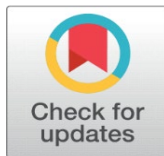
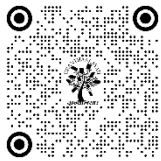


FOLKLORE, FABLES, AND THE FUSION OF POLITICS, CULTURE, AND CHARACTERS IN VALLI BY SHEELA TOMY

Dr. Gifty Elza Varghese ¹

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College (Affiliated with University of Kerala), Trivandrum, Kerala



DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3955](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.3955)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

The present-day folkloristic research in India has attracted lots of adhesions mainly through the works of the emergent Indian folklorist. Still, the wider circle of academia remains uninspired by this field. The representative case study is offered by the novel Valli by Sheela Tomy, demonstrating the three-dimensionality of folklore and deep-seated cult nature. The word 'Valli' itself carries multiple meanings: climbing plant, earth, young woman, and even a feudal-age measure of paddy issued as wages. The richness of folkloric interpretations is well-supported by this novel, as it presents the Wayanad region's sociopolitical turbulence arising from political rivalries, religious conflicts, linguistic differences, and indigenous traditions. Through the story of strong-willed characters that fight to preserve their heritage, Valli showcases the continued importance of folklore in studying and preserving Wayanad culture. This paper aims to examine the folkloric components within Valli and analyze the role they play in preserving the regional cultural identity.

Keywords: Folklore, Culture, Oral Tradition, Adivasi, Marginalisation

1. INTRODUCTION

Sheela Tomy is a famous Malayalam novelist, short story writer, and scriptwriter well known for her unique voice and vivid narration. Sheela Tomy's very first novel was Valli in 2020, which got her the notable Cherukad Award for the Malayalam novel. Apart from her outstanding novel, Sheela Tomy is the author of an acclaimed short story collection, Melquiadesnte Pralayapusthakam in 2012, which became a landmark publication in Malayalam literature. Through her short stories, she has won a large number of accolades over the years. Some of these include the Abu Dhabi Arangu Award, Puzha.com short story award, and the Doha Sanskriti award, among many others. Her novel Valli is a magnum opus wherein folklore elements intricately weave within the narrative creating rich and riveting portrayals of the Wayanad region's cultural and social fabric, within the confines of Kerala.

It spans multiple generations, mainly about the life of the indigenous communities and migrant families who settle in Kalluvayal, which is a fictionally created village very much alive with its surrounding nature. Through its vivid storytelling, Valli explores the dynamic interplay of history, politics, and tradition, highlighting the resilience and struggles of these communities in preserving their identity amidst shifting social and political landscapes. The title, Valli, itself has multilayered meanings and refers to a climbing plant, earth, a young woman, and even a feudal measure of paddy given as wages.

These connotations reflect the multifaceted nature of the novel, which brings together personal narratives and broader cultural and ecological concerns. The story catches the rhythm of life in Kalluvayal, infusing oral traditions, folktales, and rituals directly from the region, while facing head-on the threats emanating from political unrest, deforestation, and displacement. Through its compelling characters and vivid depiction of the Wayanad region, Valli becomes more than a mere novel—it serves as a cultural document, preserving the folklore, traditions, and struggles of a community striving to maintain its heritage in the face of modernity.

Folklore as the work of human culture, the production of the living people who habitate in some geographical region, converse in the same languages, have the similar mechanism of material life and environmental conditions; to whose mode of life and to their folk spirit is united through identity. Folklore is a fruit of the creative mentality of men made manifest in speech art and even in material carrier—it may originate from a group of people or a lone individual' (Mazharul Islam, 1985).

The folkloric elements woven seamlessly by Sheela Tomy into the tapestry of the narrative indicate great depth in terms of the area's cultural outlook and commitment to this form of reaching the larger people.

2. FOLKLORE AND CULTURAL PERSEVERANCE

The fusion of folklores in Valli is an essential ingredient of the novel. It adds flavor to the plot and brings the characters closer to their surroundings. Sheela Tomy has drawn inspiration from her own experiences growing up in Wayanad—a region steeped in local tales and traditions. This personal history makes it rich and authentic for her to narrate the lives of Adivasi communities with such authenticity and their folklore in such a natural manner that one forgets one is reading. The reader becomes involved with these unique traditions, beliefs, and narratives that characterize the Adivasi way of life (a descendant of any of the indigenous peoples of South Asia).

