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Power in *Lalsalu* by Syed Waliullah: A Foucauldian Study

K. M. Wazed Kabir*
Md. Shamim Mondol**

Abstract

Syed Waliullah's *Lalsalu* written in the backdrop of remote rural northern village of Bangladesh covering the time period after the division of Bengal is considered as a realistic novel and has already been a classic in Bangla literature. The novel is based on and around Majeed, a rootless man laying foundation on a chance discovery and its establishment as a socio-cultural, economic and political center using his bare capital of mere religious knowledge to become one and only authority from a non-entity. The way Majeed deals with the affairs, uproot probable challenging agents, faces whatever creeps up and thwarts through availing power, producing knowledge, establishing truth amidst resistance quite fit into the concept of power propounded by Michael Foucault which is quite different and deviated from the common perception of power as a type of possession by some privileged groups or individuals. The way power emerges and is applied with capillary circulation in this novel follows Foucault in a very explicit manner. This study aims at analyzing the text *Lalsalu* by Syed Waliullah from Foucauldian approach to show how power operates in the text reversing the traditional concept and affirming Foucault's stand.

Keywords: *Lalsalu*, rootless, challenge, power, Foucauldian

Introduction

Syed Waliullah, a foremost novelist and short story writer of Bangladesh, was born in Chittagong in 1922. His father was a district magistrate of British Raj and so the writer had opportunities to experience his boyhood in different districts of Bangladesh like Chittagong, Kurigram, Feni, Mymensingh, Krishnanagar. This provided him with opportunities to know rural Bengal, the simple people, social trends and practices. He availed those experiences in his creative career successfully. His educational background is quite strong. He started his career as a journalist in the *The Statesman*. Later he joined Radio Pakistan in 1947. He served there till he started his job in the Foreign Service. Finally he worked with the UNESCO. He lost his job as he refused to serve in Pakistan during the Liberation War. He rather paid attention to serve the mother land. He engaged himself in generating western opinions in favor of the independence of Bangladesh. He died on October 10, 1971, and his dream of an independent Bangladesh came true on December 16, 1971.

*Associate Professor, Department of English, Green University of Bangladesh

**Assistant Professor, Department of English, Green University of Bangladesh

His writings concentrated on portraying the people and geography of rural Bangladesh. His major attention was to delineate the rural areas of Bangladesh. However, he gradually shifted his attention to reveal more and more the inner workings of the characters in his later novels. The writer authored only four novels titled *Lalsalu (The Red Cotton Fabric)*, 1948, *Chander Amaboshay (Dark Moon)*, 1963, *Kando Nadi Kando (Cry, O River)*, 1966 and *The Ugly Asian*, 1959. Of them, the last one is the only novel in his career written in English. He has also three dramas and two volumes of short stories. *Lalsalu* brought the writer prestigious Bangla Academy Award in 1961. He was also awarded the highest state level award of Bangladesh Ekushey Padak posthumously in 1984.

Lalsalu, the magnum opus of Syed Waliullah was published in 1948. To Ali Anwar, in whole Bangladeshi literature, "the two best novels on rural life are Syed Waliullah's *Lalsalu* and Abu Ishaq's *Surya Dighal Bari (The House Along the Line of the Sun)*"(116). In the title, the writer has been symbolic and he implied to a dominant practice in the Muslim society of the then Pakistan where a class of Mollah would use graves as mazar and capitalize on that to thrive materially in the society.

Literature Review

The story is generally studied as a narration on how the protagonist "fraudulent Majeed preys upon the religious feelings of his fellow villagers by using a mazar or tomb covered by a piece of lalsalu, the red cotton fabric associated with ascetics and holy men." (Amin, 2014) This study narrows down the novel into a narrative of a fraud who cheats the simple minded people by using their sentiments associated with mazars or the astana of the holy men. And the writer's objectives are shown as the portrayal of the relation of an exploiter and the exploited. Das (2009) considers the novel as a symbolic presentation of the superstitious practices. To him, "*Lalsalu* is the symbol of religious superstition." (p. 9) While Hasan feels that the novel is all about the realities of social life existing in the society of Bangladesh from time immemorial. The writer focuses on the incongruities of the society with an implied motif of corrections. He assesses Waliullah's attempt saying, "Syed Waliullah in his novel *Lalsalu* has portrayed the deep rooted problems and crisis as well as the incongruities of the social life." Zaman (2006) traces the origin of the novel and shares with surety that the mazar of the novel has been a result of a real mazar which the writer comes across while he was living in Mymensingh in his early life. In writing *Lalsalu*, 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, 2016) Thus she affirms that the book is a realistic one woven from the practical experiences of the writer. Yet other studies align with the psychoanalytical reading of the

novel where the critics go for the workings of the mind of the protagonist and other characters. In that line, Anwar (1996) puts that Waliullah's interest is "characteristically focused on the shifting light and shadow of an individual's consciousness." (p. 117) Again some critics see the novel dispassionate about the realities of the historical perspectives as it has nothing of the political turmoil or major crisis of the time which had much ground in the psyche of the people of the country. Those critics consider the novel away from the socio-political events of that time.

