

Ecofeminism and Indigenous Ecology in Sheela Tomy's Valli

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ABSTRACT:

The paper explores the intersection of ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology in Valli by Sheela Tomy. Set in the forested landscape of Wayanad, the novel depicts the intimate relationship between Adivasi communities, women, and the natural environment. The study argues that *Valli* presents the forest not merely as a physical setting but as a living and sacred entity that shapes identity, memory, and cultural continuity. Through an ecofeminist lens, the paper examines how women emerge as custodians of ecological knowledge, preserving traditional practices related to medicinal plants, food, rituals, and environmental stewardship. Their experiences reveal that the exploitation of nature is closely connected to the oppression of women and marginalized communities. The paper also investigates Indigenous ecology in the novel by analyzing how Adivasi worldviews promote a sustainable and reciprocal relationship with land, animals, and forests. In contrast to modern development, plantation expansion, and commercialization, Indigenous knowledge systems emphasize coexistence rather than domination. The study highlights how ecological destruction leads to displacement, cultural erosion, and the loss of ancestral memory. By linking gender, environment, and social justice, *Valli* offers a powerful critique of patriarchal and capitalist models of development. The findings demonstrate that the protection of forests is inseparable from the preservation of women's knowledge and Indigenous cultural heritage. The novel ultimately suggests that ecological sustainability depends on respecting both nature and the communities that have historically lived in harmony with it.

KEYWORDS: *Ecofeminism, Indigenous Ecology, Ecocriticism, Adivasi Studies, Environmental Justice.*

Introduction

In recent decades, environmental concerns such as deforestation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and the displacement of Indigenous communities have become central issues in literary studies. Ecocriticism, a field that examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, seeks to understand how texts represent nature and how they challenge human-centered attitudes toward the natural world. Greg Garrard defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between humans and the nonhuman environment as represented in cultural texts. Ecofeminism, a significant branch of ecocritical thought, further argues that the exploitation of nature is closely linked to the oppression of women under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva emphasize that women often preserve ecological knowledge and sustainable practices that resist destructive models of development. At the same time, Indigenous ecology has gained increasing importance in environmental humanities. Indigenous communities across the world view land, forests, rivers, and animals

not as commodities but as living relatives with whom humans share reciprocal responsibilities. Their traditional ecological knowledge offers alternative ways of understanding sustainability and coexistence. In the Indian context, Adivasi communities have historically maintained intimate relationships with forests and local ecosystems, yet they continue to face displacement through development projects, tourism, and commercial agriculture. *Valli* by Sheela Tomy provides a powerful literary representation of these concerns. Set in the forested region of Wayanad, the novel portrays the lives of Indigenous communities whose cultural identity and survival are deeply rooted in the natural environment. The forest in the novel functions as a living and sacred presence that sustains memory, spirituality, and everyday life. Tomy also depicts the destructive effects of migration, plantation expansion, tourism, and state intervention, all of which threaten both ecological balance and Indigenous cultural continuity. This study examines *Valli* through the combined frameworks of ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology. It argues that the novel presents women as custodians of ecological memory and traditional knowledge while portraying Adivasi communities as guardians of sustainable environmental ethics. By connecting gender, land, and cultural survival, the novel reveals that environmental degradation is inseparable from social injustice. The study also demonstrates how women and Indigenous communities resist systems that exploit both nature and marginalized people. The significance of this research lies in its attempt to bridge ecofeminist and Indigenous perspectives in the analysis of contemporary Indian literature. Although recent scholarship has discussed *Valli* from ecocritical and decolonial viewpoints, limited attention has been given to the intersection of women's ecological roles and Indigenous environmental knowledge. This paper seeks to fill that gap by showing that the protection of forests in *Valli* is also a struggle to preserve memory, identity, and human dignity. Through this perspective, the novel emerges as a profound critique of exploitative development and a compelling vision of ecological justice.

Literature review

The growing field of ecocriticism has provided important tools for understanding how literature represents the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). Her foundational statement established that literary texts should be read not only for their social and political meanings but also for the ways they imagine land, animals, forests, and ecological interdependence. Greg Garrard expands this view by examining key concepts such as wilderness, pollution, dwelling, and apocalypse, arguing that literature reveals both human dependence on and exploitation of the nonhuman world (5–7). Lawrence Buell further emphasizes that the environment should be treated as an active presence in literary works rather than as a decorative backdrop (7–8). These theoretical contributions form the basis for analyzing eco-conscious narratives in contemporary literature. Ecofeminism developed as a related critical framework that links environmental degradation with the oppression of women. Vandana Shiva argues that women, especially in rural and Indigenous communities, possess practical ecological knowledge rooted in everyday labor and care for the land (xiii–xiv). She maintains that industrial development often destroys both biodiversity and women's traditional roles in sustaining life. Greta Gaard similarly contends that patriarchal systems create interconnected forms of domination over women, animals, and ecosystems (1–3). Karen J. Warren adds that Ecofeminism exposes the logic of domination that justifies both gender inequality and ecological exploitation (1–5). Together, these scholars provide a framework for examining women as custodians of environmental ethics and cultural memory. Indigenous ecology has become increasingly significant within environmental humanities. Indigenous communities understand land as a

