

# Gendered Trauma And Identity In Sheela Tomy's Novel, Valli

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Women process trauma in a unique way than their male counterparts. For society, women's trauma is at the periphery, however in certain contexts, it could be a manifestation of the struggles of the community. Trauma of indigenous women is less researched because of their invisibility in mainstream literature. This paper aims to study the traumatic experiences of individual tribal Adivasi women characters and their collective trauma as a community in Sheela Tomy's novel, *Valli*. Studying their pain in juxtaposition with the trauma of women characters belonging to dominant communities provides a perspective that focuses on the shared trauma that women face. The paper explores the different strategies that women characters follow to confront and internalize trauma as part of their identity.

**Keywords :** Trauma, Gender, Indigenous, Tribe, Women.

**Introduction:** The national uproar on May 4, 2023 on two Kuki tribal women from the state of Manipur in India who were paraded naked on the road and gangraped in the nearby field rocked the foundation of Indian Constitution which is built on the ideals of justice, equality and liberty. The warfare between two ethnic groups of the North Eastern State took a horrible turn when the sexual violence on the women from Kuki Zomi became the headlines of the country. Apart from the incident being a stark violation of human rights, it brought out some disturbing perspectives of how the female body is treated in the times of communal rivalry. Research on Partition of India recounts several incidents of rape, torture and mutilation of women's bodies. (Deepa Narasimhan-Madhavan et al., Arunima Dey et al.) These targeted violence against women has been an enactment of authority and dominance of one community over the other. History notes several instances from the past which proves time and again that women, who are considered vulnerable by society, are targeted to show the dominant class or community's display of strength and superiority. (Laura Muñoz-Encinar et al.) It is a deliberate attempt to control, intimidate and turn the events into a psychological warfare. According to Nira Yuval-Davis in her book called *Gender and Nation*, women become the special target during ethnic and nationalist conflicts. Gendered violence serves as an act of intimidation, humiliation and the assertion of dominance. (C. Rollero et al.) Violence and the consequential trauma cause deep scars in the psyche of women who struggle to process the traumatic experiences caused to their bodies.

Trauma in indigenous women is often not or less researched. It is arguably collective, intergenerational, and psychological in nature. The physical and mental trauma these women face is consigned to oblivion because of the society's dehumanizing perspectives towards them. Their body experiences are not documented or represented in the mainstream because of their so called 'resilience' or 'indifference' to pain. Their bodies, which are a site of cultural inscription and traumatic experience, confront the reality of living with these traumatic memories with no agency to recount their past traumatic experiences. Unless there is video evidence like the incident of the Kuki women, the survivor's or the witness' testimony is always discredited as erroneous or distorted. Their voices are muzzled because of the society's hegemonic perspectives about their body experiences. This paper attempts to understand the different levels of trauma that indigenous women characters face in Sheela Tomy's novel, *Valli*. The novel, based on the Paniyar tribe of Wayanad, is a powerful narrative of exploitation, discrimination and resistance. Originally written in Malayalam and translated into English, the story is set in Wayanad, the highlands of Kerala, and serves as a neat documentation of the Paniyar tribe's everyday living and their struggle to survive against intergenerational oppression of the dominant class. The Paniyar characters are sometimes mentioned as Adivasis in this paper. Adivasi is the term that denotes aborigines from India or otherwise known as original inhabitants of the land.

While attempting to study traumatic experiences of black women, Jennifer L Griffiths in her book, *Traumatic Possessions*, raises doubts about the usefulness of contemporary trauma theories because trauma studies originally was a part of Freudian Psychoanalysis and the trauma theories that emerged about the Holocaust event were all 'western' in their outlook. (Griffiths 3) These studies prove ambivalent owing to their little understanding of the sufferings of these women from the standpoint of indigeneity as well as because of their Eurocentric prejudices and the classical psychoanalysis patriarchal leanings. Freud's theory of understanding repression and desire becoming the key to interpreting psychic trauma fails to hold good because the traumatic memories of these women are in the actual events rather than their repressed feelings and memories. This proves the impracticality in the use of traditional trauma theories. Owing to these shortcomings of the contemporary trauma theories, a scholar is left to interpret the trauma in indigenous people with an improvised understanding.

*Valli* chronicles the lives of four generations of women who lived in the highlands of Wayanad and carry beautiful as well as traumatic memories about their survival in the forest. The word 'Valli' presents a multiplicity of meanings. In Malayalam, it means a vine, earth, a young woman and most importantly the wages that indigenous people received after toiling in the lands of the dominant class for months. This 'oppressive feudal practice' is what exploited Kerala's indigenous Adivasi people called the Paniyars. This is the collective trauma that the Paniyars share for many generations. Their victim status is not understood by them because of lack of education, awareness and their chronic trauma has altered their self-perception and the inability to express the same in language. As such, trauma theorists argue the inability of language to express traumatic experiences. Jacques Lacan's Real stage tells us about the state of limbo where language holds no value and it becomes incorrigible. The traumatic experiences of the tribes can be associated with Lacan's Real state where language loses its meaning. The Paniyars spoke the Paniya language which lacked script and hence lacked the witness accounts or memories which is crucial for trauma studies.

