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Decolonising Environmental Education: Forest Narratives in Sheela Tomy's *Valli* (2022)

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Abstract

The discourse on decolonising environmental education necessitates a critical engagement with Indigenous epistemologies and narratives that challenge dominant, Eurocentric paradigms of ecological knowledge. Sheela Tomy's *Valli* (2022) offers a compelling literary intervention in this context, concentrating forest narratives and subverting colonial legacies of environmental exploitation. The analysis positions *Valli* as a narrative intervention that centres the Adivasi communities of Kerala's Wayanad district. The fiction portrays the forest as a sentient, sovereign entity, challenging colonial and post-colonial forest policies that commodified nature through timber extraction and plantations, leading to ecological ruin and displacement. Guided by the insights of decolonial theorists such as Walter Mignolo, Arturo Escobar and Vandana Shiva, the article demonstrates how the fiction leverages folklore and testimony to validate oral histories, presenting them as crucial for understanding ecological crises. *Valli* enacts a pedagogical project that recentres Indigenous knowledge, aligning with environmental justice movements. The article concludes that decolonising environmental education requires fundamental ontological shift from human domination to coexistence. It advocates for a pedagogical model, exemplified by the fictional Kadoram school, which integrates Indigenous knowledge, advances multispecies empathy and recognises the land as a co-instructor. This approach thereby fosters pluriversality and a sustainable environmental ethic.

Keywords: adivasi; decolonisation; environmental education; forest narrative; Wayanad

Introduction: Unlearning the forest: colonialism, *Valli* and the path to decolonial environmental education

Colonialism had a profound impact on Kerala's forests, transforming both the landscape and the lives of its Indigenous communities. Before British rule, Kerala's forests were managed under traditional systems, with local tribes like the Adivasis practicing sustainable agriculture and shifting cultivation. However, colonial administrators viewed forests primarily as a resource to be exploited for economic gain (Mathew, 2019). British colonial rule fundamentally transformed Kerala's forests, replacing Indigenous, sustainable management with state-controlled exploitation (Kumar, 2013). This displacement of Adivasi communities facilitated extensive commercial timber extraction, notably teak and the establishment of cash crop plantations. Consequently, these policies precipitated deforestation, ecological degradation and the severing of cultural and economic ties between forest dependent communities, tribes and their land (Guha, 1985; Gadgil & Guha, 1992; Kumar, 2023). Nested within the lush, undulating landscapes of Kerala's Western Ghats, the Wayanad district stands as a vital ecological treasure. Moreover, its verdant forests and fertile soils are more than natural resources; they are the ancestral homeland and living heritage of

numerous Adivasi communities. The Adivasi, India's Indigenous people officially designated as "Scheduled Tribes," have their heartland in the rugged hill ranges of the Western Ghats and the adjacent low-lying territories spanning the southern borders of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (Bhengra *et al.*, 1998). Groups like Paniyas, Kurichiyas, Kurumbas, Kattunaikkas, Adiyas and Uralis, among others, have woven their identities, cultures and survival strategies into the very fabric of this land for centuries, long before the concept of state boundaries or modern conservation paradigms existed (Thurston, 1909; Census, 2011; Sebastian, 2024). Their relationship with the forest transcends mere habitation; it embodies a profound symbiotic philosophy where nature is not an external entity to be dominated, but a kin network to be understood, revered and nurtured.

Sheela Tomy's award winning debut Malayalam novel, *Valli* (2022), translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil celebrated for its profound ecological concerns and its deep dive into the lives and struggles of the Adivasi communities on the Wayanad district. *Valli* unfolds in the fictional hamlet of Kalluvayal, nestled in the Western Ghats of Kerala, a region where the lives of the Adivasi communities are inextricably woven into the ecological tapestry of the land. For the Indigenous communities of Kalluvayal, the forest is a homeland, a provider and a temple. The division into thirty-six chapters and an epilogue, eschewing a traditional linear plot, mirrors the fragmented, layered nature of history and memory itself. Through Susan's diary, daughter of Thommichan and Sara, Tomy counterposes regional folklore and personal testimony to confront the official record, forcefully documenting four generations of socio-political and ecological destruction. Thus, the narrative operates through a logic of immanence to articulate a pluriversal truth: a parable about the cost of ecological devastation and the enduring power of stories to bear witness.