living relation rather than as property, and their ecological knowledge is based on reciprocity, sustainability, and long-term stewardship. Fikret Berkes describes traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of practices and beliefs developed through generations of close interaction with the environment (7–9). This perspective is especially relevant in the Indian context, where Adivasi communities have maintained deep relationships with forests and biodiversity despite historical marginalization and displacement. Recent scholarship on *Valli* by Sheela Tomy has highlighted its importance as a contemporary Indian eco-novel. Uma Devi and Prajeesh Tomy analyze the text through ecological justice and green criminology, demonstrating how deforestation, tourism, and land exploitation affect Adivasi communities and nonhuman life. Animesh Roy interprets the novel as a decolonial environmental narrative that foregrounds Indigenous knowledge and challenges dominant ideas of development. Other critics have explored the spatial and performative dimensions of the novel, emphasizing how Wayanad is represented as a contested ecological and cultural landscape. However, most existing studies focus on ecocriticism, environmental justice, and decolonial pedagogy. Limited attention has been given to the intersection of ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology. In particular, the role of women as protectors of forest memory, medicinal knowledge, and cultural continuity remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining how *Valli* portrays women and Adivasi communities as interconnected guardians of ecological ethics. By combining insights from ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Indigenous studies, this research demonstrates that *Valli* is not only a narrative about environmental destruction but also a story of resistance, care, and cultural survival. The novel suggests that sustainable futures depend on recognizing the knowledge systems of women and Indigenous communities and respecting their enduring relationship with the natural world.

Research Questions

1. How does *Valli* portray the relationship between women and the natural environment?
2. In what ways are women represented as protectors of forests, traditional knowledge, and cultural memory?
3. How does the novel connect the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women?
4. How are Adivasi communities shown as living in harmony with the forest ecology?
5. How do women and Indigenous communities resist ecological destruction and social marginalization?
6. What role does the forest play in shaping identity, spirituality, and community life?
7. How does *Valli* demonstrate that environmental justice is closely linked to gender justice and Indigenous rights?

Research Gap

Recent scholarship has established *Valli* by Sheela Tomy as an important work of contemporary Indian eco-fiction. Existing studies have examined the novel from several perspectives, including ecocriticism, environmental justice, green criminology, decolonial environmental education, and literary cartography. For example, Uma Devi and Prajeesh Tomy analyze how deforestation, tourism, and land exploitation affect Adivasi communities, wildlife, and ecosystems. Animesh Roy highlights the novel's challenge to colonial ideas of development and its emphasis on Indigenous environmental knowledge. These studies demonstrate that *Valli* is a significant text for understanding ecological destruction and Adivasi resistance. Foundational scholars in ecocriticism and ecofeminism provide the theoretical basis for further investigation. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study

of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii). Vandana Shiva argues that women often preserve ecological knowledge and biodiversity through their everyday practices (xiii–xiv). Greta Gaard and Karen J. Warren further explain that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature arise from interconnected structures of power (Gaard 1–3; Warren 1–5). These ideas suggest that a combined ecofeminist and Indigenous approach can reveal dimensions of *Valli* that have not yet been fully explored. The major gap in existing research is that most studies focus on environmental destruction, Adivasi displacement, and decolonial ecological thought, but they do not specifically analyze the intersection between women's experiences and Indigenous ecological knowledge. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how women function as custodians of forest memory, medicinal practices, oral traditions, and cultural continuity. Likewise, the reciprocal relationship between gender, land, and resistance has not been systematically examined. This study addresses that gap by investigating how *Valli* portrays women and Adivasi communities as interconnected guardians of ecological ethics. It argues that the novel links the preservation of forests with the preservation of women's knowledge and Indigenous identity. By bringing together ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology, the research offers a fresh and original interpretation of the novel and contributes to ongoing discussions in ecocriticism, environmental justice, and contemporary Indian literature.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and interpretative methodology to examine *Valli* by Sheela Tomy through the theoretical frameworks of ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology. The study is based primarily on close textual analysis, a method commonly used in literary research to interpret themes, symbols, character representations, and narrative structures. M. H. Abrams explains that literary criticism involves the careful examination of a text in relation to its language, form, and ideas (63). Using this approach, the study analyzes how the novel portrays women, forests, and Adivasi communities as interconnected agents of ecological preservation and cultural resistance. The primary source for this research is *Valli*, translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil. Selected passages related to forests, women's experiences, oral traditions, medicinal knowledge, and environmental change are examined in detail. Particular attention is given to narrative moments that reveal how women preserve ecological memory and how Indigenous communities maintain sustainable relationships with land and biodiversity. The study also uses secondary sources, including books and scholarly articles on ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Indigenous studies. Cheryll Glotfelty and Greg Garrard provide the ecocritical framework for understanding literature's engagement with the physical environment (Glotfelty xviii; Garrard 5). Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, and Karen J. Warren supply the theoretical basis for analyzing the relationship between women and nature (Shiva xiii–xiv; Gaard 1–3; Warren 1–5). Fikret Berkes contributes the concept of traditional ecological knowledge, which helps interpret the environmental practices of Adivasi communities (7–9). This research follows an interdisciplinary approach by combining literary analysis with insights from environmental humanities, gender studies, and Indigenous studies. The method involves identifying major themes such as forest memory, environmental justice, women's resistance, and sustainable living, and interpreting them in relation to the selected theoretical frameworks. The study is descriptive and analytical rather than empirical. It does not involve fieldwork, surveys, or interviews; instead, it relies on textual evidence and scholarly interpretation. The objective is to produce an original reading of *Valli* that demonstrates how the novel links ecological preservation with women's knowledge and Indigenous cultural survival.

