International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)
Volume- 2, Issue- 5 | September - October 2025 ISSN: 3048-9490

Reclaiming 'Place' in the Age of Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Indigenous Knowledge and Resistance

Dr. Neethu Varghese
Assistant Professor, Department of English, BCM College, Kottayam
Email: neethu@bcmcollege.ac.in

Abstract

The place is foundational to community, identity and a sense of connection with nature. The contemporary erasure of place, exacerbated by globalization and technology, engenders alienation and detachment from land, emphasizing the necessity of a life-place a deep attachment to the land and its human inhabitants. The paper examines Valli (2022) by Sheela Tomy and Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu. (2004) by C.K. Janu as significant eco-narratives that explore these dynamics within the ecological context of Wayanad, Kerala. The narratives, set in Wayand, Kerala, foreground the forest not merely as a backdrop but as an active presence shaping indigenous identity, memory, and resistance.This study explores how these texts articulate an affective and cultural attachment to the land, drawing from the concepts of biophilia and topophilia, the analysis is further framed through analysing the role of indigenous ecological knowledge in countering displacement and environmental degradation.

Tomy's Valli, through its epistolary form, weaves a narrative of environmental loss, colonial histories, and the resilience of Adivasi communities. Mother Forest provides a lived account of ecological dispossession and activism. Janu's autobiographical voice underscores the urgency of land rights movements, illustrating how environmental justice is interconnected to social and political struggles. By engaging with deep ecology and bioregional thought, this paper argues that these narratives serve as eco-critical interventions, urging a reimagining of human-nature relationships. In an era of climate crisis and aggressive resource extraction, these works offer a powerful critique of ecological alienation while reclaiming 'place' as a site of resistance and renewal.

Keywords: Valli, Mother Forest, Sheela Tomy, C.K. Janu, eco-narrative, Wayanad, biophilia, topophilia, tinai poetics, deep ecology, indigenous knowledge, sustainability, resistance.

"Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other"

(Tuan 3)

Eco-narratives, as a distinct literary genre, offer a vital lens through which one can examine the interrelations between culture, environment and identity. As Lawrence Buell posits, "Environmental texts are distinctive because they imagine the relationship between humans and non-human worlds in consequential ways" (Buell 7). These narratives are foundational responses to ecological crises and cultural alienation. Place is not merely defined by geographical boundaries but imbued with cultural, spiritual and emotional significance, finds the core of eco- narratives. The sense of "Place" fosters an intrinsic connection with nature and

shapes individual and collective identities. In this age of rapid technological expansion, the idea of place necessitates a return to what ecologists' term as "life place"- a deep-rooted attachment to land. (Thayer 3)

In this context, Sheela Tomy's Valli and C. K Janu's Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu are seminal works that explore the symbiotic relationship between people and landscapes, centered in the cultural milieu of Wayanad, Kerala. Both texts highlight the affinity of the community towards the natural landscape. Sheela Tomy's Valli weaves a testimony of memory, belonging and a deep ecological commitment to the landscape and Mother Forest serves a testament of indigenous wisdom and cultural identity.

The theories of Deep ecology and bioregionalism, as articulated by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty and Karla Armbruster, advocate for sustainable living practices that align with the natural rhythms of ecosystems. As Arne Nass writes, "The essence of deep ecology is to ask deeper questions" (Nass 151) focusing on a call to rethink human nature relationships. By placing Valli and Mother Forest within these theoretical paradigms, this paper seeks to examine the interplay of place, identity and ecology. The paper explores the environmental degradation of Wayand and urges the readers to foster a renewed sense of belonging toward their landscape.

As Robert L. Thayer defines "A bioregion is literally and etymologically a 'life-place'". It signals a close attachment to place and other than human inhabitants (Thayer 3). This concept ties into E.O. Wilson's idea of 'biophilia,' the inherent feeling of unity with all life forms and Yi-Fu Tuan's 'topophilia,' which refers to "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (4). A bioregional perspective can also help us relate positively to the world around us. It helps to construe our identity beyond the narrow confines of the ego bound self. Kirkpatrick Sale outlines the major premises of bioregionalism in his significant work, Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision (1991), and his list of essential knowledge includes: " ... rocks under our feet, the source of the waters, we drink, the meaning of the different kinds of winds, the common insects, birds, mammals, plants, and trees; the particular cycles of the seasons; the times to plant and harvest and forage- these are the things that are necessary to know."(Sale 42). Sale points out that an "industrial scientific paradigm" has reduced the human race to a species hurtling towards self- extinction. According to him, the solution to this evil, lines in becoming the "dwellers in the land" (Sale 42).

