

Language as A Tool of Deception and Power Practice in *Tree Without Roots*

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Abstract

Syed Waliullah's writing consistently explores the societal apocalypse, portraying a common scenario in rural Bengal. The Tree Without Roots is highly acclaimed for its dynamic and diverse phenomena, which attract the critics and writers to delve into. This project examines the linguistic aspects of this novel by analyzing specific dialogues, situational overtones and undertones, and colloquial dialects that serve as tools of deception and power practice. This study aims to scrutinize the linguistic calculation of the protagonist Majeed, who establishes his position as an uncompromising and unbeatable entity in Mohabbatpur village by employing favorable rhetoric centered around the mazar. Employing a Foucauldian framework of discourse and power, the paper analyzes the dynamics between speech and social control in postcolonial rural Bengal. A detailed discussion reveals how religious performativity, myth-making, and epistemic control through language operate to sustain deceptive power structures. The findings highlight the novel's relevance in postcolonial discourse, rural politics, and the ethics of spiritual authority. In terms of method, this paper adopts a qualitative and close reading approach.

Key Words: *Apocalypse, Discourse, Rhetoric, Control, Power*

1. Introduction

The pir-centric rhetoric has highly dominated Bengali Muslim culture for centuries. Islam entered the Bangla Sultanate through Sufi-Darwish agents, who were locally known as 'Pir', even before the Sultani or Mughal dynasty. They preached Islam in this region and earned a great reputation, characterized by a heart full of beliefs, and earned respect from their devotees. So, the idea of Islam and 'Pir' was so amalgamated that the masses did not feel any urgency to differentiate between them. As a result, the Pirs have exercised absolute power and authority over the local community, whose members were unable to raise questions against the Pirs, as they were considered the sacred agents of Allah. Sometimes, they misinterpreted religious doctrines to manipulate the common people and establish their favorable rhetoric. Linguistic mechanisms have always been a powerful tool for them to execute their purpose of deception and exert power. This tendency was not overlooked by Syed Waliullah, a canonical writer of Bangla literature, who harshly criticized charlatanism in rural Bengal in many of his writings, including *Bohipir*, *Lal Shalu*, and later the transcreation of it, *Tree Without Roots*.

In the history of postcolonial South Asian literature, *Tree Without Roots* ¹ by

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Syed Waliullah occupies a critical place for its stark portrayal of rural prejudice, spiritual exploitation, and authoritarian control. Set in the fictional village of Mahabbatpur, the novel centers on Majeed, a fraudulent religious leader who employs spiritual rhetoric, constructed myths, and symbolic performances to manipulate an illiterate and devout community. The power that Majeed holds is not through physical coercion or wealth, but through the calculated and strategic use of language. His words, invocations, stories, and threats are carefully posited to achieve obedience, reverence, and fear. Language in this novel functions not merely as a means of communication but as an ideological apparatus that generates fear, constructs myth, silences dissent, and legitimizes authority.

This paper argues that *Tree Without Roots* is fundamentally a study of how language, particularly religious language, operates as a tool of deception and control of power. By mapping Majeed's rise and dominance, the novel unveils a linguistic power structure in which speech functions ideologically. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of discourse and power, and intersecting with postcolonial critiques of religious orthodoxy and orality, the paper argues that Majeed's control over symbolic language facilitates a regime of belief, obedience, and silencing.

2. Literature Review

The twentieth-century novel *Tree Without Roots* by Syed Waliullah has garnered critical acclaim both domestically and internationally. Waliullah attains worldwide recognition for incorporating the "proletarian" lifestyle of rural communities and the socio-cultural rituals of the Muslim population in greater Bengal. Serajul Islam Chowdhury (2006) notes, "With the imagination of an artist, Waliullah has grasped the deprivation and sadness of the people in the villages, arising out of the stark fact that there was little land and too many people to feed."² Little food means more religion, as Waliullah (1967) writes in *Tree Without Roots*, reflecting how, amid survival crises, the villagers turn toward pirs or saints, seeking spiritual salvation through accessible figures of authority.

