

Miguel Street: Deep Tragedy in the Heart of Overstated Humor

Hamid Farahmandian

This paper aims to elucidate and explore the rate of tragedy which is overcome to comic matter which has been totally overstated in the mentioned novel written by V. S. Naipaul, even though the tragedy does not dominate directly because Naipaul also offers considerable humor. Despite, it is full of fun and humor it possesses manifold deep ideas about the problems of the society, of course in the time of World War II which has been interweaved by the context of the novel, "*Hat used to say, Is a damn nuisance, having that man trying to be funny all the time, when all of us well know that he not so happy at all*" (P. 79). Indirectly the novel is the messenger of the plethora of the agonies that low level countries or mainly postcolonial countries with an especial concentration on Caribbean countries suffer with a very minor change in the world that make the people of the mentioned part to be stranger than the rest of the globe in some factors.

Miguel Street is a semi-autobiographical novel in world war II Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago published in 1959. The young narrator who is one of the characters in the novel befriends lots of people on Miguel Street. Most of the people on Miguel Street had a negative influence on the narrator, except his mother and B. Wordsworth B. (he had a positive influence on the narrator. He showed him things he had never seen before). The narrator was surrounded by alcoholism (rum), abuse and prostitution on almost a daily basis. It is a collection of short stories based on the narrator's childhood recollections of events that occurred on Miguel Street. The book mostly gives vivid images in each short story focusing on each inhabitant's ways to escape from their problems on the other words secrets or their overall life style. A major recurrent event is the physical abuse of women and children. Miguel Street where every character had unique characteristics trying new things to forget the past, but at the end the ugly past came back to them and left them in disillusionment which made them strange as it is said in the chapter eight "*everybody was quite different from everybody else. Man-Man was mad; George was stupid; Big Foot was a bully; Hat was an adventure; Popo was a Philosopher; and Morgan was our comedian*" (P. 12). Communities are places where many things occur. *Miguel Street* is a book that is a perfect example where characters are involved in these things and they give a lot of meaning to the book. *Miguel Street* is an amazing book that shows us how our uneducated societies behave in the everyday living where love is confused for other treatments and where a person would do things for that love, where people will discriminate because they cannot be like others that have it good. The stories are told from a point in the future after this

departure, and thus they are filled with nostalgia for something that was lost. But this is a kind of nostalgia that does not romanticize things. He sees the flaws in the people who surround him, in his city, in his home country. The stories depict both poverty and a great sense of community, both love and domestic violence, both greatness and failure. But even when the darker sides of life are being described, there is always a great amount of tenderness behind every word.

Miguel Street is the story of Seventeen inhabitants of the Miguel Street in different chapters. The chapters are totally interchangeable, the only obvious exceptions being the last two which form the climax of the book. The characters fall in to two groups: the 'insiders' - Compromising the narrator Hat, Boyee and Errol, who are ever present and the 'outsiders' - who are residents of the street but come and go as the story develops. Despite this division, however, there is the complex, continuous presence of almost all the characters in the story that gives it an organic unity. What links the stories, and therefore the characters together is the similar destinies of seemingly inevitable disillusionment in which they all wind up. This builds up the patterns of the whole novel, which ends on a similar note as the disillusioned narrator makes his own escape to a larger world than the limited and limiting Miguel Street. This escape by the end becomes the main theme.

Miguel Street was the first work that was authored by Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul who was born in a small town in Trinidad into a family of Indian Brahmin origin on 17 August 1932. He generally considered the leading novelist of the English-speaking Caribbean, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature 2001 and many other ones besides he has been called "a master of modern English prose" in *The New York Review of Books* and in 2008, *The Times* ranked Naipaul seventh on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945. Naipaul's writings dealt with the cultural confusion of the Third World and the problem of an outsider, a feature of his own experience as an Indian in the West Indies, a West Indian in England, and a nomadic intellectual in a postcolonial world. Naipaul has also arisen much controversy because of his politically incorrect views of the "half-made societies." He in a TV interview held for awarding Nobel Prize expressed his view that women's writing was inferior to men's, and that there was no female writer whom he would consider his equal. Naipaul stated that women's writing was "quite different", reflecting women's "sentimentality, the narrow view of the world. In 2008, writer Patrick French released the first authorized biography of Naipaul, which was serialized in *The Daily Telegraph*.

