Literary Cartography of Performance Ecologies in Sheela Tomy's *Valli*

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Abstract

The shift towards posthumanism is characterized by blurring boundaries between humans and other species alongside emerging narratives centred on climate catastrophes and ecological crises. Sheela Tomy's *Valli* (2022) is one of the most recent works of Indian fiction that actively promotes ecological consciousness. Set against the picturesque landscape of Wayanad, *Valli* intricately captures the essence of the indigenous community, weaving their stories into its narrative. The paper suggests that reading *Valli* through a cartographic lens transforms the narrative into an intelligent discourse on spatial politics. The performances in *Valli* are understood through the lens of "performance ecology" (Jeff Grygny), reflecting ongoing contemporary ecological debates. Their interrelation is explored by mapping spatial memory and schema of the characters, based on Robert T. Tally's theory of literary cartography (2013). Additionally, the paper will provide an overview of the ecopolitics of Wayanad, with a specific focus on the socio-political conditions of the Paniyar and Kuruchiyar scheduled tribes from which the characters are drawn. The study will underscore the triad of space, performance, and ecology in *Valli*, invoking a sense of ecoprecarity essential for rethinking and potentially expanding our notion of sustainability.

Keywords: Ecological Crisis, Ecoprecarity, Indigenous Community, Performances, Spatial Politics

Introduction

In a global context increasingly marked by environmental degradation and corporate exploitation, the most vulnerable populations—both human and non-human—are facing unprecedented levels of displacement and disruption. In *The Extractive Zone*, Macarena Gómez-Barris discusses high-biodiversity areas, stating that "[b]efore the colonial project

could prosper, it had to render territories and peoples extractible, and it did so through a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence" (5). Kimberly Richards further argues that understanding these "extractive zones" creates opportunities for "critiquing, resisting, and dismantling extractive capitalism and coloniality, and for reorganizing social and ecological life based on Indigenous principles of coexistence with the nonhuman world" (163). This reimagining of extractive zones not only foregrounds the violent legacies of colonialism and capitalist exploitation but also highlights the potential for alternative futures—rooted in reciprocity, care, and the restoration of ecosystems long under siege.

With the spatial turn in the 20th century came an increased emphasis on place-mindedness, manifested through spatial narratives that serve as crucial tools for exploring the complex intersections of history, ecology, and humanity's future. This shift offers new insights into what Amitav Ghosh refers to as the crisis of imagination in *The Great Derangement*, when he surmises that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination (12). This study investigates how indigenous performances have historically generated -and continue to generate- alternative forms of ecological power and imagination, serving as potent spaces of resistance against anthropocentric and capitalocentric frameworks. Through these performances, new relational modes between humans and the natural world emerge, challenging dominant systems that exploit both.

The paper begins by outlining a central argument and conceptual framework, followed by a critical analysis of *Valli*. It then delves into the dynamics of human agency within participatory ecologies, drawing on Sheela Tomy's work to underscore the ways in which human interactions with the environment are reframed through performance. By foregrounding performances as vital connectors between human and non-human worlds, this paper posits that when analyzed through the lens of performance ecologies and spatial theory, these interactions

reveal emotional geographies that resonate deeply with both characters and readers. These geographies, in turn, foster ethical and empathetic engagements with the environment, encouraging a shift towards more sustainable, interdependent modes of existence.

This analysis highlights the capacity of Indigenous performance to not only reflect ecological relationships but also actively reshape them, offering a meaningful critique of capitalist and human-centered worldviews. Through this lens, performances become crucial tools for fostering ecological consciousness and reshaping how we understand our place in the natural world.

The Ecopolitical Imperative of Wayanad and its People

Designated as a World Heritage Site in 2012 (UNESCO, 2012), the Western Ghats are a region of profound indigenous heritage. The Adivasis, recognized as India's indigenous population and commonly referred to as 'Scheduled Tribes,' predominantly inhabit the hill regions of the Western Ghats as well as the low-lying areas along the borders of the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu (Bhengra et al. 5). The Wayanad region in Kerala hosts the largest tribal population in the state, comprising eight Scheduled Tribes: Adiyan, Paniyan, Mullukkurman, Kurichyan, Vettakkuruman, Wayanad Kadar, Kattuniakkan, and Thachaanadan Mooppan (Menon 1).

The Adiyans are a matrilineal tribal group who, until 1976, were subjected to bonded labour by landlords. Today, most Adiyans work as agricultural labourers, with some engaged in marginal farming (Government of Kerala 6). Historically, the Paniyan (also known as Paniyar and Paniya) were a patrilineal community subjected to servitude until the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act of 1976 was enacted (Government of Kerala 24). The Mullukkurman, a patrilineal and patrilocal tribal agricultural community, are distinguished by their hunting

skills and speak the Mullukkuruma language. The Kurichyan are among the most significant tribal communities among the Scheduled Tribes in Wayanad, known for their fearlessness and trustworthiness. The Vettakkuruman are another patrilineal tribal community whose members speak the Bettakkuruma language. The Wayanad Kadars are historically hunters and gatherers. They are classified as a matrilineal marginal tribe. 'Kadar' is derived from the word 'kadu', meaning forest. The Kattuniakkan are a patrilineal community traditionally residing in forested areas, practising hunting and gathering. The Thachaanadan Mooppan is a matrilineal community traditionally involved in shifting cultivation and hunting. Despite their varied histories, all these communities are now primarily engaged in agriculture, either as cultivators or labourers, and many earn their livelihood through daily wage labour (SOL Connectnconsult et al. 3).

Long before the twentieth century, the Colonial Government prioritized the Wayanad plateau primarily for its economic potential rather than its rich biodiversity. Following 1800, the expansion of plantations resulted in significant deforestation. The government actively promoted estate formation, facilitating the rise of capitalist agricultural enterprises. The introduction of monoculture in Wayanad's unique landscape severely disrupted the local flora and fauna, marking the initial phase of ecological degradation during the colonial era (Saha et al. 6).

