

Veils of Power in Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*

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Abstract

One of the most generative apparatuses for generating discourse is religion, which is often measured as a source of moral instruction and a scaffold of communal cohesion. The hegemonic nature of religion creates a fecund milieu of orchestration of manipulative discourse. This paper examines the nexus of religious discursivity and power in Syed Waliullah's novel *Tree Without Roots* (1967) through the lens of Michael Foucault's paradigm. Majeed efficaciously subjugates his devotees by fabricating religious narratives. This study aims to decode how Majeed manipulates the Epistemic submission of vulnerable masses to extend his authority and dominance. Women within these communities are gradually subjugated: initially, as members of a manipulated populace, and secondly, due to their gender identity. The study examines the silent architecture of control – how power constructs a system where it no longer needs to be imposed but is willingly obeyed. However, *Tree Without Roots* serves as a potent ground for analyzing power through a Foucauldian lens. By exploring into literary and cinematic media, this article emphasizes that religious discourse operates to shape identity, morality, and resistance beyond time and space. Thus, the critical conversation on religious hypocrisy in South Asian narratives is extended in this paper.

Keywords: Hegemonic Nature; Religious Discourse; Power; Authority and Dominance; Religious Hypocrisy

Introduction

In the history of human civilization, religion has long been providing a moral framework, shaping communities, and setting social norms. However, this central force has also been used as a common tool by opportunists for personal gain, especially in South Asia for ages. In this regard, the opportunists seek to legitimize authority, to prop up hierarchical structure and overall, to control the population through the use of religious discourse. Religious manipulators do not only interpret the divine will but also direct societal behaviors which demonstrates the intersection of power and religion. This article aims to examine this intersection in Syed Waliullah's novel *Tree Without Roots* as it explores religious discourse as a mechanism to gain power and control over women as well as other social positions. Based on the framework of Michel Foucault's theories of power, this study will explore how imposters use religion to sustain social hierarchies, exploit vulnerable mass people and maintain patriarchal dominance.

Michel Foucault's theoretical contribution, particularly his con-

cept of Power/Knowledge is the ground of this study. Foucault rejects the traditional notion of power. Rather he believes that power is diffused throughout the society. This article will show how *Tree Without Roots* reflects this dynamic.

Very often, religion and power are intertwined through discourse that structures people's perception regarding truth, reality and morality. The study analyzes how religious perverts manipulate belief system and consequently gain material wealth and power and that is enough to suppress the dissenters. In *Tree Without Roots*, Majeed fabricates a religious discourse around a forgotten grave to elevate himself as a spiritual leader and gradually expands his wing of exploitation over the whole village. This narrative is potent example of how power structure is created and exercised through the use of religious discourse and how people either conform or resist the power structure.

The methodological approach of this article is organized into several determining steps. The steps are divided into two key

scopes of analysis:

- **The construction of discourse and mechanism of control:** This section examines how religious leaders, in this text, establish and sustain their dominance. Through the use of story-telling, ritual and myth-making, they produce a sense of divine justification for their own desire, reflecting Foucault's concept of power/knowledge.

Ultimately, this article discloses that religious discourse does not merely shape faith or spirituality but it is also a strong means to construct social reality. Exposing the mechanism of dominance, this study shows that religious narrative deals with power, intertwined with faith-based structure. Besides, it emphasizes on the potential for transformation and resistance.

For those who have not gone through the novel *Tree Without Roots*, here is the synopsis of the text:

Tree Without Roots

Syed Waliullah, a prominent novelist of Bangladesh, was born in Chittagong in 1922. He got opportunities to pass his boyhood in the districts of Chittagong, Mymensingh, Feni, Krishnanagar, and Kurigram, as his father was a district magistrate of the British Raj period, which was a transferable job. Consequently, he came to know the rural Bengal, the simple-minded people, social structure, and practices that served him with the materials for his creative career. He uses those experiences artistically in his creative works, as seen in *Tree Without Roots*. "The writer was inspired by a shrine covered with red cloth that he would often pass when he lived with his father in Mymensingh". (Zaman) [1]

