

INDIGENOUS NARRATIVES OF LAND AND IDENTITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POTIKI AND VALLI

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Abstract:

Indigenous living is deeply rooted in their environment which encompasses land, nature, and animals. Their spiritual expressions are manifested in the natural elements found in the environment and their peaceful coexistence with these natural phenomena exemplifies the harmonious living. Across many indigenous cultures, land is the key contributor to the community's identity. Indigenous communities have a unique relationship with the land that the settler colonialist would never decipher. Sheela Tomy's *Valli* captures the Paniya tribe's sense of belonging to the land of Wayanad in Kerala. Patricia Grace's *Potiki* encapsulates the Māori people's bond with the ancestral land. Both texts present a distinct study of the connection that these tribes have with their land. This study captures the intrinsic connection between the land and identity. A comparative analysis of the texts explores the similarities and differences in these indigenous communities' resistance, resilience, and the cultural significance of the land in the indigenous living. This paper analyses the way the indigenous communities use narratives to preserve their history, traditional ecological knowledge and how land shapes their identity.

Keywords: Indigenous land, Māori, Paniya, Resistance, Environment

INTRODUCTION

Land has been an important resource and wealth throughout human history. Numerous wars were fought and empires decimated to appropriate land. In Bible, God promised the Israelites "a land flowing with milk and honey." (Genesis 13:10, New International Version). The idea of land which is fertile and rewarding has always captured the imagination of mankind. Man's greed for seeking and annexing more land is the cornerstone for imperialism and his justification for the practice of colonisation. Columbus' discovery of America opened the immense possibility for the European empires to extend their territory beyond the seas. The idea of land as perceived by the colonizers and settlers is only restricted to considering them as avenues of increasing their wealth and resource. There is no bond or an intimate connection that a colonizer feels with the land. (Atleo, 2022) He only uses the land as his means of gains and benefits for economic and political dominance. It is a symbol of his authority over the original inhabitants. Exterminating the original inhabitants proved his absolute authority over the land and its people. On the contrary, land is part of an indigenous community's identity. It signifies their origin and end. As Kimmerer discusses,

"In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us." (Kimmerer, 2013, p.32)

Indigenous people have a deep connection with their land. The land they live in defines their identity and contributes significantly to their way of life. Land is an expression of their spirituality and animism. Whether it is a coastal area, or a wetland, the land they live in is considered sacred and the all the living organisms have the equal rights over the land. This deep respect for all the living organisms contrasts sharply with the settler colonialism which thrives on considering everything as a commodity. As a young Anishinaabe person recollecting this bond, Chevaun Toulouse reminiscences this intrinsic connection with the land when she writes, "Many Indigenous people understand that caring for the land and environment is a sacred responsibility. There is an understanding of relation to the land, where the land, humans, and non-human life are all interdependent in a cyclical way" (Toulouse, 2022). A similar perspective of the land is reflected across many indigenous cultures and communities.

Indigenous people around the world have faced innumerable horrors of violence in the name of colonization. "From militarism and policies of genocide, to religious indoctrination and cultural assimilation, the tactics of imperialism were developed from the blood of indigenous people" (Goldtooth, 2004, p.9). Despite the geographical differences, indigenous people across the world, had to bear the brunt of the greed of the colonisers and the imperialist. The fight for claiming their ancestral land rages even into the modern world wherein indigenous communities around the world are filing claims and charges that their ancestral land be returned. Asserting and proving their existence on the land to be recognized as the original inhabitants is a constant battle

that indigenous communities wage across the world. In this context, it is important to understand the sacred connection that indigenous people have with their land and how land defines their personhood.

This paper compares how these indigenous communities establish their identity foregrounding the land they live and how their interaction with the environment imbues their community's spirituality and deep respect for the natural world. The paper focusses on how these narratives of land reinforces the indigenous community's identity. The paper also analyses how these indigenous communities use storytelling as an efficient form of preserving their traditions and culture. Resistance towards the imperialist attitudes of the dominant world is another scope of this paper.