The novel poses a good mixture of indigenous tribal characters as well as the dominant class characters. This juxtaposition offers the readers an understanding of the stark binary opposition in which these tribal characters are placed in the society. Among the men characters belonging to the dominant class the readers are offered a contrast of some who plunder, rape, murder and exploit the Adivasi community and some who teach, rebel and strive for the advancement of these indigenous people. The women characters, Annamkutty, Sara, Susan and Tessa are the four generations of women who have lived in the imaginary place called Kalluvayal set in Wayanad and they belong to the dominant class. Sheela Tomy skillfully handles the psychic trauma of these women and an augmented version of physical and mental trauma that the indigenous Adivasi women undergo. The story is viewed from the perspective of Susan who was born and raised in Kalluvayal and a key witness in the trauma of indigenous women characters and the dominant class. Her letters to her daughter Tessa and her diaries written during her life in Kalluvayal act as powerful witness accounts of the innumerable horrors that the characters undergo. Her memory and testimony offers the readers an impartial account bereft of any dominant cultural voice aiming to reinterpret the events. According to trauma expert, Cathy Caruth, trauma is not an individual affliction but a collective experience that has social, cultural and historical dimension (Caruth 4) Susan's pain of carrying the traumatic memories is not hers alone, but the memories that the entire Adivasi village carried in their hearts.

Susan's mother, Sara elopes with Thommichan and settles down in Kalluvayal, a hilltop village. The pain and the psychic trauma of leaving her family is reflected in the hesitant manner in which she starts her life in Kalluvayal. She focuses on teaching the Adivasi children in the Kadoram School to overcome the longingness to see her mother and express her guilt of leaving her. This is a scar that Sara carried her entire life and her anger and guilt towards herself is targeted towards her husband, Thommichan who considers her short temperedness as a migraine induced temper. The instant attraction that Sara experiences with Annamkutty is a reflection of her likeness to her mother and she represents a visual and a psychic replica of her mother. For Annamkutty, who is in a long abusive marriage with the domineering patriarch, Ivanchan, who plunders and colonizes not just the forest resources but its human inhabitants too, Sara is the daughter she never had. Sara's witnessing of Ivanchan's son Luca's sexual encounter with an Adivasi woman proves a breaking point in her sanity. Her nightmares are a proof of the intense trauma that she endures when Thommichan is arrested and tortured for educating the Adivasi people and kindling their revolutionary ideals. Her nightmare about the landslide offers a premonition about the gruesome death she is about to endure. She finds herself running with Susan clutched to her chest and watches blood flowing from Apettan's sightless right eye. "Unable to stand the redness spreading across the fields, Sara woke up with a scream" (Tomy 247). The redness of the field is symbolic of her psychic landscape which is increasingly filled with trauma caused by her own guilt. Her motherly instincts to protect Susan from the dangers of the forest and evil men who prey on innocent people is what is reflected in her nightmare. In another nightmare, she rushes to help Thommichan who is tortured by the police and locked up in the torture cell. When she gathered him in her bosom she "saw that her breasts had been cut off" (Tomy 251). This is another stark reminder that her sexuality is threatened because of the absence of her husband who was arrested the previous day. Her nightmares offer an avenue into the psychic trauma that she goes through. According to Laurence Kirmayer, "Traumatic experiences are not a story but a cascade of experiences,

eruptions, crevasses, a sliding of tectonic plates that undergird the self. These disruptions then give rise to an effort to interpret and so to smooth, stabilize, recalibrate” (Tomy 182) Sara’s calibration with the reality comes in the form of her letter to Fr. Felix Mullakkattil where she voices her inability to share her fears and anxieties with her husband Thommichan. Her words, “My sleep is invaded by nightmares in which I am running, being chased, across the hills and mountains” (Tomy 253) captures the traumatic war that is raging in her mind.

Kali, an Adivasi woman whom the readers are exposed to from the beginning of the novel is described as the ‘daughter of the forest’. Her likeness with the forest bears similarity with her past. Her fearless, wild nature can be understood in the comparison made by the author. Kali roams free in the forest as a mad woman singing during nights and sleeping in the burial ground. Kali’s past has many pointers to understand the trauma that she has suffered. As a young woman, she too had loved a man. They were eager to get married and start their lives together. On a fateful evening when her mother was detained back at work, the lonely girl was raped by an unknown man in her home. Trauma induced by rape is chronic and it alters the self-perception of the victim. It makes it impossible to communicate the experience to others. Upon hearing Kali’s losing her virginity, her family ostracizes her and throws her out of the house. “... Kali fell into her (mother) lap and cried, but her mother had looked at her as though she were a stranger. A young woman who had lost her virginity, her honour - she had no place at home, said her father” (Tomy 185)

