

Existentialism in *Tree Without Roots*

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Abstract: Syed Waliullah is a modern Bangladeshi writer who wrote both in Bangla and English languages with equal efficiency. *Lal Shalu* (Red Cloth) and *Tree Without Roots* are two excellent examples of his excellence in this regard. The novel has also been translated in French by Ann-Marie Thibaud. An important note about this translation is that the source of the translation was not *Lal Shalu* but *Tree Without Roots*. The novel has also been translated in Urdu, German and Czech. The aim of this paper is to find out existentialist and modernistic elements from *Tree Without Roots* as little work has been done in this regard. In the novel, both Majeed as an individual and the people of Mahabbatpur collectively make their choice to survive or strengthen their existence in this world. Instead of having an existentialist approach, our author portrays an ever-conscious conscience of Majeed to establish him as a modern hero in *Tree Without Roots*.

Existentialism in *Tree Without Roots*

Tree Without Roots, written in English nineteen years after the Bangla version *Lal Shalu*, is actually a transcreation by Waliullah himself which has been appreciated as “improved version” or a more mature work of the author by a renowned scholar of Bangladesh (Choudhury, ix). Being a part of the post-war intellectual community Syed Waliullah infuses the concept of existentialist view as well as modernistic elements in his writing. He combines the modernistic idea of self-consciousness and existentialist approach of meaninglessness of a human existence side by side. He neither gives a hope nor approves a sense of total refusal of existence. He prefers to remain open-ended in between two ambiguities. In a way, the novel mingles elements of both existentialism and modernism.

Santiago, the old man of Earnest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* is a portrayal of ever courageous human nature while Waliullah’s Majeed from *Tree Without Roots* declares his urge to survive with pride. Majeed could leave his shrine for his safety but he did not because his ‘existence’ has no meaning without the shrine. Now, it is not only his physical existence but also his beliefs that need to survive. Though he is very much aware of the fact that the *mazar* is a fake and meaningless entity, he grabs this meaninglessness which can only make his future existence meaningful. This particular moment of Majeed’s life matches with the core argument of existentialist philosophy that “Existence precedes

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essence” (Lavine, 330). It is Majeed’s consciousness that has created his individual value for his life. The following paragraph establishes Majeed’s self-created value or essence for his life:

... Is it wrong to lie if it’s done in a good cause? he pondered. There is no doubt at all in my mind that there’s little fear of God here, and that His name is hardly ever uttered. If I prevaricate slightly in order to implant fear of God and His holy name, I will surely be forgiven. (Waliullah, 12)

On the other hand, it is Majeed’s existence which demands his consciousness to create a value which can support his worldly existence in Mahabbatpur. It is his survival which precedes everything even his values. He speaks to himself: “If, at the same time, I make a living, is there anything sinful in that? After all one must live. And I live to spread the word of God” (Waliullah 12). These two extracts have established Majeed as an existentialist character whose existence precedes essence. The only contrast the character of Majeed has is that he believes in God whereas most of the existentialist heroes in literature do not believe in God.

In a parallel way, Majeed is a representative of gross poor Bangladeshi rural people who seek their existence in self-created religious identity. In spite of their severe poverty, they have to survive, but to do that they have to have some kind of value to hold on to or to make their life meaningful. The narrator of the novel says:

Perhaps the reason there are so many white *tupees* in this part of the world is that the land cannot feed the men. Little food means more religion. God said: cover your heads when you pray to me, for this is the mark of the god-fearing man. . . . There are more *tupees* than heads of cattle, more *tupees* than sheaves of rice. (Waliullah, 5)

But when this religious value cannot secure their existence they go to town for work. Work becomes their priority for their existence in the town as well as in some well-off villages like Mahabbatpur. Majeed’s observation about the villagers is: “The only time they became deadly serious was when they were working” (Waliullah, 12). It is an irony the novel poses that though Majeed does not like the villagers, he is actually an epitome of the common villagers. They change their values as their existence demands.