Scope of the Paper

A comparative exploration of the Māori and Paniya tribe sheds light on each community's reflection on how land is considered an integral part of their lived experiences though these tribes live in a widely different the geographical location. The Māori people are the original inhabitants of New Zealand who were colonized by the Europeans mid-17th Century. The Māori tribe faced the European settlers with grit and resilience much like other tribes. The novel chosen for study in this paper is *Potiki* written by Patricia Grace, a writer belonging to Māori community of Te Āti Awa descent. She has authored several novels and short stories establishing herself as a prominent voice of the Māori community. Her contributions to the New Zealand literature are widely recognized. Her novel, *Potiki* published in 1986 was her first successful novel winning awards and nominations. *Potiki* captures the travails of a Māori community living under the threat of dispossession of their ancestral land. The novel is a testament of Grace's commitment to registering Māori experience. *Potiki* highlights the pejorative situation that the Māori community often find themselves in. The story entails the details of a small Māori community threatened by the powerful corporations and individuals. The prophet child, Toko visualises the future of the community who is intimidated by the 'dollarman.'

The Paniya tribe also known as Paniyars are an indigenous tribe native to Wayanad, Kerala. They are believed to be of African ancestry. The word, 'Pani' refers to 'work' in many South Indian languages. This tribal group served as bonded agricultural labourers to the wealthy landlords and later to the white colonist. Their meagre wages ensured that their low economic status remained unaltered for many generations. There are many settlements of the Paniyas in the South India. Socioeconomic and living conditions differ in each Paniya settlement. The novel, *Valli* written by Sheela Tomy registers the dismal lives of the Paniyas who reel under the stronghold of the dominant landlords for many generations. Despite being the original inhabitants of the land, the Paniyas were systematically made to believe that they have no claim on the land they live-in. Paniyas' culture and religious practices honour and respect the natural world and the forest they live in. The Paniyas consider the forest as their land and the sustenance for living. *Valli* documents the lived experiences of the Paniya tribe in a narrative that stretches for four generations. The novel documents the resistance that the Paniyas exhibit to break away from the transgenerational bonded labour. The two texts considered for the study highlight these two tribe's relationships with the land they live-in and shows how their environment and especially the land play a crucial part in their identity formation. The texts' narratives of the land reinforce the indigenous communities' identities that is derived from the natural world.

Theoretical framework

It is imperative to understand the indigenous worldviews on land and their rights over the ancestral lands. Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* offers a unique study of how the indigenous knowledge of the natural world can be appreciated when juxtaposed with the western knowledge. Kimmerer discusses the strands of braids of the sweetgrass as the braiding together of the indigenous knowledge and the western scientific knowledge within her identity as an indigenous person who is a botanist. According to Kimmerer, her study is,

"... an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other. (Kimmerer, 2013, p.12)

Kimmerer argues that the western views about the land must align with the indigenous views to establish a renewed relationship with our environment. This paper foregrounds her theory to illustrate the sacred relationship between indigenous people and land. Another resource considered as a theoretical framework of this paper is Miranda Johnson's *The Land Is Our History: Indigeneity, Law, and the Settler State*. Johnson presents a scholarly work on the indigenous land rights activism across Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Her work offers a comparative approach towards understanding the struggles of the indigenous people in claiming their rightful ownership over their land and discusses how the modern legal systems respond to those claims.

Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit by Jo-ann Archibald (Q'um Q'um Xiiem) is used as another source for the theoretical framework of this paper to analyse the importance of the narratives in the indigenous living. The author highlights how indigenous cultures across the world use storytelling and narratives to perpetuate the essence of their lives. "The Elders taught me about seven principles related to using First Nations stories and storytelling for educational purposes, what I term storywork: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy" (Archibald 2008, p. 9). Dr. Archibald's seminal

work discusses how the stories restore the “power of interconnections within family, community, nation, culture, and land” (Archibald, 2008, p. 9).

