

TREE WITHOUT ROOTS: AN ARCHAIC OF MAJEED AS AN EXTREMIST AND A COLONIALIST

NURE JANNAT & MD. TAPU RAYHAN

Lecturer, Department of English, Noakhali Science and Technology University, Noakhali, Chittagong, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

Syed Waliullah (1922-1971) takes to the writing of novels in order to in stil religious and socio-economic awareness among his readers. By instilling awareness and sensibility he attempts to change life condition, fate and outlook of common people. He is cautious about the real condition of poor people living in Bangladesh moving irrevocably toward thoroughgoing poverty, degradation and self-abasement. It is in Tree without Roots that Waliullah cautions his country dwellers about the negativity of extremism and colonialism by depicting Majeed as an extremist and colonialist. Tree without Roots is an excellent example of religious extremism along with colonialism. Keeping this perspective in mind the treatment of Waliullah's Majeed in Tree without Roots, as an extremist and colonialist is undertaken to be examined. This article defines extremism and extremist; colonialism and colonialist and in the light of these definitions argue for labelling Majeed as an extremist and colonialist. The present study intends to show Majeed's intention of offering 'spiritual' service to the community of Mahabhatpur as the agenda of practicing and exemplifying religious extremism by which the community was pushed first to a corner and subsequently marginalized without having the permission to speak but only to be spoken for. Thus, this paper extrapolates how Majeed, the protagonist of the novel Tree Without Roots like a parody of the prophet, undergoes changes and becomes a successful colonizer using pseudo-religious dogma as written to colonize the villagers of Mahabhatpur which becomes a site of contesting religious and colonial practices.

KEYWORDS: Waliullah, Extremist, Colonialist, Religion, Mahabhatpur & Protagonist

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INTRODUCTION

This study starts with a brief Introduction of Syed Waliullah and his writings which is followed by a close analysis of the extremism and colonialism which ultimately unfolds Majeed, the protagonist of the novel *Tree without Roots*, translated version of *LalShalu*, as an extremist and a colonialist.

SYED WALIULLAH AND TREE WITHOUT ROOTS

Syed Waliullah is one of the best known novelists among the Bengali-Muslim writers. He was born at Sholosahar in Chittagong on 15 August 1922. At the same time he was a novelist, short story writer, playwright and what not? His father Syed Ahmadullah's becoming a government officer opened the door of a great opportunity for him. This opportunity is nothing but his father's getting transferred at different places. For this he got the chance to behold the life of people in different parts of the East Bengal. He contrived many of the characters of his plays and novels from this inwardness. Though he passed his matriculation examination from Kurigram High School in 1939 and IA from Dhaka College in 1941, but surprisingly he started his writing career with his work at hand written magazine 'VhorerAlo' when he was the student of the Feni High School.

“HotathAlorJhalkani” was his first short story, published in the magazine of Dhaka College. He showed his craftsmanship in both Bangla and English. He was a writer in SAOGAT, MOHAMMADI, Bulbul, Patriarchy, Purbasha and Arahi. He also served as a sub-editor in Calcutta’s Statesman during 1945-1947. Syed Waliullah worked in Radio Pakistan after the partition of India. During that time his first novel *LalShalu* was published and for writing it, he was inspired by a shrine covered with red cloth which he used to pass during his living in Mymensingh with his father.