Majeed is haunted by the “individual human dilemma” (Morner, Rausch, 74) of modern existentialist philosophy. However, the presence of self-consciousness and self-questioning quality also depicts Majeed as a modern character. His dilemma about self-created illusion and a fear of being punished is revealed when he says “there was merely a vagueness, perhaps death and the day of judgment, but all distant and shapeless” (Waliullah, 12). Eventually, he declares that he will be pardoned if he continues to spread God’s name though he thinks that the Day

of Judgment is a shadowy thing. It shows that he is still confused about his belief. His dilemma does not end here but is reflected in his rhetorical questions: "But did he, Majeed, really know any more than the rest of them? . . . Could he really say that he knew more than they because he knew that the power of the grave was a lie?" (Waliullah, 52), or "Am I being punished? He asked himself, . . . Did I not lead innocent people to pray to the spirit of an unknown man, a man who might well have been a sinner? My aim was a noble one, but does that justify my having deceived them?" (Waliullah, 129) In the process of self-questioning he often mocks and consoles himself. Sometimes he boosts his morale for the sake of strengthening his roots in Mahabbatpur. Waliullah has often portrayed him as a modern-hero to seize the reader's sympathy for Majeed. He is living in Mahabbatpur struggling from his childhood with poverty, hunger and insecurity. He never had any home. He has always dreamt of a home, wife and economic stability. But his fate before here never supported him to have a smooth and well-off life. Like the villagers, readers are also enchanted by Majeed's story-telling genius and by his ability to understand others' psyche. All these characteristics that Majeed possesses, makes him a modern hero.

The existentialist term 'angst' or 'anguish' (Lavine, 330) is Majeed's dread for losing the power over the villagers in this particular novel. Majeed is always afraid that his "divine bounty might suddenly end" (Waliullah, 42). In his angst, he often thinks that in future he may be questioned by the villagers about his phoniness and even his power could be questioned by someone. To his utter surprise a *pir* enters in his domain to unsettle his reign. From an existentialist view this has depicted Majeed's anguish in its full breadth. In consequence, he even wants to unveil his trick to the villagers to show how worthless they are:

'Ingratitude,' Majeed muttered to himself lying there in the dark, intolerable 'ingratitude.' In a cold rage he decided bitterly that this pompously decorated so-called *mazar*, the grave of a nobody, was just about what they deserved for their ingratitude. If I should ever decide I've had enough of them, then I'll tell them the truth. I'll tell them exactly how I've been making fools of them year after year. And then I'll tear down the yellow canopy and the red cloth with its silver trimmings, and I'll leave the country. (Waliullah, 44)

Existentialist philosopher, named Macquarrie, in *Existentialism* compares "freedom" with "the child of necessity" as it "is determined by being" (179). Again Sartre in his *Existentialism and Humanism* says a "man is responsible for everything he does" (30). Here the freedom of an individual is to choose his or her values consciously. Consequently he is not only free to choose but also responsible for his own choice of values. In existentialist philosophy, there is no single value inherently good or bad in this universe but depends on choice. In general, Majeed's value may seem to be an evil one, but his responsibility

towards his choice of value establishes his existentialist freedom. Majeed's individual responsibility has been shown by his own confession that he will never be able to reveal the truth as he has dedicated his full conscience to the shrine: "But in his heart's heart Majeed knew that he would never do it. It was he who had created the *mazar*, and he could not destroy it. For he was now its slave" (Waliullah, 45). Here, in these particular lines Majeed is revealed as the slave of his own created value which is a representation of severe kind of responsibility towards his own value. This slavery has been compared with *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) by Kaiser Haq in an article titled "Existentialism in a Bangladeshi Village."

In existential philosophy the individual realizes his aloneness. Despite having two wives and a powerful landowner as a friend, Majeed is very lonely indeed. Moreover, he cannot share his secret with anyone, not even with his wives. Majeed thinks, "We are alone, all of us, every man is alone in this cruel and friendless, intolerant, pitiless world." (Waliullah, 59) At the beginning of Part Four of the novel Majeed mentions Khaleque as a 'friend' for numerous times. It shows that how Majeed was longing for friendly company but to his utter surprise he realizes that Khaleque has never considered him as a friend. It makes him feel more lonely and abandoned than ever in his life. More interestingly, this loneliness establishes Majeed as a modern character too.