As a native American writer, Thomas King’s *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* offers a distinctive study of understanding the role of narratives in the indigenous communal living. King writes about the importance of oral tradition in indigenous cultures. The oral storytelling which is passed down from generation to generation is a quintessential indigenous practice. According to King, for Indigenous peoples, “our stories are who we are; that’s all we are” (King, 2008, p. 2). Stories that exist within an indigenous community defines their identity. King explains how the oral tradition of the indigenous people is disregarded by the non-indigenous people as something that “lack an inherent sophistication” (King, 2008, p. 100). In other words, the non-indigenous people assume that the oral stories lack purposes and are hence forgotten and left behind. However, for the indigenous people, oral stories are like ‘medicine’ as described by N. Scott Momaday in his book, *House Made of Dawn*. He explains how his grandmother’s stories “... were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. They were beyond price; they could neither be bought nor sold. And she never threw her words away” (King, 2008, p.100). King argues that the stories that exist in the oral tradition of the indigenous cultures need not seek validation that the western world for the lack of the written form. King is sceptical about the fabricated stories that were created to describe the indigenous people and how it has shaped the perception of the western world. His book reiterates the importance of the stories in the lives of indigenous people. He asserts that our stories are who we are and that they can “control our lives” (King, 2008, p.9).

Analysis

Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* offers a fine example of the challenges and the obstacles that the indigenous communities face in the modern world. The novel discusses the threat that indigenous people confront in their everyday lives. Pressured to assimilate and surrender their land rights, the indigenous people are forced to rewrite their history or in some cases face total erasure. As a Māori writer, Grace’s novel captures the essence of Māori customs, traditions, and beliefs. The term ‘Potiki’ means a small child and refers to Toko, the adopted son of Roimata and Hemi in the novel. Though Toko is physically challenged, he is blessed with ‘knowing and seeing things.’ The novel is written from the perspective of different characters and is a fine example of syncretism. The origin story in the prologue narrates the story of the carver who carves figure of the ancestors in the wood immortalizing their stories. Preserving the stories of the ancestors is an integral part of the Māori living. Their meeting place the Wharenuī is place of carved wood narrating the life stories of the ancestors. Roimata, the mother of the family outrightly establishes the family’s claim on the land when she says, “This piece of land is the family land of the Tamihanas” (Grace, 1986, p. 9) The Tamihanas have always lived near the curve of the sea overlooking the waves. The readers learn about the depth of Māori culture through Roimata’s eyes. The land is the anchor of Māori lives. Whether they live near a coastal area or a desert dry land, their lives are shaped by the nature of the land. Māori Whakapapa highlights the deep connection they have with the land and the tribal genealogy based on the land. When men lost their jobs, Hemi, Roimata’s husband, was confident that the land and the sea could care for them. Many Māori families had migrated and succumbed to the pressure of assimilation. However, Hemi reiterated the Māori belief that working the ancestral land could rejuvenate the Māori way of life. Hemi’s own education had been about the land. He was taught by his grandfather Tamihana how to plant, tend, gather, and store. While he was trained to cultivate the land, he was greatly aware that “he was being given knowledge on behalf of a people, and that they all trusted him with that knowledge.” (Grace, 1986 p.55) This sharply contrasts with the self-promoting capitalistic ideals of the colonizers. The indigenous people are gifted with the awareness that there is a scared bond they have with the land and every tiny organism that lives in it (Cloud, 2023). While discussing this dichotomous worldview of the indigenous people and the non-indigenous people, Kimmerer shares an interesting perspective based on the creation stories of these two groups. While the former is taught to embrace nature and its varied organisms in a holistic and grateful approach, the latter was taught how the once lush Eden Garden is beyond the reach of the humanity because of betrayal and disobedience. Kimmerer argues that it is this spiritual connection with the land is what defines the people. “...people were looking to their land again. They knew they belonged to the land, had known all along that there had to be a foothold otherwise you were dust blowing here there and anywhere – you were lost, gone.” (Grace, 1986 p. 57)

