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Rootlessness and Existential Uncertainty: A Critical Look at Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*

Abstract: *Syed Waliullah's novel Tree Without Roots (1967), originally his own Bengali novel Lal Salu (1948) is an existentialist literature. In this novel, Waliullah examines an inner problem of the human mind, namely the existential crisis suffered by marginalized people. He shows how Majeed, the protagonist of this novel, suffers from an existential crisis and acute isolation. The readers are introduced to the ins and outs of Majeed's character through the prolonged descriptions of what happened in his inner mind and outer world. Along with Majeed, we also discover other characters like Rahima, Amena, Khaleque, Kulsum, Tara Mian, and the poor villagers who have suffered from existential crises on different occasions. The themes of rootlessness and uncertainty of life are illustrated in this novel with different characters and incidents. In this study, we will try to explore how they suffered from an existential crisis and how it shaped their personality, life, and destiny.*

Keywords: existentialism, fear, power, isolation, majeed, uncertainty.

Rootlessness and Existential Uncertainty: A Critical Look at Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*

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Introduction

Existentialism is mainly a 20th-century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centring on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad. It emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence.

Existentialism originated with the 19th-century philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, although neither used the term in their work. In the 1940s and 1950s, French Existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simon de Beauvoir wrote scholarly and fictional works that popularized existential themes, such as dread, boredom, alienation, the absurd and nothingness. Kierkegaard saw rationality as a mechanism humans use to counter their existential anxiety, their fear of being in the world. Sartre saw rationality as a “bad faith” which hinders us from finding meaning in freedom and confines us within everyday experience. An Existential crisis is a moment at which an individual questions the very foundations of their life: whether this life has any meaning, purpose, or value. This issue of the meaning and purpose of existence is the topic of the philosophical school of existentialism.

This article focuses on Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Root* to investigate the existential crisis suffered by marginalized people such as Majeed and their struggle to find a meaningful life.

Literature Review

Existentialism is a philosophical framework that explores different themes such as alienation, identity, and the quest for meaning in an indifferent world. In literary contexts, existential themes often emerge through characters facing absurdity, alienation, and despair. Sartre's concepts provide a foundational lens through which such characters and themes can be critically examined. Jean-Paul Sartre's famous assertion that “existence precedes essence” reflects the notion that people are not born with a fixed

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purpose—they have to create meaning through their actions. This existential lens becomes particularly relevant in Syed Waliullah's novel *Tree Without Roots*, where Majeed creates a fabricated religious identity to survive and assert influence in a rural Bangladeshi village. The novel subtly reveals the void beneath Majeed's outward convictions, exposing the anxiety, uncertainty, and moral ambiguity that characterize existential crisis.

In Waliullah's novel, the existential dilemmas are not just philosophical abstractions but are deeply rooted in the socio-economic realities of rural Bangladesh. Scholars have emphasized that the rural setting in *Tree Without Roots* functions not only as a physical backdrop but also as a metaphor for the existential imprisonment faced by the characters. The characters in the novel are trapped in a cycle of poverty, tradition, and social norms, much like the "tree without roots" mentioned in the title—detached, stagnant, and directionless.

The rural setting itself, often idealized in literature as a source of simplicity and peace, is shown in Waliullah's narrative as anything but serene. Instead, it becomes a space of isolation and despair. The characters are often left in a perpetual state of internal conflict, torn between their desires for personal fulfilment and the oppressive reality they face. This aligns with existential themes of alienation as outlined by Sartre and Camus, where individuals struggle against the absurdity of their circumstances in search of meaning.

Discussion

In his novel, Waliullah has portrayed a fictional village Mahabbatpur as the setting for the fortune-hunting protagonist Majeed, who has transformed into a neglected grave of an unknown person about whom he knows nothing but he declares him to be a saint. Majeed claims that the saint visited Majeed in a dream which was a bluff. Majeed becomes the self-appointed guardian of this grave or *mazar*. Though Majeed is a sly impostor Waliullah does not make him the villain of this novel rather portrays him with great pity and sympathy. He understands Majeed; depicts the ins and outs of the man and shows all the external and internal matters to the audience to make the audience sympathize with Majeed. After encountering the terrible psychological complexity and loneliness, our protagonist suffers much in his inner mind. How insecure, uncertain and lonely he is, as a reader only can feel it after reading the soliloquy he has made throughout the novel on different occasions.

