

## Analysing Waliullah's Majeed in *Tree Without Roots: An Existential Perspective*

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### Abstract

*With only five novels to his credit – Lal Shalu (Red Cloth)(1948), Chander Amabasya (Night of No Moon)(1964), Kando Nodi Kando (Cry, River, Cry)(1968), How to Cook Beans (2012), and The Ugly Asian (2013), Syed Waliullah (1922-1971) holds an eminent place in Bengali literature. He had always been quite introspective as an author, focusing more on analysing the psyche of the characters than elaborating on the plot. The protagonists Aref Ali from Chander Amabasya, and Muhammad Mustafa from Kando Nodi Kando are considered to be two of the very first existential characters in Bangladeshi as well as Bengali literature. Majeed from Lal Shalu shares the trait of introspection to a certain degree and the author leads us to his innermost turmoil through extensive use of stream of consciousness, but Majeed is usually considered to be an opportunist fraud feeding upon the religious sentiment of people. However, Tree Without Roots, the English version of Lal Shalu presents a Majeed more contemplative and less villainous in nature, different from his counterpart in the Bengali original. The English version, a revision by the author, differs substantially from the Bengali version and the protagonist in the English version seemingly emerges with an existential undertone. This article aims to focus on the differences between the two versions of the novel as well as the character in question and analyses whether the protagonist can be considered as an existentialist character or not.*

The Bengali original of *Tree Without Roots* entitled *Lal Shalu* was published in 1948, just the year after India and Pakistan achieved independence from the British colonial rule. The two major religions of the inhabitants, Hinduism and Islam, influenced the creation of the new states, the dissolution of the British-Raj and the partition of the Indian subcontinent. The united struggle for independence from the British colonial rule ended up in dividing the political milieu of the subcontinent into political parties built on religious identities – the

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Congress and the Muslim League. Both political entities pursued the Two Nation Theory, propagating the idea that the unifying factor for Hindus or Muslims in the subcontinent is religion rather than language or ethnicity or other commonalities, and therefore Hindus and Muslims are two distinct nations to have separate sovereign political identities. This resulted in creating an irreconcilable duality, an atmosphere of religious zeal perpetuating distrust and hostility between the Hindus and the Muslims that still strongly afflicts the political philosophies in the subcontinent.

Experiencing the impact of the partition politics on his native country must have intrigued the author in reconnoitering how deep the roots of faith go into the psyche of people and encompasses the social, political, and economic aspects of their lives, and how easy it is to move or manipulate people by religious sentimentality. However, instead of making the political turmoil of the division of the subcontinent the focus of his writing, he decided to write about people living in the periphery, far away from the urban landscape, to pinpoint his focus on only how a manipulative person can use religion to make a superstitious people his puppets. He chose to work with a setting where hardworking but illiterate people live at the mercy of nature, and fall prey to the manipulative schemes of both social and religious leaders.

In *Lal Shalu* (1948), we find Majeed playing the role of a crafty opportunist appropriating his institutional education received in *maktab* and knowledge of *The Koran* as “the discourse of religion, of sin and salvation in order to preach particular norms of behaviour in domains like marriage, sexuality, family and charity” (Nayar 35). Through this manipulation he becomes the sole dominating authority in the village *Mohabbatnagar*.

Majeed’s native land yields almost nothing not because it is infertile but because there are too many hungry people to feed; little food means more devotion in religion, and the devout *maktab* alumni spread out in search of vocation once they discover they are unemployable in their own land. Majeed embarks on his journey to *Mohabbatnagar* after hearing about its prospects from a hunter in his isolated mosque in the Garo Hills. Quite amusing is the question that he asks the hunter – “But are they God-fearing? Do they pray? Do they fast during the month of Ramadan?” (Waliullah 8) This clearly shows how concerned he is about learning whether or not he would be able to manipulate the people by stimulating their religious sentiment.

