

Extractivism, Epistemicide: Reconfiguring Adivasi Lifeworlds in Sheela Tomy's *Valli*

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Abstract: This research paper investigates Sheela Tomy's *Valli* (2019), which depicts five decades of ecological destruction and social injustice in Wayanad, Kerala. The novel portrays how the bonded labor of the Paniya, an indigenous Adivasi community under the Vallippani system, the relentless clearing of forests for timber extraction, plantation, agriculture, and tourism, and the gradual disappearance of the scriptless Paniya gothrabhasha are interconnected forms of violence rather than separate historical events. This paper examines *Valli* through the theoretical perspective of extractivism and epistemicide. Extractivism explains how forests, labor, and indigenous cultures are transformed into economic resources, while Boaventura de Sousa Santos's concept of epistemicide reveals the systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge embedded in language, oral traditions, and ecological practices. The study also analyses Wayanad's natural loss and resists indigenous cultural erasure. It represents Adivasi communities not as victims but as resilient agents whose cultural memory, indigenous ecological knowledge, and collective resistance.

Keywords: Ecological destruction, Paniya Adivasi, Extractivism, Epistemicide, Indigenous culture

Introduction

Malayalam novel *Valli* by Sheela Tomy (2019), translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil (2022), is seen as an intense discussion of the environment in contemporary Indian literature. The transformation of Bayalnad, the 'land of paddy fields', into Wayanad reflects a larger process in which the economic values imposed by settlers replace the cultural meanings attached to the land by its native people. This ongoing history of dispossession is the root of the destruction of forests, language, livelihood, and community throughout the novel. *Valli* uses the fictional village of Kalluvayal to explore almost 50 years of ecological and social change in Wayanad. It starts with the murder of the Naxalite activist Varghese in 1970 and ends with the disastrous floods in Kerala in 2018. At the heart of the novel, along with migrant Christian settlers like Thommichan and Sara, are the stories of the Paniya Adivasis, who were subjected to bonded labor, land alienation, and cultural oppression, and who reveal the hidden underpinnings of modern Wayanad. This research paper explores *Valli's* novel through two theoretical approaches. The first is extractivism, the conception of the forest, the indigenous workforce, and local culture as economic resources. Extractivism is not just an environmental problem but, as in this novel, an ongoing political-economic framework that commodifies nature and human communities for profit. The exploitation of Wayanad is an example of a sustained mode of accumulation from the colonial extraction of timber and plantation farming to the present day and onward.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos' second analytical framework is epistemicide, which refers to the colonial elimination of marginalized systems of knowledge. The disappearance of the Paniya language in *Valli* is not merely linguistic, but a systematic erasure of the indigenous language of the entire world through the extinction of the oral tradition, ecological practices, collective memory, the Paniya indigenous people's understanding of the forest, and the oblivion of their scriptless gothrabhasha. This article talks about the decline of indigenous communities. Instead, the novel reframes the lives of the Adivasis as dynamic places of continuity and culture, of ecological knowledge and political resistance. Through the convergence of environmental history, indigenous epistemologies and innovative narrative forms, Tomy shows that even though the Adivasi people have been dispossessed for generations, their communities persist in sustaining alternative modes of living, remembering and protecting the land.

Extractivism as the Ecological Transformation of Wayanad

Extractivism is simply the extraction of natural resources, and forms a larger political and economic system that treats nature and human communities as goods for exploitation. Naomi Klein says that extractivism is the relationship of domination of the earth as a resource to be exploited, instead of a setting that provides space for a wide variety of life forms. To characterize this extractive logic, *Valli* traces the evolution of Wayanad from a rainforest rich in biodiversity to a colonial forest frontier, a plantation frontier, and, finally, a tourism frontier.