Environmental education has long been recognised as a crucial component in fostering ecological awareness and sustainable practices. Traditionally, it has been framed within Western paradigms, emphasising scientific knowledge, conservation strategies and policy-driven approaches (Sandoval-Rivera, 2019). However, this conventional model often overlooks Indigenous and local ecological knowledge, marginalising alternative ways of understanding and interacting with the environment. In recent years, scholars and activists have called for the decolonisation of environmental education, advocating for the inclusion of diverse epistemologies, narratives, and cultural perspectives that challenge dominant Eurocentric frameworks (Fricker, 2025; Thornton *et al.,* 2019). Decolonising environmental education involves more than just incorporating Indigenous knowledge into existing curricula; it requires a fundamental reorientation of how nature is perceived and valued. Western environmentalism often separates humans from nature, framing conservation as a form of stewardship over passive ecosystems. In contrast, many Indigenous worldviews, depicted in *Valli*, emphasise reciprocity, interconnectedness and the sacredness of the land (Tuck *et al.*, 2014; Calderon, 2014). Decolonial scholars such as Anibal Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel, Enrique Dussel, Walter D Mignolo, Prakash Kashwan, Aseem Hasnain and Vandana Shiva exposes the enduring structures of Eurocentric domination embedded within global capitalism. Scholars like Linda Smith and Sandy Grande further argues these structures by advocating for a radical reconnection of body, mind and spirit – a necessary step in dismantling the epistemological violence of colonial modernity (Smith, 1999). Richard Kahn (2010) extends this critique, aligning decolonial thought with ecopedagogical struggles that emphasise planetarity – a holistic resistance against capitalist exploitation of both people and the planet. The decolonial critique, therefore, is not just an academic intervention but a call to action – one that demands solidarity across movements to confront the ecological and epistemic crises wrought by colonial-capitalism. Environmental Education in postcolonial contexts has been often shaped by Western conservation models that prioritise state-controlled resource management over Indigenous Ecological Knowledge. This hegemonic approach, rooted in colonial forestry practices, continues to displace and disenfranchise Indigenous communities while perpetuating ecological degradation. *Valli* disrupts these narratives by centring Adivasi perspectives on land, forest and sustainability. Similarly, Tomy critiques the Indian state forest policies, exposing how bureaucratic

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and corporate interests exploit natural resources at the expense of tribal communities. Despite the compelling argument from Schneiderhan-Opel and Bogner (2021) for prioritising environmental value development, the field lacks the proven methodologies to effectively translate this priority into practice. This gap in literature raises questions about the feasibility of their proposition. However, some research suggests promising avenues – for instance, Lithoxoidou *et al.* (2017) found that fostering empathy in pre-school children cultivates intrinsic values toward nonhuman beings. Furthermore, Ginger Potter (2009) argues that traditional environmental education must evolve to address contemporary ecological crises effectively. Potter emphasises the need for environmental education to integrate interdisciplinary approaches, incorporating social justice, Indigenous knowledge and systems thinking to address complex issues like climate change and biodiversity loss.

One of the central arguments of the article is that mainstream environmental education remains deeply rooted in colonial frameworks that prioritise scientific, utilitarian and anthropocentric perspectives on nature. *Valli* is far more than a work of fiction; it is a profound pedagogical manifesto, a narrative act of reclamation that challenges the foundations upon which mainstream, Western-centric environmentalism and its educational models are built. The narrative act functions as a direct challenge to the architecture of colonial and neocolonial knowledge systems. The Western-centric educational model, which encounter through formal schooling and government policies, is predicated on extraction, categorisation and a fundamental human-nature duality. In contrast, *Valli* subverts this by presenting an alternative, embodied pedagogy where learning is synonymous with living. The weight of *Valli*'s pedagogical manifesto lies in its assertion of sovereignty not just territorial, but cognitive and spiritual. The fiction challenges the hierarchical distinction between "scientific" and "traditional" knowledge, suggesting that Indigenous wisdom offers viable solutions to contemporary ecological crises. Thus, the article advocates for a pedagogical shift that validates oral histories, storytelling and land-based learning as crucial components of environmental education (Datta *et al.,* 2022). Another key argument in the article is *Valli*'s critique of developmentalist narratives that justify deforestation and industrialisation in the name of progress. The fiction portrays the violence of land dispossession, corporate exploitation and state-sanctioned environmental degradation, exposing how colonial-capitalist ideologies continue to harm both ecosystems and marginalised communities. Moreover, the article emphasises that decolonising environmental education must involve exposing these power structures and amplifying resistance movements led by Indigenous and local communities. Therefore, the article underscores the importance of literature as a tool for decolonising environmental education. Unlike conventional textbooks that often sanitise or simplify ecological issues, literary texts like *Valli* engage readers emotionally and ethically, fostering deeper connections to environmental justice. In doing so, the article argues that decolonising environmental education requires dismantling colonial epistemologies and centring Indigenous voices, as exemplified in *Valli*.