But the novel with its complex story has hardly been considered from the perspectives of the power structure that has been manifested in the story and especially in the protagonist. This paper is an attempt to look into the novel from the perspective of Michael Foucault (1996) to whom "Power is relations; power is not a thing, it is a relationship between two individuals... such that one can direct the behavior of another or determine the behavior of another. Voluntarily determining it in terms of a number of objectives which are also one's own" (Interview, "What our Present Is" 410). The study will make use of his concepts of power and show how those concepts have been incorporated by the writer in the highly acclaimed novel *Lalsalu*.

Foucauldian Concept of Power

Power is generally studied as a quantified unit transferable to one location to another and it is considered as based on few measurable factors. It is commonly analyzed from two perspectives, Marxist and Weberian perspectives. The former relates power to property and economic power while the latter analysis is attached with mainly status. Foucault, on the other hand, considers power to be immeasurable and liquid which is not concentrated in any location in a binary relationship, rather it is a relative position and it has a liquid structure with circular nature. Power is always challenged from top down and bottom up positions. None is and can be outside of power structure. Hence it is hardly related to some specific conditions rather constantly in a volatile condition.

Foucault is mainly concerned with the relation existing between the individual and the institutions in a society. Power operates in that sphere very closely. His major works focus on the effects of institutions on individuals or group of people and how the people affirm those effects or resist them. His discussion on power differs from the earlier studies as the previous ones was one way channel of producing and applying power where the powerful are thought as holding power as a type of possession and it is used only to suppress or close down those who are powerless. These studies analyze power as a top-down process having only negative connotation like constraint, control, destruction and suppression of those

thought powerless. To Foucault, this is a faulty consideration. He says, "... [power] is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated." (Foucault, 1997, p.29) His concept of power is broader and abstract. To him, power is not a static affair or a possession. Rather it is an active relation. It is something that puts into action in relationships. In Foucault's words,

Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them. ((Foucault, 1997, p.29)

Power has two dimensional projections among individuals where they are subjects to it as well as they make it subject to them in case of exercise. Again his concept of power excites many new dimensions. He famously said in a proverbial manner, "Where there is power, there is resistance". This oft-quoted expression opens an out of the box consideration that power works from both sides. It is both a top down process as well as bottom up process where both the parties involved are in a strategic situation with no one-sided supremacy. Rather there is reciprocity in its projections. For this very reason, power does not entrap individuals, rather, "power is 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it." (Interview, "Power and Strategies" 1980, p. 141-142) And this very situation keeps one empowered to be free and empowered to bring about a change. To him, power puts all the stakeholders in a strategic situation where it not only restrains, but also empowers. He says,

[W]hat I mean by power relations is that we are in a strategic situation towards each other. . . . we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or non-behavior of the other. So we are not trapped. We are always in this kind of situation. It means that we always have possibilities of changing the situation. (Interview, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" 1996, p.386)

Althusser puts power as 'repressive state apparatus'. Foucault's concept of power is again against what has been thought for ages. And generally power is understood as means or apparatus for repression and oppression of those without power by those who hold it. It is conceptualized as something that operates through hindrance. In Foucault's words, "In defining the effects of power as repression, ... one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition." (Interview, "Truth & Power", 1980, p.119) And his position is argumentative with reference to the contextualized practices in normal way of life. Foucault's contention is that power is productive too. He poses a ques

tion, "If power were never anything but repressive...do you really think one would be brought to obey it?" (Interview, "Truth & Power" 1980, p.119) The answer he takes for granted is negative because his observation shows the productive nature of power that not only hinders but also gives rise to desired situations and things. Power is inevitably related to truth in a reciprocal way where neither power nor truth can be exercised or function without the exercise of power and the production of truth which maintains a circular relation. According to Foucault, power relations "are indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work." (Foucault, 1997, p. 24).

Knowledge maintains mutual relationship with power which is much the opposite to the linear type of thought about knowledge as we say, "knowledge is power." Knowledge and information are created and accumulated through the exercise of power. He in an interview said,

We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and-such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. (Interview, "Prison Talk", 1980, 51-52)

But Foucault is not oblivious of the complexity which the analysis of power relations involves. He is rather quite informed of the fact that power relation is sometimes unilateral and it allows some parties to block its flow of relation which creates a state of domination. In that case, freedom doesn't work freely, rather it is restricted or limited and it works in that situation unitarily. Foucault (1996) says,

The analysis of power relations is an extremely complex area: one sometimes encounters what may be called situations or states of domination in which the power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen. (Interview: "Ethics of the Concern for Self", 1996, 434,).