In 1947, when Pakistan took birth religion was a consequential point for the nations of both East and West Pakistan. Religious feelings were the prime weapon for the West Pakistan to have dominance over East Pakistan. Waliullah had a very deep understanding of these feelings and for this in the context of *Tree without Roots* Majeed, the protagonist, symbolizes the then West Pakistan is using the religion to have authority over the villagers of Mahabbatpur which stands for the then East Pakistan in miniature. These religious issues as well as exaggerated so far ornamented man-made devout rules had created one kind of agitation inside the customary and plain sailing village dwellers. The ruling class as well as the hypocrite exponents of this society used this terror for their self- obsession. Their egocentrism was so extreme that when they were using the name of God to manipulate the unostentatious people they themselves forgot the existence of God and the penance awaiting for them for their own deeds. Syed Waliullah had an uncanny awareness of these hypocrite people and sympathy for the oppressed and deprived villagers. At the same time he was conscious of the rural cultural traditions of Bangladesh and the impact of colonialism on it. In this sense, this is obviously a postcolonial text as the writer has an awareness of some key issues: “The use of indigenous cultural traditions, the appropriation of English, and the impact (whether cultural, psychological or political) of colonialism and its aftermath” (O’Reilly). His this awareness got its complete exposure in the images he had drawn in his *LalShalu*.

“There are more *tupees* than heads of cattle, more *tupees* than sheaves of rice.”

LalShalu was published in 1948, only a year after the partition of India through which Pakistan had come into being as a new state, claiming to be the homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent (Choudhuryix). It was possibly twelve years back when Tanvir Mokammel was inspired by this book for taking the decision of making film out of this novel because he thinks: “Lalsalu tells a story very much close to that of our own lives. Though the novel is set in the mid 40’s, nothing has practically changed in the rural societies of Bangladesh. At a time when fundamentalism has come under world attention, our rural societies are ruled under the spell of obscurantists and hypocrite mullahs” (Mandal 8). *LalShalu* was translated into several languages. It is not only translated, but transcreated. So, it is said that the most interesting example of transcreation is that of Syed Waliullah’s Classic Bangla novel, *LalShalu* (Waliullah 1-90). Kalimullah translated it into Urdu in 1960 with the same title. In 1961, Anne-Marie Thibaud, or Mrs Waliullah translated it into French as *L’Arbre Saans Racines*. Later on it was translated into English and published in London by Chatto and Windus Ltd. in 1967 with a new name that is *Tree without Roots* (Waliullah). NiazZaman says, “We may reasonably assume, therefore, that *Tree without Roots* was Syed Waliullah’s own English translation/transcreation of *LalSalu* ” (Waliullahviii). She further says that Waliullah made the changes because he wrote the Bangla novel when Islamic fundamentalism had not raised its head; when the enemy of the west was not Islam but Communism. In it there are contractions and alterations made by the writer himself where the main focus is not on the shrine but on its caretaker who is none other than Majeed, the protagonist of the extremist and colonialist society.

Using Mahabbatpur as the theatre Waliullah has created an imaginary village which is quite mythical having no connection with the rest of the world in order to throw light to the socio-economic, political and religious issues of

Bengali- Muslims which created troublesome on their life through the upheavals of religious, ethnic and gender conflicts(Mahmud & Abdullah). This village is that crops field where Majeed sows seeds of religious issues to colonize them in order to have his food as well as to have his own livelihood. Just after the beginning there is the hunting scene as if a colonizer is hunting his prey that is the colonized people as the people of Mahabbatpur:

“One day an official, ostensibly making his rounds on an inspection tour, had gone off to the wild Garo Hills in the north, for outside his own district, for a little hunting.”

This hunting scene is nothing but the demo of what is going to happen in this novel. A hunter that is the extremist and colonialist Majeed is going to hunt the villagers with his only one weapon that is the religious emotion of the villagers. But before showing Majeed as an extremist this paper will show what extremism is.

EXTREMISM AND MAJEED AS AN EXTREMIST

Extremism is connected with extreme views. In religious sense it means having the state of being extreme towards the mainstream issues of religion. There are lots of contradictions regarding the definition of Extremism. According to Peter T. Coleman and Andrea Barton, it is a complex phenomenon having a very deep and internal complexity which is often hard to see (2).

It's a person's beliefs, behaviours and activities which are extreme and far away from the ordinary. Actually the definition of Extremism and the addressing of a person as an extremist depends on the situation and on the viewer's beliefs, attitudes, values, ethics which are very much subjective. There are reversal relation between the extremist and the person labelling him as an extremist that is the observer in a sense that an extreme action can be experienced by other as just and moral action.