2.1. FOLK TALES

The novel integrates a variety of folk songs and stories that vividly reflect the essence of Adivasi culture. As Jan Vansina observes, "The communication of oral tradition is part of the process of establishing collective representations" (Islam, 1985). An excellent example in Valli is the Moopan, a traditional harvest song of the Paniyar, the indigenous people of the forest. These songs serve not only as a means of preserving cultural memory but also as a powerful expression of the community's connection to their land and traditions.

“Peyyuru Peyyurumaaye
Adechukuthiyum peyyuru
Aanekkulippanum vollam kaani
Kuthirekkulippanum vollam kani
.....
pappathi Kulippanum vollam kaani’.
(Rain come, come, rain
Like never before rain
No water for the elephant’s bath
No water for the horse’s bath
.....
No water for the mistress’s bath).

Such folkloric ingredients are not used as mere appendages; instead, they have been the cornerstones of revealing identity and deep communication with nature that these characters sustain. As mentioned above, "Folklore permeates childhoods, families and communities and is the language of the inarticulate" (1). Here, it gives a glimpse about the role

played by folklore that has been well woven into cultural identity, the same way through which it finds its place with the characters' lives in Valli. A poignant example can be seen in Thommichan's reflections on Kelumooppan's songs. Thommichan wondered why Kelumooppan sang such songs despite the abundance of water. It was only much later that he realized the profound wisdom of the forest bards, who could foresee the droughts that lay ahead (26). This moment underscores the foresight embedded in oral traditions and the crucial role of folklore in conveying ecological and cultural knowledge.

From Valli, one gets a sense of the living forest, full of mysteries and legends that deeply sway the imagination of the community for faith. In its narrative, the novel presents how folklore molds the relation of Adivasis with their environment and how they understand it. A lot of local belief about animals and plants is intricately woven into the routine of life, guiding agricultural practices and community rituals. This is well represented in Chapter 5 entitled "The Forest Calls," in which the deep impact and significance of the forest are expounded on, but surely its role in being not only a physical support for the community's existence but also a spiritual cornerstone. "The forest surrounded Kalluvayal, sneaked into its fields, set shoots, flowered. A forest where rosewood, ben- teak, karimaruthu, red silk cotton, venga, ironwood, wildlime, wild gooseberry, jungle fig, paratti, punna, wild guava, kambakam, flame of forest, poisonous cheru and a thousand other trees jostled and kissed each other, where asparagus, wild ginger, snake gourd, sarasaparilla. (35). Through out the chapter wide varieties of plants, fruits, shrubs, trees etc can be seen and the impact of Wayanadan beauty too.

2.2. CULTURAL PRESERVATION

The Adivasi communities have done a lot to preserve their traditions and culture. For example, rituals surrounding important life events are very symbolic. "See that red cloth tied around her waist, over her clothing? That signifies she's had her first menstruation. Only menstruating women wear those. There was a celebration last month when she had it for the first time" (45). This moment emphasizes the community's practices that honor natural transitions and mark them as important milestones in their cultural narrative. M. R. Panickers's "Kerala Folklore" (2018) notes; "The red cloth as a symbol of menstruation carries deep cultural significance, marking both biological and social transitions in a woman's life" (234). This can be analyzed alongside another significant reference from later in the text, "The community gathered, as they always had, to welcome another daughter into womanhood. The songs they sang spoke of earth and fertility, of cycles that never end" (89). The novel emphasizes the oral tradition through which these practices are preserved, "Muthassi's voice carried the weight of generations as she explained each ritual, each symbol. 'This is how we remember who we are,' she would say" (167).

3. IMMORTALIZATION OF LANGUAGE FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF MARGINALISED VOICES.

In Valli, Sheela Tomy skillfully weaves the Paniya language, an unscripted tongue spoken by the indigenous Paniya community of Kerala. This is an inclusion that is deeply meaningful because it speaks to the efforts of preserving cultural heritage and the voice of the marginalized. Using the Malayalam script to transcribe Paniya words, Tomy immortalizes a language that, by tradition, has no written form. It not only saves the linguistic heritage of the Paniya people but also introduces readers to the cultural subtleties embedded within the language. Tomy's use of the Paniya language throughout the novel adds authenticity to the Adivasi voice and culture, ensuring that their identity is faithfully represented. In the English translation by Jayasree Kalathil, these linguistic elements are carefully preserved, enabling a wider audience to engage with and appreciate the richness of Adivasi heritage and the cultural depth of the Paniya community.