A Foucauldian Reading of *Lalsalu*

The power structure manifested in *Lalsalu* by Syed Waliullah can be interpreted to some extent by Marxist stand and Max Weberian explanation, but it can fit in Foucauldian concept of power where power is not conditioned to the traditional aspects of higher social class or holding powerful positions or wielding power through some apparatus, human, material and abstract, rather is distributive in nature and always in flux.

Power is concerned with knowledge which comes out of discourse, the statements acknowledged as having acceptance. Power is a determining factor in case of truth, quite opposite to the traditional view of truth as something universally accepted phenomenon. Majeed's first challenge was to create a discourse through a dream of a mazar and its power on the people the root of which is already in the mental formation of the villagers. He continued doing so by false story of the mazar and his acquaintances in the hospital when his followers have been admitted there.

The novel *Lalsalu* is set in a village of East Bengal named Mahabbatpur. Simple minded people live there with tolerable affluence. Majeed has got some religious leanings. He arrives there to get rid of the extreme poverty of his locality. There in his locality, the people at an early age realize, "the words of the ancient books neither fill their stomachs nor create any permanent peace in their minds." (p. 6) His primary dream of a tolerable living gets lengthened after a primary observation of the inhabitant of the village. So he attempts to go in a new direction and make a hold there. "Power cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power" (Foucault, 1997, p. 24). He makes a chance discovery of a deserted grave and passes it on to them as the grave of a Muslim saint. He gives a name to the imaginary person in the grave, scolds the villager for their negligence saying, "You are ignorant men, men without understanding." (p. 11). He confidently tells them of his being informed by a dream by the saint, "Go there, go to Mahabbatpur, for its inhabitants do not know that I live among them, unattended and uncared for. Tell them to honor me." (p. 13) Thus Majeed paves a way to make him a place where he earlier emerged as a zero with no direction or plan. But he proceeds and manages a directory of his own to adapt with the situations. He establishes himself there in no time with the grave at the center of all his activities. "The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. ... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power." (Interview, "Prison Talk", 1980, 51-52). He emerges as the leading man with nodding head of all including the most influential man Khaleque. He injects in them the impression he wants to create through controlling and framing their daily habits and practices. Pylypa's observation is, Michel Foucault coined the term "biopower" which "refer to the ways in which power manifests itself in the form of daily practices and routines through which individuals engage in self-surveillance and self-discipline, and thereby subjugate themselves." Still Majeed faces occasional oppositions and challenges. He feels anxious for the complexities and feels alienated from all around. But he manages to tread the paths and advances with dominance over all. He has his wealth, wife and power.

The often quoted line from Foucault that "Where there is power, there is resistance" lies at his power resistance dichotomy. In *Lalsalu*, power is generally thought to be wielded and enacted by Majeed alone. But considering bottom up flow of power, Majeed faces resistance from within as he feels shaken thinking of his hoax centering the mazar. He faces resistance from outside when Akkas embarks on advancing education to change the power structure and it affirms, "Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it." (Foucault 1980b:59) Majeed through his knowledge about the challenges resists them by exploiting the psychic structure of the rural people. That resistance comes out of the people who are supposed to be suppressed if power is perceived as a suppressive apparatus. Foucault finds those supposedly repressed boiling under that pressed situations and consequently resistance comes out. The power he shows is often challenged and he subverts those challenges by innovating protective apparatus. Rahima, the wife of Majeed comes to his house as a servile wife to fit into the need of Majeed both physically and materially as she has been chiseled by the socio-cultural demands. Still she has her way out of the box, a way to tread the way, walk with confidence unlike other women of her standing which shakes the hollow foundation of Majeed. So he finds it formidable and warns her, "Bibi, don't walk that way. The earth gets it to heart." (p. 8) Khaleque Bepari's wife too poses another resistance by not believing Majeed's treatment about her being a mother while his wife Rahima herself is without issues. So she arranges by insisting her husband to bring holy water from another saint staying in the adjacent village. She faces grave consequences of divorce. But the role of power has already been displayed. Challenges come from Zamila, the younger, tender wife who dares to defy his command by not being sincere about her prayers, falling asleep on the zainamaz keeping prayer unfinished. She even makes fun of the man whom none even think of disobeying. She unreservedly says to Rahima, "I thought seeing him first at our house he is the father of the bridegroom." (p. 51) She is tied to the mazar and she feels frightened. Majeed shudders inside showing the shattering foundation saying, "I feel pity for you. I am giving you pain, I am feeling wounded for this." (p. 63) But the greatest protest comes from her in the end of the novel where she is lying unconscious by the side of the shrine with one leg touching the grave showing her defiance and deviation from all around. She also succeeds in gathering her close associate and strong supporter like Rahima who comes out of her shell and defiantly tells Majeed the husband, "What'll be the use of paddy if there is no life left?" This way Majeed the man on the surface holding power faces resistance which, in turn, proves the powerless as powerful.

