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Comparative Study of Bogart and Popo in V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*

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Abstract

V.S. Naipaul has depicted a panoramic gallery in *Miguel Street* and almost every story of his present work introduces a new character. All of these characters are representative of the Miguel Street in which Naipaul has spent his childhood. He has depicted many characters in *Miguel Street* but present paper attempts to analyze and assess two pococurante characters Bogart and Popo in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* to compare how these both characters have some similarities and contrast also in their attitudes, temperaments and dealings. Their life decelerates at times and then both of them play a game of hide and seek like children as they periodically disappear somewhere without telling others their whereabouts. They both live in the same street named Miguel Street among many other eccentric, odd, bizarre and funny characters hailing from different cultural roots. Both Bogart and Popo live a hibernated life and have sign boards to show off that they are busy in their respective profession but in fact, neither Bogart stitches the clothes nor Popo does any work in his workshop. They just kill their time in a new cultural environment. Through this paper it has been tried to highlight how Naipaul has portrayed his characters in the environment where they strive for their own identity and space in the third world. Naipaul's two characters from Miguel Street have been analysed in this paper.

Keywords: Bogart, Comparison, Contrast, Identity, Emigrant, Nostalgia

Naipaul is an internationally acclaimed diasporic writer having his parentage from Uttar Pradesh and he was born on August 17, 1932 in Chaguanas, Trinidad. His grandfather was emigrated from India to Trinidad as an indentured labourer and later he settled there. Naipaul's work *Miguel Street* presents panoramic view of characters and his two characters Bogart and Popo have so many things common in them. Naipaul's stories of Bogart and Popo give a realistic touch to the novel. These stories have the influence of Naipaul's father as Kamal Mehta contends, "The stories of the Miguel Street are considerably influenced by the author's father Seerpersad Naipaul, and especially by his stories published later on as *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales* (1943) that consists of seven stories giving a direct and



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realistic picture of the life of the Indian Community in Trinidad” (Mehta 283). Bogart is the first character depicted in the first short-story entitled “Bogart” that is very concise but keeps all the character binding together. There is no interruption of flow of thoughts. Selwyn Reginald Cudjoe rightly says, “To begin with a short-character sketch—no more than six pages [seven pages current edition]. The subject is Bogart, languid, enigmatic, and periodically absent from his small room in a backyard of Miguel Street, Port of Spain, Trinidad” (Dolley 14). Bogart is an introvert and silent man. He has been living there in the street on rent for eight dollars a month since four years before his missing incidence. Bogart is outwardly cut from society but he has ‘a picture of Lauren Bacall in his room’ (15) to show that he is indulged in intellectual world. He speaks little since he has come to the street. When he comes to the street for the first time, he comes with a single suitcase and enquires about the room for rent. He starts his conversation with Hat only with a few words, “You know any rooms?” His arrival in the street has been described in a peculiar way, “He had come one day with a single suitcase, looking for a room, and he had spoken to Hat who was swatting outside his gate, smoking a cigarette and reading the cricket scores in the evening paper” (3). Hat shows a servant room to him and he starts living in that room. The way he brings out a pack of cards and begins playing, impresses Hat. He becomes a mystery for others. He pretends to make his livelihood by tailoring. He buys a sewing-machine and a number of blue and white chinks to mark on the clothes before cutting. He advertizes and puts a sign board to expand his business of stitching. Bogart has no rival in his profession of tailoring as he is never seen tailoring in his shop. Narrator-boy Naipaul writes about this strange habit of Bogart “But I could never imagine him competing with anyone; and I cannot remember him making a suit” (2). When George beats all of his family members, it is Bogart who gets angry and says, “Ha, I mad to break old George tail up, you hear” (16)? Bogart is a big bore in the novel, “You couldn't really talk to Bogart, he looked so bored and superior” (1). Unlike fat funny men he was not so, “His eyes were small and sleepy. His face was fat and his hair was gleaming back. His arms were plump. Yet he was not a funny man. He did everything but a captivating languor” (1). He is described as a most boring person, “He was the most boring person I ever knew” (1). He pretends to show that he is a tailor by profession but he never does tailoring work. He does not want to let others this; that’s why he orders the narrator boy to write a sign for him:

TAILOR AND CUTTER

Suits made to Order

Popular and Competitive Prices (2).