Like the family of Tamihanas, there was once a piece of land that belonged to the Te Ope families. However, the land was usurped from them for the reason of war. The land of Te Ope was in a ‘good place’ according to them. “But it has been said since that this was an excuse to scatter the people, destroy their homes, and take the land.” (Grace, 1986, p. 68) The government authorities failed to acknowledge the cultural significance of the Māori people and their land. The Te Ope people had several meetings with the authorities which was of no use. They were told to be grateful to the government because they were given better houses in the city and there were many opportunities to find jobs in the city. This forceful assimilation and dispossession of their land leaves the Te Ope people grapple their identity. Their yearnings for their land and especially their Wharenuī, the meeting place exacerbates the conflict of being an indigenous people in the modern world and the settler’s pressure of assimilate. The systemic propaganda of the settler colonists to deface and undermine the Māori identity is reflected when the Te Ope youngster, Reuben voices out, “That’s all I learnt at school – that I’m not somebody, that my ancestors were rubbish and so I’m rubbish too. That’s all I learn from the newspapers, that I’m nobody, or I’m bad and I belong in jail.” (Grace, 1986, p. 71)

Like the plight of the Te Ope families, the Tamihanas also face a threat from the ‘Dollarman’ who wants to develop the land behind the Tamihanas’ place into a theme park. He entices the people with huge money for the land and job opportunities for the people. His request to open the access for the theme park through the land of Tamihanas is met with rejection from the Tamihanas elders. His disregard for the Whare Tipuna and Urupa, the sacred place of the buried dead is evident when he offers to build a better meeting house and find a better burial place for the dead. His words, “Just as you can become a slave to past things. And to superstition ... and all that ... hoo-ha.” (Grace, 1986, p. 90) is an embodiment of the settler colonizer’s opinion about the indigenous people. Years of enslavement, discrimination, and the justification of obliterating the indigenous cultures and communities is evident in these lines. The chief’s words sum up the history of identity erasure that Māori people encountered ever since the settlers had arrived in New Zealand:

“We haven’t come a long way at all. All we’ve done, many of us is helped you, and people like you, get what you want. And we’re all left out of it in the end. We’ve helped build a country, all right. Worked in its factories, helped build its roads, helped educate its kids... We’ve committed our crimes, done our good deeds, sat in Parliament, got educated, sung our hymns, scored our tries, fought in wars, splashed our money about...” (Grace, 1986, p. 90). The lines express the anguish and betrayal that Māori people faced over the years of forceful assimilation and meticulous actions under the guise of development. The Tamihanas family’s rejection of the offer is met with sabotages and intimidation. However, the community reinforce their sacred connection with the land evermore. From a spiritual perspective, the Māori articulate that the land does not belong to them but they belong to the land. Roimata’s words explicate the sacredness of the land: “We could not forget that it was land who, in the beginning, held the secret, who containing our very beginnings with herself” (Grace, 1986, p. 106). The Māori people’s spiritual connection with the land can be understood in their creation story. The earth is a mother figure called Papatūānuku who gave birth to the humans, birds, and animals. The Māori people’s deep respect for the land and all the living organisms hail from this creation story. Kimmerer argues that this respectful relationship with the world and its inhabitants is evident in the indigenous languages. Indigenous languages recognise the animacy of the world unlike the non-indigenous language which considers animate and inanimate things of the world as non-human and hence the absence of respectful approach towards them (Kimmerer, 2013, p.80). The Māori word for land, Whenua, has another meaning called the placenta, the connection that an unborn child shares with the mother. Toko’s accounts of the flood and the fire that ravages the Wharenui is symbolic of the authority driven catastrophes that were brought upon the Māori people to erode and decimate their cultural heritage.

