



## The vulnerability of characters in *Miguel Street* of V.S. Naipaul: A Study

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### Abstract

V.S. Naipaul, as a historian, short story and fiction writer, is a very distinguished writer among the postcolonial writers. His place as a writer is unforgettable that influenced the Caribbean readers and the readers all over the world with his splendid themes of social relevance and new way of narration. His transformation from a son of an unsuccessful Trinidadian to the heights of winning the Nobel Prize for literature is a virtual pilgrimage of post-colonial success. V.S. Naipaul, in his writings, quests his own position in the world. *Miguel Street* is considered to be the contribution of a young Naipaul to the Trinidad where he is brought up lift behind in 1950. The tone of the *Miguel Street* is apparently nostalgic. As a precocious and enthusiastic observer of his colonial Trinidad, he narrates seventeen stories in *Miguel Street* with a naked innocence accepting the values and vulnerability of the street. All the stories in *Miguel Street* explore and expose gullibility of the West Indian society and its inhabitants who escape from reality to fantasy and who are carried out by eccentricity, ambition, and romanticism. Naipaul asserts that *Miguel Street* is the first serious writing in which he tries to discover 'the trick of writing'. The inhabitants of the Miguel Street form the 'rubbish heap' of the West Indian society. Naipaul with his sarcastic tone in all the stories seems to have denounced the culture, habits, and values of West Indian Society. There are no laws of the land, no moral and ethical conventions to order the disordered lives of the inhabitants. Miguel Street is fully replete with mere anarchy. There is no particular culture to bind them and they have no ambitions to achieve. These inhabitants are outcasts, prostitutes, and knaves. This research papers aims to study the gullible characters portrayed by V.S. Naipaul in *Miguel Street*.

**Keywords:** gullible, vulnerable, imitation, inhabitants, rubbish-heap, picaro

### Introduction

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, popularly recognized as V.S. Naipaul, was born in 1932 in Trinidad in Hindu family. His fiction and non-fiction have brought him honour and accolade including Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, in addition to many literary honours in his life as a distinguished writer. V.S. Naipaul, as a historian, short story and fiction writer, is a very distinguished writer among the postcolonial writers. His place as a writer is unforgettable that influenced the Caribbean readers and the readers all over the world with his splendid themes of social relevance and new way of narration. His transformation from a son of an unsuccessful Trinidadian to the heights of winning the Nobel Prize for literature is a virtual pilgrimage of post-colonial success. V.S. Naipaul, in his writings, quests his own position in the world. The unique circumstances relate him to three societies – Caribbean, the India, and the English – and left him with a sense of homelessness. V.S. Naipaul writes with an autobiographical element in his works. As Bruce King opines,

While the novels and short stories have seldom been about himself, they have reflected the various stages of his disillusionment with Trinidad, his despair with India and his concern with being a homeless ex-colonial" (p. 108).

Therefore, it can be estimated that his shorter fiction also contributes to his ordering of experience and his status of being a "perplexed exile". The Shorter Fiction is also an evidence for V.S. Naipaul's chronicling of personal experience. In his shorter fiction, he attempts to give expression to the themes of identity crisis and restlessness. In his Shorter Fiction, the narrative technique is rich with

irony and satire. He has taken the Western traditional form of shorter fiction, but blends it with his own cultural experience of the East Indian community in Trinidad. His early fiction portrays the cultural confusion, homelessness, and characters fighting to retain their dignity. In this paper I have made an attempt to expose the worthless struggle of the characters in *Miguel Street* caught in the web of uncertainty with reference to socio-cultural and ethnic forces of heterogeneous Caribbean society, for the survival.

### Analysis of *Miguel Street*

*Miguel Street* is considered to be the contribution of a young Naipaul to the Trinidad where he is brought up lift behind in 1950. The tone of the *Miguel Street* is apparently nostalgic. As a precocious and enthusiastic observer of his colonial Trinidad, he narrates seventeen stories in *Miguel Street* with a naked innocence accepting the values and vulnerability of the street. All the stories in *Miguel Street* explore and expose gullibility of the West Indian society and its inhabitants who escape from reality to fantasy and who are carried out by eccentricity, ambition, and romanticism. Naipaul asserts that *Miguel Street* is the first serious writing in which he tries to discover 'the trick of writing'. He says in an interview with David Bates,

"I remember, late one afternoon, putting in a bit of paper, setting it at single space and without pausing writing the first story of *Miguel Street*".

In *Miguel Street*, V. S. Naipaul tries to say something different from what his father said in his stories. He has not only attempted to portray the reality of life but also the pattern that controls them. Miguel Street is a

conglomeration of varied kinds of people who are chosen by the place of living rather people choosing it themselves. It portrays the uncertainties of the West Indian Society in which the inhabitants try to get away. The uncertainty and instability is the result of very stability of varied subcultures that constitute the strange soup-mix recipe of this society. The physical layout of the Miguel Street confirms it as the perfect ecological metaphor of the human situation. The seventeen stories of the *Miguel Street* are titled after the individuals of the street. Every character is interconnected to the other characters. As Francis Wyndham says:

“The street is in Port of Spain, and Mr. Naipaul takes us from house to house connection on a character here, a situation there, before moving on the next: a major figure in one episode may fill a subsidiary role in another” (78-79).