The novel follows this environmental history over multiple generations. British colonial administrations initiated forest clearance to establish tea, coffee, and spice plantations, basically altering the ecological character of that region. Following independence, clusters of settler migrants from southern Kerala hastened this process by bringing more forest land under cultivation. Tomy brings to life the fertility of Wayanad with the photograph of "even shards of glass stuck in the soil sprouted (Tomy 398), signifying the fertility and the desire of the settlers. However, this agricultural bounty is built on a history of dispossession. The original people of the region were the Paniya Adivasis, who were subjected to bonded labor since they were required to work for an entire year to earn just enough meager wages of coarse cloth, a small amount of paddy, and a few rupees. It was their labor that was the hidden basis on which the region's agricultural prosperity rose. *Valli* is an excellent example of how Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence can be applied. Tomy does not show ecological destruction as a single event, but something that takes place over decades. These are all small changes that add up to a bigger ecological problem, and show how environmental damage can go unnoticed until it becomes irreversible.

This slow erosion culminates in the devastating floods in Kerala in 2018. Tomy directly links the floods to decades of 'quarrying', 'indiscriminate construction', deforestation and unsustainable development. The pattern of scars left on individual hillsides by earlier landslides eventually becomes a statewide environmental catastrophe, a consequence of extractive development. The novel thus refuses any analysis of the flood as a natural disaster, and breaks with the notion that it was the result of humanity's incursion into fragile ecological systems. The very rapid process of tourism development in Wayanad is one of the most telling criticisms in the novel. Tourism doesn't seem to be a different way to do things to replace extractivism, but rather the next iteration of it. The resort, called Swargam (heaven), is situated on the land that has been taken by Indigenous people, highlighting the irony that people who are supposed to be on the land are not there. Displaced Adivasis are given barren land and substandard houses to rebuild their lives. At the same time, younger generations are offered jobs as guides, hostesses, or daily wage laborers to cater to tourists who eat their lands. Thus, the concept of extractivism goes beyond the exploitation of forests for timber and turns to profit from the scenery, the culture, and the Indigenous heritage of the forest.

The moral implications of extractivism are exemplified through the character of Anjilikkunnal Ivachan, by Tomy. Ruthless timber smuggler, Ivachan, is a powerful landlord who motivates environmental destruction through his greed. "Ever since the Chettys and the Gowdas from the land of the Kannadigas had lost their power, Ivachan had taken over as the judge and jury of the land. (Tomy 150)" These lines show Ivachan's avarice. He marks valuable rosewood and teak trees in secret to earn money from the forest, and he doesn't care about the importance of the forest. However, the novel does not set up an either/or proposition between settlers and Indigenous people in an environmental conflict. The small migrant farmers are victims of the same economic system as well. Many are caught in a vicious cycle of indebtedness, low productivity, and volatile markets, which make it hard to sustain their livelihoods and lives. The death

of Vakamattom Varky was caused by the flood, which destroyed his crops and his future as a farmer, and is a prime example of the way extractive capitalism ultimately harms vulnerable farming communities and Indigenous communities.

This critique is capped off with a strong sense of poetic justice in the novel. However, at the farthest extreme of the area he was trying to conquer, a wild elephant ultimately kills Ivachan, whose wealth relies on deforestation. Meanwhile, his daughter Isabella decides to share the exploitation's wealth and asks for the possibility of ethical restoration. While they do not remedy decades of ecological harm or social inequity, they are a symbolic recognition of the past. In these woven tales, *Valli* offers an alternative definition of extractivism as not a series of isolated economic activities, but as a continuous historical process. Colonial forestry, plantation agriculture, illegal logging practices, tourism and environmental disasters are demonstrated to be part of the same matrix of domination. The ecological destruction, social inequality and dispossession of the Indigenous communities are all components of a single extractive system that continues to define the present-day Wayanad.

Languages Without Scripts: Epistemicide and the Paniya Lifeworld

According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, epistemicide is the systematic annihilation of the knowledge systems of marginalized communities as a result of colonialism and the modern powers that be. In *Valli*, this devastation goes beyond the loss of land. The dispossession of the Paniya community is also the loss of language, oral traditions, ecological knowledge and collective memory. The novel also implies that the loss of land is linked with the loss of knowledge; both reinforce each other. One such instance of this epistemic violence is the gradual extinction of a tribal language called Paniya gothrabhasha, which is not written. Tomy dedicated the novel to the languages without scripts, focusing on the fragility of oral cultures where history is remembered, but not written. At the same time, losses in forests have jeopardized the existence of indigenous languages, culture and ecological knowledge in Wayanad, writes Jayasree Kalathil in her translator's note. Then the destruction of the natural environment is the destruction of the intellectual and cultural worlds supported by the natural environment.