Generally such kinds of people have no friends but Bogart was an exception in this regard as he has many friends and earned popularity in the whole street. It is astonishing fact about him that such a silent man has developed good social relations and he has many friends, “It is still something of a miracle to me that Bogart managed to make friends [...] I used to see him squatting on the pavement with all the big men of the street” (2) and thus, he

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becomes a popular person in the Miguel Street. He has befriended with Hat, Howard, Eddoes and when they talk one another, Bogart remains silent keeping himself busy in drawing rings of his fingers. He never laughs audibly nor tells any story to them. Every morning Hat asks about Bogart and he replies him in the same manner, “What happening there, Hat?” He is like Popo, his next door carpenter, who too never makes a stick of furniture but always keeps himself busy in planning and chiseling. But one thing was particular about him that he was not so silent like Mozart, whenever the author asks him what he is doing, he replies abruptly, “Ha, Boy! That’s the question. I making the thing without a name” (2). Thus, Mozart was a man who likes less stirring his tongue. Bogart calls his room ‘the servant room’ as if he had a servant also to assist him in his tailoring work but neither any servant in the room ever lived nor he bothered to have any. Popo has a wife who has done many jobs and befriends with many people, “Popo had a wife who worked at a variety of jobs; and ended up by becoming the friend of many men” (2). One day, a strange thing happens. When Hat calls his name to know his well-wishing as usual, Bogart leaves no reply to his shouting. All come to know that Bogart has abandoned his room in the Miguel Street and nobody comes to know where he has gone or disappeared. All are shocked and they assemble in his house. All the men in the street were disappointed and grief-stricken for two whole days. They assembled in Bogart's little room. Two months passed but there were no signs of Bogart. He also does not furnish any news about his return. Hat and his friends make Bogart’s room a hub for anti-social activities, “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” (3). Hat involves with the police for seeking permission ‘for gambling and sponsoring cock-fighting’ (3) and all illegal activities he in engrossed. He gives bribes to the cops to make his way clear of all problems created by the police. But to great surprise, after two months he returns unexpectedly at around seven o’clock in the morning and he founds Eddoes and a woman on his bed. The woman jumps up and screams to see a stranger in her room (4). Bogart is not the least surprised to see all this in his room. He only tells Eddoes that he is tired and wants to sleep. He wakes up in the afternoon and finds his room packed with all these anti-social elements. Hat has brought a bottle of rum. Hat asks him in the most spoken sentence, “What happening there, Bogart?” And he gets the same response from him, “What happening there, Hat” (4)? With this question, he goes on asking so many questions from him and he was speaking like Rex Harrison. The man who used to speak occasionally now asks about Hat, his cows, Boyee and Errol seemingly in a single breath. He empties the bottle of rum shot after shot. Everybody is surprised to see Bogart in the new form, “They had never seen Bogart drink so much, they had never heard him talk so much; and they were alarmed. No one dared to ask Bogart where he had been” (4). Bogart, the man, who did not know even to laugh audibly, he now springs the issue of his friend's scandalous acts done in his house in this way, “You boys been keeping my room hot all the time” (4). Within a period of only two months not only he has changed but to some extent, his accent also, “Bogart was

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hardly opening his lips when he spoke. His mouth was twisted a little and his accent was getting slightly American” (4). He told about himself, “He was just like an actor” (4). Bogart showed his teeth and laughed in a twisted, cynical way (4) and then he tells his story and it is told that he has got a job on a ship at British Guiana. After deserting this, he becomes a cowboy on the Rupununi. He also starts smuggling things in Brazil but he does not tell it explicitly what was he smuggling. He gathers some girls from Brazil and takes them to Georgetown where runs a brothel secretly. He describes the place, “It was a high-class place,” he said, “no bums. Judges and doctors and big shot civil servants” (4). Bogart now became the most feared man in the street. Even Big Foot was said to be afraid of him. Bogart drank and swore and gambled with the best. He shouted rude remarks at girls walking by themselves in the street (6). He became a regular sight, standing against the high concrete fence of the yard, hands in his pockets, one foot jammed against the wall, and an eternal cigarette in his mouth (6). He disappears second time simply saying that he was going to the lavatory to refresh himself but does not come back for four years. When he returns, “He had grown a little fatter but he had become a little more aggressive. His accent was now pure American” (6). To give himself an impression of a real American he becomes expansive towards children. He calls out to them and gives them money to buy gum and chocolate. “He loved stroking their headstand giving them good advice” (6). He disappears once again. When he comes back he gives a grand party to all kids. He buys cases of Solo and Coca-cola and Pepsi-Cola and about a bushel of cakes. Sergeant Charles, the policeman of resident of forty-five in Miguel Street comes and arrests him in the charge of bigamy. Hat says that evening “The man leaves his first wife in Tanupuna and come to Port of Spain. They couldn’t have children. He remains here feeling sad and small. He go away, find a girl in Caroni and he gave she a baby (6-7). Gillian Dooley contends, “*Miguel Street* is so much a part of Naipaul’s self dramatization of his beginning as a writer—his discovery of his maternal and his voice—that it will be considered first, even though, it was the third of his book to be published (Dolley 14). Naipaul’s works have an Indian tinge in their characters, ideas, temperaments and eating habits though Naipaul has visited India only a few times. Naipaul’s soul still dwells in India though he has been away from India almost all time. Bruce King also contends, “Naipaul’s novels differ from most European and American fiction in portraying romantic love and sexual freedom as destructive, a dereliction of one’s duties. The perspective is Indian, rather than European” (31).