In the outskirts of *Mohabbatnagar*, Majeed spots a nameless grave forgotten by time itself and makes it the centre of his web of manipulation. He presents it as the grave of a holy person, so much alive in death that it deserves to be turned into a shrine for the welfare of the villagers. He claims that the Saint himself summoned him in a dream to go to the village and make the villagers aware of their oblivious negligence of the sacred grave as well as the presence of this holy soul in their village. Being both religious and superstitious in nature, the residents of the village accept the fantastical explanation quite heartily. Majeed's religious training and knowledge validate his fabricated tale as truth, and thus Majeed starts his domination in the village.

Majeed's dominion manifests in myriad sadomasochistic ways. In the name of religion, he has both father and son circumcised publicly. He causes the death of Tara Mian indirectly by insulting him publicly through questioning the legitimacy of his children. He makes Amena suffer at first for desiring to visit a rival *pir* by making her fast all day and later on circle around the mazar as a ritual, and then convinces Khaleque, her husband, to send her away to her father's house. Even though Khaleque is the richest, and thus most powerful man in the village, he dares not go against Majeed's decision. The villagers obey him without questioning as the ideology or form of religiosity that he presents appeals greatly to the simple-minded God-fearing villagers. In fact, it fills up the internal ideological void they live in. Living in an economy based on traditional feudal mode of production, the villagers besides the mercy of the landlords yearn for the mercy of the supernatural to fend off natural calamities that could dash all their hopes and dreams in a moment. This is the reason why they willingly submit to the ideological framework built by Majeed, and do not object even when his role evolves from the concerned spiritual caregiver to the oppressive social authority, subjecting them to his whimsical decisions and humiliating treatment.

That is why, ever since its publication, *Lal Shalu* has been considered to be a representative literary documentation of the lives of people of the subcontinent, especially from the periphery who are being dominated in the name of religion. Similarly, Majeed, the protagonist of the novel, has been considered to be a stereotypical fortune-hunting villain, who does not deserve analysis from any other perspectives, such as an existential one, so to say.

The question whether a different analysis of Majeed's character is possible rose along with the publication of its English counterpart, *Tree Without Roots*,

nineteen years later in 1967. However, the English version takes a different route from the Bengali original. Like its Bengali counterpart *Lal Shalu*, *Tree Without Roots* also deals with the naive, illiterate, and marginal people being victimised by a manipulative religious leader; but a number of differences in plot sets it apart as a transcreation that stands on its own rather than a faithful translation. These changes make Majeed appear in *Tree Without Roots* to be comparatively more humane than the Bengali counterpart in *Lal Shalu*.

The title *Tree Without Roots* itself suggests a shift of focus from the shrine to the caretaker as Serajul Islam Choudhury points out in his Introduction to the English version published by The University Press Limited. He contends: "The change in the title of the new version indicates a shift of emphasis from the shrine to its caretaker. Although it is well-nigh impossible to separate the two, here the focus on the man is sharper than it was in the original novel." (Choudhury xi)

The publisher of the English version of the novel, Niaz Zaman indicates the changes in a newspaper article titled, "Syed Waliullah: Existentialism, Nostalgia, Nationalism":

Translated several years after *Lal Shalu* had been written, *Tree Without Roots* has small but significant changes from its Bengali original. In the Bengali novel, Majeed is portrayed as a charlatan who exploits the religious beliefs of the common people to make a living for himself. At the end of *Lal Shalu*, Majeed sternly tells the villagers bewailing their losses, "Do not be ungrateful. Have faith in God." *Tree Without Roots* agrees with the Bengali original in the essential storyline but has a longer description of the Bengal landscape and introduces nobility in Majeed's character towards the end, missing in the Bengali version. In *Tree Without Roots*, Majeed leaves his two wives with his friend and strides off alone across the flooded land. (Zaman 10)