Language is inextricably linked to place, as the novel points out numerous times. Indigenous communities understand and interpret their environment using the forest as a source of material resources and as a source of cultural vocabulary. The ecological references in the Paniya language get lost as the landscape changes due to deforestation, plantations, and commercial development. In this connection between language and environment, Tomy makes clear that the degradation of the environment inevitably leads to the erosion of the culture.

This connection is clearly being expressed by a politically active school teacher, Padmanabhan, in a village meeting. He maintains that settlers took up the land of Indigenous peoples, but also took over their history by imposing new stories, languages, names and knowledge systems onto the land. This observation highlights how development projects in the colonies and postcolonial world remold the physical

environment and the history of the people living in it. When language is usurped, it is another way in which the Indigenous identity is silenced and pushed aside.

Despite all these pressures, however, *Valli* refuses to represent the Paniya community as victims of cultural erasure. Rather, it focuses on common acts of resistance that sustain Indigenous knowledge from generation to generation. This is what Basavan, the respected elder of the Paniya community, represents. From this intimate knowledge of the forest comes a form of ecological knowledge gained through lived ancestral experience, not formal education, and practiced by him. He doesn't only talk about the forest; he represents a way of thinking that sees humans and the more-than-human world as one.

A memorable incident of the novel is when Basavan guides the people of Ippimale to the forest to keep contractors from felling marked trees. Villagers hug the trees with their own bodies and remember the spirit of the Chipko Movement, but make some adjustments to the politics in the context of the history of Wayanad. Basavan challenges the loggers to "Come on then, cut us down (Tomy 153), and breaks down the difference between man and tree. The statement states that violence towards the forest is violence towards the community, interdependent with it. Environmental protection thus is a defense of Indigenous life itself.

The novel also reveals how epistemicide works by silencing cultural memory. The songs of Kali carry the oral history of the Paniya community, who suffer displacement, sexual violence and murder. Her passing represents more than just a loss; it's a loss of a living archive of Indigenous history. If her songs stop, the forest, too, becomes silent. As Tomy refers,

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. I can count all my bones. My heart is stricken and withered like grass. I am like an owl of the wilderness, like a little owl of the waste place.

When Kali's songs stopped, so did the music of the forest. The hutments by the forest fringe lay inert, voiceless. At least a few people were heartbroken at her passing. (Tomy 198)

Basavan's murder is only briefly mentioned in official records, but her funeral song restores her dignity and ensures her memory lives on in the collective memory of the community. Tomy therefore juxtaposes institutional archives with the power of oral remembrance.

Another key place of resistance is education. In the fictional Kadoram School, inspired by K. J. Baby's Kanavu initiative, Tomy envisions a place for Indigenous children to learn in their own languages, stories, songs and cultural traditions. The school affirms Indigenous identity, instead of trying to assimilate them into the dominant systems of knowledge, and poses questions of historical injustice. The young student asks, "Which God gave you the right to enslave us? (Tomy 144)." A question of political consciousness based on cultural self-respect. Preservation of language now is intertwined with a fight for justice and self-determination. In the end, *Valli* suggests that epistemicide is not about the annihilation of the epistemological, but about a struggle

for cultural survival. As extractive modernity threatens to destroy Indigenous languages and knowledge systems, Tomy also uncovers the resilience of communities that are holding on to their pasts through oral traditions, ecological practices, education, and collective resistance. In foregrounding these modes of knowledge, the novel contests the dominant historical narrative, asserting the ongoing vitality of Paniya lifeworlds.