Whatever he has done, no matter good or bad is done for his survival or existence in this complex modern world where every people are in a never-ending struggle for their existence. It is true that he deceives the villagers with the name of religion and plants fear among the people but he has done it to plant his root of existence in this midst. He is fearful of others but frightened within himself, "He sensed that one day he might have to face unpleasantness, perhaps resistance from villagers, or even a struggle to maintain his position" (Waliullah 75).

He is always in fear of losing his newly acquired firm position among the villagers as it gives him certainty in his present life, assurance of a bright future of wealth and authority and a reverent identity in his rootless life. He is determined to do anything to maintain this fortunate position in his poor life as he never enjoyed such certainty of luck, wealth and happiness.

His fear of losing his position, power and existence becomes acute when a Pir Saheb or religious saint visits the neighbouring village. The more the fame of the miracle and spiritual power of Pir blowing in the wind, the more the fear circulated in Majeed's mind. Majeed feels insecure about his kingdom of fear in the village. So his diligent effort is to exhale the villagers not to visit the Pir for any reason. When he listens to any news about the Pir he becomes anxious and furious. He is more irritated with his own people than the Pir as they frequently visit him secretly for fulfilling their numerous desires with the blessed water from the Pir. That is why he takes cruel steps against Amena, wife of Khaleque when she expresses her will to send a man to the Pir for some blessed water to fulfil her long cherished dream of a child. He does not retreat to give her such punishment as it is related to his own existence. He cannot tolerate any news which is dangerous for his survival. As a result of Majeed's irritation and anger, Amena was compelled to follow some diluted rituals because of Majeed which compelled her to become mentally unstable and at last leave her own family even.

Along with his fear of losing his position, his wholehearted effort to strike his root or acquire and secure his identity shows the acute identity crisis he had felt. As he has no technical education to support himself with any respectable job, he is compelled to work as a muezzin at a mosque in Garo Hills where people are poor, illiterate and far away from religion. But his native village is not much better than that land. So he searches for his luck somewhere different and finds it at Mahabbatpur. After discovering an old grave, he plans to taste his luck with it and soon with his eloquence and quick wit he takes control of the situation. People are compelled to listen and fear him as he comes as a messenger of religion and nobody dares to protest when he told his story about the unknown grave and rebuked them for neglecting it as he claimed it to be a saint's grave. He shouted to them, "You are all blind. You are ignorant men, men without understanding. If you were not, then how could you have left the grave—no, it is not a mere grave but a mazar—how could you have left the mazar of Saint Shah Sadique unattended like this?" (Waliullah 05).

Later, he built a *mazar* and nourished it with numerous means: "Day after day Majeed studied the villagers surreptitiously, seeking to learn their habits and customs, trying to penetrate their minds" (Waliullah 14). In the process of establishing his position, he tries to drive out songs and laughter from their lives. After three winter harvests, he felt secure and self-confident. In the village, he is respected by all. They seek his advice and blessings whenever they have problems, and beg him to say special prayers for them when faced with misfortune. He has also made friends with Khaleque, the landowner, who is always eager to act on his advice and help him. He feels he has struck his roots deep and firm

like the largest tree in this village and his tree has flourished and spread its branches wide over the whole village. Khaleque's influence in the village is never negligible but his influence is greater, though of a different kind.