Seymour Martin Lipset relates it with fascism by saying that the existence of extremism of the centre, besides the extremism of the left and right, forms the base of fascism (42-8). It is also defined from religious point of view and addressed as religious fundamentalism which is a mental illness and is also 'curable' (de Bruxelles).

Actually extremism is a concept of defending anything which is neither vice nor virtue. But the most negative and objectionable thing about the extremist is that they are intolerant suppressing their intolerance over their opponents. It is a vehicle to suppress the freedom of speech through self-given interpretation which is very much transparent in the character of Majeed created by Syed Waliullah in his *Tree without Roots*. Majeed can obviously be labelled as extremist if we focus on the characteristics of an extremist given on the blog named as “The three characteristics of extremism,” (Lurie): 1. Unquestioned certainty about one's position, 2. Demonizing those who disagree, 3. Desire for a final battle. Having these qualities Majeed is that person who changes the entire scenario of Mahabbatpur by transforming the simple peasants into devout Muslims. If we see Mahabbatpur as Bangladesh in miniature then he is the ruler of East Pakistan who has, “successfully changed the image of Bangladesh from a liberal Muslim country to an Islamic country” (Kabir 201).

There are many forms of extremism and obviously this paper is not going to describe the more obvious forms, such as suicide bombers. After analysing 315 suicide attacks over 25 years it is said, “There is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism or any of the world's religions” (Pape). Many Governments have taken extreme steps using religion for fulfilling their political and economic purpose.

Syed Waliullah had a very ebullient observation of Muslim society. Amir Khan Sahid thinks, "After very thoroughly analyzing the causes of Muslims decline he set himself to the task of reforming the Muslim society." In *Tree without Roots* he made an instrumental use of religion by showing it as a power to break down orders and create a new one. Here, his whole hearted attempt is to show general people more or less attraction for mazar and how they are getting manipulated by the fortune seekers whose main intendment is to fortify their own opulence. Majeed is the archetypal of the fortune seekers who has embellished his fortune creating a pseudo fear among the people. Majeed has used religion but he has used it non-violently in comparison to the use of religion in Humayun Azad's *Pak Sarzameen Saad Baad* where religion was used turbulently by the fundamentalist group of people (Azad).

Though Waliullah has used religion as an oppressive tool but he avoids the political use of religion. Islam is an ideology and in it he has shown the fundamentalist and parasite like Majeed's non-political as well as ideological use of religion for his own egotism. He is definitely extremist doing violence using religion.

"After the afternoon prayers, Majeed prepared his paraphernalia: a bit of cloth, some oil, two thin pieces of stripped bamboo and a sharp knife. The fat boy saw it all and started to howl, in great fear."

But certainly he has specific purpose which is not political. This translated version of '*lalShalu*' shows his vague implication of religion to achieve power as well as to establish his own existence. For this he becomes a self-appointed caretaker of a mazar and preys upon the common rural people by practicing religious extremism because he thinks he is

"the servant of one whose communion with God is pure because, freed from flesh and blood he is himself pure."

Though Waliullah presents Majeed as an extremist exploiting the religion but at the same time becomes sympathetic rationalizing Majeed's purpose to whom religion means food and shelter. To materialize his proposition he makes an amiable relation with Khaleque as if the power of shrine has been encapsulated with the power of land. Thus the entire scenario has become very much feudalistic. Majeed has a super power of suppressing people's psychology. He secures his place by manipulating the mind of the people and becomes a very prosperous man from a powerless one. Powerless Majeed uses religion to habituate his extremist approach. This approach is very much vivid in almost all the judgments he is involved in. Again and again we find him super-scribing the villagers as sinners to instill fear among them, the fear of God:

"When you sing like Satan himself and take women to the jute field out of lust, you deny the very name of God. O lord of the universe ... protect us from these sinners!"

