



Tribal Ecologies of Wayanad: A Parallel reading of C.K. Janu's *Mother Forest* and *Adimamakka* with Sheela

Tomy's Valli

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Abstract— “Tribal Ecologies” is one of the emerging fields of study in India, in tandem with, and as a part of subaltern studies and ecocriticism. Tribal Ecologies refers to the unique ecological knowledge, practices, and relationships that tribal communities have developed with their environments over time. This concept encompasses several key aspects like cultural knowledge, sustainable practices, political and social dimensions. Due to the intrinsic relationship the Adivasis share with nature in their association of tribal ecological knowledge and livelihood practices, ‘Tribal Ecologies’ argue that nature constitutes the tribal identity formation. Although nature constitutes the core identity of Adivasis, the American environmentalism, and, to an extent, the ecological criticism with its focus on deep ecology, largely ignore the material needs of Adivasis. Through a tribal ecological reading of the autobiographical works, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu* (2003) and *Adimamakka (Children of Slaves)* (2023) by the Adivasi leader and activist C K Janu, and the ecofictional work, *Valli* by Sheela Tomy this work focuses on the representation of tribal ecology and indigenous voices at the intersection of fiction and life narratives, and establishes the materialistic aspects of tribal ecology as against the postmaterialist grounding of deep ecology and American environmentalism.



Keywords— ecocriticism, environmentalism, deep ecology, cultural knowledge, sustainable practices, post materialist, materialist

I. INTRODUCTION

“Tribal Ecologies” is one of the emerging fields of study in India, in tandem with, and as a part of subaltern studies and ecocriticism, that highlights the unique ecological knowledge, practices, and relationships that tribal communities have developed with their environments over time. The term “Tribal Ecologies” suggests not a monolithic area of study; instead, it leaves out spaces and gaps for enquiry into multifarious tribal ecologies encompassing several key aspects like the rootedness in land, cultural knowledge, sustainable practices, political and social interventions, throughout the length and breadth of India. Of these, two focal areas that current scholarship on Tribal Ecologies engages with are the study of Adivasi’s inherent and symbiotic relationship

with nature, and the eco-political stance for the reclamation of the traditional ownership of the natural resources including the land and forest. Hence Tribal Ecology is foregrounded against the western romantic, deep ecological focus on the “preservation of unspoilt wilderness and the restoration of degraded areas to a more pristine condition in a sophisticated attempt to globalize the ownership of the forest” (Guha, “Radical” 98).

The body of Adivasi literature from South India, fictional or non-fictional, with only a few of the works ever written by the Adivasis themselves hitherto, has largely focused on socio-religious and cultural aspects; the interface between land – which includes, forests, rivers, lakes - and the Adivasis, that shapes the body of tribal eco-political knowledge is seldom written or critically read.

This work attempts to fill this lacunae by engaging a parallel reading of tribal ecologies as represented in the biographical writings, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu* (2003) and *Adimamakka (Children of Slaves)* (2023) by C K Janu, and in the ecofictional work, *Valli* by Sheela Tomy – all three works dealing with Adivasi realities in Wayanad, a district which has the highest concentration of Adivasis in the North-Eastern part of Kerala. C.K. Janu who belongs to the Adiya community of Wayanad, Kerala is a social activist and the leader of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha who led the famous Adivasi land protest in Muthanga, Wayanad. Sheela Tomy's novel *Valli*, translated from Malayalam and published in English has received much critical acclaim as one of the best 'ecofictions' published in India. A tribal ecological reading of these books intends to establish that tribal ecologies are materialistic and deeply eco-political, and is posited against the post-materialistic concept of deep ecology, American environmentalism, and world bank funded ecodevelopment plans which calls for the eventual eviction of the Adivasis from their homelands.