Critical Discussion of Ecofeminism and Indigenous Ecology in *valli*

Valli by Sheela Tomy is a significant contemporary Indian novel that presents a deep relationship between women, Indigenous communities, and the natural world. Set in the forested region of Wayanad, the novel depicts how Adivasi communities depend on forests for their livelihood, identity, spirituality, and cultural survival. Through the perspectives of ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology, the novel demonstrates that the exploitation of nature is closely connected to the oppression of women and tribal communities. Ecocriticism is a literary approach that studies the relationship between literature and the environment. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). This definition is highly relevant to *Valli* because the forest is not simply a backdrop but an active and living force that shapes the entire narrative. Greg Garrard explains that ecocriticism examines how literary texts question human-centered attitudes and reveal the interconnectedness between human beings and the nonhuman world (5). In *Valli*, the forest is represented as a sacred and life-giving presence rather than as a commodity. The setting of Wayanad plays a crucial role in the novel. The region is known for its hills, forests, rivers, medicinal plants, and rich biodiversity. Sheela Tomy portrays this landscape as a living ecosystem where every form of life is interconnected. The tribal communities of Wayanad gather food, collect herbs, cultivate crops, and use traditional healing methods based on their close relationship with nature. Fikret Berkes describes traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of practices and beliefs developed through long interaction with the environment (7–9). The Adivasi people in *Valli* embody this knowledge through their sustainable way of life. The forest influences language, rituals, food habits, healing practices, and religious beliefs. When the forest is destroyed, the entire social and cultural system is affected. Lawrence Buell argues that the environment in literary texts should be seen as an active presence rather than a passive setting (7–8). In *Valli*, trees, rivers, animals, and mountains directly shape the lives of the characters. This shows that the well-being of Indigenous communities depends on the health of the ecosystem. The novel also portrays the hardships faced by the tribal people of Wayanad. Although they have lived in harmony with nature for generations, they suffer because of migration, plantation agriculture, tourism, and state-led development projects. Outsiders view the forest as a source of profit, while tribal communities regard it as their ancestral home. As forests are cleared and land is commercialized, tribal people lose access to food, medicine, and sacred spaces. This displacement leads to cultural loss and emotional suffering because their identity is deeply rooted in the land. The concept of Indigenous ecology is central to the novel. Indigenous communities do not treat land as private property but as a living relative that deserves care and respect. Their ecological ethics are based on reciprocity, gratitude, and responsibility. Vandana Shiva argues that modern development often destroys biodiversity and marginalizes communities that have protected nature for generations (xiii–xiv). Tomy reflects this idea by showing how so-called progress harms both forests and the people who depend on them. Women play a particularly important role in the ecological world of *Valli*. Through an ecofeminist perspective, the novel reveals that women are guardians of environmental knowledge and cultural continuity. They gather medicinal plants, preserve seeds, prepare food, care for children, and pass on stories and rituals. Their daily work sustains both the family and the ecosystem. Vandana Shiva states that women have historically acted as protectors of biodiversity because of their close involvement in the processes that sustain life (xiii). The women in *Valli* exemplify this principle. The connection between women and nature is practical, emotional, and spiritual. Women understand seasonal changes, know the healing properties of herbs, and teach younger generations to respect the forest. Greta Gaard argues that ecofeminism recognizes women as defenders of both environmental and social justice (1–3). Tomy’s portrayal of women confirms this argument

