

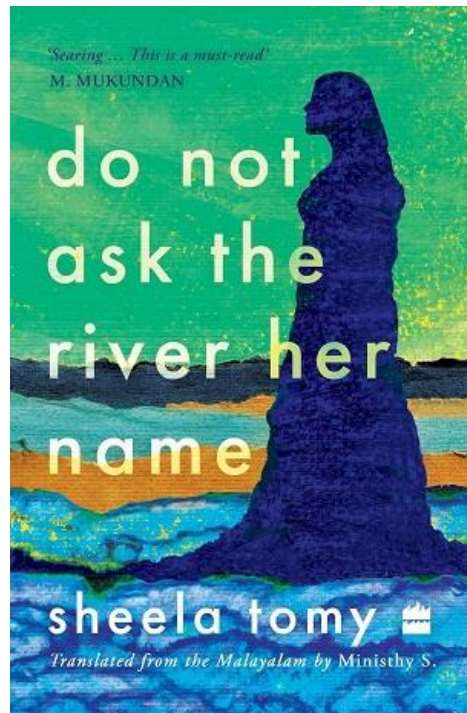


## Book Review of Sheela Tomy's 'Do Not Ask the River Her Name' by Subhajit Bhadra

**A Saga of Terror and Human Value: Expanding the Horizon of Malayalam Literature**

In recent times, there has been a surge in the number of works by writers of Indian Bhasha languages, whose impact has been felt internationally through translations into English and other European languages. Many critics argue that translation often diminishes the essence of the original work, while others view it as an act of cultural recovery. The book under review, titled *Do Not Ask the River Her Name* (an English translation of the original Malayalam text), was first published in 2023. The English translation, by

Ministhy S., successfully retains the flavor of the original. However, given its powerful expression, one could argue that it transcends the boundaries of mere translation.



## Universal Themes and International Appeal

Sheela Tomy has established herself as a significant voice in world literature with her debut novel, *Vally*. Malayalam literature, in its vernacular form, is both rich and profound. Sharmishtha Panja, a professor of English at Delhi University, edited a book titled *Many Indias, Many Literatures*, which challenges the misconception that all Indian literatures are homogeneous. Tomy's novel exemplifies this perspective. She deliberately transcends provincial boundaries in her novel, which resonates internationally due to its central theme: the

conflict between Israel and Palestine. The English translation holds global appeal, driven by Tomy's philanthropic outlook.

The title of Tomy's novel is deeply symbolic. The novel's setting extends far beyond South India, encompassing locations such as Dubai, Tel Aviv, Jordan, and beyond. Jerusalem also plays a significant role in the novel's narrative landscape. However, the novel remains deeply rooted in Kerala, the home that Ruth, the female protagonist, leaves behind to care for her injured, bedridden husband and two children. As she journeys through the Gulf countries and Europe, the narrative offers readers a panoramic view of international issues.

## Themes of Exile, Loss, and Resistance

The theme of exile takes center stage, accompanied by the theme of exodus. Numerous religious and mythical references to Islam and Christianity, combined with historical details, add depth and complexity to the novel. Through Tomy's masterful handling of the plot, the mass exodus across the borders of Israel and Palestine is vividly portrayed. This evokes George Steiner's observation: "The twentieth century is the age of transcendental homelessness."

Edward W. Said's seminal work, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, offers valuable insights in this context. Milan Kundera famously stated, "Any novel that does not explore a hitherto unknown territory is not a novel at all," a thought-provoking observation from his book *The Art of the Novel*.

Alongside the war between Israel and Palestine, the narrative also delves into the roles of Hamas (the Palestinian intelligence branch) and Mossad (the Israeli intelligence agency). The theme of siege, along with the concept of imaginary boundaries between nations, features prominently in the narrative. The narrative also explores themes such as

“nation,” “nationality,” and “nationalism,” echoing similar concerns in Indian English author Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Shadow Lines*.

The novel poignantly laments the loss of innocent lives and explores the futility of war, echoing themes found in the war poetry of English poets such as Wilfred Owen, who wrote during the First World War. A notable feature of Tomy’s novel is that each chapter has its own title, with a total of forty-seven (47) chapters. The river’s gender is depicted as feminine, consistent with the portrayal of most rivers in South India. The novel seamlessly blends myth and reality, lending it a gripping and immersive quality.

The novel begins with an introduction to the family tree, detailing the lives Tomy explores throughout the narrative. Chronologically, these families include the Menahem family, Manjottil, and Padmala. The novel’s settings span various national and international locations, primarily Jerusalem, Dubai, Switzerland, Kerala, Riyadh, and Nazareth. However, the narrative predominantly focuses on Israel and Palestine, as previously noted.