"Rich in detail and facts, it is possible to read *Valli* as a socio-political commentary or as a people's history of Wayanad through the life stories of its characters", says Jayasree Kalathil, the translator of the Malayalam novel into English (Tomy 403). However, the novel is not merely a socio-political commentary or a fictionalized history; the novel's constant preoccupation with Wayanad's geography and ecology and biopolitics has won the fame for novel as one of the ten best ecofictions from India. Ecological concern is the hallmark of the novel and "the land itself is the protagonist" (403). Of the two life narratives by C.K.Janu, the first one, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu* may not be considered a purely autobiographical work in literal sense, as it is not written by C.K. Janu herself, but it is a documented oral testimony by Janu narrated to and transcribed by Bhaskaran and published in Malayalam in 2003 as *CK Januvinte Jeevitha Kadha*. It was translated into English by N. Ravi Shankar and published in 2004. It is perhaps the first instance of a life writing from the margins by an Adivasi in Kerala and is thus significant in nature. *Adimamakka (Children of Slaves)* (2023) written after twenty years of the first book is both a sequel and extended version of the *Mother Forest*. Both works running as a monologue about her life and experiences as an Adivasi woman and activist, and about her hopes and visions for her community at large, are more of a socio-political memoirs rather than autobiographies, delineating the collective history of Adivasi lives and struggles in Wayanad for the last fifty years.

In spite of the genre distinctions, a parallel reading of *Valli*, a fictional work, and C. K. Janu's life narratives establishes that these narratives intersect fully in delineating the Adivasi experiences, not as oppositional accounts but as complementary acts of witness. Hence a study of these narratives explores how these works turn out to be a reclamation of the history of Adivasis at two important levels of significations posited by tribal ecology: firstly, all three works contain a realistic portrayal and in-depth analysis of the intrinsic relationships Adivasi share with nature, and secondly these works involve insight into the historical complexity and socio-political intricacies that determine the Adivasi realities such as marginalities, indignities, bonded labour and displacement and the resultant resistance and struggle to safeguard traditional proprietorship over natural resources and land.

II. ANALYSIS

A) Adivasi-Nature Co-existence

Centred around Kalluvayal, a fictional village in Wayanad, a rural district in northern Kerala, up in the Western Ghats, the novel *Valli* written by Sheela Tomy tells the story of four generations of Adivasis and the migrants, spanning a time of almost fifty years. Chronologically, the storyline of *Valli* begins at the juncture of Naxal movement in Wayanad which resulted in the martyrdom of Varghese in the 1970s. Incidentally, C.K.Janu was born to Kariyan and Vellachi of Chekkote at Thrissileri of Wayanad district of Kerala on 14 July 1970 and her life narratives also follow the same time span of *Valli's* narration, making it possible to study the convergence of lived realities of Adivasi both in fictional and autobiographical narratives. Janu's first work begins with highlighting the strong connection between the Adivasis and the forest, which Janu refers to as 'mother forest'. The title is worthy of attention as "*Mother forest*, the autobiography of C.K. Janu often at times becomes the biography of the Forest too"(Sayoojya 64). *Adimamakka* on the other hand is a true tale of resistance and self-assertion in the context of Adivasi still being forced to remain as slaves; hence the title, "Adimamakka" in Adivasi language, meaning "children of slaves". The word 'valli's' signification is multifaceted and closely connected to Adivasi life, having the meaning of 'earth', 'young woman' 'the wages' as well as 'vine.'

The Adivasis of Wayanad, as they appear both in fiction and life narratives have a holistic relationship with the land, forests and rivers of the Western Ghats, in contrast to the outsiders who see the land only in terms of economic value. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* comments on the symbiotic relation between Adivasis and

