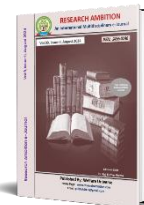




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Integration of Identity in Fragmented Forestscape: Bioregional Possibilities and Place-based Orientations in Sheela Tomy's *Valli: a novel*

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KEYWORDS

Bioregionalism, Bioregion, Tinai, Forestscape, Ecology, Place, Home, Indigenous, Reinhabitation, Dwelling.

ABSTRACT

The articulation of place-based attachments and restoration of human and natural bond keeping place in the center is the central preoccupation of Bioregional studies. Along with addressing the ecology of the place, it analyses the cultural aspects and human behavior in the context of that specific locale. It is both a socio-environmental movement and a philosophy which seeks conscious and sensitive human approach in the context of their place/land. Sheela Tomy's novel *Valli: a novel* stitches together the geography, ecology and bio politics of Kalluvayal, a village set in Northern Kerala, rich in unique flora and fauna. It is an environmental novel in which forest is placed as 'Place' and emerges as the main protagonist whose story and history are parallel to that of its inhabitants (human and other-than-human). This paper intends to address core bioregional values and then explore the novel in terms of those values as it demystifies the secrets of the forest in which history and imagination, culture and rituals, beliefs and practices, myths and superstitions, legends and folklores, songs and stories, survival and resistance, and many heard and unheard voices of dwellers as well as those of voiceless beings are all together mingled inseparably. This paper attempts to shed light on vividly portrayed struggle of indigenous people—the rightful keepers of land—for their valli (earth), for their home –mother forest—against state policies of forceful land encroachment, and increasing deforestation for the sake of tourist industry and modern developments.

Introduction

Sheela Tomy is a novelist, short story writer and a scriptwriter who hails from Wayanad in Kerala and *Valli: a novel* is her debut novel for which she received the Cherukad Award for Malayalam Literature in 2020. This novel, first published in Malayalam in 2019, appeared in the English

translation by Jayasree Kalathil in 2022. It was shortlisted for The JCB Prize for Literature 2022 and long listed for The National Translation Award in Prose 2023.

The Malayalam title 'Valli' signifies the bricolage of more than one theme. It means Earth or Land, Young Woman, Vine or any sort of climbing Plant,

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and a measure of paddy given as daily wages. The novel captures the lives of tribal people of Bayalnad (modern Wayanad) in vivid details from their folklores to gods to their medicine and funeral rites. In *Valli*, the main character is the forest, a repository of enigmas and legends. The forest is the holder and preserver of generation old cultures and traditions of pristine land. The forest lives and breathes in its people and when they suffer it suffers with them and vice versa. Entwined with land the novel represents an insightful portrayal of environmental and social justice. The characters are constantly battling one thing or the other throughout the novel; first it's landowners (native exploiters) refusing to give them wages for their labor, second the merchants trying to illegally cut down trees from their forest and much later, is the exploitative tourism business that displaces them and encroaches on forest land. There are some moments in the novel that reflect the reality where many communities that get displaced due to modern industrialization and development projects don't get rehabilitated properly. The characters fight for their 'Valli' (Earth). The story is narrated through a diary which brings out place specificities as one of the key features in accentuating the historical, socio-political, cultural and environmental disparity and justice through the characters' lives which spans across three generations. The novel is interspersed with letters, e-mail excerpts, diary entries, folksongs, lore, quotations from the Bible, popular film songs and foreshadowing of events. Local Paniya folksongs glisten like a gold line in between the fabrics of

text only to strictly claim the alignment of novel with key bioregional motif that place is the convergence of nature, space and story.

Bioregionalism and its Core Values: The North American Bioregional Congress, 1985 adopted a philosophy for healthy survival of humanity which, recognizes, nurtures, sustains and celebrates our local connections with:

**Land
Plants and Animals
Springs, Rivers, Lakes, Groundwater & Oceans
Air
Families, Friends, Neighbors
Community
Native Traditions
Indigenous Systems of Production & Trade**

(Andruss *et.al.*170).

Bioregionalism is both a philosophy of life and socio- environmental movement which seeks consciousness for place and community and advocates ecologically sustainable and culturally diverse societies in context of local 'bioregions'. Bioregionalism is a new sort of environmentalism for thinking about indigenous peoples, local knowledge, environmental politics, ecological restoration, conservation and reinhabitation. "The bioregional movement has spiritual, historical, cultural, artistic, literary and geographic identities that are very real". (McGinnis 4) In the words of bioregionalist Doug Auberley, "bioregionalism offers the best hope we have for creating an interdependent web of self-reliant, sustainable cultures." (qtd. in McGinnis 4)

To understand Bioregional philosophy, we need to contemplate upon the core values attached to it. It is as diverse as a landscape. It is an umbrella term which includes some basic values like, co-

relational interdependence of species, social and ecological justice, eco-spirituality, indigenous knowledge and wisdom, awareness of the spirit of the land, notion of place and home, and a sense of oneness with the wilderness and other-than-human life forms. I have identified few core ideas and notions on which this whole movement rests namely Place or Home, Dwelling, Reinhabitation, Diversity, and Identity.