Colonial-capitalist legacies in forest governance

Sheela Tomy begins the text with the clash of worldviews: the forest as a living and sovereign entity versus the forest as capital. At the very beginning Tomy crafts elegy, a prelapsarian snapshot of the Western Ghats' ecosystem immediately before the violation. Through its rich, sensory detail, Tomy establishes the forest not just as a setting, but as a sentient, interconnected and sovereign entity – a world completes in itself. However, hovering at its edges is the spectre of its own destruction, encapsulates in the single, chilling line: "Greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes had already made their stealthy entrance into the forest, but in those days, it was still a sacred place" (p. 35). The passage first establishes the forest's ontology – its way of being. It is not a passive resource but an active, encroaching life force that "surrounded Kalluvayal, sneaked into its

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fields, set shoots, flowered" (p. 35). This reverses the colonial-capitalist viewpoint, where human settlement is the active centre and the forest is a passive frontier to be conquered and subdued. The breathtaking catalogue of flora and fauna from the prized rosewood and teak to the "poisonous cheru," from leopards to "a hundred thousand tiny creatures" serves a crucial purpose. It illustrates a profound biodiversity where every element, regardless of its immediate utility to humans, has intrinsic value and plays a role in a complex web of life. This is a world of kinship and community, a stark contrast to the capitalist worldview that sees forests as a collection of discrete and extractable commodities. The concept of the "sacred place" is the cornerstone of this pre-colonial worldview. Sacredness here is not merely a spiritual abstraction; it is a socio-ecological contract. It implies a relationship of reverence, reciprocity and restraint between the Indigenous communities like the Adivasis of Kalluvayal and the forest. The forest provides sustenance, medicine and cultural identity, and in return, the communities act as its stewards, governed by customary laws that ensure sustainable harvesting and conservation. The "sacred" is a management system that has, for millennia, preserved the biodiversity Tomy so lovingly describes. The "stealthy entrance" of the "greedy two-legged creatures wielding axes" (p. 35) is the violent ruptures of this contract. This is the arrival of the colonial and post-colonial-capitalist logic. The axe is the ultimate symbol of this legacy. It is not merely a tool; it is an ideology made manifest. Its purpose is reduction: to turn a complex, living entity (a forest) into a dead commodity (timber). The British, and later the independent Indian state following the same blueprint, did not see a "sacred place." The authority introduces a regime of scientific forestry designed to maximise revenue by extracting high-value timber like teak and rosewood for shipbuilding, railway sleepers and furniture (Tewari, 2015). This required the mapping, bounding and policing of the forest, severing the traditional rights of access and managements to the monoculture plantations of profitable species. Thus, the colonial-capitalist gaze could only see a hierarchy of value based on profit which fundamentally desacralizing the forest.

The British colonial subjugation of India was not solely a political or military endeavour; it was equally an environmental one, where the very definition, control and usage of nature were radically re-engineered to serve the metabolic demands of a distant industrial empire. The case of Wayanad's forests is a potent testament to this process, illustrating how colonial forestry is never about conservation, but is fundamentally a mechanism for capital accumulation and bio-power, transforming living ecosystems into quantifiable revenue streams. From the outset, the colonial encounter with Indian forests was driven by a capitalist logic of commodification. Jason W. Moore (2014, 2016) argues, capitalism operates by turning nature into "cheap nature" – a realm of unpaid work and resources to be appropriated at minimal cost to fuel endless accumulation. The British administration's recognition of the "commercial value" of Wayanad's dense forests was the first step in this process. The forest was stripped of its cultural, spiritual and subsistence value for local communities and reimagined in purely extractive terms: a standing reserve of timber to be converted into capital. This epistemological shift, central to the colonial-capitalist project, allowed for the creation of a new reality where trees were no longer part of a complex ecosystem but were reduced to "sleepers" for railways and "timber" for ships, their worth calculated only in pounds sterling on the ledgers of the Empire.

The British colonial government's forest policies were designed to maximise revenue extraction, leading to the large-scale commodification of timber and other forest resources. The Indian Forest Act of 1865 was the state's first major tool to assert ownership over vast tracts of uncultivated land often deemed "wasteland." The 1927 Act dramatically strengthened this, empowering the forest department to declare any such land as "Reserved" or "Protected Forest," criminalising unauthorised use. Tomy reflects it: "When the land reclaimed from the jenmis was included in section 17 of the Land Reform Act, even those who had a tiny parcel of land became encroachers in the eyes of the forest department" (p. 230). From the forest department's viewpoint, the land reclaimed from the jenmis (landlords) was not simply vacant; it was, by their classification, state forest land that had been illegally encroached upon for cultivation. The

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department's mission, codified by the Indian Forest Act (IFA), was to secure these resources from public use, making "encroachers" of anyone on that land without its permission. The tragedy unfolded when the Kerala Land Reforms Act (1963) aimed to transfer the jenmi's land to the actual tillers (kudiyans). However, the forest department, armed with the IFA 1927, had already mapped and claimed these same areas as forest land. The "cobwebs of law" refer to this jurisdictional conflict. The Land Reforms Act sought to assign ownership, but the IFA 1927, with its focus on criminalisation and state custodianship, took precedence in the eyes of the law and its enforcers. The department's records, often old and cartographic, became the legal truth on the ground.