Memory, Inheritance, and Ecological Regeneration

One of the most important things that *Valli* does is not to present Indigenous communities as either lost or as a historical artifact to be remembered. However, Tomy's perception of Indigenous life is one of dynamism, adaptability, and future orientation. *Valli's* reconstruction of the Adivasi lifeworld is not about a bygone era, but an ongoing process of living in an ecological and cultural continuum. This continuity is represented in Susan's relationship with her daughter, Tessa. When Susan passes away, there is no legacy of material wealth or inherited property that has been undermined by social and environmental changes in Wayanad. Instead, she leaves Tessa something much more lasting: memories of the forests and a moral obligation to save them. The last statement, "I give you my forests(Tomy 378), is a shift from the passing of property to the passing of an ecological consciousness. Memory is resistance to historical erasure.

Tessa is a product of a globalized and technologically modernized generation. Expatriated as a robotics researcher, she seems to detune herself from the landscapes that formed her predecessors. However, as she returns to Wayanad, it becomes clear that ecological belonging continues not only through the presence of her body, but also through her cultural memory. Under the guidance of Thommichan, she returns to the familiar landscape where rivers have receded, forests have been cut down, and open spaces have been taken over by private resorts. As she travels, she gradually changes her perception of Wayanad and starts to see the hidden stories that are latent in seemingly mundane places. The land becomes an archive that is alive; the scars are the results of the collective effects of displacement and environmental exploitation. Tessa is not just remembering the past; she's reading the landscape critically, seeing the ecological destruction and Indigenous dispossession elements intertwined. Throughout the novel, she is the keeper of memories that could otherwise be lost, and at the end of the novel, she has become a cultural bridge between generations, showing that cultural continuity can happen only if future generations are willing to remember and re-imagine the knowledge handed down to them.

Tomy continues this vision with the ecological signage of the Kerala floods in 2018. The floods are not only presented as a natural disaster but as the result of decades of environmental exploitation. The Uttarakhand High Court's declaration that the Ganga and Yamuna can be called legal persons further bolsters the notion that rivers have intrinsic value beyond being of economic use. In this moral context, nature becomes a co-player of justice and not a mere object of human action.

Thus, the flood has a deep symbolic meaning. It uncovers the unfeasible implications of extractive development and simultaneously offers new opportunities for solidarity. The differences of caste, class and community are temporarily erased as the

people of the disaster come together to find shelter. Manjadikunnu is no longer a private good but a shared one, indicating that ecological crises can expose forms of collective responsibility that can defy divisions in society.

Valli offers a redefinition of inheritance as an ethical obligation, not a legal right. The novel implies that what is inherited from one generation to another is ecological memory, cultural responsibility, and the ability to defy systems of exploitation. These values are made salient and foregrounded by Tomy, giving a vision of Indigenous lifeworlds that is not nostalgic but rooted in resilience, continuity, and hope. The future is still open; the memory, languages, and ecological knowledge of Wayanad are still alive through centuries of dispossession.

Conclusion

This research paper critically evaluates the theoretical perspective of epistemicide and the complexity of extractivism embedded in *Valli*, and argues that the dispossession of Indigenous communities can only be understood from the landlord perspective. The loss of land means language is at risk, as is ecological knowledge, cultural memory and collective identity, as Tomy demonstrates. This novel chronicles the history of the transition of Wayanad from a forest landscape to an economy based on plantations and tourism, revealing the persistent mechanisms of extractive development, which remain in play in Indigenous life. It also questions the narratives that portray Adivasi communities as only victims of history at the same time. Instead, it is their ecological knowledge, their oral tradition, their ability to survive, and their political struggles that are always sources of resistance for Tomy. The novel has been an important addition to contemporary ecocritical and Indigenous literary studies for its depiction of the interconnections of ecological crises with questions of justice, language and cultural endurance. Not only is the forest, the river and the landscape shown as a physical environment, but also as living carriers of memory, identity and ethical responsibility. This means protecting these environments means protecting the communities whose histories and knowledge have developed with them.

Valli offers a different notion of ecological justice, one that focuses on reciprocity rather than exploitation. It imagines a future in which Indigenous knowledge, caring for the land, and caring for each other are embedded in repairing relationships between people and the environment. Through this, Tomy transforms this novel into a work of renewal and restoration for culture and ecology, and a reminder that the struggle for Indigenous dignity and self-determination has yet to be won.

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