

Eco-Folkloristics and the Subaltern Body: Ecology, Memory and Resistance in Sheela Tomy's *Valli*

Chettupally Anvesh & Pallavi Negi, *Department of Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi, New Delhi*

Abstract

Ecological degradation and subaltern marginalisation are two issues that have not been adequately explored in the context of the literary analysis of indigenous narratives. Although the current body of knowledge about Sheela Tomy's *Valli* addresses eco-criticism, folklore, and gender, they are not commonly discussed as interdependent systems that influence the narrative. To overcome this gap, this paper elaborates an interdisciplinary model that incorporates eco-subalternity, eco-feminism, and eco-folkloristics to examine how the novel constructs relations among land, body, and memory.

This analysis shows that *Valli* is not only used as a setting but also as a storehouse of environmental recollection, where a shift in the environment leads to the loss of native identity and knowledge systems. At the same time, folklore is also a vital epistemological model that codifies ecological information and perpetuates culture by myth, ritual, and narrative. These forms of narratives serve as other archives that oppose mainstream ecological and historical discourses.

This paper also postulates that the subaltern body, especially that of the Adivasi women, is a location where ecological exploitation is experienced and challenged. The novel shows the reinforcing relationship between environmental degradation and social marginalisation by connecting land and body. In this light, *Valli* criticises capitalist modernity and anthropocentric paradigms, and predicts resistance to indigenous ecological knowledge.

The paper finally establishes folklore as a form of ecological awareness and the subaltern body as a site of memory, agency and survival in the disputed environmental spaces.

Keywords: *Eco-folkloristics, Subaltern Body, Eco-criticism, Indigenous Knowledge, Valli*

Introduction

Valli by Sheela Tomy (2022) is generally considered an eco-fiction that prefigures the connection between the indigenous population and their natural surroundings, specifically in the socio-ecological setting of Wayanad, formerly known as Bayalnad. The novel portrays the close association between Adivasi life and forests, rivers, and land-based activities that define identity, livelihood, and cultural continuity (Bensla and Bhatnagar 98-99). This ecological rootedness is not only descriptive but also indicative of a larger situation in which social structures and marginalised communities are directly influenced by environmental change (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539). In particular, Bensla and Bhatnagar observe that *Valli* exposes environmental degradation, displacement, and cultural marginalisation and show that ecological crises cannot exist without human suffering (99).

Meanwhile, the *Valli* is organised around folklore, myth, and oral stories, which serve as the most important means of preserving ecological knowledge and cultural memory among local communities, just like in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (Nayak and Monica 2, 10). The novel's folklore carries lived experience, environmental ethics, and collective history, and therefore serves as a system through which knowledge of the ecology is passed down through generations. This connection between narrative and ecology can be explained through eco-folkloristics, which considers folklore a form of ecological knowledge production and cultural continuity. Nayak and Monica continue to suggest that indigenous stories incorporate ecological wisdom in the form of myth, memory, and belief systems to provide a worldview grounded in similarity and interdependence, rather than domination (1).

Intimately related to this is the idea of the subaltern body, which points to the lived, embodied experiences of marginalised groups of people under ecological and social exploitation. In *Valli*, the Adivasi groups and especially the women are in a position that is not only ecologically vulnerable but also systematically marginalised by the power structures. Srija and Mahalakshmi theorise this situation as eco-subaltern, in which marginalised human groups and the ecological systems are muted in mainstream environmental and political discourses (538). This framework shows the arrangements among ecological degradation, voice, representation, and exclusion (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539).

Although there is academic research on ecocriticism, indigenous knowledge systems, and folklore in *Valli*, these aspects are typically studied separately rather than as interdependent processes within a single analytical approach. This presents a serious division in the comprehension of the role of ecological knowledge, cultural memory, and subaltern embodiment plays within the text. The paper contends that *Valli* revive folklore as an ecological archive in which subaltern bodies speak out against environmental and cultural erasure and offer resistance.

Literature Review

(A) Ecology and Subalternity

Ecocriticism and subaltern studies intersect to show that environmental degradation is closely connected to structures of marginalisation and exclusion (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539). Srija and Mahalakshmi theorise this relationship through the term eco-subalternity, which refers to the simultaneous silencing of marginalised human communities and ecological systems in mainstream discourses on the environment and politics (538). They assert that ecological policies and conservation systems often marginalise the voices of indigenous people, therefore, perpetuating epistemic violence and systematic inequality (538). This framework confirms that environmental crises should be perceived as power, representation, and voice issues rather than solely as ecological problems (540).