These locales serve as significant tropes in the novel, which is not only ambitious but also offers a postcolonial, deconstructive, and postmodern narrative. Tomy’s success lies in her ability to render the various settings in the novel with extraordinary clarity, insight, compassion, and sensitivity. Readers may find valuable insights in *The Language of Fiction* by David Lodge and *The Rhetoric of Fiction* by Wayne C. Booth.

It is important to note that the novel as a literary form was introduced to India from the West. However, in recent times, Indian authors—both those writing in English and Bhasha writers—have gained widespread recognition through translations into English and other European languages. In this context, one can refute Fredric Jameson’s assertion that

“All third-world literatures are national allegories.” This reductionist view is contested by Aijaz Ahmad in his book *In Theory*.

Although Tomy writes in Malayalam, she draws from an already rich literary tradition. This brings to mind the works of O.V. Vijayan, a foundational figure in Malayalam literature, whose novels are now available in English translation. Novels such as *Indulekha* and *The Legends of Khasak* have achieved global acclaim through their English translations. Before the novel begins, Tomy provides a poignant comment: “The one who exited before the story ended.” The novel also includes a graphical depiction of an ancient map of Jerusalem, aiding readers in gaining a clearer understanding.

## Love, Hope, and Literary Heritage

The novel opens with Mahmoud Darwish's renowned poem *Passport*, which captures the poignant pathos of both forced and involuntary immigration. Darwish's poem is a poignant reflection on love, memory, homeland, and the native landscape. The poem's narration poses several rhetorical questions, grounding his identity in the flora and fauna of his homeland.

This evokes an episode from Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, where two exiled individuals recount their trauma and loss to Said, oblivious to the fact that he does not understand their language. While Darwish's passport allows him international mobility, his identity as a rebel poet—much like the exiled Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz—places him under constant “surveillance,” akin to Foucault's concept of the “Panopticon.”

Through his poetry, Darwish raises the Israel-Palestine conflict as a pressing international and political issue. Darwish's poem resonates with sadness, nostalgia, love, and a

fearless embrace of death, qualifying it as a protest poem. This situates him among other global voices of protest, such as James Baldwin, James Joyce, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Agha Shahid Ali, Michael Ondaatje, and Taslima Nasrin.

This detailed preamble underscores the thematic parallels between Darwish's poem and the novel under review. Tomy, as an immigrant writer, belongs to the rare cadre of creatives who can universalize local issues. Tomy's debut novel, *Vally*, offered readers a vivid portrait of an unfamiliar life. The current book brings to light issues rarely addressed by Indian Bhasha literature writers.

Tomy deserves credit for aligning the texture and structure of her novel with the sentiment expressed in Darwish's poem. Tomy's narrative unfolds naturally, marked by the effortless grace of her writing. Her varied linguistic registers reflect expert artistic professionalism and thorough research.

The novel explores the historical growth and sacred significance of Jerusalem, portrayed as a revered site for devotees. Readers are encouraged to approach the novel slowly to fully appreciate its subtle nuances. The narrative's unconventional structure, merging past, present, and future, evokes the modernist fiction of writers like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Tomy frequently employs transferred epithets throughout the narrative.

The narrative subtly gestures toward a concept of "female utopia," a term coined by Alice Walker. This idea is reflected in Ruth's Bohemian and resolute behavior as she leaves India for Dubai and other unknown destinations to earn money for her injured husband's treatment and her children's future. Ruth occasionally exhibits feminist tendencies, remaining steadfast in her decision despite adverse comments from her loved ones back home.

The novel is discursive, with its historical narrative often challenging readers' perceptions. In this regard, it recalls Alan Munslow's groundbreaking book *Deconstructing History*. Much like the characters in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, the characters in Tomy's novel recognize the existence of man-made borders between nations while also acknowledging their imaginary nature, which perpetuates divisions among people from different regions.

Ruth, baptized before assuming her role as a caregiver and nurse, later creates a vlog that recounts numerous violent incidents, placing her under suspicion. The novel's language is frequently lyrical, poetic, and adaptable to diverse registers. While working as a nurse, Ruth often undertakes menial tasks but approaches her profession with ethical dedication across various settings.

Ruth's love for literature deepens as she finds herself reading passages from the Holy Bible in some of the places she works. The translation of the novel retains many Malayalam words, as their English equivalents are unavailable, enriching the narrative with cultural authenticity. Ruth's nostalgia for her roots lingers, even as she gradually adapts to her new surroundings.

A sense of mystery surrounds some characters' movements, creating suspense throughout the novel. This detective-like undertone permeates the narrative, adding intrigue at various points in the story.

## Cultural Bridges Through Translation

Tomy deliberately integrates the mode of oral narrative throughout the novel, giving it a distinct authenticity. Ruth gradually learns Hebrew, reflecting her adaptation to a new cultural and linguistic environment. The occasional use of "magic realism" as a narrative technique—originating from



Latin American literature—adds a surreal yet poignant dimension to the storytelling.