Lalsalu (the original version of *Tree Without Roots*) was published in 1948, just a year after the creation of Pakistan as a homeland for South Asian Muslims. According to Waliullah's step-aunt, he began writing the novel while studying at Anandamohan College in Mymensingh. Nineteen years later, in 1967, *Tree Without Roots* appeared and was hailed as a major artistic achievement. The English version contains abridgements, alterations, and an important addition to the ending. Unlike the original, it portrays Majeed in a more humane light, compelled to play a psychological game for survival. Writing as an older expatriate, Waliullah looked back at Bengal with new perspective. Anne-Marie Waliullah notes that here Majeed gains "a certain grandeur" absent in Lalsalu.

The story is set in the rural area of the then east Bengal to expose the manipulative nature of a charlatan using his understanding of the rural people. "*Tree without Roots* depicts the life of the people of rural East Bengal at a time when its intellectuals were greatly agitated over political issues. The novel exposes the manipulations and activities of charlatans exploiting the religious beliefs of the common people. The novel revealed his deep understanding of human psychology" (Alam) [2]. The novel is set in a village named Mahabbatpur where simple minded illiterate people live with tolerable affluence. Anwar Hasan remarks, "Syed Waliullah in his novel

Tree Without Roots has portrayed the deep-rooted problems and crisis as well as the incongruities of the social life" (Hasan) [3].

The novel starts with the description of the difficulties of a village where there is little food and "Little food means more religion". However, the clever protagonist of Waliullah, Abdul Majeed somehow figures out that in Mahabbatpur, most of the people are happy and simple-minded and they can easily be fooled through religious superstitions. He starts scolding the villagers all of a sudden, claiming that they have not taken care of the grave of Saint Shah Sadeque (fake name given by Majeed to make his story sound more natural) and he tells them a made-up story of a saint who appeared in his dream that his grave is not being taken care of and that the people of that area are sinners. Almost everyone, including the head of the village, Khaleque Bepari, believes Majeed's story. Then the villagers repair the grave, make a shrine and a house for Majeed. Majeed begins to live there and becomes wealthy by fooling the people of the village with the means of fake religious teaching. Majeed marries Rahima, a widowed cowardly lady who turns to be a very obedient wife. However, as the story progresses, cracks appear in his carefully constructed dominance as few people resist against him e.g. Tara Mian, Amena (Khaleque Bepari's first wife), pir of Nawappur, Akkas Mian but very strategically Majeed solves all the problems. Majeed remarries a teenage girl named Jamila who later turns to be the greatest resistance for Majeed. He tries to control her behavior and at a point of Majeed's doing that Jamila spits on his face, the novel culminates here. Claiming that she is possessed by an evil spirit, he ties her up in the shrine. The novel ends with a climactic disorder.

Literature Review

The interplay of religious discourse, power dynamics, and gender inequality has long been a central concern in literary and cinematic studies. Religion, while often seen as a source of moral guidance, has also operated as a mechanism for consolidating authority, shaping social norms, and sustaining gender hierarchies. This article examines Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots* through Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, focusing on how religious hypocrisy intersects with power and knowledge. The study seeks to highlight gaps in existing research and to provide a fresh perspective on the text.

Although the intersection of religion and power has been widely discussed, Foucauldian analyses in this field remain limited, particularly in South Asian contexts. Foucault's concept of the power-knowledge relationship provides a valuable lens for understanding how religious authority manipulates collective belief systems to exploit the masses. Most existing Foucauldian critiques, however, are centered on Western or global works, neglecting their applicability to regional narratives such as *Tree Without Roots*.

The text has drawn extensive scholarly attention. Nure Jannat and Md. T Rayhan (2018) [4] interpret Majeed as both extremist and colonizer, fabricating religious authority to dominate the villagers. Tanzin Sultana (2020) [5] views him as a man trapped by

his own creation, comparing him to Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale. Existential readings by Shahidul Islam Chowdhury (2021) [6] and Niaz Zaman present Majeed as contemplative but ultimately opportunistic. While K.M. Wazed and Md. Shamim Mondol (2020) [7] have applied Foucault's theory of power and knowledge to the novel, they do not address gendered oppression.