His every action effects the beliefs and life of the people. But using religion he justifies all his actions. He cultivates the fear among people's minds by showing some reasons or sometimes quoting from Quran. Quran is a holy book, a set of beliefs. But Majeed has twisted the meaning of it for his own interest and make the religious life very difficult one which is actually very simple and easier. He tries to make Jamila fearful of religion by saying, "You did a sinful thing yesterday. You showed disrespect not to me, but to God. Aren't you afraid of God? Don't you fear the fire of hell?"

Another example is his use of an allusion from Quran to make Tara Mia's mind doubtful regarding his wife's chastity. He twisted the story of Ayesha (R :) and Hazrat Muhammad (S :) which reminds Tara Mia that incident when his wife's behaviour was like a cuckold. As a result his mind becomes shattered and devastated which leaves him committing suicide. Here, the deeds of Majeed are exactly like those Muslims who say and twist the meaning of the Quran for their

own purpose (Roy 4-5, 9-10, 24, 40-41). Though Majeed has made a strong ground of his existence which is completely dependent on his mazar business but his power ground comes under threat when Pir arrives in the next village. This Pir is another example of the common practice of the village. His arrival is like a tradition. The villagers start worshipping him envisaging him having a super religious power. Again we see that the villagers are getting manipulated by the Pir who is also using religion and the fear of God as his paraphernalia for strengthening his own contour.

“It was told, for example, how once he had decided to depart from this sinful and ungrateful world and so, while preaching to an enormous assembly, he had suddenly started ascending towards heaven, only the heart-rending wailing of his followers, begging him down to earth again.”

Both Majeed and Pir are found constantly justifying their acts in the name of God and practicing their so called extremist approach upon the villagers.

Asish Nandi divides religion into two trends: faith and ideology and says that conceive of ideology is something which needs to be constantly protected (Bhargava). If so, then the villagers don't know how to protect their ideology. This makes them accept Majeed and Pir as the protector of their ideology. But what Majeed and pir do has no elucidation other than the simple term that is the religious exploitation. It's only because they themselves are very weak in protecting their own ideology in spite of being God-fearing men. Khaleque's wife Amena belongs to those villagers who dedicate their beliefs for the exploiters. She expects Pir's blessed water, which makes her rivalry for Majeed. She becomes the instrument by which Majeed strikes pseudo fear upon the mind of the people of Mahabbatpur and makes them remember his power by making Amena compelled to leave Khaleq's house and return to her paternal house. Again, he justifies his action and Amena's reaction by saying,

“A sinner suffers in worldly. At times his suffering becomes too heavy a burden to carry and he loses his mind. Believe me that I suffer with you in your sorrow, my friend. When the sinner is someone near and dear to you, then the pain becomes almost unbearable.”

Here he is undoubtedly an extremist exercising the criteria of Extremism, “when you don't allow for a different point of view: when you hold your own views as being quite exclusive, when you don't allow for the possibility of difference” (Davies) forgetting that “being a Muslim is not an overarching identity that determines everything in which a person believes” (Sen). The villagers become the prey of religious exploitation because of their beliefs in superstitions like sitting on the doorstep brings mischance into a house, ruins it, brings catastrophe into it and burns it down. Like their poverty stricken life their beliefs, realizations and feelings are also backdated, which make them lead a superstition ridden life. This life, which is stable having no ups and down and which has no arena for new chances of economic growth, will obviously be the inhabitants of superstitious beliefs. This superstition ridden village becomes a perfect place for Majeed to exploit them using religion as his prime ammunition.

Even he practiced this approach in his own house with his two wives. Just after marriage, he started to exploit Rahima by inseminating fear within her, “It's a sin to walk like that,” and started to control her life, “Majeed's way of making love to her is kind of winning her.” As a result, “The fear of God, of the Mazar and of Majeed surged up within her.” It becomes too extreme that when he reveals his will of remarry she accepts it silently. This silence can be seen as a protest, but later on her revolutionary spirit doesn't find any exposure and she becomes the epitome of a very submissive and tolerant character. He continues this practice also with her second wife Jamila:

“He lies there in great silence but he is alive ... sees everything and knows everything.”