George builds on this point of view by introducing the notion of tribal ecologies, in which nature serves as a source of identity, a means of livelihood, and a cultural space for Adivasi communities (George 238). The paper states that tribal ecological knowledge involves sustainable practices, cultural memory, and socio-political resistance, grounded in millennial relationships with land and forests (George 239). George also criticises mainstream environmental paradigms, especially Western paradigms of deep ecology, as failing to take into account material realities and survival needs of indigenous people (242). All these views illustrate that ecological discourse cannot be detached from subalternity, since environmental destruction leads to ecological destruction and the marginalisation of indigenous communities (Srija and Mahalakshmi 538).

(B) Indigenous Ecology and Knowledge Systems

Indigenous ecological knowledge is being framed as an alternative to anthropocentric and extractive models of development that emphasise control over sustainability (Nayak and Monica 11). Nayak and Monica believe that indigenous stories reflect a worldview of reciprocity, interdependence, and respect towards nature (1). They show that oral traditions, place-based practises, and animistic beliefs are systems of ecological wisdom that serve as cultural and environmental knowledge systems (1). They also highlight that such knowledge systems are resistant to environmental damage and cultural destruction brought about by modernisation and colonialism (11).

George makes this point stronger by situating indigenous ecological knowledge within material and political contexts of survival and resistance. The research indicates that tribal ecological activities are deeply embedded in day-to-day activities and are critical to sustainability and survival (George 239-240). George further criticises abstract environmental theories on their failure to take into consideration the realities of the lives of indigenous people. All these points show that indigenous ecological knowledge is practical and political, serving as a form of resistance against exploitative modern systems (Nayak and Monica 10).

(C) Folklore, Identity, and Gender

Folklore in *Valli* is a key tool for maintaining cultural identity and ecological knowledge among indigenous populations (Varghese 998). Varghese believes the novel demonstrates the three-dimensionality of folklore by incorporating culture, politics, and native traditions into its storytelling framework (997). The paper highlights that folklore in *Valli* has maintained a sense of regional identity to the extent that it has incorporated oral culture, rituals, and lived experiences (Varghese 999). This confirms the fact that folklore is a system of cultural and ecological knowledge that functions dynamically and is not an aesthetic component.

Prabhu goes on to state that *Valli* builds tribal identity through myth, memory, ritual, and storytelling, and that these form alternative archives that challenge mainstream historical accounts. The paper emphasises that narrating enables one to reclaim repressed histories and maintain cultural continuity among marginalised groups (Prabhu 85). Prabhu further asserts that women in the novel serve as memory bearers, environmental experts, and ritual participants, thereby connecting gender with the continuity of culture and environment (84).

This proves that folklore and storytelling are closely connected to issues of identity, resistance, and survival.

Bensla and Bhatnagar further expound this argument by showing how environmental degradation in *Valli* is strongly associated with gendered marginalisation, especially for women in the context of both ecological and social disruption (102). Their discussion indicates that ecological devastation is one of the factors that result in the marginalisation of women, which further supports the linking of the environmental crisis and gendered inequality (99). This aligns with ecofeminist views, which hold that women are the primary agents in maintaining ecological knowledge and cultural memory despite systemic exploitation (Bensla and Bhatnagar 103).

Research Gap

The current literature on *Valli* offers an understanding of ecocriticism, indigenous ecological knowledge, folklore, and gender, yet views them as distinct processes. There is still a significant gap in critical work that incorporates folklore, ecology, and the subaltern body within a single analytical framework that explains the interdependence of these elements operating simultaneously in the narrative.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the current study is an integrated approach that combines eco-subalternity, ecofeminism, and eco-folkloristics to understand how *Valli* builds relationships among ecology, identity, and marginalisation. All these theoretical approaches help comprehend how the ecological and social structures work simultaneously in the story of *Valli*, as explained by Bensla and Bhatnagar in their research.

The research also suggests that eco-subalternity refers to the situation in which both human and ecological communities are excluded in all ways by the prevailing discourses of environmental and

political power (Srija and Mahalakshmi 540). They claim that systems of environmental governance and conservation tend to marginalise natives, thereby supporting epistemic violence and institutional inequality (538). This framework expands the concept of subalternity to non-human subjects that are exploited and controlled. Consequently, eco-subalternity offers a critical perspective on how nature and marginalised communities are positioned within identity politics and hegemonic structures.

