



Contested Spaces - Nature, Natives, and Neo-colonisers, a Postcolonial Ecocritical Reading of Sheela Tommy's *Valli*

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Abstract:

Neo-colonisers are generating and repeating colonial ideologies on planetary level. They view the rest of the population and nature as 'others', existing to subserve their interests, thus subjecting them to various forms of exploitation and inequalities. Within literary scholarship, Postcolonial Ecocriticism holds the potential to reflect on this double subjugation of people and nature, keeping the idea of space at the center of its discourses. The paper attempts to study the nexus of nature, natives and neo-colonisers, within the Indian context by reading Sheela Tommy's novel, *Valli*. It attempts to examine modern spaces as a site of contestation and to bring to light realities associated with the rhetoric of development, which is strategic altruism to benefit the elite. Within these discourses, the native population's continuous fight to reclaim their spaces is highlighted with an attempt to situate sustainable development models based on indigenous knowledge bases as alternative to Western ideologies.

Keywords: *Others, Nature, Native, Neo-colonisers, Sustainable, Development.*

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Introduction

As humanity enters a new age, the term “Anthropocene” gains more pervasive presence. The term was originally suggested by environmentalists, to refer to the great magnitude of impact caused by human activities to the Earth, which is hardly positive. As the idea becomes ubiquitous, certain people have suggested alternative terms such as ‘Capitalocene’ and ‘Plantationocene’ to suggest the role of powerful groups like capitalists, elite and the government who assume the role of neo-colonialist in bringing about Environmental degradation and as a result, global ecological crisis. These elitist- imperialist views are that of privileging oneself over all other species and managing, manipulating or mutating them to suit their advantage. Victims of this crisis are not only non-human world of plants and animals but also the powerless marginalized section of society.

To articulate against the neo-colonist values and practices of the neoliberal world, the intersection of Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism emerges as a powerful medium. The cross pollination of the two fields developed during the second wave of Ecocriticism. Unlike the first wave, that viewed ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ as dichotomous, the second emphasized on complex interplay between man and nature, focusing on historical and political mesh both are caught in, eventually leading to a sociological turn in Ecocriticism. *The Environmental Justice Reader* published in 2002, shifted the priorities towards the fusion of nature and culture, focusing on unequal distribution of environmental benefits among rich-poor, white and non-white, ultimately leading to the synergy between Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism in early 2000’s. Critics like Graham Huggan in his 2004, “Greening Postcolonialism” and Rob Nixon in his 2005 work “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism” vouched for Postcolonialism to be more attentive towards Ecocritical concerns and vice-versa to bring about socio-environmental justice.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism developed in Western world and was dominated by the writers and critics of Britain and American for the longest time. But the participation oriental countries, including that of India has been limited. Literature survey shows that within Indian academia, the theory seems restricted to the works of

authors like Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh. Though critically acclaimed Sheela Tommy's *Valli* has been relatively unworked by the virtue of its newness. The dearth of study in Postcolonial Ecocriticism in Indian context and lack of research on the novel by its virtue along with the inclusion of spatial understanding of people's attachment to the spaces to realise how spaces become a tool for economic elites to gain profit, power and subvert native rights. Additionally, fight of the people in reclaiming the lost spaces and discussions on indigenous knowledge bases to develop sustainable development model, broadens the purview and scope of research. Several points of convergence between Ecocriticism and Postcolonial studies make such a double-focused dialogue appear to be well suited for an investigation of Indian visions of nature and the paper attempts to discuss all these parameters by reading it along the lines of Postcolonial Ecocriticism.

Primary objective of the paper is to analyse modern space as the site of contestation. The second object is to showcase global capitalism, modernisation and pseudo development rhetoric have detrimental effect of both natural spaces and natives, aiding only the elite. Additionally, the paper attempts to highlight the how social justice and environmental justice are correlated. Having examined that, the paper aims to bring forth local knowledge which can used to develop efficient models of sustainability.

