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## **Failures and Disillusionment in Naipaul's *Miguel Street***

**Shehla Ali, M.A.**

# Failures and Disillusionment in Naipaul's *Miguel Street*

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## Abstract

This article intends to give a clear view of Naipaul's protagonist, with special consideration to his first piece of work *Miguel Street*. It also describes the life of characters and its situations, which transform their life completely. A few episodes are used to describe the failures and disillusionment of Naipaul's protagonist.

## Naipaul's First Written Work

The noble laureate V.S. Naipaul started his career as a freelance writer with his first written work of fiction *Miguel Street* in the year 1959. *Miguel Street* is a semi-autobiographical novel set in wartime Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Naipaul wrote this novel while he was employed in the BBC. *Miguel Street* won the 1961 *Somerset Maugham Award*.

As Trinidad is V.S. Naipaul's childhood home, he minutely observed its tradition and culture. The readers are introduced to a galaxy of characters with different professions and features. They love to live in illusions and meet failures at every stage of their life.

## The Structure of *Miguel Street*

The whole novel is narrated by an unnamed fatherless boy who himself is a part of a group of kids on Miguel Street. He uses a humorous and satirist tone to describe the people who make up Miguel Street. The whole novel is divided into seventeen episodes and each episode describes the life and its situations targeting one character at a time.

This approach of picking up one character at a time made this work easy to understand. The novel contains a number of characters with great ambitions that never went anywhere and are only left to be recorded in books. The novel is written in the first person, with each character getting its own episode. The narrator's experiences are also woven in between, except for the last two chapters where the protagonist is the narrator himself.

In Trinidad every small issue turned out to be a big event for the people. The novel is also about the outside influences on the narrator which lead him to leave his home in order to make something of himself.

### ***Bogart***

The novel opens with an episode of *Bogart*, named after the name of the protagonist in the story. Bogart lived in Port of Spain and pretended to be a tailor, who never stitched a single suit. Bogart was looked upon as the most bored man in the street, but still he managed to make friends.

According to the narrator, he was the most popular figure in the street. He lived a peaceful life till he suddenly vanished one day. For the street people, he had always been a man of mystery.

After a long interval he returned to the street and to the amazement of Miguel Street, he seemed to be completely transformed. He had started drinking and talking a lot, which he never used to do before. He got a job on a ship and had gone to British Guiana, where he started smuggling things. He was going on well with his illegal business, when the police arrested him. Thereafter he returned to the street and became the most feared and awful man.

Bogart disappeared the third time and finally when he appeared, he got arrested by Sergeant Charles, in charge of bigamy. Thus Bogart's great ambitions ruined his life.

### ***Popo***

Another episode describes the character of *Popo* in *The Thing Without a Name*. Popo called himself a carpenter and is always working on a thing without a name. As per his image in the street he never finishes making anything despite of keeping himself busy in his work all the time. Popo was a married, contented man then, till his wife left him. Thereafter Popo left the street in search of his wife. When he returned he was not the same man. A negative change could be seen in him, just like Bogart in the previous episode. His wife Emelda returned after a span of time and their life became normal once again, till one day a newspaper headlines said "Calypso Carpenter Jailed". He was imprisoned for stealing new furniture. When he returned from the jail, he was a better man. From then he had started working seriously. Thus he set himself free from all the illusions of life and rather than wasting time in great ambitions which have no direction, he started earning his life seriously.

### ***Man-Man***

The narrator introduces the character of *Man-Man*, as a mad-man. The whole Miguel Street believed that Man-Man was mad and so they left him alone. Though he didn't look mad and went up for election of city council or legislative council every time. At every election he just received three votes. His only friend in Miguel Street was a little Mongrel dog. Man-Man was very attached to his dog and his death caused him turn good. He began talking to himself and clapping hands. He started walking about in his white robe, begging for food. Ultimately he declared himself a new Messiah and decided to be crucified. He insisted people to throw stones

on him and when the people followed his command, he started shouting at them to stop. Finally he was disillusioned and was taken away by the police for good.

## **B. Wordsworth**

In another important episode B. Wordsworth calls himself a poet. He declared to the narrator that he was in the process of writing the world's greatest poem, but never wrote past the first line. The narrator spent a great time with B. Wordsworth, without letting his mother know about his regular visits to the poet's house. When B. Wordsworth got sick he disclosed to the narrator that he was not writing any great poem. At last it was disclosed that he lived in illusion but on the death bed he set himself free from all the illusions.

## ***Big Foot***

Big Foot, the protagonist of the episode *The Coward* looked dangerous and everyone in Miguel Street was afraid of him. He was always ready to start a fight with anyone. He followed no particular profession. At one time he made three wardrobes as a carpenter and another time he became a mason. An Englishman boxer came to Trinidad and the next day the newspaper headlines said "Who will fight this man?" Big Foot's great ambitions led him to fight with the Englishman boxer. Big Foot lost the fight in points. At last big foot left Miguel Street.

## **Autobiographical Episodes**

The last two episodes of the novel *Hat* and *How I Left Miguel Street* are autobiographical. Naipaul used some of his personal experiences in bringing these episodes together. Hat, the main character, loved to make mystery of small things. He was among the common people who make up Miguel Street. He enjoyed whatever he did. Hat was a man of settled habits. He became a responsible man when he brought home a woman named Dolly. After some time Dolly ran away and Hat chased her and found her with another man. They had a great quarrel and Hat took it out on Dolly. Thereafter Hat surrendered himself to the police. Hat was sentenced to four years. When he returned everything was changed and so was Hat.

## **Great Ambitions: Setting Oneself Free**

These were some of the characters from the episodes of Miguel Street, which depict the life of different characters full of failure and illusions. But by the end of each episode they managed to set themselves free from all mistaken beliefs.

There are many more idiosyncratic characters including Boyee, Errol, Eddoes, Titus Hoyt, and George who lived a life of failures. Most of the episodes are left open and the reader has to imagine the end.

As a whole the novel is about great ambitions that never went anywhere. The narrator was also a part of Miguel Street and at last he was the only one who manages to escape from Miguel Street, in order to achieve something in life.

### **Narrator and His Stories**

The reader never loses his perception of the narrator's satiric/ironic vision throughout the novel. Thus the presence of the narrator is crucial to the meaning, for it is he who draws the protagonist into the centre of human affairs.

The failures and disillusionments of his protagonists are presented as a necessary existential despair, which may become a turning point, a cause for change in a world that lives life as comedy of manners.

The element of personal realization is also touched upon by V.S. Naipaul. This work depicts the realistic view of certain situations as the people in Miguel Street are easily amused by small events, which make up their life. Release from such localized and circumscribed life may be one of the important points this work tries to bring out. This has been the view of several commentators, but it should also be noted that the work itself does not explicitly state that good life and success are possible only when we exit from such locales. Failures and disillusionment are easily identified even in other situations in other materially developed nations, which offer wider space and wider possibilities for individuals to prosper.

While it is true that individuals wish to leave such contexts as they begin to receive higher education, they do reveal a longing to go back and see and experience that kind of life once more, at least once more. Some novels of V.S. Naipaul weave their stories in that direction.

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