nature : “As a source of life nature was venerated as sacred and human evolution was measured in terms of man’s capacity to merge with her rhythms and patterns intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. The forest thus nurtured an ecological civilization in the most fundamental sense of harmony with nature” (56). Tribal ecologies highlight this ecological civilization of Adivasis in harmony with nature. “There was a time when Kalluvayal was a dense forest”(Tomy 1) – the opening sentence of *Valli* locates forest as important a character as others who participate in the evolution of the action of the novel. The uses of embodied metaphors such as “The Voice of the Forest”(1), “The Forest Calls”(35), “I Am the Forest”(146), “Requiem for the Forest”(229) and “The Revenge of Forest”(334) even as the titles of the chapters of the novel to stress the characters’ experiential connections with the forest echo Janu’s description of mother forest: “no one knows the forest like we do, the forest is mother to us. more than a mother because she never abandons us”[sic] (Bhaskaran 5). If *Valli*’s fictional world is set out in the childhood memories read from the diary of Susan as, “A childhood spent in Kalluvayal, amidst forest people and forest myths more astonishing than fairy tales, listening to stories of rivers, mist and earth, to the secret of the forest...”(11), Janu’s childhood sounds the same relation with the forest when she narrates the lived experience as poetically as in the fiction: “we would sit for hours listening to what the forest mumbled”[sic](Bhaskaran 3). “if strangers came we just melted into the forest”[sic] (5). This reminds us of *Valli*’s description: “It was the language of the forest that Basavan spoke, the language of the countless living things in the forest” (Tomy 150). Both narratives, fictional as well as autobiographical are replete with sensuous description of the rich flora and fauna in the mesmerizing forest of Wayanad. There was a time the forest had “the porcupine, the sloth bear, the wild boar, the pangolin, the civet, the ant eater, the snake, the mongoose, the hare, the peacock, the muntjac and thousands of other creatures...” (Tomy 1). Janu names varieties of beans, tubers, fruits and fish: *thuvara, chembu, thina, payar, muthari, karappayam, mothangappayam, paral, mussuetc* and comments, “in the forest one never knew what hunger was” (Bhaskaran 2).

“In environmental studies, it is being argued that forests are ruined because of the presence of adivasis in the forest. This led to mass eviction of adivasis from forest, either under forest conservation acts or wildlife protection acts” (bodhi and ziipao v). Adivasi community is not post-materialist but rather materialist and fiercely protective of nature. The Adivasis of *Valli, Mother Forest* and *Adimakkal* live by the forest. They harvest “Wild honey and kalpasam, black flower-like lichen that grew on rocks

and trees (Tomy 49). Janu, along with other children used to “roam aimlessly in the woods. Or to pluck wild fruits...or to gather reeds...we would dig up wild tubers and eat them (Bhaskaran 2). When “the elders leave for work in the morning, children would go for fetching leafy greens and firewood... During the rainy season when we go for collecting firewoods we would collect young bamboo shoots and leafy greens. Bamboo shoots are made pieces, boiled to remove toxicity and cooked as *toran*”(Janu19). In *Valli* we see Adivasis arm themselves with spears, bamboo sticks and sickles to protect their trees when the timber merchants enter the forest. “They waited in each corner, in each descent, embracing the marked trees” (Tomy 150). As Xaxa observes if tribes were in control of the forest, they would preserve the forest as their life support system (Xaxa, *State, Society* 65).

Nowhere else in the novel, the tribal ecological concern -- the concern for tribes as well as for ecology – is more apparent than in the comparative reading of the life of Kali and the forest in *Valli*. The fate of Kali, the tribal and the forest of Wayanad remains same. “Kali is the daughter of the forest. The one who knows the language of the forest” (Tomy 48). She too had fields in Thrissilery to harvest and to thresh until one day a man came the day Kali was left all alone at home. “A young woman who had lost her virginity and her honour – she had no place at home”(185). It was the forest that gave her shelter. When Rukku, Kali’s friend found her in the heart of the forest, “she was naked, Kali, her body awash with blood, her chela in tatters on the ground... Kali’s voiceless, lifeless lips whispered through the dried blood. It is not the creatures in the forest that we have to fear, it is the creatures among us”(193). If Kali, the Adivasi girl, is “the daughter of the forest” in *Valli*, for Janu and other adivasis forest is the mother. It is this sense of bondness and emotional attachment with mother forest that makes Janu writes, “when the virgin earth catches fire, it gives out a strange smell. Like it is being roasted alive. It is scary sight when the hill catches fire. In the night it looks as if a human being is being burnt alive”(Bhaskaran 3).