However, the Māori people have a way of preserving their existence and collective identity through their stories. Roimata is described as the keeper of all stories. She preserves the stories to be told to the children. Roimata’s words, “I became instead a teller of stories, a listener to stories, a writer and reader of stories, an enactor, a collector and a maker of stories.” (Grace, 1986, p.33) describes the unique place of the stories and the very essence of the Māori way of life. There were given stories of creation, of life and death and their own life stories. Roimata explains how all these stories were about human lives whether present, past, or future. These stories are the intersection of these dimension, in which time loses its relevance. These stories defined their lives where the beginning or the end could not be defined. These stories, “however, a common goal has been to attain a mutual balance and harmony among animals, people, elements of nature, and the Spirit World” (Archibald, 2008, p. 11). The novel registers the resilience and the resistance of the small Māori community called the Tamihanas and the Te Ope. When threatened to sell their land for money, these communities persisted in not giving up their ancestral land. The Te Ope families fight back after years of losing their land. Young Te Ope, Rueban embarks on this journey of reclaiming ancestral lands by moving into his ancestral land. To the authority’s dismay, more and more Māori people move in along with him to claim their once usurped land. When the Dollarman intimidates the Tamihanas community with his big money and development promises, the elders note: “We give it to you and we fall through. We’re slaves again, when we’ve only just begun to be free” (Grace, 1986, p.91). The Māori also realise the importance of asserting the importance of their language and registering their stories in written form. Roimata makes the stories available for children in books. She compiles all the existing stories in a book to be taught to children in the schools. “We were busy telling and retelling the stories and histories of a people and a place, and learning or relearning a language which was our own, so that we could truly call it our own again” (Grace, 1986, p. 103). Because of the profound impact of the residential schools, many indigenous people lost their ability to converse in their indigenous language. The efforts of Roimata to teach children to relearn their language is form of resistance and asserting their identity as Māori people. The activism vaguely reminiscences the Māori ‘land cases’ that were filed in 1987 and how the Māori leaders described themselves as “first among the equals” (Johnson, 2016, p.120). The Treaty of Waitangi of 1840 which was considered as a historical fraud by the Māori leaders was successfully reverted through the activism and political and social assertion of their identity. The 1987 land case verdict forced Pakeha (white settlers) power-holders to recognize the Māori people’s language, culture, and their authority over their ancestral land.

The novel, Valli chronicles the lives of the Paniya tribe inhabiting the mountainous regions of Wayanad situated in Kerala. The story registers four generation of women who were the witness to the disenfranchisement of the tribal people. The Paniyas are also referred to as Adivasis which means the original inhabitants of the land. The term broadly refers to any indigenous tribe of India. The Paniyas are agricultural labourers who acted as bonded labourers for the white landlords and later to the dominant upper caste landlords. Paniyas along with other tribes like Toda, Kurumba, Irulas live in the forests and call it their home (Yoganandam, 2023). They are one of the

primitive tribal groups found in India. Lack of education, sanitation, and alcohol addictions are some of the social problems that Paniyas face. In the recent times, due to awareness and government initiatives, the Paniya children are encouraged to attend school. Evidences of assimilation is found in tribal communities wherein the young Paniya children's clothing and interests exhibit signs of assimilation.