This colonial legacy of control provided the essential infrastructure for its natural successor: capitalist exploitation. Tomy demonstrates how the independent Indian state, in its pursuit of "development" and economic growth, operationalised these colonial frameworks to facilitate the entry of capital into the forests. *Valli* identifies two primary, interconnected modes of this capitalist onslaught: the plantation economy and the tourism industry. The sprawling tea and cardamom estates that dominate the landscape of Mavungal are direct symbols of this transition. These plantations represent a double alienation: first, the alienation of the Adivasi people from their land, which was taken over for monoculture cultivation, and second, the alienation of the land itself from its diverse, natural ecological state. The plantation is a capitalist geography imposed upon a forest geography, replacing biodiversity with a cash crop and replacing a community-based economy with a wage-labour system that creates dependency and exploitation. This cycle of exploitation is a direct consequence of the colonial-capitalist land grab that privatised common resources. Tomy's text is replete with visceral descriptions of this exploitation of labourers: "Landowning farmers and jenmis take Adivasi people on lease as labourers and make them work on their lands. It's called 'vallippani' – labouring in return for valli, a share in the crop" (p. 31). This stark contrast highlights the extractive logic of capitalism, which values the commodity over the labourer and the profit over the ecosystem. Furthermore, the capitalist logic further evolves by finding new avenues for accumulation, such as the commodification of nature through eco-tourism. Tomy's narrative exposes eco-tourism not as a benign alternative to industry but as a sophisticated mechanism of accumulation that commodifies nature and culture, continuing a historical project of displacement under a veneer of green modernity. As mentions in the local news "It has been reported that a mafia connected to the tourist industry has been exploiting the traditional medicine of the Adivasi people and its everyday practice" (p. 333). In that context, this model of tourism engages in a profound commodification of both nature (medicinal herbs) and Adivasi culture. Philip Varghese and Yoji Natori studies (2024) that tourism development has brought about additional challenges in the Wayanad and the situation of the Adivasi communities is precarious. Tomy critiques literary indictment of deforestation as "Kalluvayal has recently been in the news for the protests against deforestation and resort building. Within a decade, hectares of forest, rich in biodiversity and home to several rare species of flora and fauna" (p. 348).

Indigenous epistemologies and environmental stewardship

The foundational gesture establishes the fiction's core premise: to understand the land and its Indigenous people, the Mala Pulaya community, one must first learn to perceive the world through their ontological framework. Through the letter of Valyappachan, Tomy reflects contrasts of two worldviews: the Adivasi philosophy of symbiotic coexistence and the extractive mindset of the migrant settlers. As Tomy mentions: "... our indigenous people, the adivasis, were also nature's guards. They never poisoned the waterways to catch fish, and yet their bamboo baskets with vaala, kuruva, snakhead, catfish and whitespot. They only took just enough honey and left the rest for the bees, just enough fruits and jungle roots to survive" (pp. 7–8). The Indigenous

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epistemology detailed here is one of reciprocity and profound respect. Practices like refusing to poison waterways, taking only enough honey and fruit, and living in biodegradable bamboo huts are not primitive economics but a sophisticated ethical system. This system is rooted in the understanding that humans are not owners or conquerors of nature, but participants in an interconnected web of life. Knowledge is derived from deep, generational observation and a moral code that prioritises the health of the ecosystem, ensuring its abundance for future generations – the very definition of stewardship. The arrival of the migrants signifies the violent imposition of a different epistemology, one based on land ownership, resource accumulation and domination over nature. This shift from a reciprocal relationship to an exploitative one is what leads to the ecological and cultural devastation chronicled in *Valli*.

Tomy elaborates: "When the fields were born, there was only one god for humans, animals, birds and all creatures alike. He was Pakkathaivam, God of the Fields. . . . But slowly, humans decided to become gods, and everything changed. The rivers and ponds dried out, and Pakkathaivam began to feel very thirsty . . . " (p. 117). This singular deity, Pakkathaivam (God of the fields), is not a transcendent, detached god but an immanent one, intrinsically linked to the land and its entire community of life. This reflects a worldview where divinity, humanity and nature are not separate categories but exist in a continuous, sacred relationship. The central conflict, and the core of the argument manifests the human decision to "become gods." The desire to "become gods" represents the opposite: the arrogance of anthropocentrism, where humans place themselves at the apex of creation, separate from and superior to nature. The consequences are immediate and visceral: the rivers dry, and the land-god himself "began to feel very thirsty." This is a powerful metaphor for the desiccation of life, spirit and knowledge itself under the new exploitative regime. The thirst of Pakkathaivam is the thirst of the forest, the wildlife, and the Indigenous communities whose survival and cosmologies are tied to the water. It illustrates a key tenet of Indigenous thought: the well-being of the land is inseparable from the well-being of its spiritual and human inhabitants.

