

Rahul Soni (Ed.), *Valli: A Novel*. Sheela Tomy, Translated by Jayasree Kalathil, India: Harper Perennial India, 2022. 407 pp. ISBN: 9789356290167.

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The debut book of Malayalam author Sheela Tomy, *Valli: A Novel*, was shortlisted for the JCB Prize for Literature in 2022 and contributes to the expanding body of Indian eco-fiction. Jayasree Kalathil translated the book into English. The author writes about the Wayanadan people's spiritual interconnectedness to and dependency on the land by foregrounding the hamlet of Kalluvayal, the river Kabani, and the flora and fauna of Wayanad before she speaks about its residents and their worries. Central to the novel are the challenges faced by rural communities steeped in tradition and mythology, bound by unwritten norms of environmental stewardship as they encounter the complexities of modernization. *Valli* is similar to other eco-fictional works from the South-Western region of India by authors and their works, like Na D'Souza's *Dweepa: Island* (2013), Pundalik Naik's *The Upheaval* (2002), and Akkineni Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake* (2020) in that it treats the land as a living entity throbbing with life. However, Tomy takes her poetic and artistic descriptions of the landscape a step further by utilizing the literary device of the pathetic fallacy throughout the book. For example:

A time came when lemongrass ruled the land...a variety of cashew orchards took over the hillsides... (1)

In the interior of the forest, spared by the fire, were bamboo stands. Tender leaves beckoned their hearts brimming with sorrow, and they began cutting the reeds. When

the bamboo shook, thorns flew, piercing their legs, arms, and chests, but they did not feel the pain. (157-158)

...I can hear the soil crying, starved for the touch of hoes and ploughs...(319)

This narrative illustrates how anthropogenic activities like encroachment and deforestation led to the displacement and impairment of migrants and their livelihoods throughout four generations, from the 1970s to the present. The first chapter, "The Voice of the Forest", introduces the reader to the fertile Wayanad region, its alluring beauty, and the romance between King Iravivarman and courtesan Unniyachi, who joins the pantheon of local folk story characters that have been deified. The plot unfolds as Tessa reads her mother Susan's diary entries and, in part, as Susan, Tessa, and Thomichan (Tessa's grandfather) correspond via letters. Kalluvayal, a small village, has a diversified population that divides into two factions due to their differing ties to the land, resulting in opposing views. One faction comprises of the native Paniya tribals (Basavan, Javanan, Kelumoopan, Rukku and family, Pembi, and Kaali) alongside migrant settlers (Thomichan, Sara, Varky, Theyamma, Lucy, Peter, Annamkutty, Isabella, Salomi, and Umminithara), who have assimilated into the Wayanadan way of life in harmony with the environment. On the other hand, Ivan Kachouseph, his eldest son Luca, and his colleagues form another group that adheres to the false notion of development, which entails excessive exploitation of the land's natural resources. The substantial nexus between the Jenmis (landlords) and the police surpasses the migrant-tribal group's unwavering tenacity in the face of the atrocities of the Jenmis' unchecked and unethical exploitation of forest timber.

The term '*valli*' is significant because it encapsulates the novel's essence in three distinct ways. First, it relates to a vine or multiple clusters of vines that make up the dense forest of Kalluvayal. It also denotes a system of daily wages paid by the landed class (jenmis) to the enslaved aborigines via exploitative agricultural services. Finally, '*valli*' acts as a metaphor for a young woman, representing several female characters who see themselves as extensions of

the forest they dwell in. For example, Susan, Kaali, Lucy, Annamkutty, Isabella, Theyamma, and Umminithara, are shown turning to nature to navigate their sufferings, consistent with Tomy's intention to connect women with the soil. Through Susan's voice, the narrative jumps back and forth between the past and the present. She is a second-generation migrant of Kalluvayal, and her parents, Thomas and Sara, both teachers, moved to Kalluvayal to avoid the repercussions of an elopement from the community. In her emails to Tessa, Susan juxtaposes her two worlds (Kalluvayal and Qatar) to demonstrate how much she enjoys being in her woodland home. *Valli: A Novel* is loosely based on Tomy's childhood, and she acknowledges this in the author's remark section. As an environmentalist, Tomy endeavours to preserve the tapestry of her childhood, her native village, its culture, and the people from her past. In the same vein, she retains sentences in the regional Paniya language. By adding footnotes as translations, Kalathil skillfully helps Tomy illustrate the inclusion, sustainability, and close-knit culture of the Wayanadan people. Additionally, by alluding to forest myths through Salomi's Ramayana narration, Kaali and Basavan's songs about life and death, customs of marriage and growing up through Rukku, as well as by sprinkling biblical allusions by stereotypical settlers like Thomichan, Varky, Annamkutty, Lucy, and Sara, the readers learn how the forest legends and biblical allusions serve as both a coping mechanism through their ordeals and a moral compass that guides the characters of the novel in their actions to conserve their home, that is the forest of Kalluvayal.

Valli, a text that examines caste, gender, tribe, and the politics of the land, can be viewed as a text in the struggle for eco-socialism as well as ecofeminism in the greater context of environmental crises. Kalluvayal's innocent residents face economic instability due to the jenmis' greed, resulting in a domino effect on their lives. As a result, caste, gender, and familial imbalances develop, which the female characters passively fight against. Tomy effectively

captures the whims of nature as it wreaks havoc on the residents of Kalluvayal in an evocative yet poignant narrative. She communicates through Susan's voice that natural disasters are an appropriate price, or 'valli' imposed on humanity by nature. The author portrays the lives of the individuals as continually changing in her engrossing narrative style that uses foreshadowing, songs, and allusions. Through them, she sounds the alarm for urgent protection of the environment. However, the plot has its shortcomings, as most characters face a conventional denouement of death or disappearance, making the narrative somewhat prosaic.

Valli's narrative is intertwined with many hopeful instances, in contrast to dystopian works in eco-fiction like D'Souza's *Dweepa: Island* (2013), Naik's *The Upheaval* (2002), and Kutumbarao's *Softly Dies a Lake* (2020). Thomichan inspires James by saying, "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)". Padmanabhan is the creator of the Kadoram School, which strives to provide native youngsters with vocational training. In the epilogue, the readers see Tessa immortalize Kalluvayal and its cultural folklore by giving Kalluvayal a virtual presence in 'Unniyachi's Facebook Post'. The estranged villagers fight together to survive the conflicts driven by the much-provoked, enraged nature as the River Kabani searches for new paths to course through. The book's promising conclusion encourages readers to wish for the continuation of life and a return to normalcy in nature.