Tribal ecological reading of the works under discussion constitutes materialism evading the deep ecology based principle of bio-centricism and emphasizing on the basic human needs of the Adivasis that they derive from nature. They have lived in the forests for generations, and they have maintained balance and harmony in their surroundings. “We never had a problem creating a place for cultivation for ourselves, the implements, the vessels, a hut to live in and such... All these were closely related to the forest, the earth and Nature (47). Janu notes that “though it did not conform to the needs of the civil society,

it was a system of life that was complete in itself" (47). Intervention from the civil society and the developmental practices of the government has harmed the pristine condition of the forest in a most threatening manner and has disturbed the very balance of the Adivasis' life and ecosystem. Janu critically comments: "Mother Forest had turned into the Departmental forest. It had barbed wire fences and guards. Our children had begun to be frightened of a forest that could no longer accommodate them (30). Tomy narrates the same situation, "Greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes had already made their stealthy entrance into the forest ..." (35). They had to remain sad witnesses as "tree after tree was cut down and transported in lorries down the mountain" (Bhaskaran 38). In the blink of an eye Thambankunnu disappeared, and a township and tourist resorts appeared in its place" (Tomy 318). One can read the following observation of Janu as a continuation of the concerns of *Valli*:

A new generation of migrants bought land at a high price for their leisure and vacations. They created artificial lakes and lawns in their courtyards and fields... They wrote article after article lamenting the state of environment" (Bhaskaran 49).

Janu and the people in her community lead a life which was rooted deeply in nature. For them work meant pulling out the paddy seedlings, transplanting them in the fields. When the new migrants began to grow commercial crops, "Our people had turned into mere wage labourers" (30). Now, at the time of tourism promotion, "in colonies our new generation grew up without knowing how to read, washing utensils in restaurants, doing menial jobs in households, becoming unwed mothers..." (49), Janu comments on the present condition of Adivasis.

B) Adivasi Struggle for Land

The crucial point is that tribal ecologies are not post-material but rather intensely concerned with safeguarding traditional proprietorship over natural resources, often through the demands of state recognition (Christopher, "An Introduction" 5). As far as the Adivasis in Wayanad are concerned the reclamation of their expropriated land is the only way to survive. The Muthanga Struggle, a 49-day protest in Wayanad, when the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS) protested the delay in the allotment of land to tribal communities, would have been a turning point in this regard. In *Valli* Susan's letter to Tessa summarizes the event: "In the February of 2003, there were gunshots in Muthanga... Kelumoppa's daughter was at the forefront of the protests (Tomy 33). The fictional daughter of Kelumoppa who led the famous Muthanga Protest was C. K. Janu.

Herautobiography *Adimamakka* with its 57 non-linear vignettes, in fact, constructs an alternative history of Adivasi struggles and protests in Wayanad. Muthanga protest was the failed culmination of a series of protest like "refugee hut protest" (Janu 57, 155), "Cheengery protest" (108) "Aralam Farm protest" (174) – all for the reclamation of the disposed land and lost rights over the forest under the leadership of C.K. Janu.

"Around 30 per cent of tribal households in the state [Kerala] are landless... The proportion of landless tribal households is highest in the Malabar area, with the districts of Wayanad and Palakkad taking the lead" (Bijoy 1976). Adivasis of Wayanad were largely displaced from their traditional habitat from time to time due to the immigration of outsiders. As narrated in *Valli*, the Kumbala king, was intrigued by, "The land where cardamom and black pepper danced, where the air was fragrant with the smell of kaima rice, where the hills were shrouded in mist" (Tomy 164), and consequently, Kshatriyas, the Kottayam Kurumbranad kings, just like their successors in the following centuries, coveted this land and usurped it, killing Vedarajan. Here begins the story of how Adivasis were cheated, which was followed by occupation of the land by Nairs and Namboothiris brought by Kottayam kings turning into jennmis, the feudal lords, and European planters, resulting in pushing aboriginal people "deeper and deeper into slavery and bondage" (397). During the post-world war second migration of people from Thiruvithamcore to Malabar, "[E]xtensive tracts of tribal land were surreptitiously acquired or usurped by cultivators who immigrated from the plains and the adivasis were reduced to the position of landless serfs of these Hindu, Christian and Muslim exploiters" (Bijoy 1976). Janu writes, "All the land belonged to the migrants... The new migrants divided the land into fragments... Paddy fields began to dwindle (Bhaskaran 31). It is at this juncture Janu attended literacy classes, got involved with Communist party, and later, disillusioned by the party (Janu 45) founded an association, Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) on October 3, 2001, while the "refugee hut" protest was going on" (161).