Popo is the second major character who is introduced properly in the second story by Naipaul. He has his Indian roots but Naipaul feels uncomfortable when his name is associated with India. Namrata Rathore Mahanta says that Naipaul has Indian roots but he does not accept it and considers himself a product of England, “The rejection of India and the projection of England created chaos” (Mahanta 37). Popo is a carpenter by profession. He has a pencil stuck over his ear. Unlike Bogart, Popo is an open-minded person and the author likes him for this “I thought Popo was much nicer man than Bogart. Bogart said little to me

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but Popo was already to talk. He talked about serious thing, like life and death and work and I felt he really liked talking to me” (9) and Popo has built a little galvanized-iron workshop in his home under a mango tree at the back side of his yard. Even this was not made completely as he did not get those sheet nailed for the roof rather puts huge stones on it and whenever” there was a high wind the roof made a frightening banging noise and seemed ready to fly away. Whenever the author asks him what is he doing, he replies abruptly, “Ha, Boy! That’s the question. I making the thing without a name” (9).The authors like his way of talking like this, “I liked Popo for that.I thought he was a poetic man” (8).When the narrator boy asks him something to make, he asks the author what to make for him. Then the author tells him to make an egg-stand for his mother. Popo orders him to a make a tailoring sign for him:

BUILDER AND CONTRACTER

Carpenter

And Cabinet-Maker (9).

Popo keeps standing up in front of the sign-board. The people knew well about him that’s why they did not come to him to give order for any carpentry work but he has fear from those people who were unfamiliar with him and did not know about his nature and casually come to enquire. Then Popo gets nonplussed and tells them that the carpenter had abandoned the shop, “He doesn't live here again” (9). In spite of being social with others, he is not a popular man in the street. Popo is considered to be proud and haughty due to his nature to show off to others. Hat considers him a man of ego and conceit, “Popo too conceited, you hear” (9). Popo would take a tumbler of rum on his pavement every morning but he would never sip it. But whenever he notices someone approaching to him, he dips his middle finger in the rum and licks it to show other person. By doing so he waived to the approaching person. But the author does not have the similar views about Popo. One day the narrator boy asks Popo about it. Popo says that he just does this to feel good in the sunny morning. Popo does not earn anything, neither from his carpenter business nor from any other source. It is his wife who goes out to work. Popo says that it is women who are made for work nor men, women and them like work, men not make for work” (10). Popo's wife works as a cook in a big house nearby author's school. She waits for the author in the afternoons and takes him into the kitchen and gives him many nice things to eat. The author only does not like her style of sitting and staring him while he eats. But she had no bad intention from him, she asks the author boy to call her aunty. Popo’s wife introduces him to the gardener, a good-looking brown man, who works in the big house. He loves the flowers. He properly cares the flowers, grass and the flower-beds. The author likes his good habit and sometimes let him mew the grass. The grass was very green as the gardener waters it on time. The author takes the grass to his home to her mother where they feed their hens. He had no child, that’s why Hat says him, “Popo is a man-woman. Not a proper man” (10). As was the fear, one day, author does not find her waiting for him in the afternoon. The next morning Popo also was not seen out of



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his house dipping his finger in the rum. The author notices him sitting sad in the evening in his workshop. He himself starts without being asked a question from him:

Popo said, 'Your auntie gone, boy?'

'Where, Mr. Popo?'

'Ha boy! That's the question' and he pulled himself up there (10).