In the current novel woman has been considered as an especial character that the aim has been to show her position in the society of the mentioned country with a great and outstanding focus. Miguel Street residents mostly thought about woman as an object who was

not that much precious as Nathaniel says "*Women just cows. Cow and they is the same thing*" (P. 110). This perspective along with women's gullibility and illiteracy were compiled to create them unimportant. The most disastrous part was this one that most of the men or even boys put the important emphasis on the sexuality of them and they did not pay attention to their future or emotions. Therefore the women were able to live in this street's families who were first fruitful that is the power to bring several children especially sons and second to be very attractive and sexual; otherwise, their torture by their husbands would increase to the point to made them to leave. As it is totally obvious in George's story:

He had his wife and his daughter and his son. He beat them all. And when the boy Elias grew too big, George beat his daughter and his wife more than ever. The blows didn't appear to do the mother any good. She just grew thinner and thinner; but the daughter, Dolly, thrived on it. She grew fatter and fatter, and giggled more and more every year.(P. 27)

The men's probable most prideful factor was beating their own women who were thought as slaves in home that this behavior had negative reflection and sometimes husbands' cruel treat caused the wives to reply these behaviors in a shameful way like screaming and running on the street for the sake of their husbands' abuses and more shameful to be with other men simultaneously and bring them children too like in chapter ten where we see Laura who had eight children from seven different men. These binary quarrels made the space of the family very obscure and dark for the offspring and the parents with their shameful treats led the children to adapt them and use them in their dairy chores and associations like sleeping with different prostitutes or at least speaking about them in their own gangs made on the street which sometimes lead to bringing children which was very ordinary for them.

The women's significant role in this society was to bear children for their husbands, the more children they bore, the more respectful they were; and the ones who were barren was considered as bad omens for their society and this action gave the husbands the right and opportunity to leave them even very informally and choose another one to bring them offspring. Like Hat's brother Edward whose wife was barren and did not make and child for him and left him to America and got married with an American man without informing his first husband or divorcing as Eddoes said '*I didn't like she from the first and I don't think a man should married a woman who can't make baby*' (P.196). As it is crystal clear her leaving was not considered a bad action while the matter that made her disrespectful for the residents was the absence of her power to bring child.

Furthermore, their illiteracy made them to be more naïve encountering the social happenings. They did not have the right to study or to be educated their roles were to work hard inside or outside house even sometimes instead of their husbands and bear them offspring. For a good instance in chapter five it is evident that Man-Man who went mad mentioned that he had spoken with God previous night and who called himself new Messiah which by this nomination wanted to crucify himself in the street the same as the Jesus most of the women had accepted him and cried for him. *“When Man-Man appeared, looking very thin and very holy, women cried and rushed to touch his gown.”* (P. 53)

One of the possible and most important factors of a society in considering its courtesy is its language spoken by its people. The style of language that most of the residents both adults and children use to speak in their daily communications with each other and outsiders is very coarse and mostly offensive, however, most of the times it is not the reason to make a person to be sad with this sort of language since it is a habit for them; even in their jokes and laughter this offensive language has a especial place. This is one of those reasons along with the people’s illiteracy that make the society more obvious and outstanding in the matter of difference between underdeveloped and developed countries. They like insulting each other and sometimes call each other in a very bad way as if they welcome any insult from the others and they cannot bond without it. When Uncle Bhakcu was stuck under the car repairing it, Hat was called by Bhakcu’s wife to help him that he said to Bhakcu *“When you play the ass you bound to catch hell. The blasted car brand-new. What the hell he was tinkling with so?”* and in the answer Bhakcu replied shouting *“The moment you get this car from off me, I going to break up your tail”* (P. 148). This is one of the examples that two men use to communicate before a woman in the mentioned street which can be very shameful for the developed and educated societies.