It is a profound and often overlooked truth that the most radical environmental activism is not a modern Western import but is deeply embedded within Indian Indigenous wisdom. This is starkly evident in the narrative of Padmanabhan and Peter, whose work in Kalluvayal is not mere performance but a vital reclamation of a sacred, ancient contract between humanity and nature. To dismiss their street plays as simple entertainment is to fundamentally misunderstand their power; they are, in fact, a direct channelling of a millennia-old Indian philosophical tradition that views the forest, or "kananam," not as a resource to be exploited, but as a living entity. Padmanabhan embodies this very spirit – a true modern-day sage whose crusade is to reawaken this dormant understanding. The most potent argument for this deeper significance lies in the transformative moment of the performance itself. When the soothradharan initiates the ritual, pressing his palms together to invoke the Mother Goddess of Earth, a critical shift occurs. It is not an actor playing a part; it is Ruku becoming the deity and appears in the shape of Mother Earth dancing in a frenzy foot and warns:

"I must settle here . . .
Here, as Vanadurga, goddess of the forest
There, as Jaladurga, goddess of the water
And over there, as Bhadrakali, the protector . . .
Who will build the roof for my house?
A roof that opens to the four oceans . . .
The sky is my roof,
The green canopy is my roof,
Don't you cut it down, don't you dare touch it . . . " (p. 142)

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The forest is a living library, a repository of memory, law and identity for its Indigenous inhabitants. In the episode "I am the Forest" is a profound narrative embodiment of Indigenous epistemologies, where the forest is not a mere setting or a resource, but a sentient and pedagogical entity. The annual day event at Kadoram School serves as a significant platform for Padmanabhan to discourse on themes of forestry, wildlife and the natural world. This pedagogical approach enables children to comprehend the consequences of ecological degradation while instilling a sense of environmental stewardship. Furthermore, for the Paniyar tribal children, these narratives function as a vehicle for transmitting Indigenous knowledge, traditional practices and the cultural values attached to natural elements. This emphasis on the historical primacy of forests aligns with Padmanabhan's teachings at a Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parisad study camp, where he highlights their ancient and enduring significance as "The forest. The sacred place of rejuvenation. The abode of countless creatures. Sages would come into the heart of the forest – the Kananam – to experience God" (p. 146). This episode illustrates how every plant, stream and animal is a teacher, offering medicine, ecology and spirituality. For millennia, Indigenous wisdom has served as a profound environmental education, rooted in deep continuity with place (Poelina *et al.*, 2023). While centuries of colonial violence shattered lifeways and erased entire knowledge systems, Indigenous Elders worldwide preserved the stories and relational understandings of their peoples. Trusting that a time for renewal would come, they held these knowledges until they could be honoured once more – this time, with a clear accounting of colonial impact. This revival is now a global movement, re-enlivening ancient wisdom through learning from and with forests, rivers and the land (Bird Rose, 2022; Blaise & Hamm, 2020; Kohn, 2013).

The land of Kalluvayal is not a passive backdrop but a primary character, a sentient entity that feels, remembers and responds. This establishes the land itself as the ultimate repository of memory and truth. The characters' lives are deeply interwoven with this sentient cosmos. They speak to the trees, understand the language of birds and animals, and read the land for signs and omens. The narrative is filled with intimate, non-exploitative interactions: children talking to fireflies, farmers consulting the soil and the rain, and the community living in a constant, respectful dialogue with their environment. This mirrors the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), who in *Decolonising Methodologies* emphasises that for Indigenous peoples, the land is central to identity, history and knowledge systems. Knowledge is not abstract but is emplaced and embodied; it is derived from deep, sustained and respectful relationships with a specific territory. In *Valli*, the Indigenous Paniya characters possess this emplaced knowledge par excellence. They know which roots heal, which paths the elephants take and how the forest breathes. Therefore, their knowledge is not recorded in textbooks but is lived, sung and remembered through stories and practices passed down through generations. This epistemology is presented not as primitive superstition but as a sophisticated, accurate and sustainable science of place, a point vehemently argued by Indigenous scholars like Robin Wall Kimmerer (2015), who calls for a "braiding of Indigenous and scientific knowledge" for ecological renewal. As Kimmerer articulates in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, while the Western economic model is based on property and exchange, the Indigenous model is based on the gift and reciprocity. The earth gives gifts (food, water, materials), and in return, humans have a responsibility to give back through gratitude, care and sustainable use – to become, in her words, "the people of the seventh fire," who look back and repair the damage of those who came before.