Ecofeminism extends this analysis by foregrounding the intertwined nature of the oppression of women and nature within systems of exploitation (Bensla and Bhatnagar 99). Gendered marginalisation is closely linked to environmental degradation, especially among women in the context of ecological disturbance in *Valli* (Bensla and Bhatnagar 98). This model draws a comparison between land and the female body that is commodified, controlled, and subjected to violence (102). Meanwhile, ecofeminism also focuses on women as bearers of ecological knowledge and cultural memory, thereby highlighting their agency in resistance systems (103).

The third paradigm, eco-folkloristics, views folklore as an ecological knowledge-production and cultural-continuity system. According to Varghese, folklore in *Valli* combines cultural identity, the political situation, and local traditions, thereby conserving ecological and cultural knowledge in the form of narratives. In the same manner, Nayak and Monica highlight that indigenous stories encode ecological knowledge through myth, memory, and belief systems grounded in interdependence (1). Such views hold folklore not as an aesthetic add-on but as an epistemology through which environmental knowledge is transmitted and maintained (Nayak and Monica 7).

Collectively, these frameworks reveal that folklore, ecology, and subalternity are connected systems in *Valli*, which determines the meaning and narrative (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539). This combined method makes it clear that folklore is no longer ornamental but a form of knowledge and resistance through which marginalised communities can express ecological relationships and cultural identity (Nayak and Monica 5).

Analysis

Forest, Land and Ecological Memory

In *Valli*, the forest is built as an ecological, cultural and historical memory and is a part of the narrative (Tomy, ch. 1). The novel follows the evolution of Kalluvayal from a thriving forest habitat into a commercialised, built-up environment, a shift from ecological balance to ecological disturbance (Tomy, ch. 1). This shift demonstrates that ecological change is connected to broader processes of displacement and marginalisation affecting indigenous communities (Bensla and Bhatnagar 100).

The gradual transformation of forests into plantations, such as cashew and coffee, is indicative of the reorganisation of ecological space to accommodate economic pressures, leading to the loss of biodiversity and native lifeworlds (Tomy, ch. 1). Bensla and Bhatnagar suggest that ecological degradation in *Valli* cannot be understood without reference to cultural marginalisation, as environmental destruction destabilises identity, livelihoods, and communal structures (99). This

confirms that the destruction of forests is an additional loss of cultural memory and of the society's continuity (99).

Also, the novel maintains traces of an alternative ecological ethic by portraying Adivasi practices grounded in sustainability and harmony (Tomy, ch. 2). The letters in the story discuss how native communities use only what nature needs and uphold ecological balance, a system of environmental ethics based on restraint and coexistence (Tomy, ch. 2). Nayak and Monica call these practises manifestations of indigenous ecological wisdom that is interdependent, reverent, and sustainable in their interaction with nature (4,7).

This contrast of ecological destruction and indigenous sustainability highlights the incompatibility between extractive modern practises and traditional ecological knowledge (Nayak and Monica 8). The forest is therefore not only a physical site but also a repository of knowledge, memory, and identity that is gradually being eroded by the forces of environmental and economic transformation (Tomy, ch. 1).

By so doing, *Valli* constructs the forest as an ecological site of memory and loss, revealing how much the degradation of the environment is tied to the destruction of cultures and marginalisation of native populations (Bensla and Bhatnagar 102-103).

A cultural archive on folklore

Folklore in *Valli* is an ecological memory that stores and exchanges ecological and environmental knowledge, cultural memory, and identity across generations (Tomy, ch. 1-2). It is evident that the narrative of Unniyachi depicts how myth is enshrined in the landscape and bridges rivers, forests, and sacred places through shared memory and environmental wisdom (Tomy, ch. 1-2). This hybrid ecology-story demonstrates that folklore is a system where ecological relationships are created and perpetuated (Tomy, ch. 1-2).

The mythology of the Unniyachi also demonstrates the possibility of ecological processes being represented through narrative structures, whereby the evolution of land and the creation of natural objects are explained by cultural narratives (Tomy, ch. 1-2). These align with Varghese's assertion that folklore in *Valli* has succeeded in preserving cultural identity and ecological awareness to the extent of integrating lived experiences into oral culture and narrative (Varghese 998-1000). Varghese notes that folklore is a politicised, cultural, and indigenous practice and, therefore, is not a cultural object but a dynamic body of knowledge.

The narration may also be regarded as a memory mechanism in which the past experiences and the ecological knowledge are always reactivated, re-transmitted in the practise of narration (Tomy, ch. 2). According to Prabhu, this storytelling is a unique archive that interrupts the official histories and restores the histories of oppressed populations (Prabhu 83, 85). This is what makes folklore a weapon of defiance: a means of survival for indigenous voices in the face of ecological destruction and cultural marginalisation.