For him, the fear of mazar means the fear for himself. So, he goes on gearing up this terror within her. But, in *Tree without Roots* Jamila is the only one revolutionary persona protesting against Majeed as well as against the extremists geared up by religion, hypocrisy, fakeness and frailty of the society who protests against him: "Then, coming up close to him, she spat in his face". Thus, she spats not only on Majeed's face but also on the extremist, ridiculous society. When Majeed opens the door of mazar to bring Jamila back to the house, "one of her feet, which were painted with henna, touched the grave, "depicting her protest against the fake preacher extremist Majeed and in a broader sense against the concept of religious exploitation as well as extremism. So, it is obvious to every cautious reader that the greatest issue faced by the people of Mahabbatpur is nothing other than the religious extremism and Majeed is none but an extremist descending on them not from heaven; he is in fact the vile product of the religious thought.

COLONIALISM AND MAJEED AS A COLONIALIST

As we are told that Syed Waliullah's *LalShalu* was published in 1948 just after the dismissal of British Colonies from the Indian sub-continent, we can address Waliullah as a writer writing against colonialism and his novel *Tree Without Roots* can readily be seen as a text which is complicit with colonial power: Majeed is a fortune hunter, internally afraid of the legitimacy of his being the caretaker of the Mazar, the villagers most of whom are landless peasants are the representatives of the colonized people and their religious lesson: "we must never forget that God alone is the bestower of food and nourishment. It is written in the Koran, O Mary! Whence cometh unto thee this food? She answered: It is from Allah. Allah given without stint to whom He will. Allah is bountiful," is seen as an attempt to eradicate their own culture, or to bring them under imperialist control:

““And those who worship the earth,” warned Majeed, ‘because it gives us food, are idolaters. They who worship idols are the greatest sinners and will be cast into the deadliest hell-fire.’”

Majeed believes in himself as the rightful ruler of Mahabbatpur and here like a colonizer he is fabricating the penance for the colonized people living in the colony known as Mahabbatpur. Even though Majeed has different relationships with the villagers: Rahima (a hardworking peasant women); Khaleque (the head of the village); Kulsum (a widow working in his house); Tara Mia (Kulsum's father); Amena Bibi (a childless wife of Khaleque); and the other villagers who are serving him showing respect to him but he uses the some strategies to ensure they continue serving him. Majeed uses the fear of mazar to keep them in line, a fear that is geared up by instilling the terror of punishments as well as the fear of God in them:

“Majeed again closed his eyes, but the strange sweet smile, the ineffable smile which has no true smile at all, had vanished. When he again raised his lids, his eyes were hard and fixed on the only two men present besides Khaleque. In a voice which matched his gaze in severity, he said, ‘My brethren, it is not a man whom you should worship! Should I say more?’”

As colonialism is, “the policy and practice of a power in extending control over weaker people or areas,” (Collins) for Majeed religion becomes the prime policy by which he practices power to have control over the poor and superstition ridden villagers. If we blend the definition of Colonialism: “Something characteristic of colony” and “control by one power over a dependent area or people,” (Merriam-Webster) with the total scenario of this novel the result stands: Mahabbatpur is the colony having only one ruler that is Majeed exercising his ever cautious religiously hypocrite power over the villagers

who are blindly dependent on him specially in the case of religion:

“He had turned the people towards God, strengthening their moral fiber by tireless preaching and, when necessary, by taking severe action against backsliders. But he himself remained an ordinary mortal. All his power and glory came from the shrouded mystery of the mazar.”