*Miguel Street* is replete with lethargic, hopeless, and traditionless individuals in which imitation happens to be the order of the society. The book portrays a society devoid of any glorious past or noteworthy future. The inhabitants of the Miguel Street are neither model nor ideal, they are aware of their own inability and hopelessness in the society. The narrator of the *Miguel Street* feels: “I used to wonder whether they knew how much worry they caused, and how uncertain their own position was.” (*Miguel Street*. 129).

They have no rich social or moral background. They do not have rich inheritance to dream about nor notable history to boast of. As Walsh says, “This is the life without natural graces, heroes, saints, without a national identity of social purpose, inherited by the people of Miguel Street”. (30).

All the characters in *Miguel Street* are neither clever nor foolish. Disorder has become the order pertaining to the characters of Miguel Street. Every character faces an uncertainty and pretends to be doing something, but never achieves anything in pretending and doing so. It is very ironical and great surprise to the narrator that no one starves though they are jobless and they earn no money. Miguel Street appears to be a slum for strangers, but to the individuals of the street it is a world by itself. There are copious and varied kinds of character though each character is different from the other. “Man-man was mad; George was stupid; Big Foot was a bully; Hat was an adventurer; Popo was a philosopher; and Morgan was our comedian” (*Miguel Street*. 61)

The character of Bogart is the first one that has been introduced by Naipaul. Bogart’s living has been surrounded by mystery. He pretends to be making a living by tailoring, but he does not have the skill of stitching. He is akin to Popo, the inhabitant of Miguel Street, who lives next door. Bogart established his false identity for himself and he never reveals own story. These characters are neither idle nor ideal.

Popo, the carpenter, acts to be working on a thing without name, but never succeeds in making a stick of furniture: “And yet Popo was never idle. He was always busy hammering and sawing and planning”. (*Miguel Street*. 8). The Street looks down Popo, and his wife also ignores Popo’s poetic sensibility, as poetic sensibility has no room in Miguel Street. The typical quality of the street is that Popo beats his wife’s lover after drinking alcohol and goes to the Court of law for trial. A prison sentence for robbery grants him the necessary recognition. Then only the inhabitants of the street accepted him as inhabitant of street. Notoriety is the peculiar quality that brings popularity to the inhabitants of the street.

Man-man competes in each and every election and get only three votes every time, one of the votes being that of his own. “He never worked, but he was never idle. He was hypnotized by the word; particularly the written word and he would spend a whole day writing a single word”. (*Miguel Street*. 34). He claims himself that he is the new Messiah, which throws him into problems. Madness is accepted by the street, but not the fanaticism. He accepts to be crucified on the cross and kindles the inhabitants to stone him. He prays, “Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they doing”. Then he yells out ‘stone me brethren!’ (*Miguel Street*. 39).

George is a drunkard and frequently creates nuisance in the street with his rude behaviour. He maltreats his children and wife. He kills his own wife to remarry again and moves with stray women. His son Elias and daughter Dolly do not perform funeral to him after his death, but inhabitants of the street donate money to bury his dead body.

B. Wordsworth falsely claims himself as a popular poet, but he never completes a poem. Once the narrator of the story asked him to recite, but B. Wordsworth fails to recite a poem and escapes from the scene. Big Foot is considered to be a terror in the street, but fears to a small barking dog. He worked as driver, postman, carpenter, and mason, but in all the jobs he proves to be good for nothing. He proclaims himself as a great boxer, later he becomes a jester in the street when R.A.F. man defeats him. Finally, he settles as a labourer.

Morgan is a pyrotechnicist, but he proves himself good for nothing. He is like a jester and comedian in the street. He has frequent quarrels with Mr. and Mrs. Bhakcu and he has no cordial relationship with his children. He proves his silly nature by beating his children very badly. Mr. Bhakcu, another strange character, claims himself a mechanical expert but he never skilfully repairs even his own vehicle. He purchases a Bedford lorry, and two taxies, but he is unable to earn money. Finally we see him as Pundit.

The character of Laura, who resides next door to the precocious narrator, is a sensation in the *Miguel Street*. Bogart is a boring person in the street, but Laura is very vivacious. She is not beautiful, but she has seven husbands. This sort of typical tendency is very common in the Miguel Street. The narrators observes that her belly raising and flattening for months regularly. It is very common that men of the street cycle around her house whistling for Laura.

