



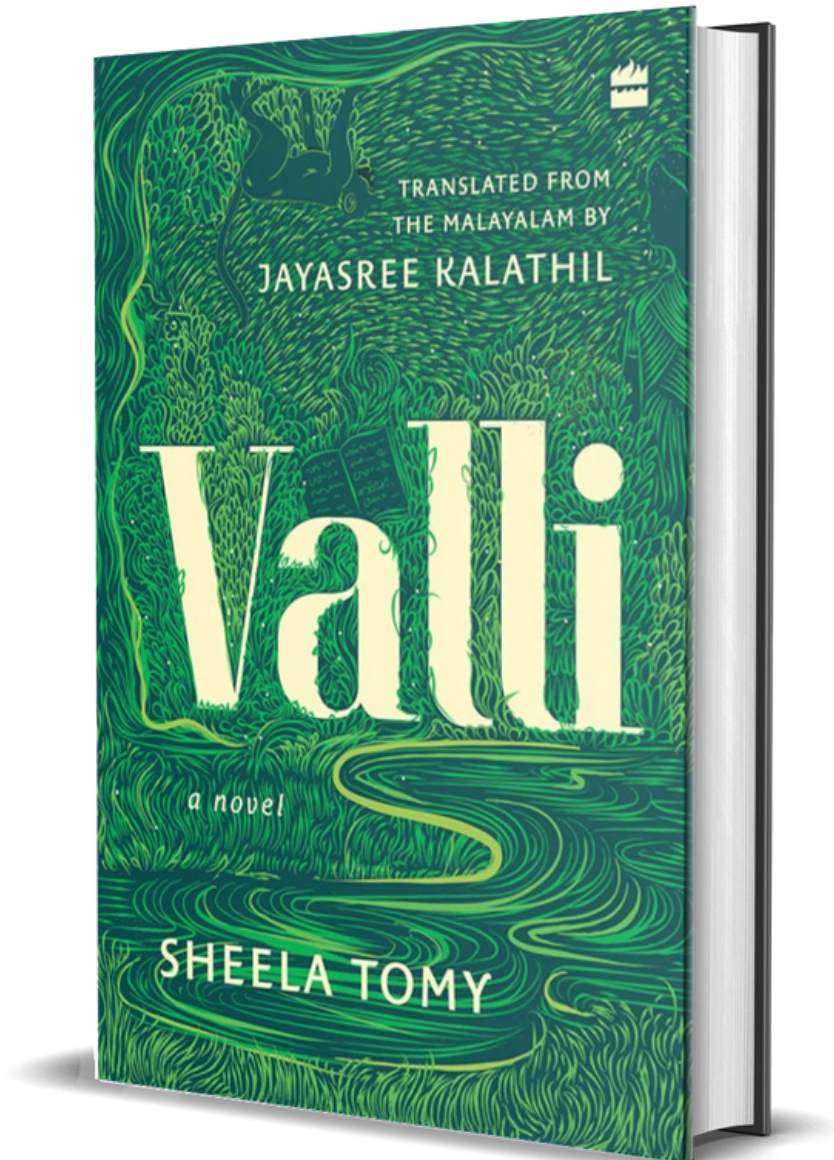
# Valli

by

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INDIAN WRITERS

# 1

## THE VOICE OF THE FOREST

There was a time when Kalluvayal was a dense, deep forest.

Skirting the village, the Kabani flowed, always looking towards the east. Migrants from the lowlands came into the forest, their bullock carts crawling up paths carved out by the footfalls of travellers, traders and mendicants, and tracks where once echoed the hoof-beats of warhorses and drumbeats of forest folk. Mosquitoes milled in the marshlands, whistling death songs of malaria and jungle fever as they mated and multiplied. Ever so slowly, the forest cleared, and the porcupine, the sloth bear, the wild boar, the pangolin, the civet, the anteater, the snake, the mongoose, the hare, the peacock, the muntjac and thousands of other creatures withdrew deeper and deeper into the jungle.

A time came when lemongrass ruled the land, rippling in the northern wind and enveloping Kalluvayal in the heady scent of citrus. Somewhere along the way, cashew orchards took over the hillsides, and a variety of cashew-fruit wines appeared in arrack vendor Karuthammakalyani's shack. The village sampled the wines, calling them by pet names, and laughed, cried, danced and played cards. At sunrise, along with the rain and the mist, children climbed up the cashew hills to collect windfall nuts to sell, dreaming of the festival at Valliyoorakaavu and of toys, glass bangles and balloons. And thus, for a while, the cashew hills ruled over Kalluvayal, kept it contented and filled its pockets with coins.

