the forest; we see it through the character of Sara, who had to leave her loved ones for the love of her life, Thommichan. Sara lost her family and her identity, her past erases her, her father burns her books, her name is spoken only in whispers, and even the rubber trees in the family's plantation forget her. Her granddaughter Tessa, who has to study far away from her family, is trying to piece together the past through her dead mother's diary. Her mother, who was once part of this land, was distanced repeatedly, physically and emotionally. Her journey from the forests of Kalluvayal to Abu Dhabi mirrors the fate of so many who had to leave their homelands for survival, better opportunities, or simply because their roots have been severed.

Such displacements reflect a broader pattern of development-induced displacement that has left Adivasi women especially vulnerable to identity erasure and systemic invisibility (Kamthan et al. 374). Displacement is captured as something that lingers and haunts, how the places we leave behind never truly leave us, and the places we adopt never fully accept us. Once the feeling of displacement creeps in, nowhere truly feels like home. Home becomes fragmented, only in temporary moments, scattered places, and memory.

ISSN 2349-4948

Those who leave the land face a constant ache, a longing for something that can never fully be theirs to claim. Those who stay bear a different loss of what it once was, watching the land change beyond recognition. The never-ending agony as the land they knew is the same yet different. With its river thinning, the forests balding, and its protectors either gone or struggling to hold on. "Eradication of the landless class – is that a solution?" (Tomy 30)

3. Resistance and Resilience

The novel makes it painfully clear that defiance comes at a cost that is often erasure, exile, or violence. Sara's story is one of punishment. When she elopes with Thommichan, she is being erased from her home. Her father burns her books, her name becomes an unspoken shame, and even the trees on the plantation "forget" her. This is a stark reminder that women who step outside the boundaries set for them are often punished not just by their families, but by history itself.

Unniyachi, the mythical dancer from the novel's storytelling traditions, represents another form of rebellion. She symbolizes female desire, power, and defiance, but the men around her ultimately control her. Her story, however, does not end in submission; she carves her legacy, becoming a legend rather than a victim.

These instances reflect the feminist "epistemology of silence," where women's voices are erased from public knowledge systems (Tialila 361; Garrity-Bond 190). Through these instances, Valli exposes the structural oppression that governs women's lives while highlighting their resilience. These women do not simply accept their fates; they fight, remember, and make space for themselves. Not all resistance in Valli is loud. The novel demonstrates that defiance can sometimes be found in the small things, in the choices people make, in how they remember, and in how they refuse to be erased.

Isabella, always smiling and always full of energy, is not just a storyteller; she is a quiet revolutionary in her own right. She represents a kind of unapologetic joy, a refusal to let hardship define her. Tessa's decision to return to Kalluvayal after her mother's death is an attempt to reconnect and reclaim something that has been lost, for her, the generation before her, and the generation that will follow. This decision is also, in fact, an act of resilience. Though disillusioned and alienated, Tessa's mother, Susan, also represents the complexities of resistance. Her very survival, her fragmented but fierce love for her daughter, and her capacity to hold both grief show how resistance can exist even in brokenness. She may not win against the structures that trap her, but she does not fully surrender. Umminithara suffered deep heartbreak, and her pain remains, yet she chooses not to be defeated by it. She finds strength in the mud and the hard work, showing quiet resilience and a deep bond with the land. Basavan showcased resilience in how he protected the land and ancient knowledge until his murder.

This defiance is also embodied in the everyday practices of villagers, who hold on to fragments of tradition amidst the waves of modernity and commercialization. The women who continue to cook using age-old recipes, light lamps in neglected shrines, and sing lullabies in a language that the next generation may never fully understand.

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The Adivasi community, pushed to the edges of Kalluvayal, continues to engage with the land in ways that resist the commercial gaze. They gather herbs, tell stories, and maintain an intimate relationship with the hills and forests, even when much of it has been desecrated. Their quiet resilience is a powerful commentary on the clash between indigenous knowledge and exploitative modernity.

In Valli, the soil remembers. The rivers may change their course, the hills may be cut down, and the people may scatter, but traces of resistance endure in rituals, in memory, and in the body itself. The novel suggests that resistance is not always about confrontation; sometimes it is about enduring, surviving with dignity, and carrying forward a way of being even when the world seems to have turned away.

Ultimately, Valli presents the keepers of the past and the carriers of the future. Even when they are silenced, they find ways to rebel against oppression and resist. As Thommichan said, 'Only those who resist can survive; all our hopes are with those who rebel' (Tomy 381).

4. Ecofeminism

"In our male chauvinist society, women are treated as inferior to men at large, women are always suppressed and subjugated by males" (Devi and Kumar, 2023). In Valli, the connection between women and the land is foundational. Both are life-givers, both are exploited, both endure, and both become sites of resistance. This parallels ecofeminist critiques where nature and women are treated as resources to be tamed, extracted, and commodified (Merchant 13; Hoque 133).

The violence against the land is repeatedly feminized. The bulldozers destroying the land are described as ripping through the hill's breasts, leaving her wounded and bleeding. The scene forces the reader to recognize that the commodification of nature is inseparable from the commodification of women. Both are treated as resources to be consumed, reshaped, and discarded.