Valli set in Kalluvayal which once was a forest. Kalluvayal was lush with the river Kabani nourishing the forest. Kalluvayal was perched on Wayanad otherwise known as Bayalnad – the land of paddy fields. A land marked by steep hills, sheer cliffs, vast valleys and treacherous rock formations. The beginning story reveals the fate of Unniyachi, a devadasi who enticed the crowd with her beauty and dance. “Unniyachi, the primal goddess, the aboriginal mother, lives on in each female child born in the village” (Tomy, 2022, p.4). These lines expose the origin story that shapes the understanding of the tribe. The semblance of the female dance with the forest is a stark reminder of how indigenous people across the world consider the earth as a mother figure. The novel traces the story of four generations of women who are witness to the hardships of the Adivasis. Through syncretic narrative technique, Tomy discusses the Adivasi's struggles for survival. “Our indigenous people, the Adivasis were also nature's guards. They never poisoned the waterways to catch fish, ... They only too just enough honey and left the rest for the bees just enough for the fruits and jungle roots to survive” (Tomy, 2022, p.8). Sara and Thommichan are two young teachers who elope and settle down in Kalluvayal in order to escape the hostility of Sara's family. Their young daughter, Susan, grows up “amidst forest people and forest myths.” Having been a witness to the violence and treachery inflicted on the Adivasis, Susan, resolves to record the harsh realities of the tribal community through her letters. “I began to write for the forest that is on fire, for the people who have no voice, for the language that has no script...” (Tomy, 2022, p.11). The Adivasi people are exploited by the landowning farmers who make them work on their lands for ‘vallipani’ – labouring in return for valli, a share in the crop. Although the Adivasis were the original inhabitants of the land, they never were considered as the owners and must always work in someone else's field to make meagre amount of money. This dispossession and alienation constantly remind the tribal group that they can be evicted from their bamboo huts any time the authorities want. The landlords collude with the authorities like the police and forest department officials to make the tribal people continue to lead a life of subservience. The Adivasis shared their home along with the other numerous flora and fauna that inhabited the forests. This coexistence was based on mutual respect and harmony and never the greedy approach of the settler colonists. The landlords ravage the forest for their own selfish commercial reasons. “You people who cut down the forest and send it to the timber mills in the cover of darkness ... you are the ones who are dangerous-“ (Tomy, 2022, p.30). The landlords pose a constant threat to the tribal people's environment and land. The arrogant landlord in the novel, Thadipappan Ivachan gets his nickname, Thadipappan, which means ‘Timber Lord’, because of his heavy timber logging activity in the forest. The environmental injustice cause havoc to not just the tribal people but also the wild animals who are poached and sold as goods. Ivachan's angry words regarding the admonishing sermon of the priest highlight the extent of exploitation that was equivalent to that of the white colonist: “Did you hear the impertinence of that revolutionary priest? He says the landlords in Kalluvayal are looting the land. Worse than the whites we are, he says! Imagine!” (Tomy, 2022, p.55). The Adivasis were never free and emancipated in their lives. The white colonists were only replaced by the internal colonists, the landlords.

The Adivasi people lack awareness about their situation due to lack of education. Thommichan and Padmanabhan the young teachers in Kalluvayal village start educating the tribal people to make them realise their subaltern position. They organize the local youth to protect the forest and stand guard in its corners. Through their efforts, they begin Kadoram school which is attended by the Adivasi children. They educate the children and even the tribal elders about their ownership over the land they live in: “There was a time when this forest was yours, when this soil was yours, only yours. Then they came, cheated, and took it for themselves” (Tomy, 2022, p.162). They narrate stories to affirm the Adivasi people's rightful claim of the land. They enlighten the Adivasi people about the systemic oppression that they were made to sustain because of the selfish intentions of the upper-class landlords. “Pollution, purity, untouchability – all these were created so that their land could be taken over, their right to knowledge denied so that they could be oppressed, and we all know for whose benefit these beliefs and customs were invented” (Tomy, 2022, p.168) The Adivasi people lacked agency to address their land claims and at some instances even their basic human rights. When the Adivasi people defied the landlords, they are threatened with violence. Their shacks are burnt and the fire ravages the forest, their home. Even more, the Adivasi women are raped and killed at the whims of the wealthy timber lords.

