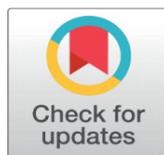
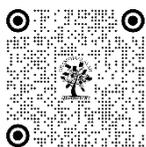


THE EPIC OF THE SUBALTERN: REVOLUTION, RESISTANCE AND REGRESSION IN VALSALA'S AGRARIAN TRILOGY

Dr. S. Jayan ¹✉

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Malayalam Sree Narayana College, Kollam Kerala-691001, India



Corresponding Author

Dr. S. Jayan, jayansnc@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.5078](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i1.2022.5078)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

This article explores the political and socio-historical significance of Valsala's agrarian trilogy, *Nellu*, *Agneyam* and *Koomenkolli*, as a literary cartography of subaltern struggle in Wayanad. Tracing the evolution of Kerala's peasant movements through fiction, the study highlights how Valsala documents the trajectory from feudal oppression to revolutionary fervour, and finally, to post-revolutionary disillusionment. Employing a close reading of key characters and their narrative functions, the article demonstrates how the author crafts a powerful political discourse rooted in agrarian realities, echoing the ideological concerns of revolutionary leaders such as Charu Majumdar. In doing so, the study positions Valsala's work as a critical site for understanding subaltern agency, political education, and the historical limits of idealism in postcolonial India.

Keywords: Agrarian, Caste, Novel, Political, Revolutionary, Subaltern

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of agrarian oppression in Kerala, particularly in the Wayanad region, has long been a site of socio-political contestation, marginalization, and sporadic revolutionary upheaval. Valsala, a prolific Malayalam novelist, emerges as a literary chronicler of this contested terrain, capturing with startling lucidity the psychological, material, and ideological dimensions of rural subaltern life. Her trilogy, *Nellu*, *Agneyam* and *Koomenkolli*, constructs a historical continuum that traces the transformation of agricultural workers from passive victims of feudal exploitation to participants in revolutionary agitation, and finally, to disillusioned citizens navigating a tepid democratic order. Through these novels, Valsala presents not merely fictionalized renderings of agrarian life but a layered epic of class struggle, social reformation, and political compromise.

In this regard, Valsala's literary vision aligns notably with the revolutionary ethos of Charu Majumdar, who famously declared that the Indian revolution must be rooted in agrarian reform. Both view the peasant as the nucleus of political transformation and argue that the success of such reform depends not merely on violence or revolt, but on ideological education and mass mobilization. Valsala's narratives are thus not simply stories of hardship and resistance; they are pedagogical in form and function, illustrating how liberation can emerge only through the simultaneous restructuring of

both social consciousness and material conditions. This paper examines the trilogy as a subaltern epic, mapping how each novel stages a different phase in the ideological evolution of agrarian resistance and social transformation.

2. HISTORICAL GROUNDING AND POLITICAL VISION

Valsala's trilogy is grounded in the socio-political realities of Wayanad, a region historically marked by the exploitation of tribal and agricultural labourers. Her firsthand visit to Thirunelli, a landscape steeped in both cultural mystique and economic hardship, allowed her to engage with the lived experiences of those at the margins. It is this immersive ethnographic sensibility that gives her novels their realist texture and political urgency. Her narratives do not merely aestheticize rural suffering; they interrogate the systemic structures, caste hierarchies, land relations and gendered labour divisions, that have long perpetuated agrarian injustice (Shaji, 2023). Crucially, Valsala recognises that upliftment cannot occur in isolation from structural change. The trilogy, therefore, becomes a fictional archive of transformation, mapping the arc from subjugation to emancipation through both personal and collective acts of defiance.

The ideological scaffolding of Valsala's vision resonates with Charu Majumdar's revolutionary doctrine, particularly his insistence that the agrarian question is central to India's political reformation. His call: "Let the agricultural revolution succeed", is not merely echoed but interpreted through Valsala's literary lens (Dasgupta, 1974). In *Nellu*, for instance, the dehumanising wage system and caste-based oppression are not merely described; they are situated within a broader political critique of exploitation (Valsala, 2008). By aligning personal narratives with historical movements, Valsala transforms individual protagonists into representatives of larger political currents. Her project, like Majumdar's, rests on the pedagogical imperative: to politicise the peasantry, to render the invisible visible, and to move from suffering to solidarity. Through this dual commitment to narrative and ideology, Valsala constructs a political vision that is both historically grounded and future-oriented.