Nayak and Monica also support this idea by demonstrating that native stories imprint ecological wisdom in myth, memory, and belief systems based on interdependence and reciprocity (6). According to them, these knowledge systems represent counter-narratives of anthropocentric and extractive developmental practises (6). This validates the fact that folklore is not symbolic but

epistemological, a system that produces, maintains, and passes ecological knowledge (Nayak and Monica 7). By doing so, folklore as a living ecological archive in Valli connects all of them, thereby preserving indigenous knowledge in life and preventing cultural and environmental erasure (Tomy, ch. 1-2).

The Subaltern Body: Women, Land and Resistance

The subaltern body, especially the female body in Valli, is developed as a place where ecological exploitation, cultural memory, and resistance meet (Tomy, ch. 14). The novel creates a comparison between land and female body that depicts both as spaces of control, commodification, and violence in the prevailing socio-economic orders (Tomy, ch. 14). This correspondence is a sign of an ecofeminist approach where both nature exploitation and women's oppression are mutually dependent processes that are the results of power systems (Bensla and Bhatnagar 102).

The character of Unniyachi demonstrates how the female body is embedded in myth and landscape as a cultural symbol and site of resistance (Tomy, ch. 1). Her story relates to the notion of feminine identity to the ecological memory because her transformation is associated with land, water, and sacred geography in the narrative (Tomy, ch. 1). This signification shows that the body is not only subjected to power but also re-agencies itself through the continuity of myth and narration (Tomy, ch. 1).

Likewise, the experience of women like Sara is indicative of the continuation of memory and identity in the embodied experience across the shifting ecological and social conditions (Tomy, ch. 2). These images support Prabhu's argument that Valli recreates identity through ritual, narrative, and feminine agency, placing women at the core of cultural and environmental continuity (Prabhu 84). Prabhu also points out that women are custodians of memory, ecological knowledge, and ritual practices, thus connecting gender to resistance and survival (Prabhu 85).

In the novel Adivasi women also reflects this relationship between body and land by perpetuating ecological practices that maintain balance with nature despite systematic displacement and marginalisation (Tomy, ch. 2). Their purpose is a product of what its defined as ecological wisdom of the indigenous based on interdependence and reciprocity, where human life cannot be separated from the environmental systems (Nayak and Monica 6). This reveals that the subaltern body is both a means of ecological knowledge and an experience of being (Nayak and Monica 7).

This process can be understood within the context of eco-subalternity, in which marginal groups and ecological systems are silenced by mainstream discourses and power relations (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539). They argue that this kind of killing creates circumstances in which subaltern bodies are ecologically erased through epistemic marginalisation (538). The subaltern body in *Valli* thus constitutes not only the space of exploitation but also the space of rejection, in which identity, memory, and ecological knowledge are maintained and exercised. In this way, connecting land and body, *Valli* shows that ecological and social struggle are closely intertwined and that resistance is created through embodied experience, just as through narrative and cultural memory (Tomy, ch.14).

Discussion

The analysis shows that *Valli* creates a narrative in which ecology, folklore, and subaltern embodiment are interdependent structures that generate meaning and resistance in the text (Srija

and Mahalakshmi 539). The novel makes folklore a key ecological resistance strategy by rendering environmental knowledge into myths, rituals and oral traditions that maintain indigenous connections with the land (Tomy, ch. 1). According to Varghese, folklore in *Valli* is a blend of culture, politics, and indigeneity, and as such, it is an active system that maintains ecological consciousness and cultural identity (Varghese 998-1002). This confirms that folklore does not act as a decorative component of narrative but is an epistemological form that supports and passes ecological knowledge.

Meanwhile, the subaltern body is introduced as a site of ecological location where environmental degradation is sensed as lived, embodied realities (Tomy, ch. 14). The research shows that the destruction of the ecology in *Valli* is closely linked to women's marginalisation, displacement, and socio-economic transformation. This aligns with the idea of eco-subalternity introduced by Srija and Mahalakshmi, emphasising the muting of both subaltern communities and ecological systems in processes of power and domination(538). Consequently, the body becomes a site where the loss of ecology is not only witnessed but also physically and culturally perceived.

Moreover, *Valli* questions prevailing paradigms of capitalist modernity by showing how forests are turned into commercialised spaces where economic interests take precedence over environmental sustainability (Tomy, ch. 1). This is termed 'ecoprecarity', in which environmental and social instability are created through exploitative spatial and economic relations that discriminate against indigenous populations (Nataraj and Narayana 73). Their theory of spatial politics also illustrates how power structures restructure land, dislocating traditional ecological relations and knowledge systems (Nataraj and Narayana 71).