According to Heidegger, dwelling is the essential character of dasein or "being-in- the-world". For a building to express dwelling, it must weave together the relationship between human beings, nature and the divine. To Heidegger, the concept of "dwelling" has a distinct philosophical resonance. Garry Snyder brings a deep ecological vision to the idea of a "home place" and declares that 'Each place is its own place, forever (eventually) wild' (Snyder 184). For Snyder, this deep realization of the entire earth as a "life- place" inspires a bioregional awareness that is not just about 'loving nature' or being 'in harmony with Gaia'- It is a more conscious relationship to the natural world' that takes place in a place' and is 'grounded in information and experience '(193)

Sheela Tomy, a novelist, short story writer, and scriptwriter from Wayanad, Kerala, made her literary debut with Valli: A Novel. The novel earned her the Cherukad Award for Malayalam

Literature in 2020. Originally published in Malayalam in 2019, the novel was later translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil in 2022. It gained widespread recognition, making it to the shortlist for the JCB Prize for Literature in 2022 and the longlist for the National Translation Award in Prose in 2023. C.K. Janu's Mother Forest: An Autobiography is more than a personal narrative; it is a testimonial of resistance and ecological belonging. The text emerges as an act of reclaiming the forest, not merely as a geographical entity but as a sentient presence intertwined with the lives of the Adivasi communities. The narrative weaves through the environmental degradation on the land and is deeply rooted in the richness of indigenous knowledge.

The title Valli carries multiple meanings in Malayalam, symbolizing earth, land, woman, a climbing vine, and a measure of paddy used as daily wages. This variety and multiplicity of meanings point out the novel's layered themes, projecting ecological concerns, social justice, and identity. The narrative provides an intricate portrayal of the tribal communities of Bayalnad (modern-day Wayanad), depicting their folklore, deities, medicinal traditions, and funeral rites with meticulous detail.

At its heart, the novel positions the forest as the primary protagonist a living entity teeming with legends and mysteries, preserving generations of cultural and ecological knowledge. The forest is not merely a backdrop but a strong and powerful force that voices the resilience of the people. The novel presents a compelling critique of land ownership struggles, the destruction of natural habitats by illegal logging, and the disruptive effects of unchecked tourism. It highlights how communities are displaced by industrialization and how the development projects are often denied proper rehabilitation. These factors add to their persistent fight for their land their Valli.

The novel is structured as a diary, weaving historical, cultural, and environmental narratives through the lives of its characters. It spans three generations making the landscape as a central character of the narrative. Tomy uses a fragmented but immersive storytelling approach, interspersing letters, email excerpts, diary entries, folk songs, oral traditions and Biblical references. This intricate narrative style reinforces the novel's depth, portraying land not just as a physical space but as an archive of memory, identity, and resistance.

According to TiNai scholar, Nirmal Selvamony, the etymology of the word "TiNai" suggests that 'which is united and therefore firm' and refers to 'family of human and non- human members living off their indigenous ancestral homestead (138). Selvamony observes that human inhabitants of this well- integrated oikos regarded plants and animals as their relatives. For instance, in the Sangam littoral poems, a laurel tree is referred to as a sister using kinship terms and the shark is considered to be the ancestor of several families. Identity in TiNai theory is therefore not to be defined in isolation but through the integral bonds that the members share with the other citizens of this integral oikos. Bioregional ecocriticism is predominantly a western practice. TiNai theory can therefore provide an alternative indigenous global south model of reading place-based literary works and also enter into a fruitful dialogue with western place- based eco critical models.