3. CASTE, CLASS, AND LABOUR IN NELLU

In *Nellu*, P. Valsala constructs a realist ethnography of Wayanad's feudal agrarian society, where caste and class hierarchies are not only structurally imposed but also internalized by both the oppressors and the oppressed. The novel's depiction of Thirunelli's adivasi and lower-caste communities reveals how labour is racialised and ritualised, assigned to bodies marked as inferior by birth. The Paniyas, Kurichiyas and other subaltern communities occupy the lowest rung in the social order, not simply because they are poor, but because their caste status has naturalized their servitude. Valsala avoids romanticizing their condition; rather, she portrays the intersection of caste and class as a violence that is both historical and ongoing. The unequal distribution of rice – two sers for men, half a ser for women – functions as a material expression of patriarchal-caste capitalism (Valsala, 2008). Labour, in this context, is not merely physical exertion but the performance of subjugation, governed by a semi-divine landowning class whose authority is legitimized by religion and custom. Valsala's narration thus makes visible the everyday mechanisms of caste capital: how surplus is extracted, how docility is cultivated and how ideology sustains these exploitative arrangements.

Yet *Nellu* is not simply a sociological account; it is also an ideological intervention. The character of Raghavan Nair embodies a rupture within the closed circuit of caste and class oppression. His resistance is quiet but ideologically potent: he feeds the labourers from the temple store, challenges the priest's ritual purity and ultimately refuses to perpetuate the landlord's moral economy. Valsala, in this, aligns herself with a vision of revolutionary humanism, echoing the Maoist-Marxist insistence that liberation must begin with dismantling both material and symbolic systems of exploitation (Valsala, 2008). The monetisation of labour, introduced under the guise of development, is shown to be no less insidious than feudal patronage. It displaces the labourers from a semi-subsistence economy into a market system where their bodies remain commodified and disposable. Through her critique of both traditional feudalism and emergent capitalism, Valsala refuses any binary between the "old" and the "new." Instead, *Nellu* asks whether any transformation is possible without confronting the foundational logics of caste, class, and gender that shape rural labour. Her novel becomes a space where the materiality of exploitation is documented and its ideological justification is unmasked.

4. REVOLUTIONARY IDEALISM IN AGNEYAM

Agneyam by Sarah Joseph unravels the emotional and intellectual terrain of revolutionary consciousness through the character of Leela, a former Naxalite who rethinks her ideological past in the aftermath of disillusionment. The novel

critiques the dehistoricized abstraction of revolutionary rhetoric by highlighting how militant idealism often ignores the lived realities of those it claims to liberate. Leela's journey is not simply a critique of the movement's failure but an inward reckoning with how revolutionary dogma can replicate the very violence it seeks to undo (Valsala, 1974/2020). Her introspections challenge the masculinist framework of radical politics that valorises sacrifice and martyrdom, often at the cost of emotional nuance and ethical clarity. Sarah Joseph, thus, uses Leela to expose the affective gaps in revolutionary praxis, the inability of movements to accommodate doubt, grief, and care. In a world where political allegiance is equated with absolute certainty, Agneyam insists on ambivalence as a mode of resistance.

However, the novel does not reject revolutionary politics altogether; instead, it proposes a more humanistic, feminist rearticulation of idealism. Leela's departure from the formal revolutionary structure is not a retreat into apathy but a movement toward embodied ethics – a politics rooted in empathy, community and the refusal to instrumentalise human life. Sarah Joseph critiques the abstract utopias of the revolution and replaces them with a radical attention to the present: the bodies scarred by violence, the women forgotten in the footnotes of manifestos, and the psychological costs borne by those who dared to dissent (Valsala, 1974/2020). In doing so, Agneyam advances a post-revolutionary vision, where transformation is no longer imagined as a dramatic rupture but as a continuous negotiation with justice, care, and memory. The revolutionary is not discarded but reframed, not as the militant warrior, but as the wounded witness who dares to imagine otherwise.

5. DISILLUSIONMENT AND REGRESSION IN KOOMENKOLLI

Koomenkolli dramatises the inner rupture caused by the collapse of collective political dreams, mapping how historical disillusionment translates into individual psychic regression. The protagonist, once buoyed by the promises of revolutionary change, now drifts through a fractured reality where past certainties have eroded. This disillusionment is not simply political; it is ontological. The world no longer presents itself as coherent or redeemable. What emerges is a portrait of a consciousness caught between residual ideological commitments and an overwhelming sense of futility. The narrative shows how post-revolutionary societies often fail to accommodate the grief of ideological loss, pushing individuals into cycles of apathy or withdrawal (Valsala, 1982/2021). The rural setting of Koomenkolli, stripped of the romanticism often attached to the subaltern in Marxist fiction, becomes a site of existential inertia, a symbol of both cultural erasure and political stagnation.