The tragic events at Muthanga in Wayanad on February 19, 2003 was culmination of Adivasi frustrations over the failure of successive governments in the state to restore Adivasi land despite several judicial verdicts in favour of Adivasis. Even though the Kerala government had passed the Scheduled Tribes Act (Restriction on Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) 1975 which legally assured the restoration of alienated lands to the Adivasis, no pertinent execution of the plan took place mainly because of the pressures of mainstream political parties whose supporters were mostly migrants. It

was in this context, under the leadership of C.K. Janu, the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha marched into Muthanga on 4 January 2003 to set up a Grama Sabha of its own. A settlement was built, rationing was introduced, a nursery school was opened, and a checkpoint was established (Bijoy and Ravi Raman 1982). The Adivasis occupied the fringes of Muthanga, which is not truly a forest area, although it was under the control of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. On 19 February 2003, the armed police descended on over one thousand adivasi families - men, women and children—who had peacefully settled on the fringes of the Muthanga range of the Wayanad Wild Life Sanctuary, driving them out in a most brutal fashion and even killing one of those men who resisted. “Our protest was absolutely democratic. However, lying and picturing it as a terrorist activity of occupying the wild life sanctuary under the influence of unknown influences, the police attacked us brutally,” writes Janu (210). Even though Muthanga event was a continuation of adivasi resistance in other parts of India like the 'Enter the Forests' action plan of Nagar Hole National Park in Karnataka in 2005, the attempt at a peaceful occupation of Muthanga by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha met with the most inhuman kind of retaliation; “The police unleashed a reign of terror in Muthanga”(216). It became another incident of Adivasis being marginalized systematically due to land dispossession leading to a denial of habitats, land rights, and then terrorized into submission. And the Adivasi realities in Wayanad remains same with extreme levels of poverty, addiction to alcohol, and low levels of literacy, the main cause of which is their alienation from original habitat.

III. CONCLUSION

The parallel reading of *Mother Forest* and *Adimamakka* by C.K. Janu alongside Sheela Tomy's *Valli*, though belonging to different genre, underscores the main arguments of the essay that tribal ecologies are not romanticized notions of nature or abstractions of good life, but are deeply materialistic, embedded in Adivasis' symbiotic relation and dependence with their land and forest. The narratives reveal how Adivasi life is intrinsically rooted to the land and forest. The biocentric orientation of deep ecology never considered the material needs of the Adivasis. Janu's assertion of forest as the mother and Tomy's depiction of the forest as a living, speaking presence in *Valli* challenge the Western environmentalism's prioritization of wilderness preservation over human survival. In tribal ecology, “nature represents a terrain of politicization,” (Christopher, “An Introduction” 5), and all three narratives highlight the

political dimensions of tribal ecologies, particularly referring to the history of dispossession of Adivasi lands and the struggle for reclaiming it. The Muthanga incident, as chronicled in Janu's *Adimamakka* and alluded to in *Valli*, exemplifies the Adivasi resistance against state-sanctioned land alienation and ecological destruction. The brutal suppression of the Muthanga agitation underscores the state's complicity in perpetuating Adivasi marginalization, reinforcing the need for indigenous sovereignty over land and resources, which is a major concern of tribal ecologies.

Ultimately, these narratives have constructed an alternative history of Wayanad, documenting Adivasi realities, which have been ignored by mainstream narratives. By centering indigenous voices, they challenge dominant ecological discourses that either exoticize or exclude tribal communities (Guha, “Radical” 99). In doing so, *Mother Forest*, *Adimamakka* and *Valli* contribute to an emergent literary and political discourse that asserts land and forest are not spaces to be conserved for their own sake, but a home to be lived in, fought for, and reclaimed.

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