

The Awakening of Self: A Postcolonial Study of Initiation Theme in *Miguel Street*

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Abstract: *Miguel Street* is a collection of linked short stories by the Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul. To interpret the initiation theme in *Miguel Street*, this paper uses Rui Yuping's theory structure to analyze the three major parts of the growing progress of the narrator "I". This paper also uses postcolonial criticism to interpret the confusing situation which "I" was in and the narrative strategy in this novel. The conclusion is that the only solution for "I" and even the whole country is to escape from the confusing situation.

Key words: postcolonial study; initiation theme; V. S. Naipaul; *Miguel Street*

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V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad with British citizenship who publishes more than thirty fictions and nonfictions over fifty years. *Miguel Street* is written in 1954 as his first novel and publishes in 1959. It wins the 1961 Somerset Maugham Award. *The New York Times* comments it as "The sketches are written lightly, so that tragedy is understated and comedy is overstated, yet the ring of truth always prevails" (Poore). The stories have a single character living on Miguel Street from childhood to early adulthood. The other characters reappear in different stories, which all share the same boy narrator, and with his growing, a gradual change of mind can be seen from his narration.

The style of the novel is very similar to Picaresque Novels and Quest Novels which was very popular in 16th and 17th century in Spain and other European countries. For this reason, the growth theme of this novel is worthy to study. In China, the first systematic book interpreting these novels is Rui Yuping's *A Study of American Initiation Stories*¹ which puts forward the structure of initiation stories and the idea of "mentor", etc. According to this idea, "I"² in the novel loses his childhood and cultural identity at first and gets his epiphany at last. Hat is the negative mentor and B. Wordsworth is the positive mentor. Narrative Strategy is also an important part in the study of initiation stories. The novel uses double vision of a boy and an adult narrator.

The novel sets in Trinidad, one of the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago, officially the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago which was a colony changed hands among Spanish, British, French, Dutch and Courlander colonizers, so a postcolonial study can be done on this novel. Both the author himself and "I" in the novel are "unhomed". In the narrator's journey of growing up, he uses the strategy of mimicry to fight back the colonial society which is also a way uses by most of the local people on Miguel Street to manifest

their menace.

In recent years, as a Nobel Prize winner, Naipaul has attracted extensive attentions by his prolific writings around the world. As one of the most representative works of Naipaul, *Miguel Street* has been studied for many years and from different angles, such as the characteristic of diaspora, post-modernism, post-colonialism and marginal themes, etc. In China, Sun Ni's *A Critical Study of V. S. Naipaul's Novels* is a relatively thorough interpretation of *Miguel Street* and Naipaul's other novels, but the study of Naipaul in China started late, with an almost single direction and a lot of post-colonial discourse. None of these papers interpretes the novel as an initiation story and also gives it a postcolonial context.

1 Growing Pains: Identity Crisis

In initiation stories, the protagonist would first experience some growing pains that can't be solved by himself. In *Miguel Street*, the pains of "I" are also the pains of all the local people—identity crisis. "In the relationship between colonization and post-colonization, the colonized cannot find their own cultural position by looking back to the past of the nation" (Zhai 65). Trinidad had a long colonial history of about 400 years which will inevitably lead to a lack of nutrition of the traditional culture of the land for people there who have no sense of glory to the local history, and thus have no opportunity to define their identities with history, which leads to their identity crisis.

1.1 The Lost "Childhood"

Christopher Columbus encountered the island of Trinidad on 31 July, 1498. After that time, the Spanish authority had been established there. In 1797, a British force led by General Sir Ralph Abercromby launched the invasion of Trinidad which then became

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a British crown colony. During the Spanish and British colonial period, African slaves and later India laborers were imported as plantation workers, so that most of the country's inhabitants were now of African and India descent. With the wave of national liberation movement after WWII, ten British Caribbean colonies, including Trinidad and Tobago, formed the union of the West Indies in 1958. During the more than 400 years of colonial period, the original culture and history there have been obliterated, which are the childhood of the island and the natives.