Drawing from tinai poetics, Valli illustrates the interconnectedness of landscape, human emotions, and cultural identity. In tinai classification, land and life are inherently linked; each landscape kurinji (mountain), marutham (agricultural land), mullai (forest), neytal (seashore), and palai (desert) influences the human experience. The narrative places Wayanad's dense forests within the mullai tinai, characterized by themes of waiting, longing, and resilience. The protagonist Susan's deep-rooted connection with Kalluvayal, her homeland, reflects the mullai landscape's enduring essence. As tinai posits, land shapes not only livelihood but also emotions and cultural memory. Tomy underscores this connection when Susan, despite her migration to Dubai, remains emotionally tethered to her native soil: "Life spurts like memories diverse, fecund, evergreen" (Tomy 4). The forest, as a repository of myths and wisdom, transcends its physical form to become an epistemological space where indigenous knowledge thrives. By using Paniya linguistic expressions phonetically before their translations, the narrative ensures that the forest dwellers' voices resonate within the text, resisting linguistic and cultural erasure. In Mother Forest, the Tinai framework is evident in how the forest is depicted as more than a physical space it is a site of collective memory, ritual, and sustenance. The narrative emphasizes how the land is not merely occupied but inhabited, forming an intrinsic part of the Adivasi identity. Janu asserts, "For us, the forest is not just a means of survival; it is our very life, our history, our home" (Janu 45). The text resists the state's classification of forests as exploitable resources, instead affirms the indigenous sovereignty over land.

The concept of 'biophilia' put forward by E.O. Wilson posits an innate affinity for nature and living systems. Wilson argues that the bond between human being and nature is evolutionary, and is rooted in humanity's dependence on nature for survival, when disrupted leads to ecological alienation. E.O. Wilson's theory of biophilia, which suggests that humans possess an innate affinity for the natural world, finds expression in Valli through Susan's persistent longing for her homeland. The forest is not merely a geographical entity but a formative space that shapes her identity and consciousness. Wilson contends that "to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and on ourselves" (Wilson 1). This ethical imperative resonates throughout Valli, where the destruction of Wayanad's forests is not just an ecological catastrophe but also an existential crisis.

Susan's migration underscores the alienation that accompanies ecological displacement. In contrast to the lush vibrancy of Kalluvayal, Dubai's urban landscape is sterile and impersonal. Her diary entries serve as a counter-memory to this dislocation, ensuring that the "forest within" (Tomy 11) endures despite physical absence. This biophilic impulse the desire to reconnect with the organic world renders Valli a testament to the necessity of ecological remembrance and belonging. Unlike modern conservation efforts that often frame nature as a pristine, untouched entity separate from human existence, Mother Forest presents an interconnected worldview. The Adivasi worldview perceives all living beings as equal participants in the ecological web. Janu articulates this ethos when she states, "The trees, the rivers, the birds everything around us has a spirit, and we cannot harm them without harming ourselves" (Janu 92). Such an outlook is central to understanding indigenous resistance against deforestation and forced displacement.

Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of topophilia, or the affective bond between people and place, is central to Valli. The novel captures the sensory and mnemonic dimensions of place attachment, where the forest is not merely a setting but an active agent of cultural sustenance. "The cultural significance of one's place and earthly home are in jeopardy" (MacGinnis 2). Susan's emotional and sensory ties to Kalluvayal manifest through the novel's rich imagery: "In the valleys were paddy fields, and everywhere, the songs of the forests" (Tomy 7). Such descriptions reinforce the idea that place is experienced spatially, emotionally and spiritually. Her longing for home is not nostalgia but an assertion of identity. The narrative closely weaves together the identities of land and selfhood. Tuan notes that "place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (Tuan 3). Susan's journey encapsulates this paradox her physical departure grants mobility but fractures her sense of belonging. The concept of Topophilia, is deeply embedded in Janu's narrative. The forced displacement of Adivasis from their ancestral lands leads to a loss that is not merely economic but ontological. The uprooting of communities from their forest homes disrupts cultural continuity. Janu recalls the anguish of losing her home: "We were taken away from the land where our ancestors had walked, where the trees had grown with us" (Janu 76). This severance from the land results in an existential crisis, as the forest is integral to identity formation. In this sense, the struggle depicted in Mother Forest is not just a fight for land rights but a resistance against the erasure of an entire way of being.