The expropriation of forest rights commenced in the 19th century under British colonial rule. The Adivasis, among the earliest agricultural labourers, were systematically excluded from participation in these emerging estates. Introducing a new cohort of farm labourers into the Wayanad estates precipitated the development of a distinct community within the estate settlements. The cultural landscape of Wayanad was further shaped by the advent of modernity. During his visit to Wayanad in 1934, Mahatma Gandhi drew attention to the deplorable

conditions endured by the Adivasis, and he strongly criticized the upper class of Wayanad for their inhumane treatment of this indigenous population; he said, “In Kaleptta in all the natural beauty, I will tell you exactly what I saw. I saw there wild figures belonging to human race” (Gopalakrishnan).

The influx of population around 1980 significantly altered the demographic composition of Wayanad, leading to the stabilization of its current social structure. As a result, Wayanad became home to a diverse array of demographic groups, including Jains, Nairs, Chettis, Muslims, Thiyyas, and Christians. Today, like other parts of Kerala, this region is characterized by a pluralistic society. However, this demographic shift increasingly marginalized the region’s early inhabitants, the Adivasis, whose material conditions had been precarious even before these changes. Wayanad was officially designated as Kerala’s 13th district on November 1, 1980. Approximately 36% of Kerala’s total Adivasi population resides in Wayanad, with 45% belonging to the Paniya community (Chandrika and Nandakumar 52).

The conversion of a struggling rural-agrarian region like Wayanad into a tourism hotspot is frequently justified by anticipated economic growth. In this context, Kerala introduced the “responsible tourism” concept to ensure that tourism is inclusive and contributes effectively to sustainability (Varghese and Natori 2). The expansion of tourism activities and urbanization has exacerbated this trend, resulting in irreversible ecological imbalances and a frequent disregard for the vital role of indigenous peoples in safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems (Jurgens et al.). This approach undermines sustainable development, as conservation efforts are more effective when indigenous peoples and local communities are actively involved (Dawson et al. 1).

These changes are manifest in various ways within the natural environment. The extensive damage from the 2018 flood can be considered a consequence of imprudent land use

practices. To examine the variations occurring in the susceptible Western Ghats region of the Indian subcontinent, the Government of India established two committees: the Gadgil Commission and the Kasturirangan Committee. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, led by Prof. Madhav Gadgil, submitted its report on August 31, 2011. Subsequently, the High-Level Working Group on the Western Ghats, directed by K. Kasturirangan, presented its report on April 15, 2013. The devastating landslides in Wayanad, which occurred in the early hours of July 30, were shocking; however, they were not entirely unexpected (Balakrishnan). Wayanad is a quintessential example of how dramatic changes in agriculture and commerce over the past two centuries have significantly impacted the environment and social life.

Central Argument and Conceptual Framework

Before delving into the contextual alignment of this paper within the conceptual framework of performance and ecology, it is beneficial to elucidate the precise definitions of the terms employed. Theatre scholar Theresa J. May coined the term ecodramaturgy, describing it as "theatre and performance making that puts ecological reciprocity and the community at the centre of its theatrical and thematic intent" (Arons and May 4). May's influential works predominantly utilize the term in the realm of dramatic texts and authorial intent, emphasizing the resolution of injustices stemming from ecological crises. Expanding upon May's conceptual framework, this paper extends its application to a thorough examination of performance that includes a broad range of artistic expressions, from conventional art forms and indigenous dances to music, costuming, storytelling, masquerading, role-playing, and more. These elements are abundant in marginalized indigenous festivals, masquerading cultures, and traditional performance practices in the Global South. This expansion entails investigating strategies for creating meaning across diverse performance modalities concerning ecological concerns.

'Ecology' describes the interconnected relationships of the living world, "the study of animals and plants, our habitat and environment, as well as the analysis of the interrelationships between us all" (Giannachi and Stewart 20). The term doesn't pertain to the biological scientific examination of organisms in the environment; rather, it concerns our human connections with one another, our surroundings, and the broader non-human world. "Ecology speaks to both complex webs of relations between the human and non-human – themselves ideological, racialized and problematic conceptual markers – and the simultaneously fraught and comforting notion of 'home', the Oikos" (Di Battista et al. 3). Ecology, in this context, directs attention to the experiential dimensions of ecological relationships within our daily existence, diverging from the conventional framework of environmental science.

The relocation of ecology from the domain of biological sciences to a realm of discourse within art and performance connotes a distinct form of knowledge acquisition and active involvement encompassing contemplation of everyday interactions with non-human entities and an examination of their configuration under the influences of global capitalism, colonialism, ideology, race, class, gender, access, and environmental injustices. The underpinning of ecological thinking is inherent in this conceptual framework, wherein the paper expounds on the interwoven nature of performances -in the sense of ecodramaturgies- with the material world and elucidates how these asymmetrical interconnections are laid bare within the realm of Indigenous performances.

In this context, the concept of performance ecology, as articulated by Jeff Grygny in *Performance Ecology: An Informal Manifesto*, is particularly relevant. Grygny suggests that "Performance Ecology seeks to integrate the aesthetic language of performance with the empirical language of ecology" and emphasizes that this integration "may be an essential move towards creating an ecological culture" (*Performance Ecology | Play on Milwaukee*). Such a

mode of inquiry aims to blend the artistic aspects of performance with the scientific language of ecology, suggesting it is a crucial step in fostering ecological literacy. If we fail to examine native knowledge of performance ecology, we might be ignorant of how ecologies and systems of sustainability overlap. Therefore, the spatial reading of indigenous performance ecologies in *Valli* lends itself to demonstrating how ecospatial realities coincide with and inform literary representations.