People in *Miguel Street* have no fixed status. They live in no fixed place. Their lives are diaspora, and Miguel Street, their beautiful garden of Eden, is gradually fading away. The novel spares no effort to describe their melancholy of losing their childhood (original countries where they came from). Memories of their childhood are still deeply imprinted in their minds. Though childhood memories are beautiful, they cannot stay strongly and clearly. Those people were living far away originally, coming to Miguel Street in Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital city, and have become a member of a multi-ethnic society. In the novel, the protagonist "I" and his mom first come there after his father died. "The boy narrator is eight years old at the start and over eighteen at the conclusion; approximately twelve years pass" (King 32). Nothing happened could be figured out before he comes there except the loss of his father. His own childhood memory is lost, which symbolizes the lost childhood of the whole island.

This novel sometimes is recognized as a semi-autobiographical novel which also symbolizes the lost childhood of the author himself for his similar experience. "*Miguel Street* consists of memories of a lost childhood homeland. Nostalgia is the usual subject matter of the first book of an expatriate colonial writer" (King 32). Born in Trinidad as an Indian, Naipaul is doomed to a diaspora life from his birth. Through his life, he is "unhomed". To be "unhomed" is to feel not at home even in your own home because your inner self is not at home: "your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee" (Tyson 421). The initiation story of "I" is also the initiation story of the author himself.

1.2 The Lost Cultural Identity

"Diaspora is the rejection and abandonment of the steady state of life. The more time, space and culture are dispersed, the easier it will be to fall into a splitting, fragmented and uncertain situation in cultural identity or the loss of the whole meaning of life" (Zhang Pinggong). More than 400 years of colonial history leads to the lost "childhood" and diaspora. This will inevitably lead to their failure of getting a complete cultural identity.

Cultural identity forms in one's childhood. "In the process of socialization, one gradually forms their own way of thinking, behavior and feeling, i.e. their own cultural identity, firstly at home, then at school, in the communication with the peers, in the workplace and in the group work" (Zhang and Qian 71). That is to say childhood is a very important state for a person to form a sound and healthy personality. "I" has no childhood, which means I would definitely experience identity crisis when growing up.

Cultural identity is "one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall 223). People coming from the

same culture group share the same cultural identity, so there are many different cultural identities on Miguel Street. His mom tells him to buy some bread and butter when they first get there. When he comes back, he "found about six Miguel Street, but none seemed to have [his] house" (Naipaul 72). The sameness of the street symbolizes they all have lost their cultural identity and become all the same.

When Titus Hoyt organizes a club and makes his last effort to keep the club together, he tries to take them to visit Fort George, a historical place. "But [it] is history... You must remember that the boys and girls of today are the men and women of tomorrow" (80). And he introduces the history of Fort George. The students "had never realized that anyone considered [them] so important" (80). They need to identify themselves by defining major historical events in the past to enhance the discontinuity of the local history. But the natural tension of the local history is strangled, so the local people naturally do not want to understand it, nor are they proud of their history. This vicious circle has marginalized the local history, and the local people have deliberately or unintentionally marginalized their history thus eventually lose their identity.

2 The Journey of Growing

According to Rui Yuping's theory about initiation stories, growing is challenging. On the narrator's way of growing, he has a lot of mentors. The two most influential ones are Hat and B. Wordsworth. He also has some way of fighting back, such as mimicry.

2.1 Mentor

According to Rui Yuping, there are three kinds of mentors, which are the positive, natural and negative mentor. "I" lives in the community Miguel Street. People in a community influence each other. All the people living on the street can be said as his mentors, but the two most influential ones are Hat and B. Wordsworth.

Hat is the negative mentor. According to Rui, there are three kinds of negative mentors. First is the one who leads the protagonist to the wrong way of life. Second is the one who provide an opposite model. In comparison with "bad", "good" has been clearly defined. The third is like Satan who leads the youth to wisdom while losing their innocence and happiness (Rui 135). Hat is the third kind. In this poor, backward and colonized Trinidad, people's efforts often become wasted. Hat exposes the cruel social truths step by step, pointing out the dark and desolate side of society, and teaches "I" to see the reality clearly, but at the same time let him lose the pure joy of childhood.

"I" has no father. Hat appears though the whole book and serves as his father. In every story, Hat told his adult perspective to "I". His sentences are short but incisive. For example, when Laura is destroyed by the fact that her daughter has to repeat her own tragedy, Hat makes his comment, "Life is helluva thing. You can see trouble coming and you can't do a damn thing to prevent it coming. You just sit and watch and wait" (Naipaul 91-92). It's a very pessimistic view towards the Trinidadian society. By listening to Hat's comments, "I" learns to see through the vicissitudes of life, and builds up his own world view and judgment system.

