The lonely worlds of SYED WALIULLAH'S FICTION

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Syed Waliullah was a novelist, a short-story writer and a playwright. Though he was not a prolific writer – he has only three novels, four plays and two short-story collections to his credit – he is recognised as one of the foremost modern writers in Bangla literature, with a Bangla Academy Award to his name. This essay will discuss his fiction, in Bangla as well as in English.

His two volumes of short stories, *Nayanchara* (1945) and *Dui Teer O Anyanya Galpa* (1965), contain a total of 17 stories. However, his total number of stories may be around 50. Syed Shamsul Haq attributes about 25 short stories to Syed Waliullah. *Syed Waliullah: Galpa Samagra* (Jonaki Prakashani, 2021) reveals that he had 32 published stories which he did not anthologise. Ahmed Mostofa Kamal, in *Syed Waliullah: Shrestha Galpa* (Bishwa Sahitya Kendra, 2008), has included nine stories which were not anthologised by the writer himself. Kamal believes that perhaps Waliullah was too busy or thought the stories did not fit in with the other stories in the anthology.

Waliullah's correspondence with Anne-Marie Thibaud – who would soon become his wife – suggests a possible reason why another short-story anthology did not soon follow *Nayanchara*. In a letter dated 24 November 1954, Waliullah tells Anne-Marie about a volume of short stories he was putting together. According to him, the manuscript was ready for the press: "I have collected most of them. I am now busy retouching them which I find absolutely necessary. . . . Though you will not understand the language, I will send you a proofcopy containing these titles. You can at least say if they look good" (in Anne-Marie Waliullah's *Waliullah: My Husband as I Knew Him*, Nymphea, 2022).

Waliullah believed that the manuscript would be ready for the press by Friday – that is, two days later. He had been planning to write a novel in English, but he told Anne-Marie that work on the book had to be suspended for the Bangla short-story collection. He also had to write a play of about 12,000 words for PEN. No one knows what happened to this collection of short stories, as his second short-story anthology appeared almost ten years later. The English novel he was planning was perhaps suspended permanently.

From his posting in Karachi in 1951 to his subsequent postings in Jakarta, London and Bonn, and finally to Paris in 1961, where he lived until his death in 1971, Waliullah lived away from his homeland and his Bangla-speaking milieu. However, he never forgot the land where he had spent his childhood and youth. Most of his short stories, whether in Bangla or English, are set in Bengal, though a few are set on board a boat or a ship, some in a place that could be anywhere on earth, and one in an undetermined space between two countries. *Lal Salu* (1948), as well as the two Bangla novels he wrote in Europe – *Chander Amabasya* (1963) and *Kando Nadi Kando* (1966) – are set in Bengal.

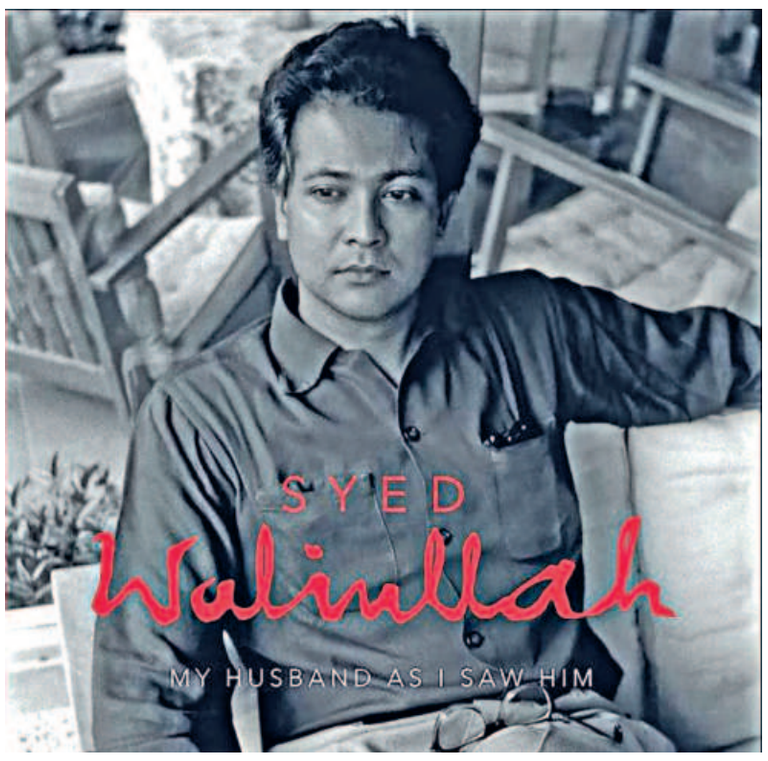
Almost all of Waliullah's fiction has a sad ending. Perhaps losing his mother when he was very young left a void in Waliullah's life, which is reflected in much of his fiction. As Anne-Marie notes in *Waliullah: My Husband as I Saw Him*, "This constant shift of places, which means he most likely could not make close school friends, together with the loss of his mother at the age of eight, partly explains his reserved character, his aloofness and some of his rootlessness."

