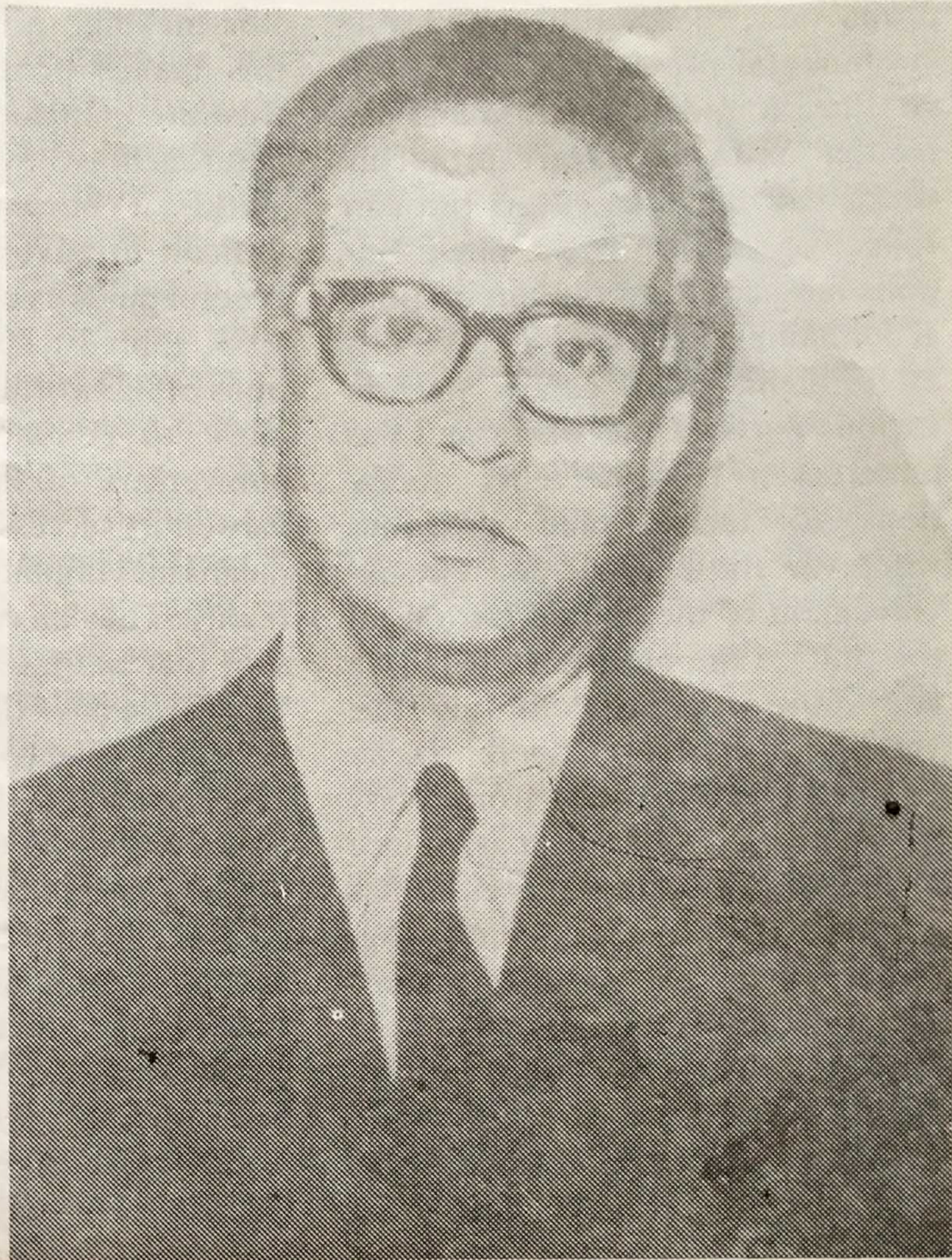


# Discovering Syed Waliullah

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Literary-critical interest in Syed Waliullah has been at its liveliest since the beginning of the 80s, leading to claims of "rediscovery" of this most innovative of our novelists. There is talk of "reassessment" of his work, and a "reevaluation" of his contribution to the novel not just in Bangladesh, but in Bangla language as well. The dust of this flurry of activities has not settled yet but one may safely make a prognosis at this point: that Waliullah will remain the centre of much critical—biographical attention for a long time to come. A two volume study of Waliullah's life and work by Syed Abul Maksud was already out by 1983, and scores of critical essays and reviews have been written on different aspects of his work and art. Bangla Academy published a definitive edition of the collected works of Syed Waliullah, again a two volume undertaking by an assiduous editor and compiler, Syed Akram Hossain, in 1986. These two volumes are remarkable for their comprehensiveness and for including all the variant readings of the texts of the novels over several editions and reprints, besides introducing the common reader to some hitherto unpublished or difficult to get works of Syed Waliullah, like the short story collection, *Nayan-chara*.

Examined objectively, the revival

of the common interest in Waliullah, may seem to be quite phenomenal, considering the slow reception accorded to most of our noted writers. A few critics are already wary that this may lead to a mythification of the novelist, obscuring the real merits of his art. The concern is not unfounded though as an assessment of some of the recent essays on Waliullah will show that while all claim his work to be showing an existentialist bias or even surrealistic tendencies or using the stream of consciousness technique, none has analysed such elements or tendencies in detail. No full length study on Waliullah's European influence, for example, has come out, although as early as 1969 critics talked about his borrowing from Camus, Kafka and a host of other European novelists. When *Lal Salu* (1948) Waliullah's first novel, was translated into French as *L'Arbre saans racines* some critics started looking for a French connection, and came up with the suggestion that Waliullah may have been influenced by French novelists, not-

ably the impressionistic writers of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Waliullah has the singular distinction of being associated, directly or indirectly with all the major literary and philosophical trends and movements of the 20th century. How much of this he rightly deserved, and how much is pure fiction is another matter altogether. But short of a de-mystification and demythologizing Syed Waliullah, the fact cannot be separated from fiction, even just 18 years after his death.

