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Valli: The Voice Of The Forest

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Abstract:

Valli: The Voice of the Forest – An Ecological and Socio-Cultural tale of Sheela Tomy's narrative explores the multi-dimensional role throughout the novel. The forest of Wayanad emerges as a perceptive protagonist and as a living archive of memory, objection, and suffering. By examining the novel through the lens of ecocriticism and post-colonial history, this study investigates on how Tomy gives "voice" to a landscape that has been systematically silenced by colonial exploitation, migrant settlement, modern commercialization and deconstruction. Through Valli's experiences and perceptions, the story highlights the forest's role as a symbol of nature's wisdom, resilience, and the importance of preserving traditional knowledge. The article delves into themes of environmental harmony, cultural heritage, and the transformative power of nature by portraying Valli as a voice that bridges humans and natural worlds. The article focuses on the linguistic and symbolic weight of the title word, "Valli," which bridges the gap between the earth, the creeping vines of the jungle, the identity of the forest-woman, and the historical wages of the Adivasi laborers. The article further analyzes Tomy's use of multipart texture, incorporating letters, diaries, and lore to demonstrate how the forest's "voice" is deeply linked to the survival of the Paniyara and Adiya tribes.

Keywords:

Adivasi identity, Deconstruction, Ecocriticism, Environmental Resistance, Forest, Indigenous Rights, Sheela Tomy, Valli.

Introduction:

In the landscape of contemporary Indian literature, Sheela Tomy's debut novel *Valli* stands as a monumental work that breathes life into the emerald heights of Wayanad. Far from being a mere backdrop for human drama, the forest of Kalluvayal emerges as the primary protagonist of the novel where cognizance and moral responsibility witness the passage of time. By giving the wilderness a "voice," Tomy challenges the traditional anthropocentric narrative, suggesting that the trees, rivers, and soil carry a memory far more enduring and honest than the human records of the land, they inhabit.

The essence of this voice is captured in the linguistic depth of the novel's title. In the regional context of the story, "Valli" is a polysemic word that vibrates with four distinct meanings: the earth, a climbing

vine, a woman as the grain-wages paid to the oppressed. These layers create a profound bridge between the ecological and the social. The "Voice of the Forest" is therefore not just a poetic metaphor; rather, the collective cry of the land, women who nurture it, and the Adivasi tribes, the Paniyara and Adiya people who have been bound to it through generations of labor and exploitation.

The narrative structure itself mimics the density of a jungle, weaving together the lives of migrants like Susan and Peter in the 1970s with the modern-day quest of their daughter, Tessa. Through Susan's intimate diary entries, the reader witnesses the forest's transition from a sacred, biodiverse sanctuary into a commercialized frontier scarred by timber extraction and monoculture plantations. The forest "speaks" through these written artifacts and the whispers of the Kabani river acting as a repository for the blood and sweat of those who sought refuge, revolution, or profit within its borders.

Central to this "voice" is the haunting presence of folklore and the spirits of the dispossessed. The novel evokes the legend of Karinthandan, the Paniyari guide whose betrayal and death at the hands of British colonizers left his soul chained to a tree. This

mythic element suggests that the forest's voice is one of unresolved trauma and resistance. It serves as a reminder that the history of Wayanad is not merely a record of progress, but a series of echoes from those human and non-humans alike who were silenced in the note of civilization.

Furthermore, Tomy utilizes the concept of "Jungle Gothic" to illustrate the forest's power to reclaim what is taken from it. As the characters navigate the political upheavals of the Naxalite movement and the encroaching greed of the tourism industry, the forest responds with its own agency. It is a place where the line between the physical and the spiritual blurs, where the deity Chedettillamma represents a syncretic fusion of nature and faith. This spiritual voice emphasizes that the forest is not a commodity to be traded, but a living temple that demands reverence.

Valli serves as both a lament for a lost Eden and a fierce environmental manifesto. It argues that the modern ecological crisis stems from a fundamental human deafness to the natural world. As the story concludes, the novel reminds us that the survival of humanity is tied to our ability to hear the forest's sigh. To listen to the voice of the forest in Tomy's work is to engage in an act of resistance as reclamation of a history that is as deep and tangled as the vines of Wayanad themselves. Valli's journey is a compelling testimony to the global struggle for indigenous sovereignty. As the Voice of the Forest, she does not just speak for the trees; rather, she asserts the inalienable right of her people to remain the autochthonous guardians of their ancestral territory. In an era of climate exigency, her resistance highlights that environmental protection is inextricably linked to human rights. Without the legal and moral recognition of indigenous land titles, the overstory that shelters our planet remains vulnerable to exploitation.

Looking forward, Valli's legacy aligns with the fundamental shift in international law toward the Rights of Nature. By recognizing the forest as a collection of living beings with their own standing, she challenges us to move beyond a colonial mindset of "ownership" toward an interdependent model of stewardship. Her voice serves as a bridge to a future where justice is defined by our ability to honor both the people and the primordial lands they have protected.

Conclusion:

Valli's journey serves as a profound testament to the power of a single voice in the face of overwhelming environmental challenges. By positioning herself as the "Voice of the Forest," she bridges the gap between ancient indigenous wisdom and the modern Exigency of conservation. Her story is not merely one of resistance, but of a deep, reciprocal love for the land that sustains us. She reminds us that the trees, the rivers, and the wildlife are not silent presences to be managed, but as

living ancestors whose survival is interwoven linked to our own.

Ultimately, the legacy of Valli is a call to reconnect with the natural world before it is silenced forever. As her message echoes through the Leafy Vault and beyond, it challenges each of us to find our own "voice" in the fight for a sustainable future. If we can learn to listen as Valli does with patience, respect, love and a fierce commitment to protection, there is still hope that the music of the forest will continue to thrive for generations to come. Her life proves that while the forest may be under threat, its spirit remains unbreakable as long as there are guardians willing to speak for it.

Valli is not just a character from the past; she is a blueprint for the future. As the world pivots toward the 30x30 conservation goals, her life exemplifies the Deep Ecology principles necessary for true survival. By treating the forest as a sentient being rather than a commodity, Valli's voice provides the compelling testimony we need to navigate the exigencies of a changing climate. Her legacy ensures that the primordial bond between humanity and the overstory remains indissoluble, offering a path toward a justice that is as old as the earth itself.

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