Jayasree Kalathil is an internationally acclaimed translator who was awarded the JCB Prize for Literature in 2020 for translating the novel *Moustache* by S. Hareesh. She was also recipient of the Crossword Book Award for Indian Language Translation in 2019 for rendering N. Prabhakaran's *Diary of a Malayali Madman* into the English language. In Valli, the characters belong to the Paniya community, speaking their native tongue instead of standard Malayalam. This gives them a real authenticity and depth in the way they are portrayed. This linguistic detail points to a unique cultural identity and a deeper connection between the characters and their heritage, as if reinforcing the novel's commitment to preserving and representing the marginalized voices. Speaking in their mother tongue, the characters in Valli can express their feelings and emotions in the most genuine and powerful way. By using the Paniya language, Sheela Tomy heightens the voices of a marginalized community whose stories have often been overlooked. Representation not only challenges

dominant narratives but also underlines the importance of indigenous voices in literature. Marginalized communities are often dehumanized and treated as "creatures" who have no say in the world. To negate this, Tomy puts the voices of his characters at the center of the novel.

The use of the Paniya language adds a richness to the novel by placing it in local folklore, traditions, and the experiences of the community. Songs, oral traditions, and cultural practices that are part of Paniya life are integrated into the story, which depicts their significant role in daily life and in bonding the community.

karundamkurundam karimooppa
Mooppana makalu cheluvoru.
koyine kappam thevaru"

' Dark-skinned chief, Karimooppan
His daughter has a pretty house
In her hand, a plate
In the plate are seeds
Pecking at the seeds a hen
And stealing the hen is a god. (trans.182)

The song, sung by Kali about the dark night called Karimooppan is accompanied by rhythmic drumbeats. As the night progresses, the song and the drumbeats cease into silence symbolizing the passing of time.

While translating Valli to English, Jayasree Kalathil plays a key role in making the Paniya language accessible to the reader who does not read Malayalam. She uses Paniya sounds to translate them phonetically in the English, such that people understand the meanings, but will only hear sounds if they take pains to pronounce these. This not only ensures linguistic purity of Paniya words, but makes an attempt for pronunciation in the mouth of the readers also. This interactive method would make the language more beautiful and complex, with readers invited to the cultural richness of the community. This method also reminds the reader of how much cultural richness there is outside of dominant languages. From "Translation as Resistance: Preserving Indigenous Voices" by Gayatri Spivak, "The translation of indigenous languages requires not just linguistic expertise but an understanding of cultural contexts and oral traditions that shape meaning" (45).

Folk songs and poems are crucial narrative apparatuses that are injected into the novel not only for better storytelling but also for richer cultural context. These objects do plenty of multi purposement in support of themes around connection to nature, cultural identity, and social justice. Through Valli, the folk songs and poems capture the very richness of the traditions of the Wayanadan Adivasi, reflecting their belief, struggle, and deep bonding with the forest.

The oral tradition included by Tomy does not only preserve the cultural heritage often marginalized in literature today but honours it, which ensures that voices of the community are heard, and their stories continue to echo with life. The use of folk songs in Valli enables characters to express their identities and emotions in ways that resonate with their cultural heritage. Often, these songs are imbued with communal values and shared histories, which help the characters feel a sense of belonging. M.V. Vishnu Namboothiri's "Folklore of Kerala" states, "Folk songs function as both historical documents and living traditions, marking social transitions and preserving communal memory" (156).

Folk songs and poems add emotional depth to the narrative, often accompanying pivotal moments or transitions in the story and helping the reader understand the inner experiences of the characters. Whether used during happy or sad moments, they mirror the inner struggles and triumphs of the characters. Through these lyrical elements, Tomy explores themes such as environmental justice, feminism, and resilience. The songs often focus on the deep connection between the Adivasi people and their land, illustrating how their lives are intricately tied to nature. This connection forms the foundation for their resistance against exploitation and environmental degradation, highlighting their ongoing struggle to protect their heritage and environment. The inclusion of folk songs and poems enhances the novel's non-linear narrative structure. Tomy employs various forms—diary entries, letters, and newspaper clippings—alongside these

lyrical elements to create a multifaceted storytelling approach that reflects the complexity of life in Kalluvayal. Thematically, the folk songs represent the voice of the community, reminding readers of their struggles and resilience. They bridge two generations of experience and realities, thus enriching the narrative fabric of Valli.