Not only the character Majeed rather Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots* provides an overall critique of how institutionalized religion can be manipulated as a tool for social control in rural Bangladeshi society. Majeed is the epitome of the scenario. Majeed arrives in the village of Mahabbatnagar and establishes his control by reviving the neglected shrine of the fictional saint Shah Sadeque. The absence of genuine moral substance in Majeed's practice reflects a broader critique of how institutional religion when co-opted by individuals or institutions, can perpetuate fear, blind faith, and conformity—hindering intellectual freedom and critical thought. Thus, *Tree Without Roots* becomes a powerful literary exploration of the intersection between faith and power, where religion is not a path to enlightenment, but a “tool” wielded to maintain the status quo and manipulate collective consciousness. Waliullah shows the manipulative power of institutionalized religion in rural Bangladesh highlighting how it functions as an effective mechanism of social control.

Majeed's control over the village is facilitated by the strategic use of rituals, fear of divine punishment, and the sanctity of the local shrine. Through these tools, he creates a framework where questioning his authority becomes synonymous with questioning religion itself. This reflects what sociologists term “the sacralization of power”—a process where religious authority is indistinguishable from social governance. The shrine becomes the ideological centre of the village to manipulate the villagers.

The theme of uncertainty which is closely related to existential problems illustrated by the character portrayal of Majeed. He is a figure who is always uncertain about himself and the things around him. He is in a circle of uncertainty and reassurance which means once he feels uncertain then he immediately tries to reassure him that everything is quite normal and he is in the safe zone. In Chapter 2, we find a description of this issue:

In any event, he told himself, a new life is beginning. Then 19th-century for an instant, he felt afraid that the game he was going to play might turn out to be dangerous. Doubts came to him whether he could succeed in it for long. But the people seemed to be so simple and good hearted, he reassured himself. He recalled the scene of that evening, how they had sat in front of him, their eyes cast downward in shame. He felt better.
(Waliullah 22)

Sometimes he cannot pacify him by his effort when he is in uncertainty and fear then he surrenders himself to the Almighty. In Chapter 4 we read a description of the inner feelings of Majeed:

He fully realized that his new life, tending the grave of an unknown, a grave now surrounded by burning candles and incense sticks, gave every evidence of assuring him

a sound future. But the fear he had felt that first night never quite left him. Wasn't it all resting on a very shaky foundation? Wasn't it all merely a house of cards which the slightest wind could upset? Then he would pray fervently, hoping that God would forgive him. He would try to console himself with the thought that God's mercy was infinite and eternal. (Waliullah 34)

Another important feature of Majeed's character is that he frequently tries to understand the meaning of life, the importance of individual existence, and the importance of logic and reason. But he finds no meaning and every attempt for existence is meaningless and futile. In chapter 10 we find this with the following description of Majeed's thought:

Why one is born on the earth only to die. Why there is a fine crop one year, and the next everything is washed away by a flood. Why one person eats well while another starves." "Man might suffer, he might struggle and in the end find himself up against a blank wall; everything might seem futile to him. (Waliullah 87)

In chapter 11, we also encounter such things when Majeed tries to understand the meaning of life and finds no meaning.

How strange is the world! Men are born, grow up, and suffer, prey to greed, lust, desire and then they die. They die like the swarming insects that fly and swim and crawl on this earth... what it all means, after all, is- everyman for himself. We are alone, all of us, every man is alone in this cruel and friendliness, intolerant, pitiless world. (Waliullah 92)

Besides all of this, Majeed suffers from terrible isolation in the midst of the crowd. He has no sharer of his secrets, and is incapable of opening his heart to anyone, even to his wife Rahima. He is a stranger to his wife and there is no mutual love relationship between them. Rahima fears him more than loves him. On the other hand, Majeed tries to dominate or exploit her rather than love her. His love is more physical than mental. So, how love exists where fear and being feared predominates the relationship. That is why both Majeed and Rahima live with acute loneliness in the same house and same bed which results in their existential crisis. If they can share their feelings then, there might be a happy conjugal life between them without any internal or external anxiety or suffering. Loneliness results in their existential crisis.