Arne Naess's philosophy of deep ecology advocates for an intrinsic valuation of nature, opposing anthropocentric frameworks that position human needs above ecological well-being. Valli exemplifies this ethos by presenting the forest as a sentient force with agency. The novel's dedication "For forests ravaged by fire, for people rendered voiceless, for languages without scripts" establishes its deep ecological stance, emphasizing the interdependence of environmental and cultural preservation. The opening lines, "There was a time when Kalluvayal was a dense, deep forest" (Tomy 1), contrast starkly with the subsequent lament: "Today, its rivers thin, its forest bald" (Tomy 2). This transformation is not merely environmental degradation but a moral indictment of human exploitation. The text critiques both corporate greed and state policies that justify deforestation under the guise of development. Susan's reflections expose the tension between progress and dispossession, urging humanity's intervention in the ecological web. By amplifying the voices of the land and its people, Valli reaffirms the necessity of honouring local ecologies and resisting displacement. The novel serves as a crucial reminder that, to protect our forests is not just an environmental obligation but a cultural and existential imperative. Janu in her narrative, challenges both state-led conservation policies and capitalist encroachments that commodify the forest. Her movement against deforestation and land encroachment reflects a radical ecological stance that recognizes nature's intrinsic value beyond human utility. Janu observes, "The forest was never something to be owned, yet we were being told it no longer belonged to us" (Janu 54). This sentiment aligns with Deep Ecology's critique of possessive land relations that reduce nature to a mere economic resource.

Robert L. Thayer proposes a spiritual hypothesis as an extension of bioregional thought, emphasizing the deep emotional and existential connection humans have with their environments. He asserts that meaningful attachment to place "offers a deepened sense of

personal meaning, belonging and fulfilment in life" (Thayer 71). This perspective finds a powerful expression in both Mother Forest and Valli.In Valli, the protagonist Susan's displacement from her ancestral land is not just a geographical shift but a severance from the spiritual and cultural essence of her being: "There was only one thing that my heart desired to return to Kalluvayal one day" (Tomy 366). Her longing reflects the spiritual dimension of place attachment, reinforcing Thayer's claim that a connection to land provides an existential anchor.Similarly, Mother Forest depicts how the forest is an extension of their spirit. Janu insists that "the land is not ours; we belong to the land" (Janu 58), a belief that closely aligns with the spiritual hypothesis by recognizing the land as an active participant in human life rather than a passive backdrop. Both texts, therefore, highlight how displacement is not just a loss of territory but a rupture of existential meaning.

Valli and Mother Forest reveal the deep interconnections between gender, ecology, and indigenous resistance. Both texts portray women's intimate ties to the land, their struggles against patriarchal and colonial structures, and the ecological wisdom embedded in their lived experiences.In Valli, the forest is both a nurturing mother and a violated entity, mirroring the plight of the women who inhabit it. Susan, the protagonist, recalls her childhood in Kalluvayal, where the forest shaped her identity: "I, Susan, A childhood spent in Kalluvayal, amidst forest people and forest myths more astonishing than fairy tales" (Tomy 11). This connection is severed when she is forced into exile. The destruction of the forest parallels the exploitation of women: "Greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes had already made their stealthy entrance into the forest" (Tomy 35). Tomy highlights the intersections of environmental degradation and gendered oppression through her depiction of Paniya women, whose lives are dictated by the rhythms of the forest yet threatened by external forces.

Similarly, C.K. Janu in Mother Forest presents the forest as both a source of sustenance and a site of resistance. Janu's narrative challenges patriarchal structures within and outside her tribal community. She recounts, "For us, the forest is not just a place to live; it is our home, our mother. We belong to the forest, and it belongs to us" (Janu 58). This articulation of belonging underscores the ecofeminist principle that women's bodies and the land are intertwined in systems of oppression and resilience. Janu's activism embodies Vandana Shiva's concept of "feminist ecology," wherein women lead the fight against environmental destruction: "They tell us to leave, but where do we go? The land is in our blood" (Janu 72). Both texts underscore the ecofeminist assertion that indigenous women hold critical knowledge of sustainable living, yet they are the most affected by environmental crises. As Susan mourns, "The valleys were once full of paddy fields, and everywhere, the songs of the forests" (Tomy 7), Janu asserts that "without the forest, we are nothing" (Janu 85). Their testimonies serve as urgent reminders that the fight for environmental justice is inherently a fight for gender justice, making Valli and Mother Forest powerful ecofeminist narratives that advocate for sustainability, and the preservation of indigenous wisdom.

