

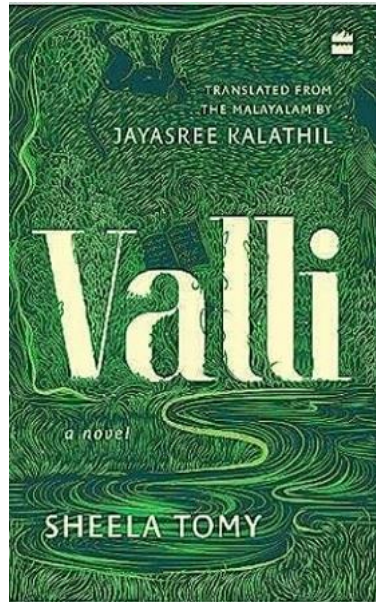


## Book Review of Sheela Tomy's *Valli* by Shilpa Nataraj

Shilpa is a research scholar at Christ (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru.

*Valli* is a debut novel by Sheela Tomy, published in Malayalam in 2019 and translated to English by Jayashree Kalathil in 2022. For this novel, Sheela Tomy was awarded the Cherukad Award for Malayalam Literature in 2020. As rightly put in the dedication page, "For forests ravaged by fires For people rendered voiceless For Languages without scripts", this story is multiscalar. It resonates with Arundathi Roy's famous

rendition of one of her works, "To the Unconsoled." *Valli* is a story of a land and its people whose essence lures outsiders and ignites a revolution of minds. Set in the hilly region called 'Wayanad' in the South Indian state of Kerala, the story brings out place-specificity as one of the key features in accentuating the historical, socio-political, cultural and environmental disparity and justice through the characters' lives which spans across three generations.



The concise list of denotations of the word 'valli' is presented at the book's beginning, encapsulating the different dimensions of the Ecofiction at multiscale levels while predominantly critiquing the patriarchal system and lamenting the anthropocentric wrongs committed. The novel's overarching concerns make it timely and sensible as it takes a place-based approach to address them in a contemporary world committed to embracing a non- Anthropocentric corporeal.

The novel's content spans 36 chapters with an epilogue and P.S. section. The many narrative devices used –letters, diary entries, folksongs and lore, Bible quotations, popular film songs, Christian devotionals, and foreshadowing of events–make the novel exhilarating work to read and different from other works of the same genre. Nevertheless, the range of devices employed is profuse with its content and characters, often exhaustive to read and difficult to follow. Nevertheless, *Valli's* preoccupation with geography and conscious political choices apprehend the reader's attention in the contemporary world.

The rich forest imagery and descriptions of Kalluvayal in the opening line, "There was a time when Kalluvayal was a dense, deep forest" (Tomy 1), gives us a sense of the (un)completeness of the story with its last line of the same section "But Kalluvayal remains, even today, its rivers thin, its forest bald" (Tomy 2) hinting at the injustices this place has endured. One can guess that *Valli* is a story of losses, remnants and changes; however, what remains through these transitions is the place. Tomy's novel strongly aligns with the Ecospatial idea that a "place is the convergence of nature, space and story" (Wyse 4). Given that the story is set in Kalluvayal, the place situatedness unravels itself in various dimensions where the ecofeminist aspect of the novel is predominant. From the list of meanings of 'valli' given by the author, a vine or a climbing plant, an earth, and a young woman can be associated with the larger context of ecofeminism within the story.

The trope of migration of women characters such as Sara, Kali, and Annamakutty bring out some of the patriarchal injustices in the plight of their life. While Sara elopes with Thommichan fearing her father and brother opposing her marriage with someone below their financial status, Kali is a victim of rape and then further victimised by her father in the name of morality and society and is abandoned by her family. In another dimension, marriage to Ivachan made Annamakutty migrate to Anjilikkunnil. What should have been a new life together with her partner shatters Annamakutty's dreams and desires. It is said, "When Annamakutty 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." Due to various reasons, these migrations further victimise women in the patriarchal society in which the novel weaves together with schemas of displacement, memories and madness. As an ecofeminist text, the story discusses the presence of the forests of Kalluvayal alongside

its female characters. The story's gustatory, olfactory and tactile imageries act as entanglements of meaning. In one such instance, Lucy stops at a chempakam tree, trying to reach up to a flower and failing, she mutters, "Won't drop even a single flower! And she's so soft one can't even climb on to her." (Tomy 43) And in another diary entry, Susan records, "If a time comes when all the storytellers are women, do you know what we would write about? We would write about forests, not places." (Tomy 278). Beginning with the displacement of women characters, even the flora and fauna of Kalluvayal disappear, making *Valli* a quintessential Ecofeminist novel.