Years later, the modern society poses another threat to the Adivasi people's land in terms of development and advancement. Due to the scenic natural environment of Kalluvayal, commercialization slowly seeps into the village and resorts in Adivasi lands are built to attract tourists. The era of tourist resorts began with many bamboo huts suddenly appearing overnight. None was aware of the permission given to begin commercial activity in the forest area. Some Adivasi people collude with the outsiders to help them buy the forest land in their names to evade the authorities. These individuals from the tourist industry stop at nothing to commercialize the Adivasi land and their knowledge. The traditional healer, Pembi, with the indigenous knowledge about the herbs and plants is exploited for running a healing centre in Kalluvayal. The Adivasi people were evicted for the construction of innumerable resorts and hotels that suddenly appeared in the village. “Then and now, always, it was the children of the forest that suffered the most, first to be evicted for a new resort or dam or granite quarry, first to be made destitute. Even the government appropriated their land...” (Tomy, 2022, p.353) These lines ring with truth about

the plight of the indigenous people in India who are constantly displaced and dispossessed of their land for various developmental reasons. The Narmada Bacho Andolan movement is reminder of the environmental injustice and the refusal to rehabilitate and compensate the Adivasis affected by the construction of dams. The struggle continues even today. A news article describes the anguish of tribal people of 18 villages in Andhra Pradesh, India, who have approached the government authorities to help them get their forest land that is occupied by the land grabbing realtor (The Hindu, 2025).

The forest is worshipped as the Goddess Vanadurga by the Paniya characters in the novel. It is her residing place. The rituals and the customs of their communal festival, Valliyoorkaavu depicts their deep respect for the forests. Their animism rests on worshipping the elements of the forests and the deities that are of the natural world. Sheela Tomy's inclusion of Paniya language in the novel can be perceived as a form of resistance and recognition of the tribal lived experiences. Throughout the novel, the inclusion of Paniya language with the translation is an effort towards giving life to a language which has no script. The Kadoram school that the revolutionary characters open is an example to resist the stifling attempt to hinder knowledge transmission to the tribal children. Padmanabhan, the revolutionary school teacher who was instrumental in opening the school remarks, "...let them learn to speak their language and sing their songs without feeling ashamed, as loud as they can for the mountain and the rivers to hear, for the forest to bloom. And from there, they can go to the world beyond their language that has no script (Tomy, 2022, p.140).

The school becomes the symbol of resistance and resilience for the tribal children are not welcome in the government mainstream school. The school becomes the focal point in awakening the revolutionary spirit of the tribal people and kindling their spirits to protest against the years of enslavement. Words like, "Tell us, how did we become slaves? Tempting us with rice and paddy...Which god gave you these rights" (Tomy, 2022, p.143). The inspiring origin stories that were told to the children in the school is an example of how stories create a foundation of one's identity. The origin stories that are narrated to the Adivasi children talk about the ancestors when they owned the forest and lived free. Seethadevi was abandoned in the forest by her husband Rama owing to distrust. She was otherwise known as Chedettillamma whose tresses came off when pulled outside the swallowing earth. "Seetha was an Adivasi girl who had come down the hills with woven baskets..." (Tomy, 2022, p.126). The other stories narrated to the children recount the betrayal that the Veda Princess faced for trusting her lover. A wedding that turns into a bloodbath and A similar story of abandonment face by the women because of greed. The story highlights the ancestry of the Adivasis who were once the owners of the land and fled into the deep caverns of the forest and "were marked down in history as uncivilised black-skins. These rightful owners of the earth" (Tomy, 2022, p.164). As King suggests stories have the power to control our lives. These stories that the Adivasi children learn about their origin shape their identity and give them a new meaning to their bond with the land. They are no more ashamed of their lives and existence.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The novels Potiki and Valli present a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the Māori and the Paniya tribes respectively. The novels highlight several shared values and customs that these tribes exhibit. The first and the foremost is their connection to the land and the sacredness of the land they live-in. The small Māori community of Tamihanas are rooted in their land for many generations and their land forms an important part of their identity. Similarly, for the Paniyas, the forest land is a deity called Vanadurga, an avatar of Kali, the protector of the forests and its creatures. Their festival, Valliyoorkaavu is a celebration of this deity. Their deep understanding of the animals and the plants foregrounds them as the protectors of the natural environment and not the consumers. The same worldview is presented by the Māori community.