Eddoes hails from aristocratic family, who works only in the morning and he is keen on women and begets a child “Pleasure”. He also involves in amorous and illicit relation which signifies that aristocratic people also have extra-marital relations with the common people in the street. Bolo, Missing Ball, is a tall man with a face of sad caricature. He acts as pedlar and barber. Finding the missing ball is his passion. He gets irritated and gets angry for not finding the missing ball to earn money in an easy way.

Hat is a notable inhabitant in the Miguel Street. The residents give much respect and importance to him. Each and every character is linked with character of Hat. He is always involved in troubles with police. He has a kind heart which enables him to collect money to bury the dead body of George. He brings home George’s daughter Dolly, and his wife. Later, he kills her for which he put in jail for four years.

Bogart is an unsuccessful tailor, and Popo is an unsuccessful carpenter. Big Foot is treated as a terrifying man, but he

proves himself as a coward, who is afraid of a small dog. Mr. Morgan fails in his fireworks. To the surprise, Laura gives birth to eight children by seven husbands. Laura's daughter Lora also follows the footprints of her mother and gives a birth to a child without getting married. Edward assassinates his wife and spends in prison. The marital relation between Tony and Mrs. Hereina is not peaceful. Finally, Hereina rejects Tony as her husband.

In the last story, "How I Left Miguel Street", reveals the narrator as a failure. Therefore, he escapes from the Miguel Street to London by securing a scholarship donated by Mr. Ganesh Ramsumair. The narrator also accepts that he has habit of drinking rum, smoking cigarettes, and involved in amorous deeds. "For sustaining ironic qualification, in which, the narrator of the story is himself a participant in it but, although he may be neither foolish nor demented, nevertheless manifests a failure of insight, viewing and appraising his own motives and actions of other characters through the distorting perspective of his prejudices and private interests".

The inhabitants of the Miguel Street form the 'rubbish heap' of the West Indian society. Naipaul with his sarcastic tone in all the stories seems to have denounced the culture, habits, and values of West Indian Society. There are no laws of the land, no moral and ethical conventions to order the disordered lives of the inhabitants. Miguel Street is fully replete with mere anarchy. There is no particular culture to bind them and they have no ambitions to achieve. These inhabitants are outcasts, prostitutes, and knaves. "These Trinidad people does only lie, lie. Lie is all they know". (*Miguel Street*, 143). Every character begins and ends up as an utter failure. Only the narrator runs away from a life which was nightmarish. As Keith Garebian observes, "Life on the street is a microcosm of dispiriting failure, so he leaves it all in a mood of exultant relief". (p. 25). The characters of the street are very different in their own way, but, by the sense of place, they are interconnected and unified. They appear and disappear. They appear only to disappear. They are wanderers, and Picaros. As Walsh opines, "They appear and disappear like fish or bird". (66).

The lay-out of the Miguel Street appears to be slums for the strangers, but it is the world in itself to the inhabitants of the street. "The inhabitants of the street have neither respect nor grace for decent living". (*Miguel Street*, 66). Amorous and extra marital affairs are very common in the street. Bogart is proved to be a smuggler and leads an illegitimate life. In his absence, his house is full of stray women and licentious people. Bogart runs a brothel house in George Town. Popo's wife elopes with a gardener. Popo, like Morgan, fights with his wife doubting the paternity of his children. Edward's wife elopes with an American soldier. Hat's wife also elopes with another man. Treachery is the primordial quality of the inhabitants of the street. The narrator of the story is not exceptional. At the tender age of 18, he maintains relation with stray women. The narrator asserts himself in the final story, "How I Left Miguel Street", "We made wild parties and took rum and women to Maracas Bay for all-night sessions" (*Miguel Street*, 174). Wives beating husbands and husbands beating wives is a common quality in the street. As William Wash observes, "If it is, even brutality, even the beating of wives and children, is tolerable". (11). George punishes his children and wife. Morgan beats his children very cruelly. All the inhabitants of the street laugh at Mr. Morgan when Mrs. Morgan holds

his by his waist. It is noticed that Nathaniel often beats his wife, Laura. Later it is noticed that Nathaniel is beaten by Laura. The narrator says, "All the time he had the story, he hated his wife, and he beats her regularly with the cricket bat. But she was beating his too, with her tongue". (*Miguel Street*, 128).

In Miguel Street, K.I. Madhusudhana Rao comments that "Even God seems to have been comfortably domesticated". (p. 29) Man-man claims that he sees God and there is no need to get surprised because seeing God is common quality as Ganesh, the mystic, has set a trend.

### Conclusion

V.S. Naipaul has portrayed the ironical view of life. The street is conglomeration of varied religions, sects, and races, which is the fundamental basis of West Indian life. Mystery prevails in each and every character in the street. All the characters are gullible and vulnerable. They are neither good nor try to mend their follies by growing out of their innocence. They allow themselves to face the sufferings out of their ignorance. *Miguel Street* is the first work of V.S. Naipaul from which he acquired the trick of writing with care objectivity.

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