Waliullah-study today, to be meaningful and just to his art, should proceed from facts. This looks like stating the obvious, but so much of tendentious, cliché-ridden and insincere work has come out that a clear headed approach seems to be the most ideal. It is true that Waliullah shows a definite existentialist influence in his novels, and in some of his short stories, but this is neither conclusive nor extensive as the critics would have it. In the first place existentialism as a philosophical concept has not been



defined clearly. Sartrean existentialism for example, is not the same as Kierkegaardian. While it is agreed that all existentialists are concerned with ontology, the study of being, and that to them existence precedes essence, their individual interpretations are quite varied and may at times, appear to be contradictory. The Christian existentialism of Gabriel Marcel is often quite apart from the existentialism of the Jewish mystic Martin Buber, whose value system was not content with the explanation of a "leap of faith" on the part of a man groping for a solution to his deep spiritual problems, who thinks he finds an answer through divine intuition. Ortega Y. Gasset, similarly, would not see man as *engage*, but, as an aesthetic agent set upon by predetermined absolute values, who must then exercise his own freedom to make his own mark in the world. Waliullah's existentialism was more eclectic than is commonly thought, picking up echoes from divergent sources, although Camus comes closest to his 'system'. Camus's "man of good faith" is the model for at least one leading character of Waliullah, who faces his lonely condition in the face of the silence of the universe and decides, in a critical moment, to commit suicide. In this final, irreversible decision Muhammad Mustafa of *Cry, River Cry* resembles Camus's absurd man, for whom suicide is not only logical but also desirable as an existential act.

As one moves through pages of intricate thought processes of Waliullah's protagonists, one becomes aware that any preconceived notion of character, or personality or even concept becomes useless in judging them. What Waliullah does is to simply explore the endless equations a man must go through in his life time—the conjunctions of man and man, man and nature and man and society that form ever newer relationships, and come up with the impression of shifting perspectives. Time does not remain a fixed quantity in this phantasmagoria,

but an evolving concept. No fixed plot, therefore, defines his novels, but a fluid inbred structure that grows organically out of the inner dynamism of the actions, which gives an impression of flux determining our final position in the world. Not merely the time shift technique, not even the elements of the stream of consciousness technique, but something more—the sense of observing one's own dream or nightmare as if expelled from it while retaining all the pleasure or the horror of that experience: this is what describes the central narrative preoccupation of the novel.

If one proceeds from facts, one immediately discovers the wide linguistic variety of the novels of Waliullah. Consciously and meticulously, Waliullah evolved three distinct narrative styles for the three novels. While *Lal Salu* is intimate, *Chander Amabasya* (the Darkness of the Moon) is quite distinct and objective. The language of *Kando Nadi Kando* (Cry River Cry) on the other hand, is close to being obsessive, as it deals with the experience of living a fascinating nightmare, haunted by surrealistic horror images. The language is continuous, unbroken in its repetitious energy, and is punctuated by moments of feverish hysteria. The scene where the narrator describes the school teacher's delirious encounter with the cry of the river takes a sinister turn, and a comparison with Kafka's closed and haunted world offers itself. But we must not forget that Waliullah was not writing about a literary archetype so that borrowing from an old master would become inevitable, but was prising open the dark chambers of our own Unknown, where once the light of our common inquiry falls, familiar shapes and contours are revealed. What lies behind this will always be a mystery, but the shapes and contours evoke a familiar response, whose expression would then have a few elements in common. When Waliullah manipulates his narrative through the tricky waters of common, every day reality

and the bland uniformity of our common discourse, he falls back on this shared experience to give to his novel a sense of mystery that defies common logic. In all three novels, Waliullah's approach to language is heuristic. He does not remain confined within the limitations of common discourse, but neither does he make his narrative too abstract—he lets the discourse run its own natural course, but "natural course" in this case also includes the dark interludes of thought and the breakdowns of thought communication. Unlike some of his stream of consciousness practitioner-counterparts, Waliullah does not believe in creating language for the moment but let the moment evolve its own language. The language in that case, although a conscious creation, seems like a spontaneous evolution from the dynamics of the moment in which an action takes place. To my knowledge, no other Bangla novelist of our time has achieved this.

Despite his "Western techniques", Waliullah belongs firmly to the vast rural world of Bangladesh, where, as *Lal Salu* so brilliantly shows, he has his roots. The Western mode of response is no myth however, as his handling of difficult situations, especially those involving shifting different time frames within a novel, suggests; but he remains essentially a story teller of our own tradition. We must take this as the basis of our inquiry into the nature and dimensions of his art. Once we realize that despite his sophistication, his predilection for the individual moment (which gets prolonged and finally becomes an extended ego-trip) his discriminating eye for realistic details which may nevertheless, in surrealistic moments, lose all solidity and clear outline to merge into a hazy abstraction and his highly educated sensibility, he is still a chronicler of rural Bangladesh. Significantly, all three novels and a large number of his stories do have a rural setting.

This is what distinguishes him from the mere practitioners of the form.