Subjectivity Entwined with Space

Spaces are not just physical stages on which action is played out, but a social construct with multitudes of meanings attached to them. In Postcolonial Ecocritical discourse, space holds a lot of significance. It forms the center of all conflicts as different actors try to etch it with their own ideologies. There exists a dialectical relationship between spaces and society that produces complex and temporal conditions for meaning production. It is integral in development of social heritage, which requires a long process of social production. It is constructed as a result of active participation and interaction of community members over a period of time. These social relationships, heritage, nature and person's self-perception add meaning to these spaces thereby leading to their identity formation. It also helps in creating a sense of belonging and is useful tool for

community survival. In Sheela Tommy's *Valli*, the space of Kalluvayal becomes the center of the conflict and contestation, as it is perceived differently by each actor. There is a constant struggle between the natives who attach significance to these spaces and the Neo-colonisers who view them as mere commodities to be altered and appropriated as per their interests. Amidst this wrangle, the environmental fabric of the place deteriorates and degrades.

For the natives, the natural spaces of Kalluvayal hold meaning beyond their immediate role as means of livelihood. For individuals as well as for the community as the natural spaces hold a symbolic importance. Knowing and practising culture within bounded domains lead to the formation of collective memories as a group. If one breaks down the ways in which the natives engage with the natural spaces, it can be observed that they do so by four principle means: Nature/Manmade landscapes, Stories and Myths, practising culture which includes their Practices, festivals and Language, which produce certain symbolic meanings.

As a group people of Paniyar tribe, through their lived experiences have formed profound connection with certain spaces of Kalluvayal that forms an integral part of their day to day lives. The Shop with its walls made of "split bamboo" is an important reoccurring spatial symbol that holds meaning for all the men of Kalluvayal. The initiation of Tommichan and Sara into the lives and issues of Kalluvayal takes place here as "Appetan's chai shop awaited the newcomers holding within it the smells of Kalluvayal and the river, and friendship, news and revolutionary ideas" (Tommy 28). It is there, Tommy goes on to meet Peter and Padmanabhan, with whom he goes on to form life long bond of shared memories and meanings. The place essentially becomes platform for people where they get to know about lives and politics within and outside Kalluvayal leading to passionate speeches, discussions and debates among men over tea. Gradually the place itself evolves as an action center for people to voice out their opinions and protest against their oppressions. Another such space is the field where Peter, Tommy and Padmanabhan used to play football on evenings. The place is etched with their memories and stands as a symbol to their unbreakable selfless bond of friendship.

Places like paddy fields, crocodile rock in Kabani's river bed, Unniyachi's shrine become an integral part in part of lives of women of Kalluvayal who share their fears and insecurities, support and strengthen each other.

Kalluvayal has tales of Unniyachi, Veda Princess, Seetha, and several other tales. All the tales directly or indirectly narrated their own stories and affirmed their lived realities. "Stories contain more truth than histories... Because storytellers are bound to bring the truth in their heart to the story they tell." (Tommy 165). Myths form an Integral part of cultural practices and collective memory of the group. The characters in Myths form an archetype for the people of Kalluvayal itself and in their tale one can find the faces of Kalluvayal's people. Occurring in the same space and presenting characters with similar circumstances, the stories lead the natives to identify themselves with it, forming an inseparable part of their identities.

Distinct language and culture that they practise within those bounded domains also form an integral part of their lifestyle. Language is distinct for each land and culture. And the languages of Paniyar tribe, a language without a script, is their way of engaging with one another, thereby providing a distinct quality to those spaces and demarcating it from the rest of the world. Tommy by retaining local songs and certain words as it has tried to keep alive the native spirit alive within the text. They have their unique customs of marriage and the month of Meenam, they celebrate festival for youth as Valliyoorkaavu in the lap of river.

This close connection and identification with natural spaces, instils in its people pro environmental behaviour. And as they begin to identify themselves with the spaces, they no longer distinguish these spaces as "other" commodities to be used for their benefits, they perceive it as a part of their own self thus forming what can be called Environmental Identities. While space is produced by the members of society over the period of time and becomes a significant part of their identity, it is also important for elites seeking to gain economic or political power. They view spaces as commodities that could be altered as per their interests. Very entry of elites into spaces of natives, marks the beginning of vicious cycle of oppression and exploitation. The advent also brings about the changes in spatial behaviour, patterns of land use and organization leading to

damage in both socio-cultural and environmental practices. Power politics operate in the entire process of spatial dominance. When the space is acquired, Neo-colonizers emanate ecological imperialism which ranges in its intensity and implications.