Most of these pirs, however, adopt hypocritical interpretations of religious scripture to consolidate their influence over the "illiterate" and "infidel" inhabitants.³ From a Marxist perspective, Ibrahim Khalil (2015) observes, "Within the polished religious frame, these pirs silently launch smart and one-way authority to legitimate their odd situations and offensive actions. They never forget to misuse mainstream Islamic religious ideals".⁴ Echoing the author's intention, Madhumita Chakrabarty (2018) asserts that "Waliullah was trying to detect the falsity in pseudo-religious dogmas and practices that voiced against freethinking and education".⁵ In a similar vein, Tapu and Jannat (2021) argue, "Waliullah had an uncanny awareness of these hypocritical 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".⁶

From another perspective, the novel, written in 1948, captures a post-partition Bengal that had recently emerged from British colonial rule and entered the Pakistani administrative regime. The backdrop of religious riots, the Partition, and mass migration

is evident, where, as Kamal and Soumya (2022) note, “a common man turned into a con man abusing religion as a tool to reach a powerful position”.⁷ Chowdhury reinforces this interpretation, arguing that Majeed is a veritable colonialist and an active missionary... who plants fear into the hearts of the innocent peasants... to transform them into devout Muslims.⁸ From an existential point of view, Chakrabarty (2018) argues that “it is his survival which comes first of all, even his ethics”.⁹ Without the *mazar*, Majeed is essentially a vagabond. Thus, he claims self-mastery by exercising subjective choices. Gradually, he devolves into an extremist figure whose “egocentrism was so extreme that he uses the name of God to manipulate the unostentatious people but forgets the existence of God and the penance awaiting him for his deeds”¹⁰ as Tapu and Jannat notes. Therefore, extremism, here, becomes a tool to suppress dissenting voices, facilitated through self-authorized interpretations. His rhetoric around the *mazar* becomes the axis of his control over the villagers.

Applying a Foucauldian discourse analysis, Kamal and Soumya (2022) highlight, “Majeed legitimizes his *mazar* cult through his narrative, which is based on a piece of knowledge he has created through lies and false perceptions”.¹¹ According to Michel Foucault (1980), “discourse institutionalizes the relationship between power and knowledge, gaining authority through internal logic and legitimacy”.¹² Majeed’s knowledge of subdued women like Rahima and Amena (the infertile wife of KhalekBepari) feeds his habitual dominance over others. The same method is employed on Jamila, the revolutionary female figure of the novel. Therefore, his failure to subjugate her marks a significant rupture in the power structure. Khalil (2015) argues, “Feminist perspective can be easily explored through the most vibrant and revolutionary woman, Jamila, in *Tree Without Roots*. Majeed easily made Amena and Rahima submissive, but his formula did not work with Jamila”.¹³ Her defiance signals a moment of decolonial feminist resistance that destabilizes Majeed’s discursive control.

Despite considerable critical engagement with *Tree Without Roots*, a gap remains in exploring how linguistic efficacy operates as a tool of power and manipulation in the novel. Postcolonial criticism considers language in literary texts as a crucial domain of analysis. This study, therefore, proposes to examine Waliullah’s diction, use of dialectal inflections, connotative language, and rhetorical strategies. These will be analyzed to demonstrate how language functions not only as narrative embellishment but also as an apparatus of ideological domination. This will involve both theoretical and close textual analysis.

3. Discussion

3.1. Theatrical Nature of Language

One of the most unsettling yet illuminating aspects of *Tree Without Roots* is Majeed’s awareness of the theatrical nature of language. Waliullah narrates his speech in a performative way that creates a transfusion among the commoners. His invocations of religious phrases, his deliberate silences, and his staged gestures at the fictitious grave of Shah Sadeque serve to reinforce a performative aura of sanctity. Language in this context