Incorporating the competitive entanglement of indigenous performance ecology through the narrative is a helpful way to examine how memory and ecology shape each other in complex ways. Here, the 'competitive entanglement of performance ecology through the narrative' refers to a storytelling technique that involves intricately weaving together the cognitive processes of spatial memory and schema to create a dynamic and immersive narrative experience. The intersection of the ongoing ecological crisis with contemporary manifestations of alienation and disenchantment in modern society necessitates focusing on the significance of Indigenous performance ecologies as an alternative mode of inquiry. By scrutinizing the diverse ecosystem of narratives and the practice of traditional art forms, dance, and songs, this inquiry aims to elucidate the dynamics of performance ecologies as an activity that stimulates varied discourse and motivation in Indigenous culture. Consequently, this study endeavours to empower individuals to resist the dominant discourse perpetuated by influential vested interests.

Using the spatial tool of literary cartography proposed by Robert T Tally, this paper will examine performance ecology, which includes storytelling, indigenous festivals, and music/songs present in *Valli*, to understand their agency in creating ecological power and imagination. The idea of performance ecology aims to blend performance's expressive vocabulary with ecology's factual language. It will be further analyzed through the spatial lens

to examine how Indigenous Performances in *Valli* accentuate human and non-human entanglements. Building on this, the paper presents the concept of ecoprecarity, as defined by Pramod K. Nayar (2019), as integral to the cartographic reading of performance ecologies, serving as a crucial acknowledgment of the systems of sustainability within both the narrative world and the reader's world.

Overview of *Valli*

Sheela Tomy's novel *Valli*, initially published in Malayalam in 2019 and later translated into English by Jayashree Kalathil in 2022, presents a richly layered, multi-generational narrative set against the picturesque yet fragile landscape of the Western Ghats in Kerala. The novel spans the 1970s to the present, illustrating the profound and evolving interplay between humanity and the environment. *Valli* is more than a mere reflection on ecological degradation—it serves as a powerful socio-political commentary, using the microcosm of Kalluvayal to explore the destructive impacts of deforestation, encroachment, and land exploitation on both people and nature.

Kalluvayal, the small village in which much of the story unfolds, serves as a symbolic battleground between two opposing factions with radically different relationships to the land. One group, consisting of native Paniya tribals and migrant settlers, represents a sustainable and symbiotic connection to the environment. Their deep respect for the forest underscores an ethos of preservation and recognition of the land as a living entity that sustains their way of life. In contrast, the opposing faction, led by the landlord Ivan Kochouseph and his associates, embodies a vision of development driven by greed and exploitation. Their actions—reckless deforestation and unchecked resource extraction—are not merely individual choices but reflect larger, systemic forces of colonialism, capitalism, and governmental complicity.

The socio-political undercurrents in *Valli* become apparent through the significant connection between the landlords (Jenmis) and the police, highlighting the systemic challenges faced by the migrant-tribal group. Despite their steadfast resilience, this group grapples with the unchecked and unethical exploitation of forest timber by the Jenmis. Another pivotal aspect of *Valli* aligns with the Ecospatial concept that posits a "place as the convergence of nature, space, and story" (Wyse 4). Tomy's narrative adeptly employs the spatial dimension, emphasizing how the physical space of the forest is intricately interwoven with the unfolding story.

Ultimately, *Valli* stands as a poignant commentary on the profound and unequal power dynamics embedded within the socio-economic fabric of rural Kerala. Tomy weaves a compelling narrative where the marginalized migrant-tribal communities' struggle for survival against oppressive forces mirrors larger global crises of environmental destruction and social injustice. The novel's complex portrayal of human-environment interactions not only addresses local ecological concerns but also resonates with contemporary global environmental movements, situating *Valli* as a vital contribution to the canon of eco-literature and the ongoing discourse on environmental justice.

Performance Ecologies in *Valli*

Performance ecologies investigate how performances shape our understanding of humanity within the broader non-human environment. Grygny's concept of biopoetics posits that all living entities express inherent desires, values, and agency through their physical forms and interactions, challenging the anthropocentric view and revealing the interconnectedness of humans with diverse biotic communities. While some pre-industrial societies existed sustainably, the scientific tradition and Enlightenment ideals have often treated non-human life

as mere economic resources, leading to ecological harm. Naturalists championed a perspective valuing nature for its intrinsic worth, a viewpoint often neglected in contemporary education (Khasawneh et al.).

Performance Ecology promotes blending scientific knowledge with poetic insight to foster a new ecological ethos through meaningful metaphors. This approach emphasizes embodied practices to deepen our connection with the non-human realm and encourages exploration across various fields to share ecological wisdom with future generations. According to Grygny (*Performance Ecology | Play on Milwaukee*), the core principles of performance ecology emphasize that living nature is an ongoing performance, humans are part of the animal kingdom, and traditional knowledge is embodied, qualitative, and poetic. This framework critiques the scientific tradition for its bias against feeling and qualitative experience, which has led to ecosystem destruction, while advocating for the integration of poetic and scientific knowledge through body practices and multidisciplinary research to foster a new ecological culture. The performance ecologies in *Valli* will be analyzed in the following section.

The novel's setting is steeped in myths and folklore featuring significant figures such as the Veda princess, the daughter of Vedarajan[1]. This region is characterized by an aura of mysteries and concealed secrets, residing within the temples of Valliyoorkaavu[2], amidst the Thovarimala hills, on the islets of Kuruvadweep, within the forts of Veliyambam and Ramangalyam, and within the ancient caves and stone structures. It is "a land where countless secrets sleep in the vast stone structures and deep caves left behind by Stone Age humans" (Tomy 2). Wayanad, with its aura of mysteries and concealed secrets, adds a dimension of ongoing performance in the natural landscape. The initial chapter, titled "The Voice of the Forest," acquaints the reader with the lush Wayanad region, its captivating charm, and the love

story unfolding between King Iravivarman and the courtesan Unniyachi. This narrative adds them to the revered cast of characters in the local folklore.