Likewise, a central element of the text is stark contrast between two opposing worldviews: the Indigenous concept of stewardship and the extractive logic of colonial and post-colonial development. The arrival of the plantation economy, represented by the encroaching rubber and eucalyptus estates, symbolises a violent rupture in this ancient covenant. This new system views land as a resource to be dominated, measured and exhausted for profit, directly clashing with the Adivasi belief in living in harmony with nature's rhythms. The felling of ancient trees and the poisoning of rivers are not just environmental crimes in the narrative; they are acts of cultural and spiritual genocide, severing the people from their history, their traditions and their very sense of

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self. The stewardship of Kalluvayal is thus depicted as a battle for the soul of the land. Through multi-generational saga, Tomy shows how stewardship is an inherited traditional wisdom and practice (Arnold *et al.*, 2021) a knowledge system encoded in practices of organic farming, seed preservation and sustainable foraging. Basavan serves as the embodiment of Indigenous environmental ethos in this context. His characterisation as "the protector, the hunger of wild trees" (p. 42) frames him not merely as a defender of the forest, but as an extension of its wisdom and a vocal advocate for decolonial and anticolonial pedagogies (Nxumalo, 2021). The text states he spoke "the language of the forest" (p. 150), indicating his resistance to deforestation is a direct manifestation of this symbiotic relationship.

While Whyte (2016) refers to the current ecological crisis as a form of "colonialism in new times," where the same logic of dispossession and extraction is now enacted through corporate and state-led development projects. This process is inherently epistemicidal – it seeks to erase Indigenous ways of knowing to replace them with a homogenising, extractivist worldview that facilitates the exploitation of land and people. The invasion in Kalluvayal by external forces – the land mafia, the political parties, the plantation corporations is simultaneously a physical and an epistemological assault. The law, instead of protecting the land and its original custodians, becomes a tool for the powerful to legitimise theft and violence, a point central to the work of scholars like Vine Deloria Jr. (1992), who detailed how Western legal systems are used to disenfranchise Indigenous peoples and separate them from their land-based identities.

Whispering woods: Forest narratives as resistance

The primary mode of resistance in *Valli* is the fundamental narrative architecture, which elevates the forest from an inert object to a sentient subject. Tomy's invocation of comrade Varghese (a clear reference to the real-life Naxalite leader Arikkad Varghese) is crucial. As Tomy highlights: "... Those who enslave the poor in bonded labour, or those who react to the injustice when they can't take it anymore? All Comrade Varghese said was that those who toil on the land are also humans, and that they should be paid fairly for their labour so that they too can live" (p. 30). This directly links the contemporary exploitation of the land to a longer history of resistance against feudal and capitalist structures. The Naxalite movement in Kerala was, in part, an uprising of the landless against the landed. By remembering Varghese's simple demand for fair and human dignity, the text resurrects a suppressed revolutionary history. Tomy forces a confrontation with the past, arguing that the present-day inequality and environmental destruction are continuations of the similar injustices Varghese fought against. One can argue that the most potent form of resistance is often the act of speaking the truth that power seeks to bury-truth about historical injustice, ongoing exploitation and ecological devastation.

Interwoven with the forest's whispers are the ancient myths and tribal folklore that bind the human community to the land and creating a narrative resistance rooted in deep time. Tomy integrates the stories of the Muthappan deity, local spirits and tribal legends that govern the ethical and ecological balance of the region. These are not quaint superstitions but functional cosmologies that encode centuries of sustainable practice and ecological wisdom (Wang, 2019; Xiang, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2016). They form a moral framework that dictates how to live with the forest, not against it. The arrival of external forces armed with machinery and legal documents constitutes more than a physical incursion, it is an act of epistemological violence, imposing a foreign system of value that invalidates a community's sovereign understanding of its history and place. Thus, the destruction of a sacred grove is thus not merely an ecological loss but a form of cultural genocide, an attempt to silence the stories that have long protected that grove.

The narrative follows the arrival and entrenchment of the worldview of plantation capitalism – first with tea and coffee, and later with the more virulent and illegal land grabs for tourism and agriculture. This process is what political ecologist Swyngedouw (2018) advances "asymmetries of

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political and economic power in which local residents are habitual victims" as a contemporary form of enclosure whereby common lands, resources and ways of life are privatised and monetised, displacing local people and severing their spiritual and material connections to the land. The fictional forest of Kalluvayal becomes a microcosm for this global phenomenon. Tomy's narrative gives names, faces and deep histories to those who are otherwise invisible in economic reports or dismissed as "impediments to development." In this context, the slow poisoning of the river, the silencing of the birds, the brutal felling of ancient trees and the consequent suicides, illnesses and cultural amnesia among the people are not presented as isolated tragedies but as interconnected symptoms of a systemic ecological and social catastrophe. It is in opposing this systemic violence that Tomy's narrative performs its resistance by embodying what philosopher and activist Vandana Shiva (2005) calls "earth democracy." Shiva argues for a shift from a paradigm of domination to one of partnership with the earth, recognising the intrinsic value and rights of nature and the knowledge sovereignty of forest-dwelling communities. Tomy painstakingly catalogues the flora and fauna not with the detached gaze of a botanist, but with the reverence of a devotee. Trees like rosewood and jackfruit are named; birds like the hornbill and the Malabar whistling thrush are identified by their calls; the medicinal properties of herbs are detailed. This encyclopaedic knowledge, woven into the daily lives and rituals of the characters, especially the Indigenous communities like the Malana and the Muthuvan, asserts the validity and sophistication of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) against the homogenising, extractive logic of colonial and post-colonial studies. The forest is known, loved and understood, not merely measured for its board feet of timber or acreage for plantations.