Moreover, Koomenkolli critiques the regressive pull of nostalgia when it functions as a substitute for critical memory. The protagonist's retreat into recollections of revolutionary zeal becomes a coping mechanism, yet it also blocks the emergence of new political subjectivities. By oscillating between longing and resignation, the novel demonstrates how the failure of collective political movements can precipitate a retreat into personal trauma, superstition, or communal isolation. Sarah Joseph's representation of this regression is laced with feminist unease: the dream of revolution was always filtered through male-centric paradigms that excluded women's agency, labour and pain (Valsala, 1982/2021). In the aftermath of political collapse, it is often the female body, literal and symbolic, that bears the burden of loss and silence. Koomenkolli thus becomes a study in the politics of despair, suggesting that without ethical re-imagination, disillusionment can easily become a conduit for regression rather than renewal.

6. A LITERARY CARTOGRAPHY OF REVOLUTION

To trace a literary cartography of revolution in *Nellu*, *Agneyam* and *Koomenkolli* is to chart the shifting geographies of ideology, affect, and resistance across time, class, and gender. These novels do not treat revolution as a fixed historical event but as a contested and mobile narrative – one that shifts location, language and emotional resonance depending on whose voice is foregrounded. *Nellu* situates revolutionary potential in the rugged terrains of the Western Ghats, using the landscape as both a site of exploitation and resistance (Narayanan, 2023). Here, the forest becomes a palimpsest where tribal oppression, caste hegemony, and capitalist greed are inscribed. *Agneyam*, by contrast, maps revolution onto a more cerebral terrain—an ideological struggle that plays out within the inner conflicts of its characters, whose idealism borders on sacrificial zeal. *Koomenkolli* renders revolution not as promise but as debris, scattered in the wake of broken dreams and failed collectivities. Together, the texts construct a topography where revolution is not a singular destination but a fragmented, often contradictory journey marked by ruptures and regressions.

In summation, these spatialised narratives of revolution intersect with gender in telling ways. While the male revolutionary is often rendered as a tragic idealist or failed hero, the female characters in these novels rarely inherit the

same ideological space. Instead, they navigate the margins, coded as caretakers, sceptics, or symbolic repositories of collective pain. In *Koomenkolli*, for instance, the feminine subject absorbs the psychic fallout of political collapse, her trauma overshadowed by the male protagonist's melancholic introspection. This gendered displacement points to a larger failure in revolutionary imagination: its inability to incorporate affective labour, domestic agency, and female dissent as integral to political transformation. A cartography of revolution that excludes these elements is inherently incomplete. What these novels ultimately suggest is that any map of resistance must account not only for topography and ideology but also for the silenced bodies that walk its peripheries.

7. CONCLUSION

Valsala's agrarian trilogy offers a layered and incisive critique of postcolonial India's socio-political landscape. Her characters embody the paradoxes of revolution: the tension between hope and disillusionment, between ideological purity and pragmatic reform. The political landscape she depicts teeters on collapse, with contemporary movements drifting into decay. In this climate, the spirit of selflessness is replaced by personal gain, and even idealism appears suspect. Balan Nambiar, as the culmination of this arc, symbolises the dilution of revolutionary values in a world governed by expediency. In documenting this decline, Valsala does not merely mourn a lost era; she compels the reader to reflect on the cost of forgetting the subaltern struggle that once promised liberation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Dasgupta, B. (1974). The naxalite movement. *China Report*, 10(4), 25–43.
- Narayanan, N. (2023, November 23). P Valsala — writer who held a mirror to lives of oppressed & marginalized. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/p-valsala-writer-mirror-lives-oppressed-marginalized/articleshow/105431065.cms>
- Shaji, K. (2023, November 22). Obituary: With the passing of P Valsala, the voice of Wayanad's voiceless falls silent. *The South First*. <https://thesouthfirst.com/kerala/obituary-with-the-passing-of-p-valsala-the-voice-of-wayanads-voiceless-falls-silent/>
- Valsala, P. (2008). *Nellu*. DC Books.
- Valsala, P. (2020). *Agneyam*. Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society Ltd. (Original work published 1974)
- Valsala, P. (2021). *Koomenkolli*. Green Books. (Original work published 1982)