Exploitation, Resource Extraction and Rhetoric of Development

In the novel, the saga of people spans for about forty years and gives a brief account of its colonial past, highlighting ecological appropriation of their lands by the British as they introduced new practices of coffee and cashew plantations in Kalluvayal, while forcing the people to bonded labor. Similar behavioural patterns are repeated and carried forward by Neo-colonisers. Ivachan and his elder son Luca, standing as a prototype for Neo-colonisers cause both social and ecological crisis. They, exploit people by, both physically and psychologically causing them humiliation and trauma as they see their ancestral spaces and identity being snatched away. Various instances in the text showcase elitist Ivachan and his son Luca clearing the forest patches for timber business, poaching animals. And jenmi's subjecting their workers to physical assaults.

The violence becomes all the more vicious for women characters as identified by various theorists like Gayatri Spivak, Vandana Shiva and Val Plumwood. Women become victims of double marginalization, standing at the cross sections of gender and caste. Within the text there are various women presented whose plight could be explored in a similar fashion. Kali's heart wrenching tale of multiple physical molestations by men of elite community stands as a testimony to the plight of several other women that led to her abandonment by her family and lover. Salim's daughter Aishu was also molested and killed by Luca, which forced her family to move away from the land.

Later in the novel, a private corporation buys the lands of the forest to establish resorts for tourism industry. The industry creeps in with a façade of modernisation and development serving them "Poison wrapped up in gold leaf..." (Tommy 320). Youngsters are lured into the fake promises of good lives and jobs by men deployed by the corporations as well as by the government itself as they willingly give way to their

enslavement. “Young, unemployed men skulked into the darkness under the bridge looking for mind-addling drugs, as the yellow wind of development blew ...” (Tommy 318). Thus, pushing people further into vulnerability. As tourists arrived, Adivasis occupying the spaces were chased away, and the land was cleared for resort construction leading them to experience alienation in spatial terms. They felt like an outsider in their own ancestral lands. It also led to the decline of biodiversity for animals and birds are led astray without homes.

All these concerns lead one to question what is development? And whom does it actually benefit? Schas pointed out that development depends on what rich nations feel, development today panders to global corporate interests and is merely a form of strategic altruism, which is executed to suit the socio, political and economic interests of the elite. The idea, standards and definition of development is set by the west, making the oriental nations feel inferior and less adept, thereby renewing and establishing its supremacy. It then strategically tries to enforce its ideas, fulfilling its own interests under the pretext of helping the poorer nations. Similar narrative can be found in the text, situated within the local context, where Tourism industry enters or invades the natural spaces of Kalluvayal, under pretext of development and good life. In the proposed model of development In *Valli*, nobody is concerned about what kind of development people want, the development that should be for improvement of their quality of life, in turn degrades it. For them lands and people are just abstract concepts that they need to move up and down the scale according to their needs. Ecological imperialism in the form of bio-piracy has also been highlighted in the text through the example of Pembi a local healer was exploited by wellness industry. The corporate raids indigenous knowledge and natural resources while exploiting the locals.

“Sometimes, the rain fell out with the earth and did not visit, and at other times, it fell out of the clouds as though the sky itself were falling down. It had lost its integrity. But it was human beings that upset the rhythm of the earth...” (Tommy 324). Amidst these social and ecological catastrophes, text subtly hints towards climate change. It questions the planetary centrality of humans, who are now acting as geological force in the planet. Their ontological modes open up a socio-ecological crisis of climate change. In *Valli*, instances

of heavy flooding, untimely rains, landslides and the like are brought up from time to time. The crisis not only harmed the ecological harmony of nature but also disrupt lives of human beings as the flooding kills thousands of animals as well as humans in the text. Lucy and Peter lose their son Joopan to the same floods. This effectively highlights how the people who are at vulnerable positions, are worst sufferers of these Ecological imbalances. And even though, the blame for the crisis cannot be directly pinned down on a particular group, it becomes very evident that the profit driven capitalist activities contribute a major share to the crisis.