Another overarching presence in the story is the critique of anthropocentric injustices. Kalluvayal is subject to the greed of human beings for its richness of resources. In time, Kalluvayal retorts with flood and forest fire, but the forests are defeated and exploited with technological innovations. This brings us to the posthumanist side of the story, making it a timely rendition of reimagining the place of humans in a non-anthropocentric world. The letters exchanged between Susan and her daughter Tessa capture this concept of looking beyond humans to understand the world around us. While Susan, in her letters, laments her distance from her home in Wayanad and writes about freedom and slavery, Tessa mentions for the first time about the robot that she is building, "Freedom and slavery... Knowing that there is barely any distance between the two, my hands shake as I write the programme to feed into my robot. Robot Betty-let me see if she will obey my programme. If she does, I could say she is my slave, but I don't think the time when she will make me her slave is all that far away." (Tomy 34) As a definite critique of Anthropocentrism, the story sometimes advocates a posthumanist strand of thought that man is not an exceptional and privileged being because human beings were never distinct from other forms and entities on earth. In her letters, Susan reminds Tessa not to get too involved with machines even though they do not get jealous; she also says that machines do not know how to love.

In the response letter, Tessa writes, "Anyway, listen, it's not machines that don't know how to love; it's human beings..." (Tomy 100) This concurs with the posthumanist thought what Donna Haraway calls "collaborative" but also "competitive entanglements" of human and non-human worlds.

Alongside the Patriarchal and Anthropocentric critique, the story of *Valli* has multiple characters who reclaim their presence through myth, folklore and story. Bonds of conviviality have a deep recognition in their stories of survival. What Basavanan was to Peter and Padmanabhan, Annamakutty to Lucyamma, Tommiachan to James (after Peter goes missing), and Lucyamma to Susan (after Sara's death) shape the affective landscape of Kalluvayal with complementarity rather than competition. Nevertheless, the foreboding of ill fate, be it the rape or the forest fire or floods, indicates that revolution, of both the individual and systemic, is inevitable for consciousness to prevail alongside the changes and advancements.

Overall, *Valli* is a timely novel with its confluence of different issues in contemporary times. This work will be of immense value to scholars in the field of ecocriticism, geocriticism and literary spatial studies especially for those interested in studying Global south and postcolonial societies. Shortlisted for the JCB Prize 2022, Sheela Tomy's *Valli* accentuates reshaping our temperament of human supremacy with an ethics of complementarity in restoring lives and stories for reshaping our surroundings.

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1. Tomy, Sheela. "Valli." Harper Perennial, India. 2022. Print.

2. Wyse, Lowel. "Ecospatiality." University of Iowa Press, Iowa City. 2021. Ebook.

Title: Valli A Novel: A Novel

Author: Sheela Tomy and Jayasree Kalathil

Available: [Amazon](#)

## **About the author: Sheela Tomy**

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Sheela Tomy is a novelist, short story writer and scriptwriter. *Valli* is her debut novel, for which she was awarded the Cherukad Award for Malayalam Literature in 2020. She is also the author of a short story collection, *Melquíadesnte Pralayapusthakam* (Melquíades's Book of Floods), published in 2012. Sheela has won several awards for her short stories, including the Abu Dhabi Arangu Award (2007), the Puzha.com Short Story Award (2008), the Doha Sanskriti Award (2012), the Doha Samanwayam Award (2012) and the Kamala Surayya 'Neermathalam' Award UAE (2014). Born in Mananthavadi in Wayanad district, Sheela currently resides in Doha, Qatar. Her second novel, *Aa Nadiyodu Peru Chodikkaruthu* (Do Not Ask the River Her Name), is set to be published later this year.

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## About the reviewer: Shilpa Nataraj

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Shilpa Nataraj, is a research scholar at Christ (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru. She has majored in English and Cultural Studies and worked for few years as Assistant Professor at St. Joseph's College, Bengaluru. Having taught courses on critical theory, cultural studies and world literature her areas of research interest include spatial literary studies and ecocriticism.

Through her doctoral work, she is exploring the urban ecologies in Indian literary representations using a place-based approach. This will foster new ways of examining texts, places, and spaces by contributing to the praxis of ecological coherence and sustainable futures in literary representations. Through her doctoral work she aims to uncover certain images and patterns distinct to realistic urban fiction. She aspires to contribute to field of higher education through quality research work and teaching.

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