Foucault puts,

We cannot jump outside the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I've said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free.

Well anyway, that there is always the possibility of changing.” (Interview, “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity” 1996, p.386)

Throughout the story of the novel, it is quite evident that all the characters are somehow inside the circle of power and they all have their roles in their respective domain. The overall situations put the characters in a cycle of power from which there is no outlet in any way inside the society.

Power is productive to Michael Foucault quite opposite to the common perception that power is oppressive. While Foucault refers to this aspect of power, he thought much about the disciplinary power which the modern time state in capitalist era started to wield. He specially focused on panopticon, a model for jail by architect Bentham, where the state surveillance operates on the prison constantly without any access of the prisoner to that system which, in turn, keeps them psychologically under surveillance all time. Though they show unwillingness initially, they consequently get habitually disciplined enough to be engaged in productive works beneficial for themselves and the society. This model of productive power has been observed by Foucault in institutions like schools, hospitals, jails where the disciplinary actions far from being negative turns into positive and beneficial for those on whom it is applied. The prisoners, students and patients through disciplinary actions get disciplined and put their attention and energy in productive activities. In case of Lalsalu, the surveillance of Majeed hardly pushes Rahima to get decayed, rather that way of life under Majeed earns her position to be a person to whom other women seek blessings, suggestions, and accept her as a medium to reach the higher authority Majeed. Foucault says, “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (Interview, “Truth & Power” 1980, p.119) Rahima in her married life avails that opportunity and elevates herself from the earlier self and emerges as a superior woman to others who were superior to her in previous days before her marriage in terms of riches, ages, social standing etc. She comes to be an able manager of Majeed’s family affairs, employing others to help her with an ensured prestigious for her in all situations. She not only elevates herself consciously above others, she too creates a domain of her own to support those not to the liking of Majeed. With this position, she can easily nestle Zamila in her rebel days to a remarkable degree by facing Majeed with her own arguments. Besides, Kaleque Bepari and other influential people of the village show improvements by being united in actions, congregating on the fixed in the mazar with discipline and thwarting initiatives like Akkas’s school with one voice.

To Foucault, “Each society has its régime of truth.” (“Power and Strategies”,

1980, 131) He doesn't see truth as some solid facts unquestionably accepted and universal. Rather it is a matter of creation by power in a period for convenience of those having knowledge and power. In that case, knowledge, power and truth are intricately entwined. Majeed's arrival in Mohabbatnagar in search of a livelihood with the capital of a bit Arabic education of primary level, garb and beard and subsequent observations of the people, their faith, strengths and weakness make him established in no time. He establishes himself by establishes a truth which gives to some norms and locations, and he does that with his knowledge which yields him power. "Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power. . . . Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. ("Power and Strategies", 1980, 131) Majeed finds the dilapidated grave in a deserted place, applied his knowledge and established the truth firmly by bringing all to book and fabricating his reasons of arrival by linking it to a dream with command to rescue that grave. He cooks up a story of a great sacrifice of leaving amenities in the imaginary previous place. His desperate efforts to get established earn him instant support and obedience. Thus he gets to wield his domination over all others and he makes conscious efforts not to leave any space for those against his command. He emerges as a supreme leader. Foucault too highlights that the "exercise of power can produce as much acceptance as may be wished for." (Foucault, 1982). Majeed controls the uncontrolled and thwarts all the creeping challenges like spreading general education, intrusion of other religious leader and prioritizing others than him. Thus he succeeds in ensuring domination. "When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of domination. In such a state, it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited" (Interview: "Ethics of the Concern for Self", 1996, 434,).

This way he employs power and knowledge reciprocally and both advance each other's interest. Thus Foucault takes us away from age old standard for truth and knowledge and Syed Waliullah quite ably has put that to usage in his novel *Lalsalu*.

Conclusion

Lalsalu exhibits a power structure through the story and the characters which fits in the concepts of power propounded by the leading twentieth century French philosopher Michael Foucault. In the novel, power functions from different directions and entangles all the characters and incidents in its network. The discussion clearly demonstrates the fact that power as is commonly perceived does not

manifest itself in that form in reality. Rather its dimensions as is touched upon by Foucault function at all levels with multifarious impacts other than the repressive ones. In the novel *Lalsalu*, the prominent writer Syed Waliullah has skillfully woven a story that explores power in all its aspects and impacts, and this dimension of the novel makes the story more interpretive and suggestive. Thus the article captures the aspects of the novels little studied so far by the critics and scholars.

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