Discourses of Resilience, Negotiation and Reclaiming the Spaces

The Idea home and anxieties of belonging has been extensively explored by Postcolonial Ecocritical writers. With Kalluvayal having multiple claimants and stakeholders, the very idea of home leads us to the debate and discussions on the issues of entitlement. The idea essentially operates on two different planes. It is either legally claimed or emotionally experienced. Thus, giving rise to multitude of questions about how entitlement operates.

In the text, Jenmi, Ivachan could be seen claiming his entitlement to the land in his monologue to Anamkutty, in which he recalls how his father has legally bought the land from Adhikari. He says “If I cut the trees in the forests and hills that my appan bought paying good money, what’s it to them” (Tommy 56)? Hence, claiming that he and his offsprings are entitled to do whatever they wish to with the spaces they bought. Similar entitlement claims were later made by tourism industry workers who boastfully asserted “Don’t you tell us what to do on the land our masters have bought with good money” (Tommy 311). Hence, Neo-coloniser claims to entitlement are purely based on materialistic terms. Native claims stand in opposition to that of elites, who assert “This earth is not yours,’ he [Padmanabhan] said. ‘It belongs to those who have lived here from time immemorial” (Tommy 310). They share with spaces what could be called blood culture and memory nexus. But unfortunately, living and sharing the spaces for generations doesn’t grant any legal protection or claim to these aboriginal inhabitants, pushing them and the environment to vulnerability.

Postcolonial “remapping[s] of stage space” (Gilbert and Tompkins 1996: 154) highlight indigenous rights to land is connected with their basic right to live. The spaces being essence of their identity, could not and should not be taken away from them. Hence, this leads to retaliation and protests from native population as they fight for carving a space for themselves. The methods adopted to protest also varied. Some groups were formed only to defend the rights of people while others were involved in active attacks against the aggressor.

Tommichan along with Peter, Padmanabhan, Basavan and other like-minded men formed “The army of the forest” to safeguard forest from encroachment of Luca and other economic elites who carried on activities like woodcutting and poaching. The army bravely stood in front of trees, at times hugging them mirroring Sundar Bahuguna’s Chipko movement to prevent encroachers from erasing their spaces, culture and heritage and nature. At times, they were successful in resisting encroachment with their defensive methods. But with time, the power of Neo-colonisers multiplied and the army dwindled to a bunch of old men, unable to further resist such attempts.

Even though Padmanabhan was involved with Tommichan and others in defending the forest. He exhibited revolutionary tendencies and a firm belief in actively reclaiming their spaces. He supported and talked about Naxalite group formed under the leadership of Comrade Varghese. The group was formed to protest against the unfair treatment of daily wage laborers who worked under jenmis. It resisted the privatization of public spaces by the government and actively attacked the jenmis who manipulated and exploited the poor, robbing them of their lands.

These rights of entitlement are also extended to non-human species, like plants and animals in the text at times, highlighting non-human claims to the space as well.

It also becomes necessary to understand and examine the ways in which authorities react to people fighting for their land rights. They exhibit their leanings towards the elite, making it harder for poor to take legal actions. The treatment of Padmanabhan by the police presents a heart wrenching picture of authoritarian

regime and native's plight. Even though Kali was molested and murdered by Luca, police arrested Padmanabhan after Luca's statement. The ulterior motive behind this arrested was to curb the revolutionary activities that Padmanabhan was a part of, viewing it as a potential threat to elitist discourses. "Blood caked on the cheek and forehead, the whole body covered in cuts and bruises, legs, crushed and immobile, as though they had been severed from the body, eyes swollen shut" (Tommy 209).

Story of Varghese, who led Naxalite movement, also exposes the regime who did not give him a chance to present his statement instead is killed or rather murdered in a set up encounter by the landlords. Similarly, the workers who take action against their landlords are threatened by the police whereas elites like Luca are let off the hook without any repercussions. He got away with killing and molesting Aishu and later, Kali. Similarly, the men of Tourism Corporations did not have to face the repercussions of killing innocent Basavan.