Amidst the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, glimpses of human grace emerge as victims of the war are offered food and shelter by various non-governmental organizations. Asher remains in a relentless search for Sahal, growing increasingly disheartened with each failed attempt.

The novel contrasts the “grand narrative” with “mini-narratives,” as articulated by Jean-François Lyotard. In this story, “mini-narratives” or “private histories” often fade beneath the overpowering presence of mega historical narratives. Additionally, the novel references the survivors of Hitler’s Holocaust, evoking the atrocities committed against Jews during World War II.

In this context, one is reminded of Nobel Prize-winning author Imre Kertész, whose works, such as *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, *Liquidation*, and *Fateless*, explore the persistent trauma of the Holocaust. These reflections enrich the novel’s engagement with historical and human complexities.

Sahal Al Fadi, whom Asher searches for, is portrayed as a brilliant poet, with excerpts from his various poems cited throughout the novel. Sahal dreams of a free nation, one devoid of any divisions, especially those rooted in religion. The novel aligns itself with the tradition of anti-war literature, comparable to *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, to name a few. Tomy appears to convey a powerful message to her readers: “War defamiliarizes our known world.”

This novel is not only a survival narrative but also delves into the profound guilt of survival. As an Indian reviewer, I am reminded of the unparalleled horrors of the Partition of India



in 1947, which led to immense bloodshed and loss, making its historical trauma relevant to the themes explored in the book.

Ruth's role as a *metapelet*—a caregiver—requires her to shoulder immense responsibility for each patient under her care. Initially, this responsibility feels like an existential burden, but over time, it becomes her vocation, and she grows into the role with remarkable efficiency.

The novel critiques the self-centered nature of the media, as seen through Ruth's efforts to document her own version of the Israel-Palestine conflict using her video camera. Tomy frequently experiments with both the texture and structure of the narrative, showcasing her creative versatility and adding layers of depth to the story.

The novel frequently incorporates instances of incisive satire, often addressing weighty themes. Issues such as gender discrimination and the harassment of women are prominently highlighted. While these issues are acute in Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East, they are equally prevalent in non-Muslim countries, as patriarchy often suppresses women's voices—a reality explored in *The Second Sex* and other works by French feminists like Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva.

The novel can be interpreted as a historical, political, and social commentary, resonating strongly with contemporary readers. Issues such as the Covid-19 pandemic feature prominently in the narrative, further grounding the story in the present day. Sahal Al Fadi's monologues, presented as letters and poems, add depth and brilliance to the novel's tapestry. As a revolutionary, Sahal embodies the idea that poetry and revolution often go hand in hand. This concept finds echoes in the works of world-renowned poets like Pablo Neruda, W.B. Yeats, Mahmoud Darwish, and Agha Shahid Ali, all of whom seamlessly intertwined poetic expression with revolutionary ideals.

Similarly, the novel aligns with literary masterpieces like *Mother* by Maxim Gorky, *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, and *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, where socio-political upheavals and personal struggles converge.

Years later, Ruth reconnects with people from her roots in Cochin, thanks to Asher's kindness and support. However, living in Jerusalem, the family from Kerala has lost touch with their language, culture, and, inevitably, their identity.

## Humanitarian Vision and Universal Themes

Tomy addresses the grave issues of women trafficking and prostitution, which are prevalent in many parts of the Eastern world. Sex traffickers often lure innocent women or girls from different countries, exploiting them for their own gain. Ruth becomes a victim of such a trap, but through the blessings, love, and care of her people, she is able to escape this horrific racket. Later, she reveals critical information about these groups, both as a victim and a witness. In contrast, many women who are trafficked into the Middle East willingly turn to prostitution, hoping for a better life.

A peculiar character named Kanya appears in the narrative, engaging in anti-religious acts that challenge traditional norms. This reminds me of Pakistani author Tehmina Durrani's novel *Blasphemy*, which led to the book being banned in several Islamic countries due to its controversial themes.

Ruth also reads aloud Kahlil Gibran's world-renowned philosophical book *The Prophet* to Abba, which is part of her duties as a caregiver.

One important point to note is that, traditionally, we see male immigrants moving to different countries, but in Tomy's novel, we encounter many female immigrants who leave their home countries in search of a better life. Compassion and

sensitivity are twin qualities that define great literature, and Tomy's novel is infused with these elements.

The novel also challenges the assumption that some sufferings are the worst. Through the portrayal of Nina's sufferings, Tomy makes Ruth's own hardships seem comparatively insignificant. Tomy acknowledges the tireless efforts of human rights activists who provide relief to war-ravaged people and show compassion to those who have lost everything.

A distinctive feature of the novel is the inclusion of several Malayalam poems, presented both in their original form and in English translation. These poems resonate deeply with the narrative, enhancing its texture.