As we go through the novel we more become familiar with this language that even two brothers don’t respect and call each other with very offensive titles as Hat says Edward half laughing and half serious *“Edward, you is my own brother, but you know you really is a son of a bitch”* (P. 184). In the course of this chapter we understand that in their childhood while Hat was the oldest of the family’s children and among the nephew who lived with him since they had lost their father and mother in their early childhood and Hat was considered as their both brother and father they never respected him with respectful words in calling.

Even as we see in the beginning of the last chapter about the leave of the young narrator as one of the characters of the story that speak about himself says

My mother said, 'You getting too wild in this place. I think is high time you leave.' 'And go where? Venezuela?' I said. 'No, not Venezuela. Somewhere else, because the moment you land in Venezuela they go throw you in jail. I know you and I know Venezuela. No, somewhere else'(P.215).

The residents themselves knew that their behavior is under rationality and politeness. They knew that they had to find a way to scape this situation especially they want to put the children out of this bad speaking gangs; however, they are unable since it has become a habit for them to do like this and behave like this with each other. In my own opinion all these mistreatments originates in the lack of literacy and its importance among the members of this small society that can be the symbol of a whole country with the same conditions and attitudes.

Escape as mentioned in the introduction part of this paper and which has been one of the effective and dominant themes in the ongoing novel can be nominated to most of the characters in various chapters by various reasons. However, the important thing here is not variety while is the reasons that to somehow being partially clear is due to flee from problems, cruelty, wildness, etc. as mentioned in above about the departure of the young narrator of the story and the words of his mother. The members of this street look for new and fresh happenings that make them adventurer, *Hat loved to make a mystery of the smallest things* (P. 199). They want to discover the world that cannot be found in theirs while they do not know what it is; this is the reason that makes them to be totally bewildered facing the questions from their own surroundings, The Policeman said, "What you doing here? B. Wordsworth said, "I have been asking myself the same question for forty years" (P. 60).

The most disastrous problem could be this that you cannot understand the future and you cannot try to make it in a way that you love it. Escaping from the destiny and questions posed by environment, instead of fighting and finding their answers is the lowest and easiest work that a person would do without any attempt to stay but what will be the end of escape? As we see in the novel the end of escape for the members of the street is just coming back without any result and outcome from their escape. As it is findable in the novel the end of the residents of Miguel Street is not that much cheerful, one of them as they said went mad, the other one's family destroyed, the other prisoned for a while, the other made laugh of the residents, etc. , the narrator himself left the city while he did not know he was going where, and why was he going, just it had been said he had been given a scholarship by government to study, even he did not know and did not have enough information about the major that he was supposed to study.

The interesting part of each of their stories in leaving and coming back for the street was the change that they all had obtained in varied ways which for some it was prideful and for the others was again the repetition of the past and for some was neutral since there was no importance for them. It would be wished they knew what they do, they knew the meaning of life, future and family and the lost happiness that they could find it and keep it for good. Of course if all the members knew the answer of these questions and definitions there would not be any novel like this to be authored about the lives of postcolonial country of Trinidad with its strange situations in the past and present. Therefore, it is necessary to escape without reason to be famous or to be recorded in the minds forever in everywhere.

Relationship and the way of its evolving can be considered as the most significant element in building a society safe and secure place to live and enjoy the beauties of the life. The beginning of this formation is inside a family by the mother or father or both and the lack of this element will bring the member an ever standing flaw that will defect his or her relationships with others whether same-sex ones or opposite sex ones. In previous part the relationships between men and women were brought under scope of consideration, therefore, in this part I am fervidly into take advantage of some approaches of the American scholar in Sociology and Literature fields, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who popularized Homosexuality for the first time in the Literature in 1986 to show the relationships of the men among themselves and analyze its importance for the residents.

Homosexuality rudimentarily concerns social relationships or friendships between persons of the same gender especially between men (male-male relationships or masculinity) without any romantic core or sex based intention., It is not unusual for people in a homosocial companionship to be physically affectionate with each other, though not in a sexual way. Shaking hands, hugging, and teasing are all common features of this sort of relationships, as are frank discussions about sexuality, life, and health. Some researchers believe that the physical aspect of such friendships may actually be a significant socializing tool, pointing out that people with less physical contact in their lives would be less socially confident and emotionally stable.

