

From Harm to Hope: Slow Violence and the Emergence of Resistance in Sheela Tomy's *Valli*

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Abstract

Ecological degradation does not always occur through a single catastrophic event. More often, it builds slowly, leaving its mark on the land and on the people whose lives are tied to it. Sheela Tomy's Valli captures this slow violence in Wayanad through settler encroachment, commercial cultivation, timber extraction, and tourism. This article analyses the novel through the ideas of slow violence and environmental justice to show how these processes steadily reshape both ecology and community. At the same time, Valli does not remain only a narrative of violence and loss. It also traces different forms of resistance, from protest and ethical care to language, ecological knowledge, and practices of sustainable rebuilding. The article argues that the novel brings slow violence and resistance into close relation, showing that when ecological harm unfolds slowly, resistance too must take sustained and layered forms.

Keywords: Environmental humanities, Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, Slow Violence, Resistance

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the Environmental Humanities has become an important field for thinking about ecological crises in new ways. Instead of seeing environmental damage only as a scientific or policy issue, it draws attention to the role of literature, culture, history, and ethics in shaping how people understand the natural world (Oppermann and Iovino 1). As J. Andrew Hubbell and John C. Ryan suggest, environmental problems are now too complex to be approached in narrow ways, and the task is not only to solve them, but also to think differently so that people may inhabit the planet differently (4–5). The field is important in this sense because it asks not only how environmental crises occur, but also how human behaviours, values, meanings, and ideas of good life shape them. It is therefore concerned not simply with ecological damage itself, but with the cultural, moral, and historical frameworks through which that damage is understood and addressed (5).

One of the most important concerns within this field is environmental justice. Environmental justice shows that environmental problems are also social and political, marked by unequal exposure to harm, unequal access to protection, and unequal power over decisions about land and resource use. This kind of harm is not always immediate or dramatic, but often occurs

through the slow loss of land, the thinning of forests, and the erosion of long-standing ecological relations. This is precisely the kind of violence Rob Nixon describes as slow violence. Slow violence is “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon 2). Because it unfolds quietly, it can easily become normalised or go unnoticed, becoming what Nixon describes as violence “typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). It helps one understand forms of environmental harm that happen over a period of time that are not always visible at once, but are deeply destructive in the long run. Usually, it is the marginalised and vulnerable communities who bear the heaviest consequences of deforestation, displacement, pollution, and resource extraction, since those “lacking resources” are, as Nixon notes, often “the principal casualties of slow violence” (4).

In Kerala, ecological transformation has been deeply associated with land alienation, agrarian change, and the dispossession of adivasi communities. The state’s environmental history cannot be understood separate from settler cultivation, plantation interests, and forest policies that weakened older relations between land, livelihood, and community (George). This was especially evident in Wayanad, where large-scale migration and the spread of estates increasingly marginalised adivasi communities such as the Paniyars (Janu vii–viii). Read in this regional context, *Valli* by Sheela Tomy has attracted critical attention for its representation of ecological precarity and dispossession in Wayanad. Recent critics have read the novel through literary cartography and performance ecology, emphasising its spatial politics and ecological precarity (Nataraj and Narayana). Others have approached it through the frameworks of indigenous eco-centrism, environmental injustice, capitalist extraction, and displacement (Santra), while more thematic readings have highlighted environmental degradation, gendered oppression, cultural marginalisation, and ecofeminist concerns (Bensla and Bhatnagar). Building on this emerging body of work, the present article analyses *Valli* as a powerful exploration of ecological slow violence and resistance. The novel presents nature not as a passive background, but as a deeply contested space shaped by different claims, memories, and forms of power. This paper argues that *Valli* portrays ecological destruction in Wayanad as a form of slow violence unfolding through agrarian change, timber extraction, and tourism, while also presenting resistance as a layered and ongoing struggle for ecological and social survival.