His father's second marriage must also have affected him. Though later in life Waliullah always visited his half-brothers, half-sisters, stepmother and step-aunt when he returned to his homeland, they could not fill the void in his life. Moreover, Waliullah's relationship with his father was not a close one. Syed Ahmedullah could not understand his artistic son. His step-aunt relates how upset his father was when he came upon his son drawing instead of studying. He tore up the painting and pulled his son up by his hair. Waliullah quietly said, "I'll have to cut my hair to go on painting." The relationship between son and father may be seen replicated in different ways in his fiction, most particularly in the relationship between Mohammad Mustafa and his father in *Kando Nadi Kando*. Thanks to the nature of his father's job, Waliullah got to see the small mofussil towns of Bengal, but the unhappy relationship between father and son, who showed no keenness to follow in his father's footsteps and become a civil servant, is revealed in his fiction, as well as in what we learn from his letters to his wife and other sources.

The tone of nostalgia and gloom, perhaps what may be called an existential despair, is present in many of his stories, whether written in Bangla or English. Stories like "No Enemy" and "Cargo" – both written in English and later translated by Waliullah into Bangla – as well as "Mrityuyatra" (The Death March) reveal an existential despair, as do his later novels *Chander Amabasya* and *Kando Nadi Kando*.



Syed Waliullah and his wife, Anne-Marie Waliullah, in 1955.



Cover of *Syed Waliullah: My Husband as I Saw Him by Anne-Marie Waliullah (Nymphea, 2022)*, a personal account of the celebrated Bengali novelist's life and literary journey.

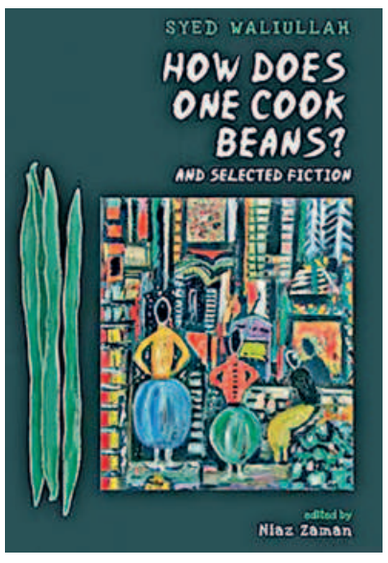
Waliullah wrote only three novels in Bangla: *Lal Salu* (transcreated as *Tree Without Roots*, 1967), *Chander Amabasya* and *Kando Nadi Kando*. *Lal Salu*, referring to the red cloth used to cover shrines, is Syed Waliullah's first and most famous novel. Initially published by Comrade Publishers in Calcutta, *Lal Salu* was subsequently published in Dhaka, East Pakistan, and continues to be published in Bangladesh.

Lal Salu narrates the story of Majeed, who finds a neglected shrine and pretends that it is the resting place of a famous Muslim saint. Appointing himself as its guardian, he preys upon the simple villagers. He marries Rahima, a childless widow. After some years of a childless marriage, he takes a second wife, a young girl named Jamila. Unlike the docile Rahima, Jamila has a mind of her own. One day, Majeed decides to punish her and forces her to spend the night alone in the shrine. However, that night there is a violent hailstorm. When Majeed goes to the shrine to see how Jamila is, he finds her unconscious. Alarmed, he takes her to their hut and leaves her with Rahima. He then sets off to check what damage the hailstorm has caused to his crops. On the way, villagers come to him, lamenting their losses. Majeed tells them not to lose faith in God. The Bangla novel ends here, with Majeed and the villagers looking at the fields destroyed by the hail.