Eventually, the scent of cashews faded, and in its place, the rousing fragrance of coffee wafted across the land. Ripe coffee berries fell like coral beads across the leaf-littered hillsides, heralding another time of plenty. More things came up the hills – rubber, black pepper, ginger – and through it all, paddy fields in shades of green and gold lay fecund in the valleys, ushering in harvest seasons smelling of kaima rice. Hillocks of tapioca revelled, quickening the heartbeats of Kalluvayal, and the people of far-hill and near-hill got together in the light of Petromax lamps to celebrate the tapioca harvest. Everyone stayed awake through the nights, listening to the tall stories told by Bug-eyed Kumaran, and through the days as the tapioca was chopped, boiled, dried in the sun, packed into bamboo chests and gunny sacks, and stored in attics and tucked into smoky, dry corners above kitchen fires. There they would rest in deep slumber, waking up only when the rains arrived bringing hardship. Harvesting and threshing the paddy, and preparing the bounty of tapioca became the festivals of the land.

Sometime much later, somehow, as the hills began to withdraw into the earth and the paddy fields began to disappear, far-hill and near-hill became strangers. But Kalluvayal remains, even today, its rivers thin, its forests bald.

A land where countless secrets sleep in the vast stone structures and deep caves left behind by Stone Age humans. It would become Wayanad later, but its old name is ‘Bayalnad’ – land of the paddy fields. A land marked by steep hills, sheer cliffs, vast valleys and treacherous rock formations.

Iravivarman’s soldiers stand guard at the Thirumarathoor market. It is shrouded in silence. The bustle of the day – the arguments and negotiations in a medley of foreign tongues, and the belligerent cries of the changatham, personal soldiers of the rich and the powerful – is only a memory.

The fragrance of marigolds envelops the rest house as Unniyachi lies on Iravivarman’s silken bed. Her golden body shimmers in the

moonlight as he liberates her slowly, languidly, from her clothes. She is a breeze from unknown lands, passing briefly through on its way elsewhere. She teaches him new tricks, magic that he has never experienced before, and he begs her for more, and more. He would worship her until the festival on the day of Ashtami in the month of Kumbham, after which he would have to return to his duties as the ruler of the land.

On the festival day, as Unniyachi ties her anklets in preparation for the performance of Dasiyattam, Iravivarman comes to her with a necklace studded with eighteen rubies.

‘This is for you,’ he says, fastening it around her neck. ‘In memory of those intoxicating nights...’

As she dances on the stage, Unniyachi notices a man with brilliant, twinkling eyes in the audience. He is short of stature, with honey-hued skin and shoulder-length hair, and his piercing gaze follows her movements. Have you forgotten me, he seems to ask. Who is he? Her feet follow the quickening beats of her heart, and the singers and accompanists struggle to keep up.

When the dance is over and the doors are closed, the man takes refuge in an old, abandoned Jain temple in Puthanangadi. The jungle has reclaimed the structure. A vaka tree blooms red at its entrance. He casts his eyes over the Tirthankara sculptures on the temple pillars and takes out his tools. His chisel sings, and as enchanting postures emerge from the silver dance of its thousand cuts, night becomes day, day becomes night.

A herd of elephants emerges from the forest to stand guard outside the abandoned structure.

Anklets tinkle as the stone tells stories. In each of its chimes, the chisel calls: ‘Unniyachi, my heart, my woman...’ But she is imprisoned, her desires confined by locked doors and heartless guards.

Dance postures done, the sculptor’s chisel carves out scenes of lovemaking. The languorous night is musical, and in the rising peals of pleasure, elephants make love in the embrace of the forest.

She will come to him, he hopes, when he has carved the last of the stones. How can she not...

When, on the ninth night, the chisel falls silent, Unniyachi is sleepless in her bed. She leaves, quietly, carefully avoiding the ruler and his soldiers. No more hiding, even if she is punished. A wood owl screeches from the top of a tree and cicadas wail in the undergrowth. Watching Unniyachi's arrival, the elephants turn away from their trail and walk down the far side of the hill into the paddy fields below. Accompanied by the night, Unniyachi enters the temple. In the flickering light of a lamp on a low stool, dancing figures move lasciviously on the stone pillars. On the floor, a discarded chisel, and beside it, a small box covered in intricate designs, the one she had absent-mindedly left in the palanquin that had brought her from Salem, over Thovarimala and through Veliyambam. Memories rush in, as though from a previous birth, and she opens the box.