This study, therefore, aims to extend the Foucauldian framework by analyzing how *Tree Without Roots* depicts religion as an apparatus of control, wealth accumulation, and gendered subjugation. In doing so, it not only uncovers the historical continuity of religious power but also reveals its universality, offering a nuanced perspective on Waliullah's text.

Methodology

This secondary research will apply qualitative research approaches to gain deeper understanding on how exploiters abuse religion in the text using Foucault's theories of power, knowledge and resistance. Close textual and cinematic analysis will be employed to conduct a detailed examination of *Tree Without Roots* specifically focusing on language, structure, themes and motifs. The real and virtual library works will be done to gain deeper understanding of the text and their background information. This analysis will be guided by Foucault's theoretical framework which emphasizes the relationship between power and knowledge and how discourse shapes social realities.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, Michel Foucault's theory has been selected because it offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing power. Applying his concepts allows an exploration of how religious discourse maintains social order, directs behavior, and reinforces gender hierarchies. The Foucauldian lens provides a nuanced perspective to examine how power is exercised, internalized, and resisted—particularly relevant to understanding religious dominance in *Tree Without Roots*.

Michel Foucault (1926–1984), [9-16] a French philosopher and historian, is renowned for linking power with knowledge and social structures, influenced by post-structuralist thought. For Foucault, power is not only about domination but also about the subtle mechanisms embedded in discourse, institutions, and norms. Power determines what is knowable: if something can be defined or categorized, it can also be controlled. Importantly, power does not suppress knowledge but encourages its proliferation, shaping what counts as truth.

His theory of power/knowledge rejects the idea of knowledge as objective or neutral. Instead, knowledge always operates within power relations, producing and sustaining authority. Institutions such as religion, law, and education construct "truths" that validate certain ideas while marginalizing others. For example, religious discourse defines sin and virtue, thereby regulating human behavior and consolidating authority [17].

The construction of discourse and the mechanism of control

Power is produced through discourse rather than being simply imposed by authority. Michel Foucault's theory of power, knowledge and discourse makes it easy to understand how religious figures legitimize their authority under the shadow of religion and control social order [18]. This chapter examines how discourse functions as a tool of power – first by providing Foucault's perception of truth and then investigating how Majeed establishes his authority in *Tree Without Roots*. This chapter explores how religious leaders fabricate belief system to exploit their followers and create a sustaining structure to maintain the dominance.

Majeed's mastery to control in *Tree Without Roots*

Tree Without Roots by Syed Waliullah is a striking example to demonstrate how religious discourse constructs and sustain power dynamics. Foucauldian notion of discourse as a mechanism of dominance is manifested by Waliullah's protagonist, Majeed where he imposes authority [19], defines societal norms and suppresses dissents by using religious rhetoric. This section analyzes the ways by which Foucault's theory of power/knowledge and discourse are reflected in *Tree Without Roots*. Discourse is not neutral reflection of religion always but a strategic curated tool to control the masses [20]. The section emphasizes how religious discourse works as instrumental to power by analyzing how Majeed manipulates collective beliefs, fabricates religious narratives through instilling fear and using selective invocation of religious text.

We are introduced with Majeed's well-planned discourse out of religion even before the introduction of him as Majeed [21]. Here religion is a very clever choice because Majeed does not have better knowledge of any other field, additionally he does not have police force, armed force or military to practice brute power. However, religion as a tool of surveillance requires minimum resources while influencing individuals' behaviors and thought process profoundly. This is aligned with Foucault's idea that power is not repressive but also productive as it produces reality and normalizes specific truth. Till now we witness our people, rioting based on religion. Religion will never be irrelevant when there is a question of practicing power [22].