Eco-theologian and cultural historian, Thomas Berry also considers 'fulfillment' as an important bioregional characteristic. A bioregion is a self-fulfilling when all its participants from the smallest plant to the humans, achieve it greatest efflorescence. (Thomas 191). In both Valli by Sheela Tomy and Mother Forest by C.K. Janu, Wayanad emerges as a central

character, its lush landscapes deeply intertwined with the lives of its indigenous inhabitants. These narratives not only celebrate the region's natural beauty but also lament the environmental degradation resulting from human exploitation. In Valli, the protagonist reflects on her childhood in Kalluvayal, a village in Wayanad: "I, Susan, A childhood spent in Kalluvayal, amidst forest people and forest myths more astonishing than fairy tales" (Tomy 11). This intimate connection to the land is disrupted by external forces, leading to deforestation and ecological imbalance. The novel portrays the forest as a living entity, suffering alongside its people: "Greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes had already made their stealthy entrance into the forest" (Tomy 35).

Similarly, in Mother Forest, C.K. Janu articulates the symbiotic relationship between the Adivasi community and the forest: "For us, the forest is not just a place to live; it is our home, our mother. We belong to the forest, and it belongs to us" (Janu 58). This bond is threatened by deforestation and land encroachment, leading to ecological and cultural disintegration.

Recent environmental events underscore these narratives. In July 2024, a massive landslide struck the Vellarimala hill ranges in Wayanad, causing fatalities and widespread destruction. Heavy rainfall triggered the landslide, but contributing factor included deforestation. Human activities like agriculture, construction, and quarrying have made the landscape more susceptible. These events highlight the fragile balance between human activity and ecological stability in Wayanad. Maathai writes, “I saw human communities restored along with nature. This is not a mystical phenomenon; it is a fact of human existence. Human beings cannot thrive in a place where the natural environment has been degraded” (viii). Mindful dwelling in life-places also empowers the local communities which is the basic unit of the human habitation. Empowered local community networks are instrumental in bring about reinhabitary and sustainable living practices, which have implications for the health of the bioregion. The authors call for a examination of human relationships with nature, emphasizing respect and sustainable coexistence. Valli and Mother Forest serve as poignant reminders of Wayanad's ecological significance and the dire consequences of environmental exploitation. Through their narratives, they advocate for a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, echoing the principles of deep ecology.

References

1. Berry, Thomas. ‘The Ecozoic Era.’ People, Land and Community: Collected E.F. Schumacher Socity Lectures. Ed. Hildegarde Hannum. New Haven, CT: Yale UP.191-203. Print.
2. Buell, Lawrence. The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
3. Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Karla Armbruster, Ed. The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. U of Georgia P, 1996.
4. Heidegger, Martin. Poetry, Language, Thought. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper & Row, 1971.
5. Janu, C. K. Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu. Translated by N. Ravi Shanker, Women Unlimited, 2004.

6. Leach, Neil.'Martin Heidegger.' Rethinking Architecture: A reader in cultural theory. London: Routledge, 1997
7. Lynch, Tom, Cheryll Glotfelty and Karla Ambruster, Eds. The Bioregional Imagination:Literature, Ecology and Place. Athens,U of Georgia, 2012.
8. MacGinnis, Jon. "The Cultural Significance of Place." Journal of Environmental Philosophy, vol. 12, no. 3, 2005, pp. 1-15.
9. MacGinnis, Michael Vincent. Bioregionalism. Routledge, 2019.
10. Naess, Arne. Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy. Translated by David Rothenberg, Cambridge UP, 1989.
11. "On the Trail of the Wayanad Landslide." Mongabay-India, 8 Aug. 2024, https://india.mongabay.com/2024/08/commentary-on-the-trail-of-the-wayanad-landslide.
12. Rangarajan, Swarnalatha. Ecocrticism: Big ideas and Practical Strategies. Ed. Scott Slovac. Orient Blackswan, 2018
13. Sale, Kirkpatrick. Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision. U of Georgia P, 1991.
14. Selvamony, Nirmal. TiNai Poetics: An Ecological Approach to Literary Studies. New Century Book House, 2016.
15. Snyder, Gary. The Gary Snyder Reader:Prose, Poetry and Translations 1952-1998. Berkeley,1999.
16. Thayer, Robert L. LifePlace: Bioregional Thought and Practice. U of California P, 2003.
17. Tomy, Sheela. Valli: A Novel. Translated by Jayasree Kalathil, Harper Perennial, 2022.
18. Tuan, Yi-Fu. Topophilia:A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values. Columbia UP,1990.
19. Wilson, E. O. Biophilia. Harvard UP, 1984.