A handful of fresh marigolds...

A string of pearls...

A fistful of reproaches...

A stone pillar in a forgotten corner of a trader's road in Bayalnad beckons, one that has stood waiting, all alone, in the wind and in the rain, in the sun and in the mist.

The ruler awakes, and the soldiers bring her back, manacled. She flings the ruby necklace, his gift, on the floor. The sword flashes in the fire that blazes in his eyes. Eighteen rubies roll away in eighteen directions as blood flows like the Kabani, and from each of those rubies, eighteen rivers burst forth forming eighteen islets between them. Where the water touches the land along the edges of those islets, life spurts like memories – diverse, fecund, evergreen. Someone names the islets Kuruvadweep. From the topmost branch of a mighty tree, which spreads its canopy over forest streams holding the water of wisdom, Unniyachi flies away into the heavens above.

There are no more devadasis, dancing concubines of the gods, in Thirumarathoor. Unniyachi, the primal goddess, the aboriginal mother, lives on in each female child born in the village.

SITTING ON THE stone platform, Tessa is engrossed in the magical story. So many centuries have passed, and still the sculptures are poetry on stone, the dancers' expressions redolent with emotions. They had set out from Manjadikunnu after lunch. When Tessa said she wanted to see the ruins of the Jain temple, it was Isabella amamma, her mother's aunt, who led the way.

'It's getting late. Soon the elephants will come out of the forest. There was a herd around here yesterday, with babies. One of them attacked Joppaan and his motorbike. His leg's broken!'

James sets out down the hill holding Tessa's hand.

'You should see how the elephants care for their young,' he says. 'Way better than humans. They tend to be jumpy if there are young ones in the herd. We have to be careful not to startle them.'

James looks back at the platform where Isabella is still leaning against a pillar. In the redness of the lowering sun, she is another sculpture.

'Ammayi, come on, hurry up!' He turns back to Tessa. 'Your mama, Susan, had written a story for the college magazine about that dancer Unniyachi. She was totally crazy.' His voice is thoughtful, as though he is trying to remember something.

'My mama was crazy? What about you then?' Tessa's eyes twinkle with mischief.

Isabella laughs out loud.

James Peter Anjilikkunnil, the crazy apostle who came down the hills having lived in the forest for forty days and forty nights, tested by Satan himself, to spread his gospel among the grass and the worms, to wander the wide earth without getting hitched even at the ripe old age of forty-two! Isabella proclaims in one breath and continues laughing.

Tessa marvels at her teeth, so straight, so beautiful even now.

In the wind that whistles through the hills, the storyteller's voice soars as though from another era.

'Susan liked to keep her own company, you know, ever since she lost her mother. She never showed her anxieties, always hiding in

the pages of a book. Unniyachi was her friend in that solitude. She walked all along these riverbanks and gullies and lanes, and went into forest shrines and into hermit caves, imagining Unniyachi in all these places, following in her footsteps...'

'Ammayi reads a lot too. She's read all the books in Susan's library,' James tells Tessa. 'Can you read Malayalam?'

'Of course!' Tessa says. 'Valyappachan writes to me in Malayalam, doesn't he? Although sometimes I needed Mama to translate for me...'

'Bellammayi, did you also have a sculptor hidden away somewhere?' James asks, widening his eyes innocently at Isabella. 'Why did you decide to leave the convent?'

'You cheeky...' Isabella raises her hand playfully, as if to strike him. 'What can I say, my boy? It was a different time. These days, young people are bold enough to make their likes and dislikes known, to protest if someone touches them without their permission. In those days, if you joined the convent and then chose to leave, you were cursed. It was considered the greatest sin. No one wanted to know what made you leave ... As far as they were concerned, you'd disregarded God's call and brought His wrath upon your entire family. Well, I just couldn't collude with the sinful things that were being done hiding behind God's name. So, I left. With dignity. That's all.'

Isabella's voice is as strong as her words.

'Render unto God the things that are God's; and render unto people the things that are theirs, I guess. Right, Ammayi?'

Without responding, the old woman walks along the bridge, a broken smile playing on her lips. Tessa watches the blue veins on her pale face. Fingers, still resisting the wrinkles of time, move rhythmically as the wind tousles the grey hair spread over her light green sari. Tessa has been watching her ever since she arrived in Manjadikunnu, this woman who always seems content. Mama Susan had not said much about her, except that she had once gone

to Kolkata to do missionary work. She was not present very much in Valyappachan's letters to her either.