The characters from the Paniyar and Kurichiyar communities, the largest ethnic group indigenous to Wayanad, sing the songs of their tribal culture. Through the characters of Kelumoppan, Kali, Basavan, Rukku, and practices of Kadoram School, the music and songs will be analyzed as performance ecologies to understand how they speak of birth, death, romance, and the plenty and penury of the seasons that serve as both a coping mechanism through their ordeals, and as a moral compass that guides the characters of the novel in their actions to conserve their home, the forest of Kalluvayal.

Kelumooppan serves as the head of the Paniyar community, and he is introduced at the outset of the narrative. Described as an elderly individual adorned with dreadlocked hair and a distinctive limp, he is attired in a soiled lungi secured around his waist. Upon their initial encounter, Sara, an outsider, experiences a sense of unease. Nevertheless, the apprehension is mitigated as the protagonists, Sara and Thommichan, find solace in Kelumooppan's company during their inaugural night in Wayanad. In the act of hospitality, Kelumooppan advises against continuing their journey to Kalluvayal in the darkness, extends an accommodation offer at his provision store, and hums a harvest song:

Rain, come, come, rain

Like never before rain

No water for the elephant's bath

No water for the horse's bath

Shake the skies and rain

Drown the Earth and rain

No water for the master's bath

No water for the mistress's bath (Tomy 21)

The following day, Thommichan ponders why Kelumooppan sang about a period devoid of water. In this harvest song, spatial memory is tied to the setting of Wayanad and the characters' initial encounter with Kelumooppan, whose presence evokes a mix of unease and eventual comfort. The schema is reflected in the cultural and environmental wisdom of Kelumooppan, symbolized by his song, which alludes to an impending drought that the protagonists initially overlook. This moment encapsulates the Paniyar community's deep connection to their surroundings and intuitive understanding of natural cycles.

In the fifth chapter, three Adivasi characters are presented. The timing of their introduction, notably preceding that of other characters from Kalluvayal and confined to a singular chapter, underscores their pivotal significance to the narrative and Wayanad's geographical and cultural landscape. Basavan emerges when Sara and Thommichan are lost, venturing into the forest's depths. He is described as having "Dark skin, curly hair, broad nose, dressed only in a mud-coloured towel around his waist. He was strongly built and looked around twenty years old" (Tomy 41). He is described as the guardian and embracer of wild trees, accentuating his familiarity with the land.

In the same section, Rukku, Basavan's betrothed, emerges as a formidable Adivasi woman who symbolizes commitment. Lucy's acknowledgement of Kaani and Mara further underscores the significance of Adivasi women, praising their resourcefulness in distinguishing edible from poisonous plants. Subsequently, the readers are introduced to another Adivasi woman, Kali: "A shapely, curly-haired woman walked towards them with an entourage of children. She smiled at them, displaying a row of prominent upper teeth" (Tomy 45), and we see her singing:

The stream is full, the river is full, full of fish ...

River, river, I'm coming too, coming to see the world (Tomy 47)

Kali, introduced with a captivating smile and curly hair, becomes a central figure, her melodies transforming the forest into a vibrant symphony.

What does a woman own

A buffalo's back-curved horn

With the horn she built a bridge

Across the bridge, banana sprouted

When fruit set, it fell to the south

The master of the south snapped it up (Tomy 48)

Through her song, Kali reflects the wisdom and power of Adivasi women, depicting their deep connection with nature and their ability to bridge worlds, metaphorically illustrated by the buffalo's horn building a transformative bridge. In this passage, spatial memory is enriched through Kali's introduction as she approaches children, placing her in a communal, natural setting that evokes warmth and life. Her smile, curly hair, and vibrant songs create a schema connecting her identity to the forest, water, and nature, embedding her in the Adivasi worldview. Her song's metaphor of building a bridge with a buffalo's horn reflects Adivasi women's wisdom and transformative power, linking their lives deeply to nature and their community's survival.

Performance Ecology includes the practice of traditional art forms, and the Kadoram School stands as a testament to it. The Kadoram School is a beacon of innovation, attempting to preserve Adivasi languages without scripts by imparting education through storytelling, song, dance, and crafts. Padmanabhan, the visionary behind this evening school, addresses the people of Kalluvayal, revealing that the school is a modest endeavour to recapture the language of the forest. The school aims to educate and nurture a profound connection to the Adivasi

heritage by engaging children in cultural practices and traditional forms of expression. In doing so, Kadoram becomes a model, highlighting the importance of cultural preservation and community empowerment through education. Padmanabhan mentions,

> These children, they were scared of everything, the strange language that assaulted their ears, the generous scolding… Silencing the songs of their people that rose to their lips, they looked longing at the ironed clothes fresh with the fragrance of washing soap that their classmates wore. These unassuming children – the only reason they came to the school was the free midday meal of kanji[3]. Hunger was the only truth. They stayed away on the days they were not hungry. They missed school during the harvest season. It was when the number of students dropping out increased that the idea of an evening school began to form. (Tomy 138-139)

This poignant passage from Padmanabhan's speech captures the vulnerability of Adivasi children facing cultural displacement and economic hardships. It portrays a lack of integration between the poetic knowledge of the Adivasi children's cultural traditions and the scientific knowledge imposed by the school environment. The spatial memory in this passage revolves around the school environment, where Adivasi children feel out of place due to the unfamiliar language and social norms. The schema contrasts their traditional life, silenced songs, and modest needs with their classmates' structured, soap-scented world, creating a sense of alienation. Their attendance is driven by hunger, symbolizing their socio-economic struggles, while the seasonal rhythm of the harvest pulls them away, reflecting a tension between survival and education in their lives.