Sheela Tomy writes through the rich tapestry of Valli her richly nuanced and profound portrayal of the relationship between Adivasi communities and the forest, their deep-rooted bonding with nature, and the disruptive influence of external forces on this bond. Set in the verdant landscape of Kalluvayal, located in the Western Ghats, the forest is not merely a backdrop but a central character in the narrative. It embodies the cultural, spiritual, and existential essence of the Adivasi people, symbolizing their intimate relationship with the land and the challenges they face in preserving this connection. The Adivasis in Valli are portrayed as the real guardians of the forest, with an intimate knowledge of its flora and fauna. Their lives are intricately intertwined with the rhythms of nature, with their cultural practices, beliefs, and daily routines all reflecting a deep respect for the environment. The novel shows how they are inextricably attached to the land, and people often express themselves through metaphors of nature while highlighting the deep and intimate connection they have with the world of nature.

The relationship of the Adivasis with the forest is that of symbiosis—when Adivasis are suffering due to external exploitation or environmental degradation, the forest bears the brunt of it too. This mutual dependence is poignantly illustrated through character interactions that reveal how personal loss is intricately tied to ecological loss. For example, when a character mourns the disappearance of familiar scents from the fields, it symbolizes a deeper, more profound loss of identity and heritage, directly linked to the forest and its changing state.

4. POLITICAL UNREST AND RESISTANCE STORIES OF THE UPRISING OF THE ADIVASI COMMUNITY

' For a bit of yam, a knot of tobacco
You can't swindle us any more
Not for valli, not for paddy
You can't exploit us any more
Ours this earth, ours alone" (174).

The narrative structure of Valli exudes deep reverence for nature, as it portrays it as the central character of the story. The lush descriptions of flora and fauna serve as a backdrop for the unfolding human dramas, with an emphasis on environmental justice and resistance against exploitation. The Adivasis' struggles against external forces—be it landowners or exploitative businesses—are told through personal stories and collective folklore. This resistance is rooted in their cultural narratives that celebrate resilience and connection to the land too. One such folktale is about Kali. She is considered as the daughter of forest. She is the one who does not know fear, the one who knows the language of the forest. The two aspects of the Forest (may be life itself) is portrayed through the figure Kali. Through the novel it is depicted that " A forest like life itself.

The forest is only a lesson' (40). So, in Kali one can see she sat in the erumadam (The wooden platform built high on stilts in the middle of the fields) and sang really well so that the forest blooms with her songs. At the same time once she enters into deep forest, she became Bhadra the Fierce. "Tongue lolling red from her mouth, curly hair abandoned to the wind, necklace of bones swinsging, kali becomes dance of the dead" (48).

In Valli, Sheela Tomy reflects on the historical events surrounding Naxal activity in Wayanad by interweaving personal narratives with broader socio-political themes. Through her characters' struggles against systemic injustice, she sheds light on the complexities of class conflict, land rights, and environmental stewardship. The novel is both a tribute to the resilience of Adivasi communities and a critique of historical injustices that continue to resonate today. The story of Valli is framed against a context of facts happening with the Naxalite movement and more specifically around the assassination of Comrade Varghese in February 1970. Varghese was one of the most important voices for the landless laborers as well as the tribals against the exploitative vallipani, pushing laborers to work in return for minimal sustenance on landowners' lands. The system is portrayed as an eye-opener of disturbance and revolt in Wayanad that eventually creates a platform for Naxal activities in the region. In an impressive narrative, it interweaves the historical

backdrop of Naxal activity in Wayanad with the socio-political dynamics in the region as they unfolded towards the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The novel captures the ethos of life at Kalluvayal besides reflecting on more profound implications arising from class struggle and the fight over land rights along with the call for justice by Adivasi groups. Sheela Tomy has done an excellent job of interweaving folklore into a personal and political narrative in the novel, Valli. Thus, not only does she save the heritage of the Wayanadan Adivasis but also critically engages with the issues of the present-day environment and social injustices. The novel stands as a testament to the power of storytelling in preserving identity and fostering resistance against oppression. Tomy chronicles, throughout Valli, the injustices that the Adivasis suffer as they resist the encroachment of their ancestral lands by outsiders. The story reflects on the historical and contemporary struggles against the landowners and corporate interests threatening their way of life. Their fight was portrayed not just as a battle for land, but a struggle to survive and keep their culture alive. Basaveswaran is one such legendary figure who spoke for the voiceless. "Basaveswaram was expelled from his land for voicing against oppression." (32). It critiques the development projects displacing the indigenous people. Tomy explains that when such projects come up, they merely disregard the ecological wisdom possessed by Adivasi communities. The loss of such ecological wisdom is actually embodied by the character Kelumooppan who declines offers by the government to relocate, and instead chose to live in harmony with the forest.