becomes ritualized performance, not sincere communication. As Judith Butler(1997) asserts in her theory of performativity, “Identity and authority are not innate but constructed through repeated acts and words”.¹⁴ In order to create an authoritative presence, Majeed repeatedly humiliates the audience with their vulnerability and opaqueness and ultimately earns their devotion to his fictitious shrine. Waliullah narrates Majeed’s gesture while delivering any speech towards the villagers in a manner like that: “He spoke slowly, his words gently rising and falling, yet woven together with strength. They flowed as sweetly as honey, adhering firmly to the minds of his listeners. He stroked his beard gently, gazing off into the distance over the heads of the villagers as they watched him with rapt attention”.¹⁵ As a result, Majeed’s performative language becomes unquestionable, shielded by ritual and myth. It is this ritualization that grants Majeed unchallenged authority since his deception is not merely verbal, but it is dramaturgical. The transformation of Mahabbatpur begins with a lie, with the invention of the saint Shah Sadeque. Majeed’s claim, that the neglected grave belongs to a great pir, is a classic act of discursive construction. Discursive construction refers to the concept that our cognitive impulse and understanding of reality, identities, and social truths are actively shaped and maintained by language rather than existing as objective and natural facts. There is no proof, no lineage, no documented tradition in case of the grave, but Majeed only reiterates the same lie. Yet it is accepted as truth because linguistic pragmatism earns belief immensely and easily. As Foucault (1969) argues in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “Discourse is not merely descriptive; it is productive. It produces regimes of truth”.¹⁶ Majeed’s deception is therefore not only in what he says but in what his speech acts. It creates historical memory to hold the position of an omnipotent entity which practically loses the validity of existence. His manipulation of memory is strategic by which he narrates the past not to preserve it but to invent it. Majeed found an abandoned grave in the village but he himself was not even sure whether it was a tomb of a great soul or not. He manipulates the opportunity of fabricating an imaginary telling that it was the *mazar* of a great ‘pir’ named Shah Sadeque. Once this myth is institutionalized, it becomes resistant to disproof. Majeed persuades them about the grave as “The saint has been living amongst you unknown and uncared for, a saint who has regard for you and who protects you...his is a merciful spirit and his kindness knows no bounds”.¹⁷ This is a linguistic colonization of myth, a fabrication accepted as collective truth. Therefore, It is power built on epistemic fraud, shielded by the religious aura, and sustained through oral repetition. There is a Goebbelsian propaganda that if a lie is repeated a thousand times, it becomes the truth. Majeed’s rhetoric on the mazar of Shah Sadeque is a perfect instance of that propaganda, as he succeeds in establishing the fictitious story behind it as true to the villagers. Therefore, the linguistic pragmatism accelerates the pace of continual fraudulence that creates a dramatic irony in this novel.

3.2. Linguistic Control and Religious Symbolism

However, Majeed’s linguistic control is not limited to religious symbolism. Rather, it extends into an economy of fear and divine punishment. His speech is saturated with implicit threats: “Neither must you insult the great and holy spirit who is ever amongst

us. He is kind, but he is powerful. Need I explain more?”.¹⁸ In such speech acts, the speaker positions himself not as an enforcer of violence but as a mouthpiece of divine consequence. This indirect threat is more powerful than open coercion because it is supernatural and unchallengeable. The villagers are afraid of the saint’s wrath more than any temporal punishment. Majeed capitalizes on this fragility and vulnerability. This aligns with Foucault’s (1982) notion of pastoral power, where control is exercised through care and salvation, rather than brute force.¹⁹ Majeed does not punish physically becoming an active agent, instead, he warns in the name of a higher power and plays the passive role of a warner. Sometimes, he uses Quranic verses to threaten and to create a solemn environment in which fear and obedience can be easily evoked. Handling Tara Mia and his wife’s quarrel, Majeed starts his court with the incident of Ayesha, the Prophet’s beloved wife, and the respective Quranic verses. He narrates to the villagers that “the Quran says, Allah knows, you know not. He gives to some men tongues dripping venom; to others tongue sweet and pleasant. Some he makes proud and haughty, others meek and docile”.²⁰ As the commoners become unable to connect the context of his speech with the present circumstances, and cannot understand properly who is targeted through these verses, they feel guilty and a sense of remorse and fear rises inside them. This linguistic detachment allows him to manipulate guilt and fear without assuming accountability. Therefore, unchallenged authority leads to sheer deception.

3.3. Silence and Dominance

Moreover, silencing is another way of linguistic domination. Majeed used to make them silent who seemed to be his potential rival, or who might challenge his dominance, irrespective of gender and class. Amena Bibi, the first wife of Khaleque Bepari, is a cruel victim of Majeed’s vengeance. Childless Amena was taunted with a fictitious idea of having ‘coils’ in her belly. The term ‘coil’ is also his newly discursive policy, as nobody in the village had heard it before. For the socio-cultural background and deprivation of progressive education, they habitually believe in superstitious ideas without questioning.

As a result, in the name of removing the coil, Majeed got a chance to punish Amena. Her only fault was that she sought the ‘blessed water’ from the pir of Awalpur, who was seemingly a competitor of Majeed. Ultimately, he took revenge by separating Amena and Khaleque, marking a baseless stigma on Amena’s character. Surprisingly, Khaleque never raised any questions over the verdict of Majeed, though he could not provide any other evidence except his intuition. Again, Majeed’s oral authority is unchallenged even by the most powerful entity of the village, Khaleque Bepari. Therefore, the power shifting takes place in this incident, and Waliullah (1967) narrates it as, “Khaleque’s influence in the village was certainly not negligible, but his own was greater, though of a different kind...Majeed’s power came from above, from their fear of the Unknown, from the grave that lay beneath the red cloth”.²¹ The fear and illiteracy are intertwined and critically depicted here. As the villagers were turned into a verbal colony of Majeed, their submissiveness and illiteracy made them dependent on orality and religious intermediaries. In this oral economy of dominance, the spoken word has immense symbolic capital to rule over the colonized commoners. Majeed’s voice gains verbosity