'Place' is the foundation of Bioregional philosophy. The bioregional poet Gary Snyder opines that, "Having a place means that you know what a place means...what it means in a storied sense of myth, character and presence but also in an ecological sense...Integrating native consciousness with mythic consciousness" (*Goodread.com*). Humans are part of a living planet and whenever we inhabit a place we become part of the life-system of that particular place. Place not only provides shelter to its inhabitants rather shapes the personalities of its inhabitants physically, mentally as well as emotionally. Place is very integral in the formation and evolution of civilizations as well as certain cultures that grow within those boundaries. Living in that region or place they are supposed to abide by certain stewardship and ethical commitment to the other co-constituent parts –other than human living beings since this earth is balanced on proportional relationship of all its members. Place is the earthly home and,

Home is the place where we live, with our human families, in our human communities, within our biotic communities. As Luanne

Armstrong says, we are created by our home, our place, "shaped, each day, by living in it." In turn, we must learn to cooperate in its processes and yield to its limit, at the same time learning to love our place as part of ourselves" (qtd.in Andruss 33).

The idea of 'Reinhabitation' directly flows from this emotive responsibility towards place or home. The Bioregionalist Peter Berg's idea of 'Reinhabitation' is the direct answer to the question that how we should fulfill our responsibilities to our place. He says in his seminal essay "Reinhabiting California",

Reinhabitation means learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation. It involves becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships that operate within and around it. It means undertaking activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems, and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it. Simply stated it involves becoming fully alive in and with a place. It involves applying for membership in a biotic community and ceasing to be its exploiter. (Berg in Andruss 35).

Bioregional notion of reinhabiting a place is a kind of engaging in a work of restoring the earth to a good health, freeing it from anthropocentric barriers and live in a healthy communion with

other life forms. It involves developing sustainable ways of living in close association with natural place.

Although Bioregionalism as movement emerged during 1970s but the seeds of its core values can be traced in age old indigenous cultures around the globe. These are rooted in the aboriginal, primal and native practices and ways of living. Long before bioregionalism entered the mainstream lexicon, Indian indigenous knowledge systems revered and practiced many of its tenets. The 'Tinai' Theory (The five-fold Landscapes or Bioregions) featured in Sangam literature is based on the notion of landscape as the fundamental element in the formation of identity of its inhabitants. In Sangam literature 'tinai' is featured as a poetic device to classify poems on the basis of mood, tone, theme and imagery associated with particular landscapes. The term 'tinai' denotes what we roughly call today, 'Bioregion'; classification of geographical landscape, its ecological and traditional perspectives, and the social and moral behavior of the people of each landscape. In words of Selvamoni, 'tinai':

refers to any specific place on earth; especially, a house with its own land surrounding it, a farmhouse. Semantically, tinai has come to mean "family", particularly, family that occupies a specific place, ... Tinai refers to, 'Human community indigenous to a specific eco region'. By extension, when tinai refers to non-material firmness, then it means 'conduct'. The major focus in tinai is the

forces and power of nature, and the centrality of nature in the wholeness that could characterize the lives of human beings. It enforces on the organic connections among persons, environment, language and spirit, rather than the differences (Tinai Studies).

The central idea of tinai is a complex linkage of space, time, landscape and emotions. Sangam poets aim to weave a shared domain of the individual's inner scape and the geophysical ambience through the device of 'tinai'. *Tolkappiyam*, a Sangam text of grammar and poetics, mentions five (major) 'tinais': the regions of kurinji (hills), mullai (Forests and pastoral region), palai (arid stretches), marutam (wetlands or marshes) and neytal (littoral). On the basis of these poems were categorized. Each 'tinai' featured distinct landscape, particular the relationship between man and nature, mode of habitation, economical patterns and mode of behavior.

Each 'tinai' was identifiable with different flora and fauna, deity and customs. These five landscapes distinguish man's lifestyle and behavior, so says Bioregionalism. The food, the culture, the profession etc. all are based on landscape to which he belongs. The mindscape of man is conditioned by the landscape. Bioregionalism too advocates how the mindscapes are conditioned by complex landscapes. These two ideas seem to resemble each other, as both emphasize the relationship between organic and inorganic environment, humans and natural entities and advocate that there is communication among

them.

Mullai, the 'tinai' which refers to forest and woodlands was considered to be the land of incomparable fragrance, the symbol of chastity and prosperity. It was a place rich in vegetation. The people lived with the harmony with nature. It was identifiable by the flower jasmine and deer. Sifting cultivation and animal husbandry were main occupations. Women were of major importance. Maayon (Lord Krishna) was deity of this 'tinai'. The Tamil love poems show how this region shaped people's emotional plain which can be easily distinguished from those of other tinai. The intimate relationship of human with living nature in woods became the source of knowledge. The thematic marker used for this land in Sangam poetry is perseveringly waiting for togetherness.