Rob Nixon's (2013) concept of "slow violence" describes a delayed and invisible structural injustice. The reader experiences the violence not through a single explosive event, but through a relentless accumulation of details: the taste of metallic water, the sight of a fish kill, the sound of a chainsaw echoing where a bird's call should be, the lingering cough of a character poisoned by pesticides. In the author's note section, Tomy undergoes in a profound and vivid enduring resistance of the Wayanad people: "Adivasi people who once fought for valli (wages), and now were still fighting for valli (earth), and the migrant farmers at the brink of suicides; the political history labour" (p. 400). It is a resistance that has moved from pocketbook to the soul, from demanding fair wages for their work to defending the sacred earth that defines them. And their most potent weapon remains the stories they tell – truths that are "brighter than light," ensuring that even if they are rendered voiceless by power, they will never, ever be silent. Tomy's narrative posits that to be rooted in a place like the Western Ghats in the 21st century is to be inherently and violently entangled with planetary ecological crisis. The community's resistance is therefore not an isolated act of self-preservation but a conscious and strategic engagement in a worldwide conflict. Their enemy is not just a local corrupt official, but the very architecture of global capitalism that simultaneously devours forests in Kalluvayal, the Amazon forest and Los Angeles wild life.

Decolonising environmental education

Tuck and Yang (2012) argued that decolonisation cannot be comfortably contained within the walls of academia or reduced to a metaphor for social justice. It must be, first and foremost, about the literal repatriation of Indigenous land and the restoration of Indigenous sovereignty. Concurrently, decolonial environmental theorists argue that mainstream environmentalism and its educational offshoots are often deeply entangled with colonial, patriarchal and capitalist worldviews that perpetuate the very crises they seek to solve. This paradigm seeks to dismantle the hegemony of Western, scientific and frequently anthropocentric modes of knowing to make space for plural epistemologies, particularly the place-based, relational and spiritual wisdom of Indigenous and communities (Witt, 2019). *Valli* serves how forests, as breathing classrooms, are inspiring new ways to imagine our collective ecological futures (Hay, 2024). It presents a vision of

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learning that is not merely an alternative pedagogical method but a radical act of reclaiming education from a colonial extractive model and "performance ecologies" (Natraj & Narayana, 2024). The Kadoram school's description is the antithesis of the standardised factory-model education imposed by colonial systems and perpetuated in the post-colonial era. The absence of "attendance books here, or homework or canes or exams" (p. 139) is a direct rejection of the mechanisms of control, discipline and quantification that define mainstream schooling. These tools are designed to produce a homogenised, compliant citizenry disconnected from their local context and prepared for integration into a global capitalist economy. By dismantling them, the community of Kalluvayal severs education from its colonial purpose and re-roots it in the rhythms and needs of their own world. Decolonising education is, fundamentally, about re-establishing the link between knowledge, land and place (Styres, 2018) and this is where the passage most vividly aligns with decolonising environmental education. The curriculum is not abstract or imported; it is emergent and embodied through direct participation in the life of the forest and its cycles. The children learn "harvest songs, Indigenous medicine, arithmetic, science, singing and dancing" not from textbooks that universalise a Western worldview, but through the acts of sowing, planting, weeding and harvesting. This is the role of ecological aesthetics and art-based practices of care and multispecies learning (Vasko, 2021). These Indigenous scholarships provide the only viable ethical framework for integrating more-than-human kinship networks of forest ecologies, a necessary guidance that Western paradigms fundamentally lack (Lewis *et al.,* 2018). Science is learned by understanding ecosystems, arithmetic by calculating yields and medicine by knowing the forest's flora. This approach of knowing forests through multispecies collaborations of more-than-human creativity (Rousell, 2023) counters the colonial legacy that has systematically dismissed local knowledge as primitive, instead positioning it as the essential, living core of a relevant and sustainable education. The flexibility – "Anyone can come at any time . . . and go back home at any time" (p. 139) respects the communal and familial responsibilities of the children, rejecting the rigid, industrial timetable of the state school. Education is not a separate sphere of life but is integrated into the daily and seasonal patterns of the community.