Majeed frequently engages in self-directed inner conversations, where he justifies his deceit and manipulations. These monologues reveal that he is not a man of true faith but rather one consumed by doubt, fear, and ambition. His inner voice often exposes his moral conflict—he knows he is exploiting people, yet he convinces himself it is necessary for survival. The situation expresses the picture of existential struggle.

Waliullah uses inner monologues to show how Majeed, and perhaps others, are not only lying to the villagers but also to themselves. Majeed tries to rationalize his actions, creating false narratives in his mind to soothe his guilt. This form of self-deception is a common existential trait, especially in the face of moral ambiguity. Despite his authoritative position in Mahabbatpur, he acknowledges, “We are alone, all of us, every man is alone in this cruel and friendless, intolerant, pitiless world” (Waliullah 59). His inner dialogues also reveal a crisis of faith. While he outwardly promotes religious devotion, he internally questions the very beliefs he espouses, “There was merely a vagueness, perhaps death and the day of judgment, but all distant and shapeless” (Waliullah 12). Majeed's self-questioning intensifies as he contemplates the morality of his actions, “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?” (Waliullah 129).

Majeed's existential crisis is even more noticeable and significant when Majeed does strange things when the hailstorm stops. He does not go to see what happened to the *mazar* or the crops in his fields. Instead, he rushes to Khaleque, the landowner and the richest man in the village. And the novelist tells us that deep within him Majeed knew why he was going to Khaleque, although he did not wish to admit it too readily. “The main source of his livelihood was not his land and his crops, but faith, and faith he knew, though not as easily destroyed by natural calamity as material wealth, if once destroyed may never be restored” (Waliullah 105).

He knew that the damaged *mazar* could be repaired, but not the damaged faith of the public in him and their trust in the *mazar*. That is why the man of religion must run to the man of material wealth, and the two must collaborate to preserve faith in the system. Majeed's seeking help from Khaleque is ironic but realistic. To preserve his existence he must need to go Khaleque because it is Khaleque and, no one else, who can save Majeed from disaster. Because should Khaleque lose faith in Majeed and his shrine, no one else in the village will have any trust in Majeed.

Indecisiveness is another important feature of Majeed's character which shows his existential problem. Sometimes he decides to reveal his secrets but he cannot do it due to his fear and indecisive nature. He says, “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 117). But in his heart of hearts, Majeed knew that he would never do it.

Along with Majeed, the other important characters of this book namely Rahima, Amena, and Khaleque suffered from existential crises. Rahima and Amena's existential problem is due to their barrenness as a mother. In the society they live in never give respect who fail to conceive a baby. As they have no child of their own after so many years of their marriage they do not get adequate respect as a mother. A child means to them not only a child but an identity to live with adequate honour in

society. In chapter 6, we confront it when Rahima asks a favour from the saint to be a mother of her own child: “She would say that she was childless; that she felt lonely and empty without a child; that she was a strong woman and could bear many children. Would the saint give her a child, only one child? As she made the plea, only her eyes revealed her anxiety and longing” (Waliullah 64). The childlessness not only affects Rahima but also Majeed. This also creates an identity crisis for Majeed as well as Rahima.

In the case of Amena, the wife of Khaleque, her identity crisis as a childless woman results in envy towards Tanu, the second wife of Khaleque. That is why when a Pir came into the neighbouring village she could not control her desire to ask for blessed water from the Pir to be a mother and get an identity though she was aware of the facts that the disclosure of this event may irritate Majeed who ordered the villagers not to go to the Pir in any case. She risked it because it was the question of her identity as well as her existence.

Though Khaleque is a landlord he also suffers from mental anxiety, uncertainty and fear of losing his present fortunate position in society which means an existential crisis. His crisis becomes acute and clear to us when the hailstorm ruins the crop field. In chapter 20, we discover it while the novelist describes the inner feelings of Khaleque: “I am always afraid that something may happen and suddenly strike me down. Life is so uncertain. The hailstorm made this so terribly clear to me” (Waliullah82). Like Khaleque, the existential problems of the villagers in general, are also clear to us after the hailstorm. Hailstorm ruins not only their crops but also their dreams and certainty of life and existence.