Certain spaces were also constructed by the Paniyars as a symbol of protest to revolt against the abuses of the system and to protect their culture and their lands. It includes, spaces like Appetan's Chai Shop, Kadoram School, Church, Bamboo huts and water reservoir built by natives on the slanting slopes of hill emerged as spaces of protest. Huts enacted by Peter to resist the profit driven, environment destructing pseudo developmental projects give way to debate of sustainable development and how indigenous knowledge bases and pro environmental attitudes of people can be used to construct sustainable projects. Indigenous Knowledge bases can be used to design a formal and efficient system.

Natives continue to struggle with western knowledge systems, often eclipsing their traditionally rooted systems. But these cultures house diverse forms of knowledge which are deeply rooted in their close communion with the nature, which has allowed these communities to manage their lifestyles with limited impact on the plant and animal species. But it is a near impossible task to avoid the waves of development of modernisation in this highly globalised world. Even Postcolonial Ecocriticism as a theory is not anti-developmental in its attitudes rather it's against the development that panders to global corporate interests and

pushes the people and environment to the periphery. Hence, it becomes important to devise strategies that could implement development what actually helps natives, transferring minimal impacts on the environment.

Conclusion

Cross pollination of Postcolonialism and Ecocriticism finds uniqueness in fact that it promotes aestheticism with advocacy. As Dominic Head points out about these two theoretical fields, Ecocriticism de-privileges the human subject, while post-colonial theory is, in a structurally similar fashion, concerned with the relative de-centering of the colonisers and their discourses. In both cases, such de-centering also involves the attempt to recenter the silenced other and to listen to his or her voice.

Susan's story which runs parallel to the tale of Kalluvayal and its people, is narrated on the account of her diary that she wrote towards the end of her life. She symbolises both the plight of Kalluvayal and its people through her life story. In her case, her lover and husband Shyam and later his mother don the role of Neo-colonisers. Shyam takes her far away from Kalluvayal, to the glass building in deserts of Abu Dhabi. He and his mother often condemn her spirit, her actions making her inferior on the account of her identity.

The ending of the novel is abrupt with no definite conclusion, as the natives continue to fight for their spaces and the neo-colonisers carry on their profit driven discourses by building resorts, housing societies etc. The situation mirrors the present scenario geo-political scenario where continuous subjugation and destruction of land and people is being carried out. In this context, the text is vouching for activism from its readers in general and natives in particular. Tommichan becomes mouthpiece of the author as he voices out her opinions when he says, "All our hopes are with those who rebel" (Tommy 381).

Valli deftly puts forward the issues and complications that arise in Postcolonial world, where spaces become central to human discourses. The concept of development and modernisation remain mere altruistic profit driven strategies unless it addresses actual demands of the people. Tommy hints at current climate crisis that is occurring due to human activities of development and assertively establishes the fact that humanity does

not have a future if it continues with its destructive approaches. Ivachan's death by getting trampled over by elephant symbolises the correlation between social and environmental justice. The approach adopted in such scenarios should be bottom- up and natives should be given enough participation to voice out their opinions. Laws should be amended to give natives enough sovereignty over their ancestral lands to prevent their exploitation. The text is not anti-developmental in nature, but looks forward to its sustainable alternatives. As pointed out earlier, it argues for the development knowledge bases of indigenous population collaboration with modern science to suit the need to the situation.

The subfield of Postcolonial Ecocriticism is gradually moving towards its merger with animal studies. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* offers a timely discussion of this merger in its second section. With the inclusion of Zoocriticism in the field, researchers would be able to further explore and develop the relationship between animals and mankind. *Valli* offers various examples of such bonds throughout its narrative. Toto the monkey remains a companion of Kalluvayal's people and a witness to their plight throughout the text. Both children and adults develop a bond with him, so much so that he was named. Characters like James and Susan also share bonds with Elephants in their village. These connections could be explored further for environmental advocacy and to vouch for animal rights.

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