In 1963, Anne-Marie Thibaud's French translation of the book, *L'arbre sans racine*, was published. Four years later, an English translation of the novel appeared as *Tree Without Roots*, with the title translated from the French. Four translators were credited: Anne-Marie Thibaud, Qaiser Saeed, Jeffrey Gibian and Malik Khayyam. However, in *Waliullah: My Husband as I Saw Him*, Anne-Marie describes how she had translated the book, as well as *Chander Amabasya*, from Waliullah's own English translation.

Waliullah could not resist correcting or improving what he had written earlier. Even published pieces are marked by corrections or changes. The English translation that he had prepared of *Lal Salu*, so that his wife could translate it into French, was done more than a decade after he had written the novel. Apart from the change in the title, there are several other changes. Perhaps the most striking ones are in the opening and final chapters. The poverty of the land is described in vivid language: "There are too many of them on this land, this piece of raped and ravaged land which yields no more. They know it, but what can they do? Every inch of it is ploughed and sown."

The most significant deviations of *Tree Without Roots* from the Bangla original are the added chapters at the end, which make Majeed a more complex character than in *Lal Salu*. The Damra, a quiet river which was thought to be dying, has flooded, and Majeed realises that the river has become so powerful that, at any moment, it could break its high bank and flood his hut and the shrine. He cannot leave the shrine which he has created, but at least he can save his wives. Accompanied by Rahima and



The cover of *How Does One Cook Beans? and Selected Fiction*, edited by Niaz Zaman and published by University Press Limited (UPL) on 30 October 2026. Waliullah wrote the unfinished work in English under the pseudonym Abu Sharya.

carrying Jamila in his arms, he takes them to his friend Khaleque's house and asks him to look after them. Leaving them there, he returns through the floodwaters to the shrine: "A thin, haggard man, with sunken, utterly expressionless eyes, his sparse beard as pale as the dawn, a frail human speck standing alone on the edge of a vast expanse of water that merged into the infinite vastness of the sky."

Syed Waliullah's second novel, *Chander Amabasya*, opens with the description of a moonlit scene in a bamboo grove. Aref Ali, a young teacher who happens to be there, discovers the half-naked dead body of a young woman. When he emerges from the bamboo grove, he notices a man whom he recognises as Qadir, the younger brother of Dada Sahib, the elderly man who has hired him. Though Aref Ali recognises Qadir, he cannot connect the man to the dead woman.

Later, Qadir asks for Aref Ali's help in burying the woman. Aref Ali thinks that the murder was an accident and that Qadir was in love with the young woman. He believes that Qadir wanted to hide the woman's body because he was in love with her and did not want her half-naked body to be seen by people. However, when Aref Ali realises that Qadir had never loved the woman, he decides that it is his moral duty to tell Dada Sahib, his patron, as well as the police.

He does so. However, the police do not seem to believe his story. He finds himself being accused of the murder. Apart from him, there is no witness, and he is told that he has been seen committing the murder. Aref Ali ponders over the death of the young woman and thinks that someone has to be punished for the crime. Even, perhaps, he himself. As in the later *Kando Nadi Kando*, *Chander Amabasya* also asks the same moral question: How far is a person responsible for an act committed by someone else?

Syed Waliullah's *Kando Nadi Kando*, translated by Osman Jamal as *Cry, River, Cry* (2015), tells two parallel stories: one of a dying river, Barkal, and the other of Muhammad Mustafa, a young magistrate in charge of administering a small town. There are two narrators: Tabarak Bhuiyan and an unnamed narrator, the cousin of Muhammad Mustafa. Bhuiyan was a booking clerk at the steamer station when Mustafa became a magistrate.

One day, the steamer station is dismantled, an acknowledgement that the river is dying. That same night, Sakina Khatun, the daughter of Mokhtar Moslehuddin, hears a strange cry. Sakina says, "The river is crying. The river Barkal is crying." Believing that if they give gifts to the river, it will not die, the townspeople throw whatever they can into the river: a slaughtered calf, pots, pans, clothes, rice, pulses, gold and silver ornaments.

Mustafa is supposed to board the steamer on the day it does not arrive. When Mustafa returns home, he hears that his cousin, Khodija, has committed suicide. As children, Mustafa and Khodija had been pledged to each other by his father. When Khodija learnt that he was getting married to someone else, she drowned herself in the small pond behind the house. Mustafa is tormented by the thought that she committed suicide because of him, and wonders how far human beings are responsible for the actions of others. Finally, one morning, the household awakes to find that Mustafa has hanged himself from a tamarind tree, his eyes looking towards the algae-covered, stagnant pond where Khodija had drowned herself.