Majeed's entry is dramatically pretentious. He pretends to be a spiritual person. His gesture and his story that a spiritual guru came to his dream and asked him to take care of him is the starting point of his created discourse. He immediately takes control over the situation, leaving everyone feels down saying, "You are all blind" and adds that "You are ignorant men, men without understanding" (Waliullah 20). He successfully makes everyone feel guilty saying, "It is not a mere grave but a mazar, how could you have left the mazar of Saint Shah Sadeque unattended like this?" (Waliullah 20) [23]. Foucault's notion of discourse as a means of structuring knowledge and power is evident here.

The villagers become so overwhelmed by the guilt imposed by Majeed's discourse that they forget to question Majeed's sudden arrival in the village and his intention. This kind of uncritical acceptances shows how discourse creates a favorable environment for perverts like Majeed to exploit mass people. At the moment when he talks about his dream where a pir (spiritual guru) appears to his dream, not to anyone else, he uplifts himself as someone supreme to mass people who capable to make discourse [24].

Majeed places himself as a sole processor of knowledge within a very short time, hinting how influential religious discourse is compared to other discourses. Ignorance alone is sufficient to establish religious discourse whereas other forms of discourse require some deliberate conscious steps and a specific duration of time to implement them. At Mahabbatpur, Majeed appears as a sole religious guru. People come to him during unfavorable situation, for the problems that seem insoluble in any other worldly ways. This is how the villagers grant Majeed a place to belong despite the ambiguity of his origins. Regardless where his root is, he roots himself strongly in that village.

While creating religious discourse, randomly adding some verses from religious scripture gives a certain kind of weight to a person. In the entry scene, to make the illusion of his spiritual superiority, Majeed recites from the Quran, "Allah knoweth, ye know not. We know nothing, my brethren, nothing beyond what the Almighty wishes us to know" (Waliullah 23) [25]. Majeed places him as intermediary between divine knowledge and the community. Thus, his discourse is weighted with religious authority which tries to silence potential resistance.

In South Asia, religious perverts are unfortunately not uncommon. It is not only Majeed but so many pirs who chose religion as their easy way of life where exploitation is easy throughout the ages. All that a person need is creating a discourse by speaking confidently and assertively without the need of for substantial evidence. As it is related to religion [26], people are afraid to raise questions and thus this kind of discourse is not required to be testified.

Pirs (spiritual guru) come when people have good harvest is a point where writer hints that, pirs are related with wealth not with religion. Pir of Nawappur is one of them. He is no less in creating overspread discourse that he is able to revive dead person, hold the sun in place. However, his claims are rooted in the same discursive techniques used by Majeed, where confidence and unchallenged authority are the substitutes for verifiable truth [27]. As Majeed knows the way of exploitation, he cannot trust that pir (spiritual guru) blindly and consequently, he raises questions, where the pir fails.

Nevertheless, the discourses are so deep rooted and prominent that even after diminishing, some people chose to believe it again [28]. For example: Ameena desires to have medicated water by Pir of Nawappur. For them when there is no way out, their emotional impulses force them to cling to their faith as an escape from real-

ity. This illustrates how, even when the original discursive power weakens, it continues to influence individuals and shapes their choices and actions in ways that reinforce the existing power structures. Foucault notes that power is not easily diminished; rather, it is deeply ingrained in social structures and often resurfaces in new forms.

Storytelling is one of the best ways to create discourse as it provides a medium through which knowledge is shaped and disseminated. We have witnessed fairy tale having profound effect on our perception leaving us racist, sexist etc. perpetuating different bias [29]. Similarly, Majeed's skill as storyteller allows him to thrust his authority in. His narrative ability is evident in his entry scene where he tells story of his imaginary dream and later too, we find him sharing story here and there based on context. A prominent instance of his storytelling skill is his treatment of Taher's father who ends up feeling vulnerable and crying after listening to his story. Even after the disappearance of Taher's father, Majeed succeeds to convince the villagers that everything that has happened is happened for the best as it is a wish of God. Another prominent example is that Majeed is about to convince Jamila, apparently the biggest resistance for his power through his story about the supernatural power of the grave but fails. Through his storytelling, Majeed attempts to dismantle Jamila's defiance. In this way, Majeed's storytelling becomes a critical instrument in the production that ensures his dominance within the social hierarchy of the village.