This news spreads in the village like a fire and this incidence shows that he was a very well-known man in the street. People start gathering in Popo's workshop and they bring all the things to make Popo happy. Only one thing they do not bring for him was a woman whom Popo needed the most. The incidence of his wife's elopement leaves Popo heart-broken. Now no sound of hammer or saw comes from his workshop. He becomes a dead-drunkard and becomes very aggressive, "Popo's workshop no longer sounded with hammering sawing. The sawdust no longer smelled fresh, and became black, almost like dirt. Popo began drinking a lot, and I didn't like him when he was drunk. He smelled of rum, and he used to cry and then grow angry and want to beat up everybody" (11). Hat and other neighbors take a good care of him and try to develop friendly relations with him. Before this incidence nobody takes special interest in him. Popo is surprised to see the people hovering around him for his friendship. Popo, it seems, has a long cherished dream to be on good terms with all the people. But he was not much satisfied as they made a start a little late. Hat, who used to speak negatively about him due to his showing off the rum in the morning, now has a sympathetic considerations with him and tries to keep his spirit high with the women also, "Hat tried to get Popo interested in other women, but Popo was not interested" (11). One day Popo leaves his workshop. Not much later, news came out in the papers that Popo had beaten up a man in Arima and this was the same man who had taken his wife away. And this man was the same good-looking brown man, who used to give the author bags of green grass for his hens. The gardener took a legal course of action but it did not happen much. Popo has to pay a fine for that and he is warned by the magistrate not to molest gardener's wife again. When Popo comes back to his workshop, he is not Popo as he was earlier. His temperament was completely changed. He neither takes interest in the author nor the rum, "He growled at me when I tried to talk to him and he drove out hat and the others when they brought a bottle of rum to the workshop" (11). Hat thinks that the loss of his wife has turned him crazy, "Woman send that man mad, you hear" (12)? To their great astonishment, he started working-hard in his workshop but they were afraid of his new attitude, that's why they dared not talk to him. He works in his workshop day and night and vans stop outside of his house for supplying the raw material and taking the ready-made things away. He got money out of it and Popo paints his house with green colour and the roof with a bright red. To see him in new form Hat says that the man has really turned man to get married again. Hat's prediction comes true. Only after two weeks, Popo returns to his home with his wife. But it was not his second wife; it was the author's same aunty who used to give him delicious things to eat from the kitchen. But the people of Miguel Street start feeling jealous of him. They don't like his

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wife's coming back again. After that Popo starts making the thing without a name again and his wife starts doing the duty as usual again. Hat always reads the paper. He reads them from about ten in the morning until about six in the evening (13). One day he shows his headlines to author and other persons. Headline was CALYPSO CARPENTER JAILED. A fantastic story was behind it that Popo steals the things and remodels them at his workshop. All the things in his workshop were stolen ones. Now everybody in the Miguel Street knew why vans were outside of his house all the time. But one thing they all accept, "We agreed it was a stupid thing to do. But we felt deep inside ourselves that Popo was really a man, perhaps a bigger man than any of us" (14). Popo is sent to jail for one year but due to his good behavior he spends only nine months there. His wife Emelda keeps doing her job and other things as usual and nobody in the Miguel Street feels sorry for Popo. They feel sorry for her wife because "Emelda was going to be left alone for so long" (14). When he comes back from his terms, he comes back as a hero, "He came back as a hero. He was one of the boys He was a better man than either Hat or Bogart" (14) and he is completely reformed person. He starts doing work in his workshop. When the author boy asks him when he will start making the things without a name, he growls at him, "You too troublesome", he said, "Go away quick, before I lay my hand on you" (14).

Thus, both the characters have similar interests and habits to some extent. Even the first story of Bogart is spread in seven pages and so that of Popo's. Naipaul has artistically sketched their characters and narrator boy keeps both the stories embedded together. But still this short-story collection is Naipaul's apprentice phase and is not as mature as his later works. He depicts the stories of his childhood in a child's words and not as a mature writer. Kamal Mehta has the same point of view about Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, "In Miguel Street Naipaul's craftsmanship has not reached the level of maturity which one comes across in the later works, and, in particular, the last one. Further, the collections refer to different periods" (Mehta 280). There is a little room for women characters in his these two shorts-stories. Only one name Popo's wife, Emelda emerges as a female character whose role is dominant in the home as she works and her husband is an idle drunkard. Thus, she seems to be stronger than Popo. White King also agrees on this when he says, "It is the women who are strong" (King). Naipaul's aim in this novel is to depict various characters as they were in their real life. The primary business of V.S. Naipaul is to project carefully the complex fate of individuals, societies and cultures (Prasad 1).

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