Kali’s trauma is exacerbated by her own family casting her out because of defiling the family’s honour. Her female body that held the centrality of her culture, family honour and custom is now considered impure because of the defilement of someone else’s lust. This socially produced trauma inflicts more pain than the physical trauma that she suffered. Her suffering of the rape encounter as a victim is not acknowledged or regarded with empathy but dealt with from the societal perspective. The post-traumatic stress drives Kali mad. Kali’s female body becomes the site of memory and loss. Her body informs her of the sense of the worldly materiality as well as perception of how her body is looked at by others. From being an owner of a female body that was chaste, immaculate, and virginal to being thrown out as torn, shattered, blemished and as disgrace to the family’s honour, Kali’s intense trauma drives her mad. She loses the validation of her own life and becomes the periphery of the society begging alms in the street. In her belly, she carries the bundle of someone’s lust, wandering and sleeping on the streets. Even at this juncture, she does not cease to be the female objectification by the male gaze. “Of the insinuating whistles from the night buses and jeeps...” (Tomy 185) highlights the provocative cat calls from strangers who instantly assume her promiscuity and share a tendency to violate her traumatized female body. Kali’s psychic trauma forces her to lose the ownership of her own body. The traumatic violence committed against her body and mind agonizes her to the extreme of denying her own female body which is now growing the child of her perpetrator.

And, finally, of the wailing of a newborn that rose to the sky, and the rain that fell in response, the flooding of the river ... Of the streetlamps and the stars in the night sky winking out ... She did not know any of this, not even where she had left the infant that had been born in the darkness. It was darkness that she had given birth to, emptiness that she nursed. (Tomy 185) The author’s comparison of the child with darkness is a symbolism of Kali’s dark past. The price that she had to pay because of her female body. The intangible violence and harassment

that society had meted out to her solely because of her gender is an example of the cultural indoctrination towards the indigenous female body. The brutal end that Kali faces in the novel is another symbol of how violence and racism are the invisible inscription written over the female body. Kali is raped again and killed by the dominant class men. According to trauma theorists, Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, “emotional and physical responses of the original experience are raised when the survivor perceives a potential threat in a new situation.” Kali relives the original traumatic pain the second time she was sexually assaulted and killed. Her body encounters another moment of living the moments of horror and loses itself in this confrontation.

Lucy is another woman plagued by psychic trauma caused by the class segregation in the society. She marries Ivanachan’s son Peter for love and her trauma begins with that marriage. Her marriage to Peter is not something the dominant class would approve of. Ivachan’s roaring voice admonishing Peter’s actions talks about the class and racial prejudice that Ivachan carried, “My darling son has brought us a kitchen maid! What, didn’t find a better one in the Paniyar paadi? A Koori or a Mara...? Though the couple share initial moments of bliss it later turns out to be a nightmare. When one of nature’s forces consumes Lucy’s youngest son, Joymon, it was only the beginning of her traumatic experiences in life. Her intense pain could be understood in the words,

“The visions blurred as she hoped, prayed, for a rain of fire that would consume the earth. Her insides were molten lead, her being emptied like a pan of water someone had thrown away. The muddled water of the Kabani would settle, but Lucy’s mind would not clear ever again.” (Tomy 95)

The pain of a mother losing her young son and the guilt of her inability to save him from danger drives her ‘screaming until exhausted’. She becomes a living corpse unable to confront the reality as a failed mother. In the later part of her life, the readers find that the only source of her joy, her husband, Peter disappears into the forest trying to escape the authorities. This causes a rupture in Lucy’s sense of identity. Her confrontation of her victim of social and natural injustice causes her to withdraw even further. Her last days in her in-laws house brings the victim and the abuser in the single frame. Lucy becomes a person trapped within her status as a victim just like her mother-in-law, Annamkutty. Her trauma can be classified as ‘insidious trauma’ as referred to by trauma expert Maria Root.

As a community, the Adivasi people’s realization of their collective trauma is lacking in the absence of enlightenment and education. The novel starts with the revolutionary efforts of Padmanabhan, Thomichan and Peter who inspire and stimulate an understanding of their exploitation through education. As a retaliation to their efforts, the antagonists of the dominant class set fire to their humble forest settlements. The fire ravages the Adivasi people’s huts and kills the innocent. The following words describe the intergenerational pain and suffering that they undergo as a community,

Those who had assumed that dark-skinned people’s tears would dry in their eyes - because they were the descendants of those who had learned to hold back their tears when their masters

tied them to post and whipped them, made them walk with stones strapped to their backs, harnessed them to the plough with the oxen to turn the fields - were wrong. Their cries, now, were loud enough to reverberate through the forest. (Tomy 153)

Trauma was part of their everyday lives as long as they remember. Their identity as the Adivasis shapes their collective memory which is wrought with shame, humiliation, ignominy and reduced to the status of an animal. The cultural history and collective consciousness of the Adivasi people is marred with the traumatic lived experiences that are difficult to express in language. This can be attributed to a great extent to the fact that the indigenous people were not enlightened about their social and political status in the current society because of systematic indoctrination to propagate their lower status.

Trauma is part of the indigenous women's identity. Their traumatic accounts or testimony never becomes part of the mainstream owing to several social, political and discriminatory factors. The lack of agency is the single and foremost reason for their unaccounted tales of suffering and discrimination. Positioning women's traumatic experiences within a traumatised community becomes indispensable to understand the nuances of gender perspectives in the field of trauma studies. Their double discrimination augmented by the absence of literacy makes their lives shattered and fragmented.

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