To cite a few more differences, the way the isolation of the village *Mohabbatpur* is presented in the English version makes it almost as mythical as *Malgudi* in the works of R.K. Narayan or as *Macondo* in the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Importantly, this confines *Tree Without Roots* within social, economic, and religious context but takes away the political one. Like the name of the village, the name of the saint also changes in the English version. The name of the saint

is Modasser in the Bengali version, whereas in the English one it is Shah Sadeque. The Arabic word Modasser is a variant of Mudassir that means clothed, or covered, or hidden. Choosing such a name for a fabricated alive-in-death saint indicates Majeed's shrewdness in *Lal Shalu*, the original novel in Bengali. It is as if Majeed is teasing the innocence of the gullible villagers by picking such a name, who remain unaware of his true intention throughout the novel. In the Bengali original, Majeed's confrontation with the rival *Pir* depicts him to be a desperate aggressor trying to fend off contending rivals to protect his territory; likewise, the way he opposes Akkas establishes him as a ruthless power-monger. Both confrontations are absent in the English version. Also, it is Majeed who demands the construction of the mosque in *Lal Shalu* but in *Tree Without Roots*, Khaleque proposes building the mosque as if to compensate for his wife Amena's impudence. Whereas, *Lal Shalu*, the Bengali original ends with a hailstorm destroying the crops, the English version goes one step further showing the shrine being submerged by flood. In the end of *Lal Shalu*, Majeed sternly warns the villagers not to lose faith in the face of natural calamity, whereas in *Tree Without Roots*, despite knowing that it might cost him his life, he decides to walk back to the submerged shrine. In the light of these differences, though both Majeeds are exceedingly self-absorbed and exceptionally unsympathetic, the Majeed from *Tree without Roots* appears to be more humane than the one from *Lal Shalu*. This is why, perhaps, in *Tree without Roots*, the attention of the reader is drawn more to Majeed's inner struggle than the cult-leader persona who intends to dominate the land and extort the people in the name of religion.

Kaiser Haq, in an article reviewing *Tree Without Roots*, provides an insight about the English version being different from the Bengali one:

*Lal Shalu* was written by a young man, probably when he was still a college student and was published in 1948. When he wrote *Tree Without Roots* he had matured, become better read, acquired a commendable mastery of the English language. He had also become an UNESCO official in Paris: this was perhaps the most important factor affecting his creative life, for in Paris he absorbed existentialism and successfully infused it into his writing. The Majeed of *Tree Without Roots* is more amenable to an existential analysis than his original. (Haq 12)

Ann-Marie Thibaud – Mrs. Waliullah, translated *Lal Shalu* to French from the English translation made by Waliullah, which she later amalgamated to

*Tree Without Roots* (Thibaud 64). The couple was also working on the translation of *Chander Amabasya* at that time. Waliullah had already been exposed to and influenced by the existentialist movement in France, a lasting impression of which can be observed in the protagonists of his two novels *Chander Amabasya*, and *Kando Nodi Kando*. In the newspaper article, "Syed Waliullah: Existentialism, Nostalgia, Nationalism", Niaz Zaman also hints at the author being influenced by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus after moving to Paris. She also refers to Serajul Islam Choudhury's emphasis on this influence and considering Waliullah as the introducer of Existential strain into Bengali fiction in his subsequent novels – *Chander Amabasya* and *Kando Nodi Kando*. Protagonists from both the novels, Aref Ali and Muhammad Mustafa, struggle with moral dilemma as well as questions about choice and responsibility, which are obviously the telltale signs of existential protagonists. And this is why perhaps, when the author decided to revise *Lal Shalu* and rewrite parts of the novel to tone down the negative traits of the protagonist, Majeed's character seemingly developed an existential undertone.

However, Thibaud does not consider existentialism to be the driving force behind Majeed in *Tree Without Roots*. She admits that the protagonist achieves a certain kind of grandeur, especially by deciding to return to the submerging shrine, but ruminates it to be the act of a man being caught up in the web of his own lies, who has no other way out but to stand firm on the shaky ground of falsehood to make it appear like a firm one (Thibaud 64). Raju from R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* is found in a similar situation too: playing the role of a sage to escape from the miseries of his life; but in the end, the villager's faith in him rekindles his faith in himself to a certain extent, which persuades him to continue the ritualistic fasting, even if it could result in his demise. However, in Majeed's case, sadly, it is just to protect the charade that he had run to subjugate the villagers for his own gain since he came to the village is his prime motive, and not anything to do with a spiritual reawakening. We find similar observation in the introduction to *Tree Without Roots*, where Serajul Islam Choudhury ponders the possibility of the villagers of *Mohabbatpur* losing faith in him should he leave the *mazar* unattended during the flood:

He knows that if he leaves, people will lose faith in him and in the protection of God he has so consistently and loudly proclaimed to have been ensured by the holy saint. And consequently, he will be rendered homeless, perhaps forced to return to the place he came from. (Choudhury xii)

Kaiser Haq also reaches the same conclusion in the article “Existentialism in a Bangladeshi Village”, the book review of *Tree Without Roots*:

Majeed is anxiously aware of the “game” he is playing and its attendant risks, but once he has embarked on it there’s no turning back: ‘It was he who had created the *mazar*, and he could not destroy it,’ he muses. ‘For he was now its slave’ – which is a good example of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). But when a deluge threatens the *mazar* his decision not to abandon it is not made willy-nilly but in full consciousness of his freedom. Readers may be reminded of Narayan’s Raju, another unlikely existential hero, but Majeed in the last four paragraphs of the narrative is much more of an exalté, closer to Sartre’s Mathieu in his final moments. (Haq 12)

It is admirable the way Majeed overcomes the socio-economic restraints he was born under, and his journey from the barren native land to the Garo Hills, and finally to *Mohabbatpur*. However, it will be a mistake to consider this trajectory to be fulfilling the primary principle of Existentialism, that “existence precedes essence.” Majeed’s entrepreneurship does seem to fulfil the first half of the of the first premise in that – “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world-and defines himself afterwards” (Sartre 28), as Majeed does not let the conditions he was born under to define or restrict himself. Rather he ventures out in the world and keeps reshaping it to suit his needs. However, Sartre also proposes that doing so is an act of subjective choice, and when a man chooses something, in making the choice he does not remain responsible for himself only, but also for the whole mankind. According to him, an existential choice must be a universally acceptable as well as applicable one, as any choice made by anyone has to be eligible to everyone. The person who is making the choice cannot wish other people not to make the same choice, and thus a selfish choice serving the interest of a single person does not possess the quality of becoming a universal one. Therefore, a person is free to choose subjectively but he is always under moral scrutiny – whether the choice is good for the person only or is it good for everyone. Thus anyone making a choice makes the choice as a universal human being, where the act of choice becomes an example and the choice-maker a role model for the rest of mankind (Sartre 29-30). In *Tree Without Roots*, Majeed chooses to be what he is only to serve his self-interest, and as Sartre himself would put it, he cannot be taken as a role model since what he does cannot be taken as a universal model of human being. Also, in choosing what to be, Majeed restricts the choice of all the other people of

*Mohabbatpur*, and forces his own choice upon them, trapping them in an essence defined by him, treating them as mere means to his desired end. What Majeed does for his betterment worsens everyone else's lives in *Mohabbatpur*.

Then again, the anguish readers find him suffering from in every chapter, which is exposed through the author's employment of stream of consciousness, could be mistaken for Existential despair. Majeed's anguish is very personal in nature, and it is caused not by the outstanding burden of having to choose for everyone. His anguish comes from the fear of being caught, not out of bearing the burden of deciding not only for him but also for the villagers. From the very beginning, he is afraid of the shaky foundation of his enterprise built entirely on a lie and hopes that God would be both understanding and forgiving about his deceit, but it does not lessen his anguish. In course of time he becomes an unquestionable socio-religious authority in *Mohabbatpur*, but he remains anxious about the outcome of the shrine business, and of the day when his scam would be exposed and his authority challenged. All the prosperity the shrine provides cannot ease the deep-rooted anxiety in his heart. This does not qualify as the existential anguish that Sartre proposes since an existentialist's anguish is in the responsibility of having to choose not only for himself but for the mankind. "Am I really a man who has the right to act in such a manner that humanity regulates itself by what I do" (Sartre 32), is how an existentialist should meditate on decisions, and the existentialist anguish is caused by being responsible about making a thoughtful good choice universally appropriate, and not in any other way.