with Arabic invocations, Qur'anic phrases, and pseudo-historical narratives that carry unquestioned weight. Waliullah critiques this vulnerability not to shame the illiterate, but to expose how their dependence on oral tradition makes them susceptible to discursive tyranny. In the absence of textual verification, speech becomes law. This transforms language from a means of communication into a tool of autocracy. When Majeed reproaches the villagers as "You are ignorant, men without understanding"²², his oral supremacy is expressed in a very conscious manner. His dominance prolongs as long as their poverty and ignorance prevail upon them.

3.4. Metaphor of the Title

Again, the metaphor of the title *Tree Without Roots* becomes clearest in this context. Majeed's power is rootless, like the fabricated saint's grave. His language constructs an artificial origin to establish authority. The deception lies in this simulation of rootlessness. He soliloquizes in his lonely moment and thinks of his existence as "Was not it all resting on a very shaky foundation? Was it not all merely a house of cards which the slightest wind could upset?"²³ This moment is symbolic as his power is rooted in forgery, not in truth and validity. Faith is established on myth and superstition instead of pure religious doctrines. The tree grows, but the roots are invented. It is a critique of belief systems founded not on rationality, but on linguistic illusion.

However, the investigation focuses solely on the discursive practices within the fictional narrative, avoiding ethnographic data or real-world sociolinguistic fieldwork while pointing toward the historical and cultural realities that inform the text's production. Nevertheless, the aim is not to produce definitive answers, but to explore how language operates as a discursive strategy of control, complicity, and resistance within the symbolic world of the novel. As the Foucauldian lens provides a powerful tool to interrogate language and power, it is acknowledged that Foucault's Eurocentric context may not fully capture the cultural nuances of rural Bengal. However, this limitation is mitigated by integrating postcolonial insights that prioritize indigenous contexts and power dynamics. Therefore, further researchers can figure out these limitations and relate the text to sub-continental theories and fictions.

4. Findings

The findings of this research reveal that *Tree Without Roots* by Syed Waliullah functions as a powerful critique of postcolonial modes of control, where language becomes the primary mechanism of domination. Postcolonial theory is a body of thought that examines the cultural, political, and economic consequences of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the impact of human control and exploitation of colonized people and their lands. Foucault (1976) argues, "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it".²⁴ Majeed's performative piety and staged sanctity around the fictitious *mazar* demonstrate how discourse can fabricate authority and institutionalize deception. His omnipotent attitude and caliber on creating rhetoric around the shrine centralized the power dynamics of Mohabbatpur village capitalizing on the pervading destitution and pseudo-religious dogma. The setting of this novel indicates to a poverty-driven rural community where even basic

human rights are violated and unimaginable let alone progressive thoughts and pure religious practices. Therefore, charlatanism grows fervently and hypocrisy spreads like a pandemic. Waliullah narrates the scenario in the manner that “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.”²⁵ In this context, the religious intermediaries like Majeed earn immense attention and priority with their linguistic dexterity and fraudulence over the commoners.

4.1. Power of Knowledge

Waliullah’s writing invokes the question of what works behind Majeed’s confidence in every step. The possible answer would be his knowledge of the villagers’ competency and a good command of language. This aligns with Foucault’s theory of power-knowledge, where he argues that it is not just a top-down force held by institutions, but rather a fluid, pervasive force that shapes social relations and individual identities.²⁶ According to Foucault’s understanding, power is based on knowledge and makes use of knowledge; on the other hand, power reproduces knowledge by shaping it under its anonymous intentions. Power creates and recreates its fields of exercise through knowledge. Majeed’s knowledge of mind mapping enables him to sustain his position as unbeatable and unchallenged. He understood very well that the villagers would not dare to question his position and actions. He soliloquizes at a moment, “Is it wrong to lie if it’s done for 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”.²⁷ Moreover, he knew how to suppress people by attacking their weak points. Thus, he tried to apply the same technique to handling Jamila, who disobeyed his order due to her fickle nature. Surprisingly, Majeed has failed to dominate her by the invocation of fear. Then, his tone was getting down, and he asked Rahima gently, “Did you curse me for marrying again?”.²⁸ The powerful Majeed seems like a helpless entity, and Waliullah describes the moment like “something in his tone sounded friendly, even intimate...never heard him talk like this even in the darkness of the night, when he was no longer the person who recited the Koran by the Mazar”.²⁹ This undertone reveals his shattered position and an internal fear of losing his authority over others. As a result, Majeed’s power is reflected through his overtones and undertones according to the circumstances.