Tara mian is another character who is compelled to die because of his Identity crisis. He is an aged man who has retired from life and has nothing to do but regular quarrels with his wife. One day during a quarrel between them, his wife told him “Pox take you, old man. Do you still think you were the father of my children...I swear by God, that you were not their father” (Waliullah 93). He is terribly shocked to listen to it and his supreme male self/Igo is threatened with such a remark from his wife. Later in this novel, we see this shock guides him to silent death. Minor characters such as Amena, Khaleq, and others serve not only as individual figures within the narrative but also as representations of the collective psyche of a village ensnared in existential uncertainty. Amena is a young woman who is vulnerable and easily influenced by the authority of Majeed. Her confusion and dependency illustrate the emotional and intellectual stagnation that comes from blind faith and lack of agency. Her silence and submission are symbolic of how women, in particular, are silenced in a system where religious control suppresses critical thinking and personal freedom.

Khaleq, an elder, represents the fear of social and spiritual disorder. His belief in Majeed’s power stems from a deep need for order and meaning in a world where traditional structures are weakening. He clings to Majeed’s rituals as a safeguard against the unknown, portraying the way rural

people often use religion as a defence mechanism against existential fears like death, suffering, and purposelessness.

Karim Baksh (The Gravedigger) represents the literal and symbolic link to death. His occupation constantly reminds the villagers of mortality—a central theme in existential philosophy. Yet Karim himself shows no spiritual depth or reflection; he performs his duties mechanically, highlighting the desensitization to death in a society caught in routine. His lack of questioning or emotional response to death signifies how the villagers have lost the urgency to seek deeper meaning in life, reflecting existential numbness.

Characters like Tamij blindly follow Majeed, carrying out his orders without understanding or questioning. They mirror the herd mentality Nietzsche warns against—where individuals suppress their agency and critical thought for the comfort of belonging to a belief system. These followers symbolize how existential agency is willingly surrendered in exchange for security and acceptance, which reflects the villagers' fear of individuality.

Rashida, a marginalized female character, represents the existential plight of women in rural patriarchy. Living in spiritual and social isolation, her vulnerability makes her easy prey for Majeed's manipulations. Her quiet suffering and social exclusion are metaphors for how existential crises are gendered—with women often bearing the silent, internal consequences of structural and spiritual oppression.

Though not heavily focused on, the children in the novel symbolize hope and innocence that is slowly being lost. They mimic religious rituals and internalize fear early, suggesting that existential crisis is inherited rather than awakened. The loss of imaginative freedom and early indoctrination reflects how the cycle of spiritual rootlessness continues through generations.

All these characters, when seen together, reveal a community not merely manipulated by one false prophet but already fragile, fragmented, and spiritually hollow. Waliullah doesn't just show how Majeed controls them—he shows why they are so easily controlled. Their insecurity, passivity, superstition, and dependence stem from an existential void where genuine faith, education, and self-awareness are totally absent.

Findings

This novel shows the inner problems of human life through the characters and their activities. We all search for our obscure identity. We see in the paper how existential crisis reshapes human psychology negatively. Majeed and his above situation sketched the picture clearly. Another important finding of this research is the uncertainty and nothingness of marginal people and all other people as well. They are always uncertain about their present and future. They feel like they are nothing important and thus

anyone can exploit them easily. Through this research, the researcher can contribute to the inner philosophy of marginal people and it will be an important task for world literature.

Conclusion

Finally, from the above discussion, it is clear that the existential problem is true for every human being no matter how great he is or what he belongs to. Either this way or that way human beings are the victim of existential or identity crises. Everybody is in fear of losing his position and uncertain about even their near future. Though critical of the exploitation of religion, Syed Waliullah looks sympathetically at Majeed for whom religion means food and shelter and yet, he is human, a tragic character fending for himself and causing harm to others, not out of any ill will, but because of the harrowing of living. So, for survival or existence man can do anything and it is true for every human being.

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