Majeed is a lonely figure in the novel, alienated from everyone else. This is far from the Existential abandonment though. Majeed depends upon Khaleque's wealth and influence over the villagers to protect his own authority but he cannot open up to Khaleque. His relationship with his first wife Rahima is purely physical as there seems to be no emotional attachment between them. His relation with his second wife Jamila is a failed one too as she is too young to be indoctrinated like Rahima or the rest of the villagers. However, the abandonment Majeed experiences is an abandonment of his own creation. People around him always are simply means to his desired end serving his intended interest, and that is why he terribly fails to establish a human connection with anyone and faces abandonment. Abandonment in Existentialism is something else entirely. Existentialist abandonment refers to the responsibility of a person who has to choose without any excuse, as a she or



he does not have anything or anyone to depend upon either within or outside himself to defend his or her choice or decision –

For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's action by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom. Nor, on the other hand, if God does not exist, are we provided with any values or commands that could legitimise our behaviour. Thus we have neither behind us, nor before us in a luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse – We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free. (Sartre 34)

Moreover, Majeed is not a person who can claim authenticity as a human being. He builds his whole life upon lies and deception, and that in turn makes him as inauthentic as the shrine. Existentialists consider a person to be “a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organisation, the set of relations that constitute these undertakings” (Sartre 42). This notion renders Majeed to be inauthentic as a person as all he does is lie and deceive to serve personal interest. He is a religion-monger who preaches for money and power, and never practises what he preaches.

The most misleading part of the novel is perhaps when Majeed decides to go back to the submerged shrine, which imposes a kind of grandeur on him. However, it is to be considered that the optimistic stance of the self – renewal in the face of severe odds is what makes a person an unlikely but true existential protagonist. He makes the conscious choice out of commitment to what he believes. He does this in sheer despair though; ready to accept the consequences; which Majeed does not –

In the face of my mounting doubts and confusions with regard to the world affairs, subjectivism says, I alone, in my own situation, pursue my own projects and make my moral decisions, freely and responsibly, in authenticity. But I decide in anguish, Sartre adds, since I am without foundation. (Lavine 375)

Arguably, desperation is there in Majeed's final act in *Tree Without Roots*, but all the other essential existential qualities such as moral consideration, accountability, responsibility, conviction, and authenticity are missing from his decision of going back to the submerged shrine-

There was no feeling or bravery, no anger or no stubbornness in decision, his resolve to return alone to his house ... In fact having a good reason did not seem important to him anymore, once he had made up his mind. (Waliullah 154)

In the light of the discussion above, it can be safely assumed that, Majeed from the novel *Tree Without Roots*, even though he does not appear to be as villainous as his Bengali counterpart, lacks the essential qualities of an existential character, and could not be considered as one. The author did make redemptive changes in the character but in the end he did not feel Majeed worthy enough to step in the shoes of existential protagonists such as Aref Ali or Muhammad Mustafa. It is to be noted that, Aref Ali and Muhammad Mustafa, both are educated to a certain extent whereas the only educational grooming Majeed has is a traditional religious one, the professional applicability of which is considerably very limited. Religion-mongers like Majeed can act as a moral compass for a people only when the people are blindly superstitious besides being devoutly religious, and only when fear is the most effective tool of subjugation in the hands of people like Majeed. This explains Majeed's aggressive opposition to Akkas's proposition of establishing a school teaching English and other essential subjects of the day, as Majeed feels such education would enable people to see through his bag of tricks and web of lies. The author must have felt such a character who thrives on manipulating people's faith to lack the empathetic and ethical considerations much needed to generate the existential sensitivity, does not deserve an existential redemption such as Raju from R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. Thus in *Tree without Roots* too, like its Bengali counterpart *Lal Shalu*, Majeed remains a fortune-hunting opportunist driven by primal instinct of survival, intent on preserving self-interest to the very end, and does not deserve analysis from an existential perspective.

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