In addition to these three novels, Syed Waliullah wrote one English novel, *The Ugly Asian*, under the pseudonym Abu Sharya. The novel was published posthumously in 2013 by the Bangla Academy.



The cover of the first edition of Syed Waliullah's debut novel, *Lal Salu* (1948), designed by Zainul Abedin.

Waliullah had high hopes that this novel, so different from his Bangla novels, would be accepted by a Western publisher. His letter, dated 5 July 1961, to Macmillan Publishers expressed the hope that "a novel about Asian reaction to the problem dealt with in 'The Ugly American' by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick may interest many people in the West." He explained that he was "a Bengali novelist and [enjoyed] some reputation in serious circles." His Bangla novel had also received an award from "the Bengali Academy of East Pakistan." However, he wished to publish the English novel under a pseudonym and therefore wanted the correspondence to remain confidential.

We do not have Macmillan's reply.

A political allegory, *The Ugly Asian* takes place in an imaginary Asian country where there has just been a change of government. However, the new government is as corrupt and hostile to the people as the previous one. Set during the Cold War, the novel explores the relationship between the US and the Asian country, which is attempting to throw off its colonial roots and becomes the setting for America's proxy struggle against Communism.

Though different in language and theme from Waliullah's other novels, *The Ugly Asian*, too, has a lonely hero in Professor Ahsan. Professor Ahsan fails, much as Majeed, Aref Ali and Muhammad Mustafa – the protagonists of his Bangla novels – fail. Unlike them, however, he is a political figure and, through him, Waliullah voices his opinions on American politics and how South Asian countries are affected. Ahsan tells an American named Johnson, who is on a "fact-finding mission", that even a small nation must be left to itself to decide what it wants. "Go and defend your own shores but not mine. I do not want you to defend anything of mine because I know that you are not defending me but yourself. I do not therefore accept you as my defender. If the other side comes to my country to defend itself, I will also ask him to leave my country." If America really wants to help Asians, it must learn what Asians want. In "An Asian Speaks", an afterword to *The Ugly Asian*, there is an imagined dialogue between an Asian peasant and an American who speaks his language fluently. The American tries to convince the Asian that Communism is bad but fails to do so: "The American spoke the man's language. But the man did not understand what the American meant."

As mentioned earlier, Syed Waliullah had also attempted to write a novel in English in 1954. He was at the time posted in East Pakistan, separated from the woman whom he would marry a year later. He was lonely and depressed. In a letter to Anne-Marie, dated 15 October 1954, he told her he was writing "a novel about the life in the villages here but with my individual notes interwoven throughout." In a later letter to her, dated 5 November 1954, he said, "I feel so uncertain about my future. . . . that is why I am putting so much faith and hope in the book I am writing. I have a feeling if it is accepted by an outside publisher, I might take a bold decision."

Almost all of Waliullah's fiction has a sad ending. Perhaps losing his mother when he was very young left a void in Waliullah's life, which is reflected in much of his fiction. As Anne-Marie notes in Waliullah: My Husband as I Saw Him, "This constant shift of places, which means he most likely could not make close school friends, together with the loss of his mother at the age of eight, partly explains his reserved character, his aloofness and some of his rootlessness."

This book was not *The Ugly Asian*, which is not about villages but about American politics in Asia. Did Syed Waliullah ever write this book? If he had written even a few pages, Anne-Marie would have kept them safe, just as she kept all his published and unpublished writings safe – something their daughter Simine is doing now.

One piece of unfinished English writing which Anne-Marie kept safe was a work very different from his other writings. Written in English, like *The Ugly Asian*, and, like it, under the pseudonym Abu Sharya, it is very different in tone, setting and theme from that novel. *How Does One Cook Beans* begins in a South Asian country but then shifts with the narrator to France. It is a humorous piece of writing, reflecting the side of Waliullah that his family and friends saw. Though there is a sort of an ending, it is unfinished. He had started writing it in 1961, but perhaps the demands of life, work and family intervened, and he could not finish it. Instead, he went on to write two other Bangla novels, *Chander Amabasya* and *Kando Nadi Kando* – both set in his homeland.

Niaz Zaman *is a retired academic, writer and translator.*