In the novel most of the Residents and maybe all the residents did not have a proper bring-up in their childhood even the children of the street did not have a good nurture on their present situations, fathers were mainly cruel with them, mothers did not pay attention to their success or social behaviors, for the sake of these most of them used to smoke or be with different prostitutes and speaking about them in their young gangs. Therefore, there was no appropriate conditions to be learnt how to behave with humans especially near friends. When they grew up they would be the same as the present

adults of the street who the others were not important and just thought about their own benefits even encountering their own offspring and family. So, how is it possible to expect a society like this to be more homosocialized or even heterosocialized one? Pretending to be friend is the worse than to be a frank enemy.

The significant factor in relationship of a man to other same gender friends in the course of the novel is his leave that makes the others happy, since the first thing that they will do is attending his or her house or room and take the ownership of money the properties left there even very nominal and stuff. Therefore, here is a kind of expectation that makes them stay in behind and wait for a good opportunity; this is far from humanity and the right that we nominate for the individuals that may help us in a need time.

_A month passed; then another month. Bogart didn't return. Hat and his friends began using Bogart's room as their club house. They played wapee and drank rum and smoked, and sometimes brought the odd stray woman to the room. (P. 12)

and

_We went to Bolo's little room that very evening and we cleaned it of all the useful stuff he had left behind. There wasn't much. A bit of oil-cloth, two or three old combs, a cutlass, and a bench. We were all sad. (P. 172)

Everybody thinks for himself; everybody thinks about their own benefits, happiness has become individual; group prosperity does not have any meaning any more. Altruism has been vanished; how nice animals live at least without pretence and far from any fear about past or future.

This novel which has been one of the master pieces in the Caribbean Literature written by V. S. Naipaul which indicates the situation of man in his world in life in the new world. The author has done his best to display how a group in a small society like Miguel Street especially with its bizarre neighbors can live. It expresses a deep agony and tragedy in the face of humor that this novel trail with itself. The problems are such far big that does not let the reader to consider it as a comic or funny story. Uneducated individuals, cruel parents, indifferent neighbors, notorious husbands for wives, treacherous wives for husbands, etc. are the problems that proof the previous sentence.

This paper has done best to analyze and consider the rate of tragedy of the novel from various angles in four parts, "Women in Miguel Street", "Language of the Residents", "Escape" and finally "Relationships", which in the last one a new concept was applied to this novel named, *Homosociality* which has been introduced to literature by American Scholar Eve Sedgwick. By this paper we can

come to this conclusion that the residents of the Miguel Street that can be a symbol of a large society pretend to have the sympathy and emotions for each other while they think for their own benefits even facing their children or wives. They live with each other but not for each other, of course with a lot of humor and fun that they know themselves that all are pretending to be happy.

Works Cited

Josyjosy, Interpretive Essay on Miguel Street, category English, TermPapersLab.com March30, 2011

Naipaul V.S., *Miguel Street*, First Vintage International Edition, New York, June 2002

Sedgwick Kosofsky Eve, *Between men: English Literature and Male homosocial desire*, Columbia University Press, April 15, 1985

Poore Charles, *Miguel Street*, online submission, The New York Company, 1998

<http://fragments-correspondence.org/category/vs-naipaul/>

<http://books.google.com.my/books?id=72sF3kxaqA8C&pg=PR10&lpg=PR10&dq=miguel+Street+summary&source>

<http://kirjasto.sci.fi/vnaipaul.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V._S._Naipaul

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Trinidad_and_Tobago

<http://www.thingsmeanalot.com/2007/11/miguel-street-by-vs-naipaul.htm>

<http://www.hpcnet.org/peru/schoolartsandsciences/language/clemente/fall2006/nonwestonline/notes/12/naipaul>

Mr. Hamid Farahmandian
Department of English
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
University Putra Malaysia
Malaysia