Another aspect of these tribes is their community living and solidarity. The Māori people are known for a communal based living that nurtures and cares for every member of the community. The novel presents many instances of Roimata and Hemi looking out for other members and standing by their side during the difficult times. During the incidents of flood and fire, the community comes together to help each other and stay by the side of a grieving family or fighting for their rights. In Valli we learn about how the Adivasi young men under the leadership of Basavan stand guard for the forest to protect it from the timber lords. Both the tribes celebrate their customs and traditions that brings the community together.

These two tribal communities exhibit a heightened sense of environmental justice and a deep respect for every living creature in the ecosystem. Their traditional knowledge of the plants and animals are now viewed with renewed scientific and cultural interests. The Paniya character, Pembi, who has immense knowledge about the herbs in the forest becomes instantly famous for her traditional ecological knowledge. Toko's grandmother possessed a rich understanding of the spiritual ancestral world. Both the communities offer a treasure trove of sustainable environmental practices.

Stories play a quintessential role in the lives of the tribal people. The Māori people keep the memories of their ancestors alive through the stories and legends. The Paniya children learn stories about their possible origins from the revolutionary school teachers. Both the communities understand the importance of stories. "Stories contain more truth than histories..." (Tomy, 2022, p.165). Both the writers, Grace and Tomy understand the significance of the tribal language. Grace's handling of Māori language and not presenting a translation of the Māori words

asserts the importance of their language. Similarly, Tomy uses the Paniya language whenever the Paniya characters conversed in the novel. This emphasises the need to recognise the indigenous languages.

An important point of divergence between these two tribes is their activism and resilience to assimilate. While the Māori tribe show a lot of strength in resisting the pressures of the outside world, the Paniyas lack agency and hence depend on the educated to help them in their cause. A major reason for this is their lack of awareness about their colonized state. Paniyas were bonded labour for many generations and even though the white colonizer left the country, they were kept as bonded labour by the internal colonists, the wealthy landlords. Education is a determinant in bringing this awareness. While the young Māori characters like Reuben and Tangimoana are educated and studying to become lawyers, we hardly find any young Paniyas to be educated. The teachers start the literacy revolution in the village to imbibe the value of education in decolonizing.

Both the tribes suffer the historical trauma of having been classified as the powerless subaltern who lack the civilized culture of the western. The Māori tribes were colonized and killed in large numbers by the western settlers. They were forcefully educated on the western habits made to feel inferior about their culture and traditions. Reuben's words said in anguish, "That's all I learn at school – that I'm not somebody, that my ancestors were rubbish and so I'm rubbish too" (Grace, 1986, p.71). highlights the postcolonial and transgenerational trauma of the younger generation. The Paniya tribe were traded as slaves by the whites as well as the rich merchants. The paniyas were completely dehumanized and reduced to the level of commodities. The people lacked awareness of their subaltern state. These two tribes have suffered historical trauma that has left a lasting impression on the people. The contemporary resistance of these tribes highlights the decolonizing initiative towards empowerment.

CONCLUSION

As the world is faced with environmental degradation and ecological threats, it becomes imperative to learn the sustainable practices that indigenous cultures and communities had always imbibed. The humanity is faced with the dire situation of extreme weather conditions arising from the climate change. Marginalized and ostracized for generations and termed as 'uncivilized', the indigenous communities are now viewed with renewed interest and appreciated for their philosophy of holistic living that respects every part of the natural world. Patricia Grace's *Potiki* and Sheela Tomy's *Valli* offer a unique study of these environment conscious practices of the Māori and Paniya tribe. Both these tribes have the land they live-in as the centrality of their lives and identity. The tribes present a strong resistance towards the pressures of assimilation often shrouded in the name of development. Despite the vast geographical differences between the tribes, the communities are portrayed with similar challenges of displacement, dispossession of their land and identity. Further study on different tribes from different parts of the world can enrich our knowledge about indigenous epistemologies and cultural practices.

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