Elaborating further on the activities, Padmanabhan mentions that the students at Kadoram School actively engage in various tasks. In this passage, spatial memory is shaped by the activities and collaborative spirit at Kadoram School, where students engage deeply with

nature through tasks like sowing, planting, and harvesting. Interestingly, Padmanabhan attributes the school's name to Kali. He recounts a day when Jogi, Machi, Bavu, and their friends ascended Thambrankunnu and celebrated joyfully. The schema reflects an integration of education and cultural heritage, as the students learn harvest songs and indigenous medicine and embrace singing and dancing traditions. Collaboratively, they construct a bamboo hut and dance to the tunes sung by Kali. The lyrics "Forest, river, sky, and a school by the forest fringe..." (Tomy 139) recounts Kali's role as the symbolic "mother" of the school.

As part of the celebrations, the youth from the Paniyar community commence performing the traditional dance known as Vattakali. Additionally, a Paanan and a Paanathi[4], the bards of the community, begin skillfully playing their *mizhav*[5] drums and narrate, through song, the tale of Kela, the formidable warrior of Wayanad, whose adversaries never returned alive to their kingdoms. The rhythmic drumbeats accompanying the narrative enhance the multidisciplinary approach, creating a compelling theatrical experience combining music, performance, and social commentary. The narrative transports the audience to a bygone era, recounting a time of obscurity along the banks of Mananthavadipuzha, predating the arrival of Mappilas for the spice trade in the Mananthavady market. The Velichappad, an oracle, rested by the river, slipped into a dream and encountered the goddess Bhadrakali in a dance. Rukku, embodying various goddesses, mesmerize the children with a dynamic performance whose vivid imagery and dynamism convey a subjective experience of the indigenous characters.

The narrator, or *soothradharan*, invoking the goddess Valliyooramme[6], proceeds to narrate the divine decree for the construction of a universal temple, with the sky serving as its expansive roof, in the following manner:

I must settle here...

Here, as Vanadurga, goddess of the forest

There, as Jaladurga, goddess of the water

And over there, as Bhadrakali, the protector...

Who will build the roof for my house?

A roof that opens to the four oceans…

The sky is my roof,

The green canopy is my roof.

Don't you cut it down, don't you dare touch it... (Tomy 142)

In this invocation, spatial memory is intricately tied to the concept of a universal temple, with the sky symbolizing an expansive and inclusive space that connects the divine to the natural world. The schema reflects a deep reverence for nature as the narrator invokes the goddess Valliyooramme and associates different deities with specific elements—forest, water, and protection—suggesting a harmonious relationship between spirituality and the environment. The plea to preserve the green canopy underscores the importance of nature in this sacred space, framing it as an essential component of both physical and spiritual existence.

In the aftermath of a devastating conflagration, an anthem emerges, reflective of the sentiments of the Kurumar, the descendants of the hunter-kings.

There a hill, here a hill

Over yonder, the Chamba hill Hurry, the leopard calls, let's go

To our little ones, let's go,

Crazy woman, stop loitering

Collect your firewood

Hurry, the leopard calls, let's go

To our little ones, let's go (Tomy 161-162)

The anthem expresses subjectivity in nature, portraying hills, leopards, and the urgency of responding to nature's calls as part of the community's daily life. The perseverance of Padmanabhan's school and the daily singing of a traditional folk song suggest an attempt to create a new ecological culture by preserving and passing down cultural heritage.

In Padmanabhan's captivating narrative, the historical tapestry of Wayanad unfolds, portraying the region as a dynamic stage where the echoes of time resonate with the exploits and struggles of its people. Vedankotta, the formidable fortress of the Veda Rajas, becomes a symbol of resistance against the backdrop of Wayanad's resource exploitation, spanning from the Sangam period to colonial intrusion. The story dramatically turns when a prince's forbidden love for a Veda princess in Veliyambam defies societal norms. Despite opposition, divine intervention unites them. However, a Kumbala king's betrayal disrupts the joyous celebration, leading to the tragic demise of Vedarajan and the dispersal of the Veda people. The narrative is a poignant portrayal of love, betrayal, and the repercussions of exploiting nature and indigenous communities.

Padmanabhan artfully weaves in the sustainable traditional culture embodied in Vedankotta, emphasizing its role as a bulwark against exploitation. The invasion by the Kumbala king underscores the impact of a mechanistic worldview on indigenous communities and their harmonious coexistence with nature. The story concludes with the prince relinquishing his deceitfully acquired kingdom, facing the wrath of nature expressed through Palukachimala's furious landslide. This historical tale delves into the complex interplay of human emotions and serves as a multidimensional lens through which the consequences of human-nature interactions in Wayanad are laid bare. When Susan, Thommichan and Sara's daughter, wants to cry upon hearing the end of the story, it is the truth in the story that disturbs Thommichan. While he tries to convince himself by thinking that these were made-up stories

passed on as oral history from generation to generation, Padmanabhan makes an interesting statement, "Stories contain more truth than histories" (Tomy 165), thus accentuating the vested interests of those in power.

The annual Vilichattam festival, a manifestation of performance ecology, occurrs on Ashtami[7] in Kumbham[8] at the alleged Veda princess shrine deep within the forest. The community believe every girl born among them is a reincarnation of the Veda princess, showcasing a profound human-nature connection. During the festival, Mooppan[9] transforms into the Komaram[10], donning red silk and anklets, becoming the oracle of gods. In the serene forest, his enigmatic presence, communicating in an unfamiliar language, evokes fear. After conveying his message, the celebration shifts to joyous activities by women, reminiscent of forest streams in the month of Karthikam[11].

The black hue on top of the hill, what is it, O Mother?

The black hue on top of the hill is an elephant, O my son... (Tomy 166)

The song evokes vivid imagery of the natural landscape, mainly through the reference to the black hue on the hill, which signifies the presence of an elephant, reinforcing the deep-rooted connection of the Kurumar people to the wildlife surrounding them. This transition from fear to joy, coupled with the singing of traditional songs, emphasizes the importance of rituals and cultural expressions as vital practices that foster harmony between the Indigenous community and their natural world, encapsulating their identity and resilience.