Discussion

Valli was originally published in Malayalam in 2019 and translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil in 2022. The novel tracks the story of three generations in the fictional village of Kalluvayal in Wayanad, Kerala; from the 1970s, a period marked by the Naxalite movement, land struggles, and peasant uprisings through to 2018, the year of Kerala’s devastating floods. The story primarily revolves around the complex relationship between the indigenous Paniyar community and the migrant settlers. The plot begins with Thommichan and Sara, a young Christian couple from Kerala’s plains, who arrive in Kalluvayal in 1970. Running away from Sara’s family, they find a home in Kalluvayal where Thommichan gets newly appointed as a teacher. They come there looking for a life of their own, but they also become part of a larger movement of settlers entering Wayanad at that time. This movement also reflects the wider history of Wayanad, where settler expansion and land reforms often consolidated the claims of migrant cultivators while dispossessing adivasis who had earlier held customary ties to the land (Swamy 74). In that sense, the destruction of Kalluvayal does not begin with a single dramatic event. Its early stages matter because they unfold through ordinary changes that do not immediately register as violence (Nixon 2). Tomy presents this destruction as gradual: “Ever so slowly, the forest cleared, and the porcupine, the sloth bear, the wild boar . . . and thousands of other creatures

withdrew deeper and deeper into the jungle” (1). *Valli* also shows that ecological loss is never isolated, since the displacement of one form of life disturbs the wider web of relations that holds the landscape together (Shiva 73).

Tomy traces the transformation of Kalluvayal into a landscape increasingly shaped by commercially profitable crops. The movement from lemongrass and cashew to coffee, rubber, black pepper, and ginger may seem to suggest abundance. However, the novel gradually unsettles this idea of agricultural progress through images of disappearance and depletion: paddy fields recede, rivers grow thin, and forests turn bald (Tomy 2). Shiva links such disappearance to what she calls a “politics of disappearance,” through which locally useful species are devalued and the space of local knowledge steadily shrinks out of existence (Shiva 27). Tomy’s critique lies in showing that productivity does not necessarily mean ecological well-being. This pattern also reflects the wider agrarian history of Wayanad, where ecologically fragile hill landscapes have been increasingly strained by commercially driven and unsuitable agricultural practices (Prasanth and Narayanan 88). What looked like agricultural progress here was in fact “incremental and accretive” violence, building slowly through changes that seemed productive on the surface but steadily weakened the land (Nixon 2). The novel suggests that what is often celebrated as development may actually be coming at the cost of a quieter form of ecological loss, where the promise of higher yield, improvement, and economic value slowly erodes biodiversity and narrows the life of the land (Shiva 71). Shiva’s critique shows what is at stake in this transformation. As she argues, biodiversity cannot be conserved unless diversity itself becomes “the logic of production,” because systems based on uniformity and homogenisation will continue to displace it (146). In such a system, the “one-dimensional field of vision” of the market recognises only one kind of value and treats anything outside that logic as expendable, which is why even the natural forest comes to be seen as “weeds” (27–28). Analysing from this light, the agricultural “improvement” in *Valli* is not a neutral sign of progress, but a shift toward control and profitability at the expense of ecological variety.

As the novel progresses, this ecological damage no longer remains confined to cultivation alone. It takes on a harsher and more openly extractive form through timber cutting and deforestation. Trees are cut on a large scale, and the forest is opened up for movement, transport, and profit: “Trees were being cut in Karimala, and a road had been cleared through the forest to let the lorries in . . . a bunch of people dressed like soldiers trying to make a quick getaway with the timber” (Tomy 233). The road matters because it marks a shift in how forest is approached, the forest is no longer being entered as a living space, but is being torn apart and reorganised for removal. This act is not just theft in an isolated sense. The novel presents it as part of a larger pattern in which the forest is treated as commercially valuable material, while the people who depend on it are pushed aside (Gadgil and Guha 10). The violence of this process reaches its most devastating point in Luca’s act of arson. It was a night that “Kalluvayal would never forget,” when “the eastern slope of Thambrankunnu became a graveyard” (Tomy 152). By morning, “not a single hut in Kelumooppa’spaadi had escaped the fire” and “mothers wailed, beating their chests, searching for their little ones” (152). Fire here is not only destruction, but also concealment. As the novel puts it, “fire was a curtain to hide the poaching, the cutting down of trees, the ousting of the people” (153). The damage here is not limited to the immediate loss of trees or shelter. As Nixon observes, “soil erosion and deforestation are corrosive, compound threats” that damage watersheds, intensify river drying, and contribute to broader ecological breakdown (Nixon 133). Therefore, the timber extraction and arson in *Valli* do not remain isolated acts of violence, but become part of the longer environmental deterioration that pervades the novel and finds one of its starkest expressions in the flood at the end.

Later in the novel, the same landscape faces yet another kind of exploitation through tourism.