One of the minor characters of the novel named Tara Mian is also very existentialist by nature. He and his wife often quarrel but he had never any doubt about his wife. The quarrels had a kind of recreational value to their boring, monotonous life. But when his belief is shaken, his existence becomes meaningless to him. He loses his interest in his life because now he attaches no importance to his past life. Everything of this world seems to be meaningless to him. The realization of meaninglessness of his life without his value encourages him to bring an end to his life. Amena, another poor victim of Majeed's villainy, consciously chooses to bring change in her life. She had enough comfort in her life and could lead her life easily if she never wished to have a child of her own. However, her decision to improve her status by breeding a child in her family causes her ultimate downfall. A keen observation can assure us that both the minor characters have similarities with Majeed as both of them search a meaningful life.

In this novel, Syed Waliullah uses stream of consciousness to build the structure of the novel. We do not see any direct connection between the first two chapters. One can never be assured that the *muezzin* from the Garo Hills is the protagonist of the novel, but can only guess that he is the same person. Majeed has all the paradoxical elements of a modern character like Prufrock. He mingles his past and present, his happiness and sadness, he is a modern character:

How hungry I was that wilderness day when I first came to this village! I had nothing then, owned no land, no home, no wife and no

cattle. And now I am the guardian of the *mazar*. I earn money, I live comfortably, I command the people's respect. Of course, I have changes but, thanks be to God, for the better. I have no reason to be sad. (Waliullah, 76)

The structure, techniques and the character sketch often depict this novel as a modern novel while the ending suggests an existentialist view of a modern character.

Actually, we do not know the future of Majeed as the novel remains open-ended. But evidence shows that he has strongly determined to return to his shrine "even at the cost of his own destruction" (Waliullah, 135). Eventually it is a "border-line situation" for existentialist philosophy (Maksud, 277) because fear, guilt and anxiety have their full effect on Majeed's mind and he has been forced to choose between two possibilities or choices. Existentialism as defined in Britannica is: "They focused, first, on the problematic character of the human situation, through which man is continually confronted with diverse possibilities or alternatives, among which he may choose and on the basis of which he can project his life" (25: 612). Majeed's choices are: a life resembling Majeed's past insecure life or an ultimate death embracing his dignity. Here, Majeed applies his freedom to decide among possibilities. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre defines existentialism as ". . . a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity" (20). In the same way, Majeed proves himself as his own master by applying his own subjective choice. Actually, he does not have any existence without the shrine. Maybe the shrine is fake but it is the only point to continue his life. Though Majeed knows that his return may bring his life at risk, he decides to uphold his value or essence as his existence will not have any meaning (here value or power) without his essence. As a result his existence at a certain point of life without his value (essence) is also meaningless. The reason behind this is an anxiety or fear of losing his essence or belief. Instead of any *Pir*, it is flood or natural calamity that carries anxiety back within Majeed to shatter his self-created value: "It is difficult for one to know whether one has sinned, and to what extent, Majeed told himself. But I do know that I am not frightened because of my sins. My fear is of having to go back to where I started" (Waliullah, 134). Probably it is the reason why Majeed decides to put his life at risk with the hope of retaining all his achievements he has gained in Mahabbatpur. Probably he fears his past poor powerless life. Now he knows that both his past and present lives are meaningless but with his free will he has chosen his present life as more important.

Majeed is not an absurd hero but a person who uses religious superstition to dig his roots among the common villagers. Gradually he becomes influential,

powerful and dominant. He does not only enjoy economic stability but also takes pleasure of being authoritative. This new taste makes him the slave of his self-created sham identity. His return is a choice of submission towards his own dignity. A world without comfort and authoritativeness would be a meaningless place for him. As a result, he decides to sacrifice his existence and essence altogether at once. The Nihilistic ending suggested by the author does not conclude in meaninglessness of life rather induces a poetic justice to discourage illusion.

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