The seventh-day festivities marking a girl's initiation into womanhood are a grand celebration in honour of Rukku's first menstruation. The Therandukalyanam[12] include blessings from her parents, turmeric paste adornment, and a journey to the forest, culminating in offerings at a divine stone under a majestic tree. This ritual highlights the deep connection between human customs and the natural environment. Singing and dancing symbolizes

women's liberation, with Basavan contributing to the festive spirit by playing his drum. "We are the children of Ippimaley," Rukku said (Tomy 188). However, the ancestral narrative of freedom contrasts with the descendants of Ippimaley falling prey to enslavement by jenmis[13], transforming into labourers serving external interests.

The festival of Valliyoorkaavu[14] was yet another festival of the temple. The women's preparations and appearances on the day are described as follows: "Mountain gods showered flower petals into their laughter, Vanadurga[15] cavorted in the jingle of their bangles, Jaladurga[16] rowed the boat, Bhadrakali[17] the Protector danced her primal dance" (Tomy 189). Through poetic language and vivid metaphors, it portrays a vibrant atmosphere where the laughter of women is likened to the showering of flower petals by mountain gods, and various deities, such as Vanadurga and Bhadrakali, contribute to the mystical ambience of the festivities.

In contrast, Kali, becomes a victim of rape and fatal violence. Despite the community's reverence for women, certain predatory men persistently target indigenous women, exploiting them for their own pleasure. The passage depicting the rituals and beliefs surrounding the seventh day of death is crucial in understanding the ways of indigenous people. In this tradition, the seventh day after the death of a person is crucial for calling forth the *nizhal*, or shadow, of the deceased and aiding it in finding peace. Kali's soul is feared to be pursued by malevolent spirits until the rituals are performed. A jungle crow is considered to embody Kali's soul, and the women eat only after the crow partakes of the rice offering. On the seventh day, preparations for the Kaakkappula[18] rites, meant for the release of Kali's soul, commence under Kelumooppan's guidance. The verses and chants during the Kaakkappula rites integrate poetic and cultural knowledge, narrating Kali's journey to the world of gods and the cosmic dance, providing a holistic understanding of death in this community.

During the ritual, a canopy is erected, and participants are divided into those who received their *valli* (a form of offering) and those who did not, who engage in drumbeats and songs all night. Basavan emerges as a central figure, taking up the drum and leading the chanting. The narrative concludes with Basavan, exhausted, settling Kali's soul into a thin stone under the canopy. The community disperses, having fulfilled the rites, and the passage vividly portrays the cultural and spiritual practices surrounding death in this particular community. As depicted in the passage, the cultural and spiritual practices surrounding death create a unique ecological culture within the community, emphasizing the importance of rituals in maintaining balance and harmony.

In the epilogue, spatial memory is captured through Tessa's portrayal of Kalluvayal, which is given a lasting presence in the digital realm via "Unniyachi's Facebook Post," merging traditional cultural folklore with modern technology. The River Kabani symbolizes the fluidity and agency of nature, emphasizing its ability to reshape itself and respond to changes, suggesting that the environment is an active participant in the narrative rather than a passive backdrop to it. This interplay between cultural continuity and the dynamic nature of the river reflects an optimistic vision for the future, where life's journey and natural harmony can coexist and be restored, inspiring hope among the community and the readers.

The Spatial Index of Performance Ecologies in *Valli*

The above section on Performance Ecologies in *Valli* delves into the intricate interplay of narrative, performance, culture, and ecology in the context of the Wayanad region. These performance ecologies validate Tally's narrative concept as a spatially symbolic act, highlighting the profound connections between storytelling, performances, and ecological and cultural landscapes. Tally emphasizes that texts are inherently spatial and create their own

spatial dimensions through the descriptions of settings, the movement of characters, and the relationships between different locations within the narrative. He opines,

> On one hand, consistent with my view of literary cartography as a fundamental aspect of storytelling, I mean to indicate that narratives are in some ways devices or methods used to map the real-and-imagined spaces of human experience. Narratives are, in a sense, mapping machines. On the other hand, narratives, like maps, for that matter, never come before us in some pristine, original form. They are always and already formed by their interpretations or by the interpretative frameworks in which we, as readers, situate them. (Tally, *Literary Cartographies* 3)

Literary cartography utilizes mapping techniques to illustrate texts and interrogate their deeper meanings. This approach analyses how literary works represent, create, and engage with real and imagined spaces. Within this framework, *Valli*'s narratives of performance ecologies can be situated within Tally's spatiotemporal model. This form of mapping can be entirely fictional or constructed in ways that transcend physical reality, as exemplified in the stories of Unniyachi and the Veda Princess. Alternatively, it can take on literal, metaphorical, or symbolic dimensions, functioning as maps and objects with varying degrees of significance for Indigenous characters as they seek to impose meaningful structure upon their lived experiences. Mapping performance ecologies entails a dual process, as Tally notes, and this dialectical interplay sustains a dynamic tension that fosters new creative possibilities for both the act of writing and the act of reading.

The three elements of literary cartography illustrate how the narrative functions as a form of mapping. Firstly, exploration reflects the human condition characterized by disorientation and the need for navigation. Secondly, projection facilitates the process of making sense of the world, allowing individuals to give form to their experiences and render

them legible. Lastly, imagination is crucial in restoring a sense of "transcendental homeliness," thereby constructing a comprehensive view of social totality. These elements create a dynamic framework for understanding the interplay between human experiences and their environments.