This can be seen through the lens of Vandana Shiva's concept of the feminine principle Prakriti, where nature and women are co-creators and sustainers of life. Shiva argues that Prakriti is not a metaphor but an epistemological framework that celebrates interdependence, biodiversity, and cyclical regeneration, all of which are disrupted under patriarchal development paradigms (Garrity-Bond 187).

The deforestation and commercialization of Kalluvayal mirror the way women's bodies and lives are controlled. Women like Anamkutty are often expected to conform to predefined roles, with little regard for their autonomy and agency. When Anamkutty crossed the threshold of the arrogant mansion with her auspicious right foot first, she was thrown from the haven of music and symphony to the cacophony of rebukes and reprimands(Tomy 67).

Prominent ecofeminist figures, including Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, Carolyn Merchant, Ynestra King, Ariel Kay Salleh, and Karen Warren, among others, have emphasized the interconnected oppression of nature and women. They argue that feminist issues can be understood regarding environmental concerns" (Singh 20).

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The devadasis, once guardians of art and spirituality, are reduced to poverty and exploitation, paralleling the fate of the forest, which has been degraded from a sacred space to mere real estate. Susan, who struggles under the oppressive shadow of Madhumati and Shyam, is not merely a woman trapped in a patriarchal household; she is like the forest, cornered, fenced, and reshaped without consent. The same can be said of Lucy, whose quiet defiance in living outside societal expectations reflects the land's silent endurance amid encroachment.

The adverse effects of environmental degradation on women can lead to the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable livelihood strategies, which are crucial for societal progress (Singh 25). However, Valli does not portray women or the land solely as victims. Their resistance is subtle, enduring, and persistent. Women in the novel continue to carry knowledge, memory, and dreams. Women persistently safeguard both cultural and environmental knowledge, sustaining the possibility of hope even in the face of destruction. This shared struggle also unfolds in how women and the land hold memory.

Tomy portrays women as custodians of survival and quiet resistance. Their scars are visible, their songs sometimes silenced, but their roots run deep, anchoring the possibility that one day, perhaps, the forest will bloom again, and the women will walk unburdened through it. Women in Valli preserve ecological memory. They remember which herbs heal, which trees are sacred, and which rivers once flowed gently instead of violently. They hold on even when this knowledge is pushed to the margins by commercialization and environmental destruction. However, the adverse effects of environmental degradation on women can lead to the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable livelihood strategies, which are crucial for societal progress (Singh 25).

Their memories of the land are intimate, born not from textbooks, but from living in tune with nature. This embodied knowledge, passed down through generations, becomes a silent defiance against exploitation. The older women of Kalluvayal, too, carry the past with them. They pass down tales, cultural practices, and ancestral knowledge that would otherwise be lost. By painting women as storytellers and knowledge-keepers, Valli has tried to suggest that, although men often record history, women remember and preserve it.

6. Loss

Lastly, the most profound theme of the novel is experienced through every chapter, every memory, and every character who is wounded. Wounds that are markers for it are only the wounded who can think about rising and understand their fellow beings' pain (Valli 215). Loss in Valli is not sudden; it arrives not only with death but with the unrelenting passage of time, the fading of relationships, and the quiet collapse of everything and beyond. The loss of nature is one of the earliest and most persistent wounds. The forests are cut, the hills are razed, rivers lose their songs, and sacred landscapes are violated. What remains in Kalluvayal is often a distorted version of the past. The grief in the novel often comes not from destruction but from the slow and

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painful persistence of things that have lost their essence. The landscape still resembles Kalluvayal, but it does not feel like home.

Loss is equally felt in the collapse of homes and human relationships. Sara loses her family back home in an attempt to stay with the love of her life. Susan, despite her initial dreams of love, finds herself increasingly alienated and slowly dies in silence, leaving behind her essence in her diary. Her daughter, Tessa, caught between her parents and countries, never gets to experience the love of both parents and faces abandonment far too young. Maashe loses Sara yet remains in Kalluvayal, deeply entrenched in her memories. Peter's disappearance takes away every sense of joy and hope from the younger generation. Basavan, the protector of the land, is murdered, and with him dies the sacred knowledge. Tourist resorts overtake sacred spaces where elders once gathered. Once revered as keepers of sacred art, the devadasis are now forgotten by the temples they served. The songs, stories, and knowledge once passed down orally are silenced. Kadoram School, once envisioned as a sanctuary for learning and cultural preservation, has emptied. Traditional farming is replaced with commercialized crops and artificial playgrounds. Shrines are emptied or forgotten. The story is full of symbolic losses, as each one marks the passing of an era and the loss of sacred knowledge, traditions, and ways of being.

The loss of dignity and the right to live authentically is also explored, where the villagers, especially the women, experience the bitter reality of being pushed to the margins physically, socially, and spiritually. As devadasis become obsolete, farmers lose their land, and indigenous communities are forced into wage labor, their lives become reduced to survival. The loss here is not simply economic; it is the loss of agency, self-respect, and the deep connection.

Lastly, the characters often feel a sense of loss of belonging, trapped between places. Even the village itself, modernized and commercialized, no longer belongs to those who once called it home. However, "Kalluvayal remains even today, its rivers thin, its forests bald" (Tomy 2). Its people now long for a home. A home that was once theirs but is now only a fragment of hope, "for it is only the wounded who can think about rising, who can understand the pain of their fellow beings" (Tomy 215).

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