Forest as Bioregional 'Place' in Tomy's Valli:

The diversity, and harmony rooted in forest ecosystem and the self-sustaining nature of it strongly supports the core bioregional values of interdependence and inclusivity. Forests have always been central to the evolution of cultures and civilizations. Woods have been playing the role of life giver, caretaker and preserver of lives. Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore opines, "The peace of forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man...the unifying principle of life in diversity to democratic pluralism came from forest culture" (qtd. in Shiva 56). Bioregionalism pays great respect to cultural, social and religious diversities. Diversity is one of the core values but there is, what Tagore says, 'unifying principle of life'—a sense of wholeness, oneness with all life forms on

the earth—which is rooted in sensitive consciousness and eco-spiritual mindscape.

Forests are seen as the highest expression of earth's fertility and productivity and they have provided a model for the co-operative, life-enhancing paradigm that supports ecological interdependence. Tribal or indigenous communities whose lives are strongly embedded into forests, it is bioregional 'Place' or home to them, which shapes their lives and ultimately their identity. The indigenous ways of living resonate with the bioregional notion of 'Dwelling' which is a sensitive attachment with the place and a consciousness about the fluxes of natural world. Environmental activist Vandana Shiva says:

Indigenous silvicultural practices are based on sustainable and renewable maximisation of all the diverse forms and functions of forests and trees. This common silvicultural knowledge is passed on from generation to generation, through participation in the processes of forest renewal and of drawing sustenance from the forest ecosystem (60).

One of the prominent implications of bioregional studies is that it doesn't consider Nature and Place mere passive backdrops of human civilization but rather as an active participatory force or personae which is parallel to progress and distortion of human race. "A bioregional partnership requires a new vision of life and death in the forest. Knowledge of place, within us, needs to be uncovered and revered" (MacGinnis 9). As an environmental treatise, *Valli* takes us into the heart

of the forest and portrays its wounds, unravels environmental injustice done by humans to other co-inhabitants of earth: "A forest that belonged to dragonflies, butterflies, cicadas, ants, termites, and a hundred thousand tiny creatures. Greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes had already made their stealthy entrance into the forest," (Tomy 35). Forest emerges as the Place or Home in the novel. The novelist dedicates it: "For Forests ravaged by Fire, For People rendered Voiceless, For Languages without Scripts." The first chapter entitled "The Voice of the Forest" opens as "There was a time when Kalluvayal was a dense, deep forest" (Tomy 1), reflecting the ecological richness of the land but on the next page she highlights the injustice and havoc which the land has endured, "...today, its rivers thin, its forest bald" (Tomy 2). The modern digital age seems to have become monochromatic and the diverse and unique colors carrying the local fragrances, signifiers of spirits of places seem to be blurred. "The cultural significance of one's place and earthly home are in jeopardy" (MacGinnis 2). When the essence of place undergoes erasure, the identity of inhabitants which is rooted in their 'earthly homes' deem to be oblivious. Susan, the main character of the novel, whose diary is being narrated by the novelist, suffers the same obliteration of identity after her migration to Dubai from her place where "life spurts like memories- diverse, fecund, evergreen" (Tomy 4). Her diary is a record of everything that was in Kalluvayal. She was born and brought up in the lap of forest, on the bank of Kabani river. She records:

"I, Susan, A childhood spent in Kalluvayal, amidst forest people and forest myths more astonishing than fairy tales, listening to the stories of the rivers, mist and earth, to secrets of the forest in which truth and lies, history and imagination, beliefs and superstitions mingled inseparably together" (Tomy 11). As bioregionalists claim when we inhabit a place, 'sights, sounds, feelings and tastes' become part of our 'sensual memory of place' and Kalluvayal has become part of her personality (McGinnis 1). The letter exchanges between her and Tessa carry her pain and longings for her place from where she is deterritorialized. The Forest is "testimony to the essence" of her being (Tomy 11). The ship of memories continues to deck up on the bay of the desert of Abu Dhabi, and Susan, living in the city crowded with sky reaching grey buildings and roads shrouded in desperation, yearns for the land where "...in the valleys were paddy fields, and everywhere, the songs of the forests" (Tomy 7). Her inner self chides her to relive her days in forest by writing everything in her diary, "before the forest within you [her] burns down to ashes" (Tomy 11). She dies holding a desire in heart: "There was only one thing that my heart desired- to return to Kalluvayal one day" (Tomy 366).

Conclusion: *Valli* is a narrative of the forest which explores how the question of identity becomes intertwined with the issues of ecology of the place. Susan's story compels us to reimagine the contradictions and ambiguities that take place in human's relationship with his natural surroundings. *Valli* acknowledges the deeper knowledge of life

and processes of natural world which the Adivasis possess. Tomy has tried to contextualize Paniya, a script less language, part of South Dravidian language, spoken by forest dwelling tribes. Whenever we hear a tribal character, s/he speaks in Paniya. Tomy enables the readers to taste the native flavors of words and feel the essence of emotions by presenting them phonetically in English just before their translation. As a bioregional text it vividly captures indigenous culture and practices, local myths, folklores, and legends. It is rich with forest imageries which draw concrete pictures of emotions in mind enabling reader to connect with the land. It sheds lights on the local land politics, resistance and struggles of forest dwellers against land encroachment by statist policies in the name of development as well as affirms local knowledge and the power of the bioregional.

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