Mapping the Exploration of Performance Ecologies in *Valli*

Drawing on Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, Tally asserts that "one must have the freedom to create one's own meaningful existence, establishing a sense of place and purpose in the world via a project in which the individual subject orchestrates the elements or aspects of life in some meaningful way" (*Spatiality* 65). This notion underscores the anxiety and unease accompanying the freedom to determine right from wrong. In *Valli*, the harvest song of Kelumooppan, Kali's transformative song, and Padmanabhan's vision for the Kadoram School exemplify performance ecologies that characters use to imbue their existence with meaning. These performances reveal the tension between a sense of being lost and the desire to map out a coherent understanding of the world and one's place within it.

Kelumooppan's plea for rain, marked by its repetitive urgency, reflects a deep need to navigate the harshness of environmental conditions. Likewise, with its metaphorical image of a buffalo horn constructing a bridge, Kali's song symbolizes Adivasi women's wisdom and transformative power, suggesting their profound connection with the natural world. The act of building a bridge signifies both a literal and metaphorical journey, overcoming obstacles and offering a path forward. In the context of the Kadoram School, Padmanabhan's vision seeks to reconnect with the language of the forest, using traditional art forms to reflect the cultural expressions and linguistic heritage of the Adivasi community. The initial disorientation of Adivasi children in an unfamiliar environment, coupled with their fear of a "strange language,"

underscores the tension between tradition and modernity and the yearning for cultural familiarity.

The spatial richness of *Valli* is further enhanced by the performance dedicated to Kelu, which transports the audience to various locales, such as the banks of Mananthavadipuzha and the market in Mananthavady. Dynamic elements, including Bhadrakali's dance and the presence of the Valluvar tribe, contribute to this vivid storytelling. The cartographic impulse within the song invoking the goddess Valliyooramme symbolizes a desire to settle in diverse forms, embodying nature's elements—Vanadurga, the goddess of the forest; Jaladurga, the goddess of water; and Bhadrakali, the protector. This mapping reflects the anxiety and necessity of connecting with different facets of the natural world, suggesting an attempt to navigate and orient oneself within a broader environmental context.

Mapping the Projection of Performance Ecologies in *Valli*

If the anxiety of homelessness and the need to situate oneself in the world can be understood as strategies for navigating the uncanny spaces of daily life, then Tally emphasizes how individuals' projects are intrinsically connected to others' projects. Kelumooppan's plea for rain externalizes human needs, highlighting a dependency on nature. Similarly, Kali's transformation of a buffalo horn into a bridge projects significance onto an otherwise mundane object, symbolizing connection and progress. The establishment of the evening school in response to rising dropout rates projects a solution to provide structured education that meets the specific needs of Adivasi children. These acts of projecting meaning are fundamental interactions between individuals and their world.

The young man's song, questioning exploitation, highlights his disorientation in understanding the origins of his enslavement. His challenge to this exploitation's moral and ethical foundations becomes a figurative map, a way to navigate and overcome this disorientation. The performance ecologies in *Valli* further explore the concept of projection, particularly in the epilogue, where Kalluvayal and its cultural folklore are immortalized through Tessa's "Unniyachi's Facebook Post." Tessa's use of technology to project cultural folklore onto a virtual platform mirrors an attempt to find meaning and order in the chaotic realities of contemporary life. Additionally, the River Kabani's search for new paths symbolizes adaptability and resilience in changing environmental conditions, further projecting meaning onto life's dynamic aspects.

Mapping the Imagination of Performance Ecologies in *Valli*

Tally articulates a compelling argument about the role of imagination in shaping our understanding of social spaces. He asserts that "the power of the imagination to project a meaningful ensemble, which can then be used to aid in the navigation of social spaces, is itself a type of mapping" (Tally, *Spatiality* 67). This perspective suggests that human creativity is not merely an abstract or artistic endeavour; it plays a vital role in structuring our perceptions of reality and our interactions within it.

In this vein, Kelumooppan's vision of rain transcends its natural occurrence, transforming it into an overwhelming force capable of shaking the skies and drowning the Earth. The invocation of the master and mistress adds a social dimension, suggesting that the need for rain extends beyond the individual, implicating broader societal concerns. The imaginative act of building a bridge triggers the growth of bananas, creating a sense of transcendence as the mundane becomes extraordinary. The cyclical imagery of bananas

sprouting and falling to the south introduces a communal aspect that transcends individual actions.

The role of the narrator, or *soothradharan*, in navigating the realms of life and death through rituals underscores the profound cultural significance of these traditions in guiding the soul toward peace. The choice to embody Kali's soul through a jungle crow during these rites is particularly evocative, highlighting the deep connections between spirituality and the natural world. The narrative surrounding the Vilichattam festival elucidates the complex interrelationships among the Adivasi community, their cultural expressions, and the forest environment, demonstrating how these elements are interwoven into their identity and existence.

Moreover, the metaphorical imagery of entrapment in nets conveys a sense of being caught in involuntary circumstances, suggesting the pervasive nature of systemic constraints that limit individual agency. This imagery is further amplified by the plea for explanation, which reflects a yearning for a more equitable social order—one where unjust power dynamics are dismantled and replaced with structures that foster equity and justice. Within the context of *Valli*, the spatial projections in the performance ecologies represent the characters' attempts to navigate the representational crises of their social lives. These projections serve as a means to map out their identities and roles, ultimately aiding in their understanding of their place in the world and the broader socio-ecological landscape.

Ecoprecarity and Systems of Sustainability

A cartographic analysis of Indigenous performances in *Valli* provides a compelling framework for examining the cultural and ecological relationships between central and

peripheral spaces. These performances map the interconnected dynamics of the core and margins, revealing how migration, land ownership, and cultural displacement shape these landscapes. In particular, *Valli* traces the large-scale migration to Wayanad in the mid-20th century following India's independence. The influx of settlers from other parts of Kerala - primarily Christian and upper-caste Hindu migrants from the Malabar and Travancore regions profoundly altered Wayanad's social, economic, and ecological fabric.