'There are many other places you should see, Tessa, before you go back,' James says. 'Tomorrow we'll go to Valmiki Ashramam, okay?'

Tessa watches as James walks away into the orchard. Lucy ammamma describes him as the man who spends all his waking moments rolling in the soil. She wants to follow him and watch him work but, tired from the long walk, she goes into the house and up the wooden staircase instead, and opens the door from the landing to Mama Susan's abode. She wants to spend a lazy afternoon searching through old letters that held Valyappachan's remembrances and Mama's grievances, trying to figure out a way to find the invisible Kalluvayal beyond the obvious.

*Dear Tessa,*

*I'm writing to you sitting in the front room of Manjadikunnu. Not sure when that crazy boy will find the time to copy this into an email. He's busy planting bamboos near the spring. Once, when he was in college, James took off into the forest. Trekking, he said. It was almost forty days before he came back, and when he did, he was in love with bamboo. Even in the driest of summers, when all the hills are parched, there is water in his bamboo thickets. The barrel, made from a palm-tree trunk that he's sunk into the earth at the source of the dried-up big canal, fills with crystal-clear water like the attar of roses. When Sara and I came here, much of these were swamps. Stick a toe in the ground and water would spurt. In the valleys were paddy fields, and everywhere, the songs of the forests. All gone now ... Only revving vehicles and chattering tourists are left.*

*It pleases me to see lakes and green hills in the photos you send me on WhatsApp, to know that the people there are protecting nature. See, our indigenous people, the Adivasis, were also nature's guards. They never poisoned the waterways to catch fish, and yet their bamboo baskets brimmed with vaala, kuruva, snakehead, catfish and whitespot. They only took just enough honey and left the rest*



*for the bees, just enough fruits and jungle roots to survive. They lived in bamboo huts. Then the migrants arrived from the lowlands, and everything changed.*

*It is the abode of the gods themselves that is ruined when forests are destroyed, the sanctuary of countless creatures. What's once gone does not return, my dearest. Learn to understand the times, the nature, the land, your own self, and your fellow beings. Be thankful and humble before the endless, unfathomable knowledge. That's all any of us can do with this life.*

*Waiting for your arrival...*

*Yours,*

*Valyappachan*

*My dear valyappachan,*

*When winter is gone, the naked branches of the trees will be covered in blossoms once again. Spring cannot hide. What is gone will return, Valyappacha. That's what Europe has taught me. It's zero degrees centigrade here. The leafless trees and the slanted roofs of houses are hidden under beautiful white blankets of snow. It's such a pleasure to jog in the cold. You've stopped your walks because of the cold, haven't you? Watch out, you'll be an old man soon. Just wait until I get there – I'll box your ears! Wayanadan cold is not cold!*

*Let me tell you something that my Japanese friend told me. There's this thing in her country called 'shinrin-yoku' – forest bathing. Spending time in the woods, no jogging, no workouts, just walking mindfully among the trees, taking in their love, being aware of the dampness, the fragrance, the murmur and music of leaves, their gentle caress ... It's good medicine for stress relief and for building up immunity. There are even clubs that take people who are depressed on these walks in Japan. When I read your email, I thought that's what James uncle was doing when he ran off into the forest. A green meditation. Shinrin-yoku. I'll uncover his secret as soon as I get there!*

*I have to submit my project tomorrow. It's been over three months since I've had a good night's sleep. Our robot is ready, and when it*

*started working yesterday, my project-mate Saif and I jumped up and down, and Michael – our senior – made fun of us. A single positive result from a mechanical being is nothing to rejoice about, he said. Betty – that’s our robot’s name – moved through the storey below our department’s, observing people’s movements and collecting data. The idea is to see if we can tell, based on these movements, whether someone is a student or a lecturer or a guest. You know how those who deviate from the paths preordained for them are called mad? I wonder how Betty would categorize someone who threw away their books in the final year of their degree and went off into the forest. A traveller? An explorer? An environmentalist? A nomad? A madman? Or a maverick?*

*Valyappacha, do you think, in this vast universe, everyone’s path is preordained? Like planets in their orbits, are we destined to revolve in a circular path designed even before we are born? If so, why would God, who thinks that all His creations are good, send them off on wrong paths? Who is to blame? Who made the mistake?*

*Don’t stop writing to me, Valyappacha. Your letters are windows through which I can see Mama Susan’s land. And in your orderly words, I see something of the old schoolteacher.*

*Are you fed up of waiting? Don’t worry, I’ll be there very soon.*

*Valyappachan’s kuttan (Tessa)*