Anthropocentric views are also challenged in the novel, which presupposes the agency of non-human beings and stresses the interdependence of humans and nature (Nayak and Monica 6). They claim that indigenous ecological knowledge is grounded in the principles of mutuality and coexistence, as an alternative to prevailing models that treat nature as a resource to be exploited (5). This supports the notion that *Valli* is making a relational ecological worldview that opposes hierarchical views of the environment. In this way, *Valli* unites folklore, embodied experience, and ecological awareness to challenge systems of exploitation and recover indigenous ways of knowledge and resistance (Srija and Mahalakshmi 538-539).

Conclusion

This research paper has revealed that *Valli* constructs a networked narrative in which ecology, folklore, and subaltern embodiment are closely interrelated and mutually supportive structures that produce meaning and resistance in the text (Srija and Mahalakshmi 539). It has been established that the novel has displayed the forest as not just a physical location, but as a life-force ecological and cultural memory, wherein the degradation of the environment results in the loss of indigenous identity and knowledge systems (Tomy, ch. 1). This confirms that the ecological change in *Valli* is impossible to isolate of the marginalisation and displacement of the Adivasi people (George 238).

Another finding in the paper is that folklore is an ecological storehouse where folklore knowledge of the environment and cultural memory are stored and passed to the succeeding generation (Tomy, ch. 1). According to the analysis made by Varghese, folklore in *Valli* is not the decorative narrative aspect but a dynamic system of knowledge, a mix of cultural identity, politics, and ecological

awareness (Varghese 1000). In the same tone, Prabhu points out that storytelling has become a different archive that rediscovers repressed histories and upholds indigenous identity through the practise of memory and ritual (Prabhu 85). These perceptions support the fact that folklore in Valli becomes the essence of ecological consciousness and cultural resistance.

The subaltern body analysis has shown that women, in particular, Adivasi women, are symbolic of ecological exploitation, cultural memory and resistance in the stories (Tomy, ch. 14). This is in tandem with eco-subalternity, where the marginalised groups and environmental systems are silenced in the hegemonic power structures (Srija and Mahalakshmi, 539). Because Nataraj and Narayana converse about their spatial politics and ecoprecarity, these are also spaces of knowledge and activism, where knowledge and cultural continuity are upheld in the face of systematic marginalisation (Nataraj and Narayana 73- 74).

In conclusion, *Valli* is a very eco-critical, subaltern, and folkloric text that challenges the current paradigms of capitalist modernity and anthropocentrism, anticipating indigenous epistemologies and lived ecological contacts (Nayak and Monica 11). The novel finally recovers lost territory and body as memory, resistance, and ecological survival (Nataraj and Narayana 73-74).

References

1. Bensla, Jahanvi, and Dr. Gurpyari Bhatnagar. "Valli: A Thematic Analysis." *The Context*, 2025, pp. 98-105.
2. George, Niveditha. "Tribal ecologies of Wayanad: A parallel reading of C.K. Janu's mother forest and Adimamakka with Sheela Tomy's valli." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2025, pp. 238–243.
3. Nataraj, Shilpa, and Sharmila Narayana. "Literary cartography of performance ecologies in Sheela Tomy's 'valli.'" *Southeast Asian Review of English*, vol. 61, no. 2, 29 Dec. 2024, pp. 46–77.
4. Nayak, Dr. Amar, and K.C. Monica. "Indigenous ecological wisdom and ecocritical consciousness in Mamang Dai's the Legends of Pensam." *SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELLH*, 28 Aug. 2025, pp. 1–14.
5. Prabhu, T. "Between Land and Language: Reconstructing Tribal Identity in Sheela Tomy's Valli." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 30, no. 12, Dec. 2025, pp. 83-86.
6. Srija, D., and Dr. K. Mahalakshmi. "Ecocriticism meets subaltern studies: A framework from the Sundarbans in Amitav Ghosh's 'The hungry tide.'" *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2025, pp. 538–540.
7. Tomy, Sheela. *Valli*. Translated by Jayasree Kalathil, PDF ed., Harper Perennial, 2022.
8. Varghese, Gifty Elza. "Folklore, fables, and the fusion of politics, culture, and characters in Valli by Sheela Tomy." *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, vol. 5, no. 2, 29 Feb. 2024, pp. 997–1003.