4.2. Religious Exploitation

From another point of view, the people of rural areas are always vulnerable to exploitation by any means. They adopt religion as their savior in a general sense, though they remain very far from the true essence of religion. As Marx noted, Religion is the opium of the masses³⁰; it confines them within a boundary of obedience and a set of beliefs. The religious preacher, like Majeed, always takes advantage of their ignorance and prejudice. In the case of Mohabbatpur villagers, Majeed is their only source of

confirmation. Like a touchstone, his verdict justifies or negates everything. His oral authority surpasses the need for historic and scientific evidence or logic. For instance, he offers “blessed water” to sick people who come to him for recovery instead of going to hospital or taking medicine and assures them of relief. Furthermore, Majeed’s power thrives in the absence of textual literacy, where the oral word becomes sacred law. This form of epistemic control resonates with GayatriSpivak’s concept of “epistemic violence,” where “the subaltern cannot speak” because dominant discourse structures do not allow for alternative voices.³¹ Majeed speaks *for* the villagers, silencing dissent and rewriting reality through selectively interpreted Qur’anic verses and invented traditions. His influence is so powerful among the villagers that the wealthiest person, like KhalequeBepari, did not hesitate for a single time to divorce his wife, Amena, only depending on Majeed’s opinion that she had sinned and it is for her punishment. Foucault notes, “Silence and secrecy are a shelter for power” ³² (History of Sexuality 101). This indicates that deceiving the illiterate or semi-illiterate people, who are the target audience of his hypocritical lecture, is like a game to Majeed. He appears as a savior to them, enlightening them with religious ideals, getting them circumcised, teaching them ‘kalma’(the scripture of faith), opening ‘maktab’ (institution for religious learning), but his repeated interference in their personal life turns him into a tyrant. Edward Said (1993) argues, “every empire... tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate”.³³ Majeed applies the same procedure to make his coming acceptable to the villagers. He asserts that he abandoned the happy place and happy people, only to pursue the command to enlighten the villagers that come through the dream.

4.3. Discursive Performance

Moreover, Majeed’s spiritual dominion is a discursive performance rooted in fabrication, yet it takes on the aura of divine truth through mystification and justification. He turns the abandoned grave into a gothic site where everyone feels haunted. Also, he justifies it as a sacred place by keeping the sanctity of it. However, Majeed’s power comes not from material control but from discursive authorship. He creates realities through speech acts that are believed and acted upon. Majeed does not lie outright; instead, he uses ambiguous truths, half-meanings, and scriptural fragments to sanctify exploitation. The sacred becomes a shield for personal ambition. Majeed’s authority survives because people accept the stories he tells and the stories he repeats with confidence and ritual. Majeed’s self-fashioning as a spiritual savior of Mohabbatpur reflects this colonial logic on a microcosmic, rural scale. Every time he performed Zikr, he would faint, and people took it as a sign of his spiritual devotion. Also, they compete with each other for who can kiss his feet more times. By doing that, they placed Majeed on a stage as a pseudo god. Waliullah, thus, critiques how power reproduces itself through narrative and action. His story of the unknown grave is impossible to prove or deny. It stands on the faith of the naïve villagers. At the beginning, it creates no feeling of Hamletian dilemma of “to be or not to be” as the villagers do not belong to that level of rationality to doubt or reconsider. Therefore, the charlatanism grows easily and fervently in the intruder like Majeed, whose only job is to deceive people with the alluring phrases of religious scriptures. By

manipulating sacred vocabulary, Majeed enforces moral obedience and suppresses dissent. Language becomes a theological weapon, sanctifying exploitation. He fabricates a history of the saint, which becomes collective memory through oral repetition. Therefore, language in this setting is not just a tool of communication but a weapon of subjugation, an enduring effect of colonial rule on literature, culture, history, and society, as well as how colonized peoples have resisted and responded to those effects.

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, Waliullah's writing suggests that people like Majeed are cultivated in society. Majeed is not a single entity whom Waliullah presents in this novel; rather, he is the representative of the fraudulent community. Over time, their appearance reveals the fragility of their belief system. It is alarming that discourse can easily dominate the way of thinking, shape the belief system, and shatter the possibility of thriving. Oral authority is prevalent where reason and logic are undermined. In a world where digital misinformation mirrors oral traditions of myth-making, Majeed's linguistic authoritarianism feels strikingly relevant today. So, the idea of discursive language in *Tree Without Roots* is a good point to note.

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