A key theme that emerges from this spatial reading of performance ecology in *Valli* is the stark contrast in perceptions of land between indigenous tribes and migrant settlers. For indigenous communities, land is inseparably linked to their cultural identity, spirituality, and livelihood. In contrast, settlers viewed land as a commodity to be cultivated, bought, and sold for economic gain. This dichotomy underscores how traditional indigenous lands, often communally owned, were seized—legally or illegally—by settlers imposing modern concepts of private land ownership.

Padmanabhan condemns this practice, highlighting the systemic inequities: "The jenmis who own the land can mistreat the adiyans who work on the land with impunity, beat them and kick them to death" (Tomy 31). This emphasizes that the experiences of the two groups are not comparable. While both migrants and Indigenous peoples experienced displacement, the latter suffer under systemic oppression, often denied basic rights to their ancestral lands.

Further complicating this narrative, Tomy shows how settlers—often portrayed as victims of economic hardship and landlessness—were also complicit in the displacement of Wayanad's Indigenous tribes, such as the Kurichiya and Paniya. As the narrator notes, "Thommichan opened his eyes into a morning reverberating with the sounds of engines. He lay back on his easy chair, unable to move or swallow a mouthful of water, not seeing the day

brightening and then darkening again in the evening. It was not the hill that was being demolished, it was his heart" (Tomy 309). While migrants saw the land as a means of survival, their settlement contributed to the marginalization of indigenous communities, pushing them off their ancestral lands and into the periphery of society.

By integrating performance, ecology, and spatiality within a literary cartographic framework, *Valli* draws attention to the concept of ecoprecarity, offering a critical lens for examining vulnerability to environmental hazards. As Pramod K. Nayar asserts, "Ecoprecarity... is about precarious lives, those of humans and other life forms, within specific geographical and natural settings. It is about the erosion of species boundaries and new forms of species alignment, about the nature of Nature and the nature of life in a world of potentially combinatory life forms" (11). In *Valli*, ecoprecarity manifests through various narratives, such as Adivasis being forced into bonded labour, displaced by development projects, and suffering discrimination and exploitation, which make it difficult for them to secure new homes and livelihoods. Even outsiders, primarily from urban areas, face disruptions due to environmental changes in the forest. Thommichan, a city-based educator, loses his job when his school shuts down due to environmental damage, exemplifying how ecoprecarity affects individuals across different backgrounds.

The concepts of intercorporeality and ecoprecarity underscore the profound interconnectedness between humans and nature. Through performance ecologies, the novel highlights that environmental changes in the forest pose a universal threat—directly impacting Adivasis while also affecting outsiders through biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. Consequently, Indigenous performance ecologies emerge as an alternative mode of inquiry, interrogating the intertwined relationships between the ongoing ecological crisis and modern expressions of disorientation in a rapidly shifting world. From this perspective,

Valli offers a critical framework for understanding the intersection of performance, ecological precarities, and the shared vulnerabilities facing all life forms in the Anthropocene.

Conclusion

By spatially explicating performance ecology in *Valli*, this paper posits that the intricate interplay of cartographic frameworks—specifically exploration, projection, and imagination—shapes performance ecologies within the context of Indigenous cultures. As Tally suggests, "the literary cartography that renders the world a knowable place emerges from the formation and presentation of the narrative itself" ("Spatiality's Mirrors" 561). This paper argues that performance ecologies are not merely representations but dynamic interactions between ecology and memory across geological epochs, engaging in an act of world-making that foregrounds the critical role of Indigenous epistemologies in addressing today's global environmental crises.

A cartographic analysis of Indigenous performances, using spatial memory and schema in *Valli*, reveals their pivotal role in challenging anthropocentric and capitalocentric paradigms while preserving cultural heritage and ecological wisdom. These performances highlight the deep interconnection between cultural displacement and ecological degradation, demonstrating how Indigenous understandings of land stand in direct opposition to settler-driven commodification. *Valli* also emphasizes the concept of ecoprecarity, wherein environmental degradation affects both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, underscoring shared vulnerabilities that transcend cultural divides. Acknowledging and integrating these perspectives is not just an act of inclusivity—it is essential for developing holistic and effective responses to the multifaceted environmental crises of the Anthropocenene.

Notes

[1] The 10th-century Veda king of the Veliyambam fort in Wayanad district, Kerala.

[2] The ancient temple is located near Mananthavady in the Wayanad district of Kerala.

[3] Rice porridge

[4] Adivasi tribal groups in Kerala are known for their unscripted theatre performances.

[5] A big copper drum played accompanying percussion instruments in the performing arts of Kerala.

[6] The deity of Valliyoorkavu Bhagavathy temple in Kerala is dedicated to the goddess Bhagavathy, an incarnation of goddess Durga.

[7] The eighth day of the Hindu lunar calendar.

[8] A month in the Indian solar calendar. It corresponds to the zodiac sign of Aquarius and overlaps with the Gregorian calendar's second half of January and first half of February.

[9] The senior-most member who acts as the chieftain in tribal hamlets of Kerala.

[10] Oracle

[11] The eighth month of the Hindu lunar calendar, which falls in October and November of the Gregorian calendar

[12] A four-to-five days ceremony to celebrate the menarche of girls in Kerala

[13] Landed aristocracy of Kerala

[14] Ancient Bhagavathy temple located near Mananthavady in the Wayanad district of Kerala

[15] Also known as the goddess of the forest is one of the three forms of the presiding deity of Valliyookkavu temple

[16] 'Jala' means water, and 'Durga' refers to the fierce warrior goddess who vanquishes evil forces. She is one of the three forms of the presiding deity of Valliyookkavu temple.

[17] Powerful warrior goddess who is one of the three forms of the presiding deity of Valliyookkavu temple

[18] A Hindu ritual related to the ancestral rites where an offering is given to the crow, which symbolizes the acceptance of the offering by the ancestors

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