The novel shows how forest land is taken over through fake claims, political support, and official backing, until it is made to appear legal in the name of development by the Tourist Academy (Tomy 310). The “true owners of the land” were driven out, Paniyar settlements disappeared under mud, and animals were forced away from their “watering holes”, “meadows”, and “bow-ers” (310). Here we see a form of displacement without movement, in which people and animals remained on the land but lost the forests, water, livelihoods, and ecological relations that had once made that place inhabitable (Nixon 19–20). Tourism here does not preserve the land. It changes it for business and profit, bringing in habitat loss, dispossession, and the slow loss of local control over land and livelihood (Nepal and Saarinen 7). This pattern is also consistent with the wider tourism history of Wayanad, where recent studies show that tourism emerged alongside the decline of traditional livelihoods and deepened environmental degradation rather than reversing it (Varghese and Natori). Nixon’s critique of tourism helps reinforce this point: too often, development directed at “the touristic few” ends up depleting vital resources for long-term residents, while its primary beneficiaries live elsewhere (Nixon 18–19). The novel portrays the effects of tourism vividly: “Thambrankunnu disappeared, and a township and tourist resorts appeared in its place” (Tomy 317). What comes after that is not real development, but a damaged economy of brokers, drugs, staged performances, and unstable work, where young men slip into addiction and young women are pushed into cultural labour for tourists (Tomy 318). What tourism sells here is not only the landscape but also the illusion of an effortless, untouched world, even though that image depends on the hidden labour and self-effacement of local people who are made to sustain it for others (Nixon 25). The novel makes it clear that the promise of tourism-led development is hollow and does more harm than good, because low-paid, insecure jobs cannot make up for the loss of land, ecology, and dignity (Nepal and Saarinen 169). Thommichan’s bitter words bring out the irony clearly: tourists once came to see the forests of Kalluvayal, but now they can only see “townships built on forest land,” poisoned air and water, scorched earth, dried streams, and vanished birds (Tomy 322). Even traditional knowledge is incorporated into this system, as the “wellness treatment” industry draws on forest knowledge and pays people like Pembi only a pittance for their labour (322). *Valli* shows tourism not as something harmless, but as another form of extraction that turns land, labour, and cultural knowledge into things to be used and sold.

The novel traces the slow destruction of Kalluvayal through settlement, extraction, and tourism, but it also shows how resistance takes shape in response to that ongoing damage. At first, this resistance appears in direct and confrontational forms, as the people of Kalluvayal refuse to remain passive before repeated dispossession and violence. When the “young men of Kalluvayal set out to the police station in town, armed with sticks, spears and shovels” (Tomy 204). This scene conveys the desperation of a community that has been pushed to its limits. What has been taken from them is not merely land or livelihood, but “their hearts, their words, their thoughts, their dreams” (204), suggesting that ecological devastation is also an assault on memory, hope, and collective being. The novel portrays collective retaliation when Basavan’s whistle summons young men armed with weapons, ready to move towards Karimala to confront the timber thieves (234). These moments give resistance an immediate and embodied force as the community refuses to remain passive before theft, encroachment, and state-backed violence.

At the same time, *Valli* does not limit resistance to just physical confrontation. It also imagines it as a moral and spiritual commitment to care for vulnerable life. In the novel, Isabella evokes a sense of moral responsibility when she joins Father Felix’s “Snehasena, army of love” and stands with the “Army of the Forest”, taking upon herself the task of guarding “the countless trees and plants” and the creatures whose homes are being destroyed (Tomy 212). Her voice

risers, “for the rights of those who were voiceless” (214), a phrase that is important because it allows the novel to hold human and nonhuman suffering together within the same ethical horizon. Father Felix’s sermon deepens this idea when he warns his congregation that the biblical notion of dominion does not grant human beings permission to “acquire and destroy” (215) life at will. Instead, he insists that “there is no worship more holy than looking after what God has entrusted to us” and reminds them that they are “the guardians of the Garden of Eden” (215). Tomy thus presents the defense of the forest not only as a political necessity but also as a moral calling. Resistance here thus takes the form of care, as the defence of the forest is grounded in responsibility, protection, and attention to vulnerable human and nonhuman life.