The plot sometimes focuses on Ruth's retrospective recollections, while at other times it unfolds in the present, always reflecting Sheela Tomy's ambition to present her readers with a moving and gripping story.

The novel celebrates the power of human love, which has the potential to make the world a livable place—or even a paradise—where everyone sings the glory of "Love." The author deliberately spans a vast geographical landscape, with characters traveling across various countries, each with their own unique goals. Many characters in the novel suffer the loss of their loved ones due to human atrocities, such as Sahal, who must say goodbye to his beloved Fatima.

Thus, Tomy's novel is fundamentally humanitarian in its message, rather than merely political. The novel also subtly addresses the issue of "Islamophobia," a form of suspicion Muslims face globally. However, Sheela Tomy challenges these misplaced notions by celebrating the joy of life and love.

The historical figure Arafat is also mentioned, a man who dedicated his life to establishing peace between Israel and Palestine, though his dream remained unfulfilled. Tomy beautifully captures the strength of the anti-war sentiment,

expressing it in a single line: "The existential secret of the universe is in two syllables: mer-cy."

Sheela Tomy will always be remembered for crafting a brilliant novel that is so closely tied to our times. The translation is so lucid and beautiful that it reads like an original English novel. Throughout the book, there are numerous references to historical blunders driven by political causes. Even when Ruth is urged by her husband and children to return to Kerala, she promises to come only once her professional responsibilities are fulfilled. The novel is weighed down by the grief of extermination, a sentiment reinforced by the following comment:

"Undoubtedly, every innocent's murder is a crucifixion."

It also reminds me of the metaphysical poet John Donne's remark, "No know man is an island and every men's death diminishes me."

One very important aspect of the novel is that Asher behaves like a pilgrim, a bohemian, and a philanthropist who risks his own life, moving across various locations and defying borders and checkpoints. The solidarity born from love is portrayed as the only antidote to fight against religious fanaticism, civil war, and great conflicts (such as the Israel-Palestine conflict dramatized here) in our contemporary world. It is a timely novel that tackles a theme whose implications can only be resolved through a peaceful situation maintained by human concern. Asher and Sarah's love story douses the flames of hatred and serves as a reminder that true love never dies. Most importantly, the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine is viewed from the perspective of an unbiased third country, represented here by Ruth and her native country, India.

However, the novel's ending remains inconclusive, opening the door to postmodern interpretations. Sheela Tomy's debut

novel *Vally* has already received much acclaim, and in this novel, she delves deeper into previously unexplored territory, demonstrating her extensive range. The landscape of Malayalam literature is rich, with authors like O.V. Vijayan, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, Kamala Das, K. Satchidanandan, and others, and in this context, Sheela Tomy has already proven her prowess.

The present reviewer extends heartfelt congratulations to Sheela Tomy for her unbiased and brilliant narrative. I hope she will continue to travel the path of world-class literature. The novel ends with a warm interview between Tomy and her translator, which is both illuminating and thought-provoking. This novel should be translated into many languages because of its intrinsic power and literary merit.

Book Title: Do Not Ask the River Her Name

Author: Sheela Tomy

Translation : Ministhy S.

Publisher: Harperperennial

## Sheela Tomy

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Sheela Tomy is a novelist and short-story writer, hailing from Wayanad, Kerala.

Valli, her debut novel, was awarded the renowned Cherukad Award for Malayalam Literature in 2021. Sheela is also the author of a short story collection *Melquiadesnte Pralayapusthakam* (Melquiades's Book of Floods) published in 2012. She has won several awards for her short stories, including the Abu Dhabi Arangu Award (2007), the Puzha.com Short Story Award (2008), Doha Sanskriti Award (2012), the Doha Samanwayam Award (2012), and the Kamala Surayya 'Neermathalam' Award UAE (2014). Her recognitions include the Madhyamam She Q Excellence Award (2022), the KCBC Media Award for Literature (2023) and the 'Ashayam' Basheer Award (2023).

Aa Nadiyodu Peru Chodikkaruth (Don't Ask the River Her Name), her newest work, was awarded the Muthukulam Parvathy Amma Literature Prize and the Maniyoor Balan Novel Award in 2024.

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## Subhajit Bhadra

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Subhajit Bhadra, born in 1980 in Guwahati, Assam, is a gold medallist in M.A from Tezpur University. He is a freelance writer, poet, critic and translator. He has published a number of books including *The Masked Protagonist In Jewish American Fiction*, *The Man Who Stole The Crown*, *The Rising Sun*, a book of poems in Bengali and a translated work titled *Selected Stories of Arun Goswami*.

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He has written a book on *History of English Literature*. He has also been published widely in Indian literature, a bi-monthly journal of Sahitya Akadami. At present, he is an assistant professor in the Department of English at Bongaigaon College, Bongaigaon, Assam.



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