This novel shows us the modus operandi by which Majeed escorts his settlement at Mahabbatpur and starts practicing his mastery over the villagers including khaleque, the head of the village. In this sense, Majeed is obviously a colonizer colonizing the people by the use of religion and this novel has almost all the traits of colonialism as Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy “uses the term ‘colonialism’ to describe the process of European settlement and political control over the rest of the world, including the America, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia” (Kohn).

“Colonialism is a relationship between an indigenous (or forcible imported) majority and minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their superiority and their ordained mandate to rule” (Osterhammel).

So, the power structure of this novel makes Mahabbatpur a colony; the relationship between the villagers and the Majeed makes Majeed as a colonialist ;the fundamental decisions of Majeed affect the lives of the villagers and colonized them and these decisions’ implementation presents Majeed as a colonial ruler; and Majeed’s rejection of their cultural compromises discloses how Majeed as a colonizer becomes convinced of his own superiority which “Was not to be disobeyed; as though there were no one greater or mightier than the man from whom it came.” Like the colonizers Majeed’s aim is to have control over the culture and tradition of the poor peasants to silent their voices as Zahra Sadeghi says “White colonizers’ aims were denigration of ‘native’ cultures and silencing of native voices” (Sadeghi48-54).

Aime Cesaire in his revolutionary text ‘Discoursur le Colonialisme’ elaborately discusses the nature and impact of colonialism. We can partially take his concept about colonialism into consideration to illustrate this novel having the elements of the impact of colonialism. Colonialism has never been about improving the lives of the colonized and that Colonialism is racially violent (Césaire). This is partially applicable in this novel. What Majeed does is never for the betterment of the poor villagers even not for his wives, but is only the stability and fixation of his own existence. But the method of doing is completely non-violent having no political purpose in comparison to Prospero of *The tempest* by William Shakespeare, where Prospero arranged extreme and violent punishments for Calliban as well as for those who disobeyed his commands. Though Majeed uses punishments for those who are disobedient to god as well as to him but he legalizes and makes them non –violent by addressing him having the connection with the holy Mazar in fact with the God who “Is merciful and beneficent. It is he who will judge. It is he who will forgive. “As post-colonialism is considered to address to “after colonialism “or “after independence” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin)discussing the broad area of social, cultural and political events arising particularly from the decline and fall of European Colonialism that took place after World War-II (McEwan).

But Syed Waliullah like a post-colonialist refutes these principals and revolts against this colonialist view of Majeed through the spirit of Jamila, a teenager and the second wife of Majeed whom we can address as an alter ego of Syed Waliullah :

“She had spat in his face, the face that inspired awe in everyone in the village, the face that commanded respect from all, the face which was revered when he recited the holy Koran and led the prayer.”

CONCLUSIONS

Though Waliullah is a great regional novelist, he is never parochial. Against the backdrop of village life, he studies even the little ironies of life. His Mahabbatpur is a metaphor of Bangladesh. Against the background of a single place, and amid the various problems of human life, the single individual like Majeed engages with the search for a new identity that is the caretaker of shrine to ensure his food and shelter. If Majeed's journey is mapped, it can be seen as an odyssey from a poor fortune hunter to a successful colonialist which shows his metamorphosis of becoming a self-appointed caretaker of the shrine and an extremist by practicing his self-made extremism over the villagers. For this Serajul Islam Choudhury thinks “Waliullah had an almost uncanny awareness of the shape of things to come, of the use that the ruling class would be making of religion to subjugate the public as well as to legitimize its own authority. Majeed the sly imposter, who acts like a saviour of the hapless man and women around him, is himself a poor man and has been driven to his fraudulence by the need for a livelihood; nevertheless, what he does is typical of what the ruling class has done and still doing.” he also says, “Majeed is a veritable colonialist and an active missionary, the two rolled into one”(x). This statement strengthens the arguments of this paper for which the claim of addressing Majeed as an extremist and a colonist can be accepted resolutely and with strong justification. But this can also be justified as a Waliullah's extremist approach to present Majeed as an extremist and colonialist and this approach can be the subject of further study.

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