The novel also portrays resistance in cultural and linguistic terms, showing that domination works not only through land-grabbing but also through the erasure of language, memory, and self-worth. This is why the question, “How does one assert that right in a language that had no script?” (Tomy 225) carries such force: it points to the structural exclusion of indigenous languages from official and educational systems, even where rights exist in principle. This question becomes significant at another level too, since the novel is read here in Jayasree Kalathil’s English translation. In a text so deeply concerned with linguistic erasure, indigenous speech, and the uneven visibility of marginal voices, translation does more than widen access: it also draws attention to what is carried across, what is mediated, and what may resist full transfer into English. In this sense, the translated status of the novel brings questions of linguistic and cultural difference into the act of reading itself. In the novel, the observation that some gothrabhashas now survive only in “scholarly papers” (357) makes the loss even clearer: a living world of speech and experience is reduced to academic residue. This also raises a deeper question about authority and visibility: who gets to speak for a community and, in Nixon’s words, “who counts as a witness” (Nixon 16)? What is being criticised here is the tendency to treat forest communities merely as objects of interest for documentation. As Thommichan says, many are interested in the people of the land only for academic reasons; they write down songs, dances, and customs on paper that will simply be “blown away in the wind, soaked in the rain,” (Tomy 198) without ever seeing the people’s hearts or attending to whether they have “fire in their hearth” or “food in their bellies” (226). Against this, the insistence that “we should teach them in their own language” (225) becomes an act of resistance, a demand for self-preservation and cultural continuity. Even the Kadoram School, with “very few children” left, survives as “the final reminder before everything is lost,” a fragile but stubborn sign that language and culture can still resist disappearance (380). In this way, *Valli* also presents resistance as epistemic: the struggle is not only over territory, but over whose knowledge, language, and way of seeing the world will survive. This is especially significant because the novel repeatedly affirms local knowledge not as backward residue, but as a practical and living mode of understanding the forest.

Finally, what makes the resistance in *Valli* especially compelling is that it does not stop with opposition alone. It also takes the form of rebuilding what has been damaged. The young people who begin “creating a water harvesting system, a huge reservoir by the slope of Thambrankunnu to catch the rainwater” (Tomy 325) are participating in a vision of development rooted in restoration rather than exploitation. James’s bamboo and mud houses move in the same direction by rejecting the fantasy of fancy houses (326) in favour of forms of shelter that are simpler, grounded, and more sustainable to the land. James and others try to address water scarcity, animal attacks, sanitation, fair crop prices, and the rebuilding of Thambrankunnu’s ruined ecology. Tessa’s words capture the fragile hope that runs through these efforts: “if there is a single ember left, it is possible to rekindle the fire” (Tomy 354). Her belief that one day people will have to fight for “the right to air, the right to water” (354) turns hope into warning. James’s work with natural farming, rainwater ponds, and older agrarian knowledge takes this

even further. His efforts are not performative; as the novel says, “agriculture is meditation, a penance, to him. Not for show” (Tomy 380). Even the waste produced by tourist resorts is turned into compost, so that the debris of one destructive system becomes part of a more regenerative cycle. In these moments, *Valli* suggests that the most enduring resistance may lie not only in opposing what destroys the land, but also in rebuilding the conditions for coexistence between humans, animals, water, soil, and forest life. Taken together, these different forms of resistance that *Valli* portrays suggest that slow violence is something that cannot be answered by one kind of response alone. Since the damage spreads gradually across ecology, livelihood, memory, and community, the novel imagines resistance too as collective, varied, and ongoing, taking shape through protest, care, knowledge, and sustainable rebuilding.

Conclusion

Sheela Tomy’s *Valli* shows that ecological slow violence does not happen through one single catastrophic event. It enters through ordinary processes of migration, agricultural expansion, timber extraction, and tourism. The harm in *Valli* is gradual, layered, and often normalised, but its effects are far-reaching. Forests thin out, animals retreat, rivers dry, livelihoods weaken, and communities are pushed out of the worlds they once belonged to. The novel makes it clear that this violence is never only ecological. It is also social, because the burden of loss falls most heavily on those whose lives are closely tied to the land. One of the important things *Valli* does is make this damage visible, that is otherwise easy to normalise. In that sense, the novel also responds to the representational challenge Nixon identifies through writing about slow violence, giving narrative shape to the harm that is dispersed and often difficult to register. However, *Valli* does not remain a narrative of violence and loss alone. *Valli* portrays resistance taking shape from within this ongoing damage, wherein it’s not limited to dramatic protest alone, it also appears through care, language, and the slow work of sustainable rebuilding of damaged relations between land and people. In this sense, the novel brings slow violence and resistance into conversation with each other. It suggests that when violence unfolds gradually, resistance too must become sustained, adaptive, and rooted in everyday forms of survival. What finally emerges from *Valli* is not a simple opposition between destruction and hope, but a recognition that even within damaged landscapes, the struggle for ecological and social survival continues. The study also leaves scope for further research, particularly on how indigenous speech and ecological knowledge are negotiated in English translation, and on how the novel’s account of land alienation and environmental change may be read alongside the ecological history of Wayanad.

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