by showing them as the caretakers of their families and the larger ecosystem. Women are also custodians of ecological memory. They preserve oral traditions, songs, rituals, and healing practices that connect the community to its ancestors. These traditions ensure that ecological knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next. When forests disappear, these memories are threatened as well. Thus, environmental destruction becomes a form of cultural erasure. The novel emphasizes that protecting women's knowledge is essential for preserving Indigenous identity. Another important aspect of the novel is resistance. Tribal communities and women do not passively accept environmental destruction. They challenge the forces that exploit land and marginalize local people. Their resistance is rooted in a deep sense of belonging and responsibility toward the forest. Karen J. Warren explains that ecofeminism exposes the "logic of domination" that justifies the exploitation of both women and nature (1–5). In *Valli*, resistance becomes a moral response to this domination. The novel also demonstrates that ecological issues are inseparable from social justice. When forests are degraded, women must travel farther to collect water, fuel, and medicinal plants. Families lose access to traditional resources, and tribal communities face economic insecurity. Environmental destruction therefore intensifies existing inequalities. The novel clearly shows that environmental justice cannot be achieved without gender justice and Indigenous rights. The title *Valli* carries symbolic meaning. The word evokes the image of a creeper or root, suggesting interconnectedness, resilience, and growth. Like a vine spreading through the forest, human lives are woven into the natural world. This symbolism reinforces the novel's central message that all life forms are interdependent and that harm to one part of the ecosystem affects the whole. Tomy also critiques the ideology of development. Roads, plantations, tourism, and bureaucratic control are depicted as forces that disrupt ecological and social relationships. Economic growth is shown not as a universal good but as a process that often leads to displacement and environmental degradation. The novel suggests that genuine development must respect ecological limits and Indigenous knowledge systems. From an ecofeminist perspective, women in *Valli* symbolize care, continuity, and resilience. Their work of preserving seeds, healing knowledge, and oral traditions has profound ecological significance. Their role challenges patriarchal systems that undervalue women's contributions and ignore their environmental wisdom. From the perspective of Indigenous ecology, the novel affirms that Adivasi communities possess sophisticated environmental knowledge developed through generations of interaction with the land. Their practices offer sustainable alternatives to destructive modern systems. Berkes emphasizes that traditional ecological knowledge integrates observation, belief, and ethical responsibility (9). This concept helps explain the ecological wisdom portrayed in the novel. The struggles of the people of Wayanad also reveal the emotional impact of ecological loss. The land is more than a physical resource; it is the source of stories, rituals, and identity. When people are separated from the forest, they experience grief and disorientation. Tomy powerfully captures this sense of loss and demonstrates that environmental destruction is also a form of historical and cultural violence. In conclusion, *Valli* is a remarkable eco-novel that explores the intersection of ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology. It portrays women as guardians of ecological memory and Adivasi communities as protectors of sustainable environmental ethics. The novel shows that forests, culture, and identity are inseparable, and that the destruction of nature is also the destruction of human dignity and ancestral knowledge. Through its portrayal of Wayanad and its people, *Valli* offers a powerful critique of exploitative development and a compelling vision of ecological justice.

Conclusion

his study has examined *Valli* by Sheela Tomy through the combined frameworks of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Indigenous ecology. The analysis demonstrates that the novel

presents the forested landscape of Wayanad as a living and sacred entity that sustains the material, cultural, and spiritual life of Adivasi communities. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Cheryll Glotfelty, Greg Garrard, Vandana Shiva, Greta Gaard, Karen J. Warren, and Fikret Berkes, the study has shown that literature can reveal the deep interdependence between gender, ecology, and cultural survival (Glotfelty xviii; Garrard 5; Shiva xiii–xiv; Gaard 1–3; Warren 1–5; Berkes 7–9). The findings confirm that women in *Valli* are not peripheral figures but central custodians of ecological memory. Through seed preservation, healing practices, oral traditions, and everyday care, they protect both biodiversity and ancestral knowledge. The study also demonstrates that Adivasi communities embody Indigenous ecological ethics grounded in reciprocity, restraint, and respect for the forest. By portraying the effects of deforestation, plantation expansion, tourism, and displacement, the novel critiques development models that treat land as a commodity rather than as a living relation. The originality of this paper lies in bringing ecofeminism and Indigenous ecology together to interpret *Valli*. While earlier scholarship has emphasized ecocriticism and environmental justice, this study specifically highlights how women and tribal communities function as interconnected guardians of forests, culture, and identity. The paper therefore contributes a new perspective to contemporary Indian literary studies by arguing that ecological preservation in *Valli* is inseparable from gender justice, Indigenous rights, and the protection of cultural memory.

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