The Adivasi characters, such as Kelumooppan, epitomize a deep respect for the forest. Kelumooppan's decision to stay in the forest despite government offers for relocation shows his commitment to preserving his ancestral land. His character symbolizes the deep-rooted connection between indigenous people and their environment, emphasizing their role as guardians of nature. As he states his preference to die in the forest, it reflects a powerful sentiment of belonging and resistance against displacement.

Many characters stood as the iconic figures of protest against injustice. As the granddaughter of Adivasi characters, Tessa represents the potential of the younger generation to inherit and protect the forest. The novel ends with Susan passing the responsibility of taking care of the forests to Tessa, symbolizing hope for future stewardship. This act underlines a legacy of environmental consciousness that is crucial for the preservation of the forest.

Such heroes in character as Thommichan and Padmanabhan do activism for the rights of Adivasis and to advocate for environmental justice. Their attempt to voice against exploitation and fight for fair treatment epitomizes a thrust to find a means to preserve both a way of life associated with the community and the forest. They epitomize an intersection of social activism and environmental activism- working together with the Adivasi community.

5. COMPLEX INTERACTIONS

This is portrayed as symbiotic between the characters and the forest: when one suffers, so does the other. Such interconnectedness can be observed in the experiences of loss in the characters through environmental degradation, how their identities are connected to the health of the forest. This also shows the problem of women such as Susan and the love she carries within her for the forest in this urban world. Their issues point to larger problems of ecofeminism- the entwining of women's destinies with nature's fate. This duality points out the nurturing nature that could also be at crossroads with society.

6. CHARACTERS IMPACT

- **Kelumooppan:** Being the main protagonist, Kelumooppan represents a strong relationship between the Adivasi and the forest. The fact that he chose to stay in the forest, against the pressures exerted by external elements, depicts the desire to save his identity along with the nature around him. The resilience shown by him as well as a deep sense of respect for nature demonstrates how an individual decision may work for ecological balance.
- **Tessa:** The next generation's promise is embodied by Tessa. She is assigned the task of tending for the forest and becomes a reflection of continuity with possibilities for later generations. It also represents, in passing, values and traditions that are built up over years to take care of the forest for the sake of future generations.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper exclusively focuses on the folklorist elements of Valli by Sheela Tomy. The past that left a deep scar or traumatic conditions left the community represented through the portrayal of their folktales, paniya language and the analysis of different characters. Throughout the novel, the author tries to preserve as many things as possible. The characters in the novel immersed themselves in the stories, traditions and myths of the native place. The study of the people's memories belongs to Kallvayal, with their historical subjects marking a New historical direction that will be taken up in future studies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Principal, Faculty members, Department of English and Media Studies, St. Xavier's College, Thumba, Trivandrum and my family for the immense support and guidance.

REFERENCES

- America, M. L. a. O. (2021). *MLA handbook*. Modern Language Association.
- Balu, B. G. J., & Balasubramanian, A. (2015). Tribal language and community radio: A case study on "Radio Mattoli" Wayanad, Kerala, India. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 5(September 2015-Special Issue), 160–170. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/5698>
- Connaughton, S. L., & Pukallus, S. (2024). *The Routledge Handbook of Conflict and Peace Communication*. Taylor & Francis.
- Damodaran, A. (2006). Tribals, Forests and resource conflicts in Kerala, India: the status quo of policy change. *Oxford Development Studies*, 34(3), 357–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600810600921976>
- Haring, L. (2013). *How to read a folktale: The "Ibonia" Epic from Madagascar*. Open Book Publishers.
- Islam, Mazharul (1985). *Folklore, the Pulse of the People: In context of Indic Folklore*, New Delhi: Concept Publication.
- Kalathil, Jayasree (2022). *Valli*. Harper Collins Publisher.
- Kavalam, Narayana panikkar (1991). *Folklore of Kerala*. India: National Book Trust
- Namboothiri's V. M. Vishnu. *Folklore of Kerala*. Tomy, Sheela (2019). *Valli*. India: D C press.
- Spivak, Gayathri. (2019). *Living Translations*. Seagull Books London Ltd .
- Tomy, Sheela (2019). *Valli*. India: D C press.