Ultimately, this episode culminates in a decolonial environmental ethic that is profoundly hopeful and relational. The hope that "Kalluvayal will be proud of these children of the forest" (p. 140) is a hope for a future where value and belonging are defined by the local community and ecosystem, not by external, colonial measures of success. The final sentence – "This wind and the mist, this rain and the forest, and the very heart of Kalluvayal will be with us" (p. 140) is a profound statement of solidarity with the more-than-human world. This perspective conceptualises decolonisation not as an exclusively human-centric struggle, but as a symbiotic partnership with the land. Consequently, the pedagogical approach it describes rejects the instrumentalization of the environment as a mere subject of study, instead cultivating a deep, reciprocal kinship that positions the forest as both co-instructor and partner in the decolonial project.

At the heart of the decolonial critique is the argument that mainstream environmental education is built upon a foundational separation of culture and nature, a dualism entrenched by enlightenment thought and colonial expansion. Decolonial theorists like Arturo Escobar (1995, 2011) and Marisol de la Cadena (2015, 2019) argue that this ontology is not universal but is a culturally specific product of Western modernity that was violently imposed on the rest of the world through colonialism. Environmental education that operates within this framework, even when teaching "sustainability," often reinforces this separation. It treats the environment as an external problem to be solved through technological innovation or policy intervention rather than as a web of relationships within which we are inextricably embedded. This reflects the decolonial insistence on "pluriversality" or "a world where many worlds fit" (Blaser & De La Cadena, 2018; Escobar, 2018) – the understanding that the world is made up of many worlds, all interconnected and imbued with agency and spirit.

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Furthermore, decolonial theorists such as Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) and Kyle Whyte (2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b) point to the concept of "ontological violence" – the violence inflicted when one worlding system erases or subjugates another. Colonialism was not just a material project of extracting wealth and land; it was also an epistemological project that systematically invalidated Indigenous knowledge systems, branding them as primitive, superstitious, or unscientific. Modern environmental education, while invaluable, often continues this legacy by positioning itself as the sole arbiter of valid knowledge about nature. Decolonising environmental education, therefore, involves an "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2007, 2010; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Mignolo & Escobar, 2010; Zembylas, 2025; Karmakar & Pal, 2025), a deliberate attempt to subjugated knowledges. Tomy asserts that for communities whose history has been one of displacement and exploitation by the state and capitalist forces, the truth resides not in the archive but in the collective living memory. By centring oral traditions and Indigenous knowledge, *Valli* performs epistemic shift, validating alternative ways. Furthermore, Tomy disobeys by exposing the intentional gaps and distortions within the official epistemic order.

Conclusion: Unearthing the roots of a new environmental ethos

The journey through the dense whispering forests of Tomy's *Valli* culminates in a powerful and transformative argument for the decolonisation of environmental education. The conclusion of this research article posits that *Valli* serves as an indispensable literary and philosophical resource, offering a blueprint for an environmental education that is rooted in place, embodied in practice, narrated through story, and deeply entwined with social justice. The characters in *Valli*, and the paniyar community Tomy represents, does not learn about the forest through textbooks, abstract theories, or detached observation. She understands the medicinal properties of plants, the migratory patterns of animals, and the language of the seasons through a knowledge system passed down through stories, rituals and daily practice. This form of knowing is presented not as primitive folklore but as a sophisticated, empirically-tested and sustainable science of place.

Furthermore, *Valli* demonstrates that environmental alienation is a direct consequence of colonial and capitalist extractivism, which serves the profound spiritual and cultural bonds between people and their land (Kashwan & Hasnain, 2025; Santra, 2025). The antagonist – the nexus of corporate greed, state complicity and exploitative tourism is not just a threat to the physical forest but to the very soul of the community. Thus, the research article concludes by noting that environmental education necessitates a narrative shift. The syllabus must be populated not just by Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, but by writers like Tomy, by tribal storytellers, by grassroots activists whose voices articulate a different reality of ecological struggle and wisdom. Students must engage with narratives that emerge from the front lines of environmental conflict, stories that are messy, painful and imbued with a fierce love that is often absent from sanitised textbook accounts. This literary diversification is not an add-on; it is central to developing a nuanced, empathetic and politically aware environmental ethic. Finally, the article concludes that *Valli* presents a vision of environmentalism that is inextricably linked to the fight for social justice, thereby challenging the apolitical and often elitist character of mainstream environmental education. This intersectional approach refuses to isolate the "environment" as a separate category from human society. It recognises that the same systems of power that exploit nature also exploit marginalised people. Therefore, a decolonised environmental education must be inherently anti-oppressive. It must teach students to see the connections between deforestation and displacement, between pollution and poverty, between climate change and global inequality. It must foster a sense of solidarity that transcends species and borders, creating environmental citizen who understand that justice for people and justice for the planet is one and the same struggle.

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