Gradually, Majeed spreads his wings of exploitation. Based on Foucault's theory of power and knowledge, Majeed's tactics reflect the creation of a system where knowledge—rooted in religion—becomes the foundation of his dominance. Majeed starts his experiment of oppressing people by Rahima, a physically bold strong woman. After being successful in taming Rahima, Majeed becomes more confident. As a shrewd person, Majeed soon realizes that the villagers are just similar versions of Rahima, physically strong but mentally vulnerable.

The transformation of the villagers after Majeed's arrival is a confirmation to the power of religious discourse. Previously people were indifferent toward religious practices, "not God-fearing (Waliullah16)". "They cry out to God and pray to Him only when their land becomes parched with drought, or when their crops are washed away by the flood. At other times the name of the Almighty is hardly ever uttered" (Waliullah28). After Majeed comes in the village, they are taught five Kalema, they pray five times, they fast, they spend money in the mazar. "Day after day Majeed studied the villagers surreptitiously, seeking to learn their habit and customs, trying to penetrate their minds" and identifying their emotional and spiritual vulnerabilities (Waliullah 28). He finds that "happiness can be dangerous" (Waliullah 30-31). Consequently, when they sing at harvest-time, "Majeed closed his eyes and declared, "We must never forget that God alone is the bestower of food and nourishment" (Waliullah 31), "And those who worship the earth" "because it gives us food, are idolaters. They who worship idols are the greatest sin-

ners and will be cast into deadliest hell-fire" (Waliullah 31-32). By linking their joy to the threat of punishment, he supports his position as the sole interpreter of religious truth. Majeed's discourse makes him so powerful that the most influential character among the villagers, Khaleque Bepari is influenced by him and does not hesitate to divorce his wife only based on Majeed's decree.

Foucault's understanding of the economy of power is particularly relevant here. Material gain is an integral part of religious discourse which requires minimal resources yet yields profound control. By crafting a discourse grounded on religion, Majeed creates a structure to dominate that function like bomb-subtle in its beginning but explosively powerful in its consequence. After the establishment of discourse, we find Majeed, a rootless man in Mahabatpur, gaining a good enough home, two wives, cows, field to harvest within a very short time and his gaining continues through the offering of grave. Thus, religion is weaponized to achieve far-reaching and destructive authority with minimal effort.

Conclusion

Religion functions as a powerful tool to construct social order, regulate populations, and shape individual identities through discourse. By analyzing Syed Waliullah's *Tree Without Roots*, this study has demonstrated how religious figures exploit faith to establish and sustain power structures. Using Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, it reveals how religious discourse operates to condition people, create authority, and maintain social hierarchies.

In *Tree Without Roots*, authority is not enforced through physical force but through discourse. Majeed fabricates a narrative around an abandoned grave, transforming himself into a spiritual leader. By making villagers internalize his version of truth, he consolidates power without coercion. His manipulation of religious teachings illustrates how discourse shapes perceptions, defines acceptable norms, and legitimizes authority. This aligns with Foucault's idea that power is not only repressive but also productive, generating knowledge that sustains its own dominance.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond the text's cultural context. The manipulation of religious scripts for personal and institutional power, the disciplining of bodies through identities, and the internalization of surveillance through fear remain relevant in contemporary discussions of extremism, politics, and gen-

der inequality. The study contributes to Foucauldian scholarship in South Asia, where such applications are relatively underexplored.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that religious discourse is never neutral; it is deeply entangled with structures of control. Yet, as Foucault asserts, power also generates resistance. *Tree Without Roots* exposes these dynamics, offering insights into the universality of religious power in shaping truth, identity, and social order.

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