B. Wordsworth is the positive mentor. There are also three kinds of positive mentors. First is the intellectually and morally perfect mentor; second is his peer who can enlighten each other; the

third is like the transient guest of the protagonist in his journey. B. Wordsworth is the first kind.

First, he is able to get along well with younger people in an equal status. He asks "I" secretly whether he loves his mom or not, and invites him to his house and treats him mangoes. Other people would more or less hide their personal feelings and lives from the next generation, even from their friends, but he does not. He tells everything to "I". He shares his sad love story with him. "I", though young, has experienced sympathy and sadness by listening to his love story. After listening, "I" becomes rich in heart and gets the notion of a helpless life.

Second, his identity and personality are special, which can keep him apart from the mainstream society and happy to make friends with the younger people. He claims to be a poet, and likes to cry for everything. As a friend and teacher, he leads "I" to look at the ordinary scenery poetically, to appreciate the beauty of the Caribbean Sea, and to resist the desolate reality. He took "I" to the Botanical Gardens and the Rock Gardens, "climb[ing] Chancellor Hill in the late afternoon and watched the darkness fall... [and] the lights go in the city and on the ships in the harbor" (45). He uses his poetic feelings and romantic ideas to lead "I" to reacquire himself with the familiar world.

Third, he belongs to the edge of society who has not yet been assimilated by the mainstream society. He is a calypsonian who works only in calypso season. During the rest of the year, he is a vagrant. He is writing the greatest poem in the world with only one line "the past is deep". His poetry is recognized neither by the local people nor the mainstream culture of the West. "The past" is not only his past, but also the past history of the Trinidadian colonial period, the oppression of the colonial history on the cultural development of Trinidad. Through his guidance, the narrator enhances his understanding of the meaning of poetry, especially the difficult situation of Caribbean poetry in the mainstream society.

The rest of the neighbors are the third kind of the positive mentors. They appear in his life by accident, transiently, like passers-by, but also play an important role in guiding his growth. For example, from the mechanical genius uncle Bhakcu, he learns to persist, and from Titus Hoyt, he learns to study science. These people often appear only in their special episodes, but they each have their function on the education of "I".

2.2 Mimicry

According to Bhabha, mimicry is "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha 126). In the novel, there are many places describing people's mimicry in Trinidad. But at the same time, mimicry is a possible way of "I" fighting back the colonial society, for mimicry is both resemblance and menace. "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (129). In the journey of his growing, mimicry is the few ways he could adopt. According to Bhabha's definition of mimicry, colonial education and cultural penetration are the root causes of mimicry.

Frantz Fanon once said "To speak a language is to accept a world and a culture consciously" (qtd. in Xu 142). Language is an important sign of cultural identity. Most of the lower people there use Creole English for daily communication, while a few educated

people try their best to imitate standard English in order to show their acceptance of westernized education and to improve their social status. In the novel, a clear distinction is made between standard and Creole English: the former is a symbol of a person's good education and social status, and the latter is an inferior language that is stigmatized by the former. "I" learns standard English at school and communicates with mom in broken Creole English. Although in front of his son she always shouts out the dirtiest words in Creole English, mom speaks standard English in front of the white woman neighbor Mrs. Hereira to cover up her inferior and marginalized status. However, due to the excessive attention to the standard pronunciation and form, she makes a lot of mistakes and misuses the form of the language.

Some characters could speak standard English in the novel, for example Man-man and B. Wordsworth. They deliberately imitate British accent and succeed, for "if you shut your eyes while he spoke, you would believe an Englishman was talking to you" (Naipaul 34). The other people were still imitating it. One day, when "I" goes to school, Man-man is at the corner of Miguel Street and they have the following dialog:

"Boy, where you going?" Man-man asked.

"I going to school," I said.

And Man-man, looking at me solemnly, said in a mocking way, "so you goes to school, eh?"

I said automatically, "Yes, I goes to school." And I found that without intending it I had imitated Man-man's correct and very English accent. (34)

In the first dialog, both of them omit the be-verb in the present progressive tense which is the syntactic feature of the Creole English. In Man-man's second question, he tries to correct "I", with himself making a mistake of the subject and predicate inconsistency when he uses standard English. The evidence of Man-man mixing the British and Creole English shows his mimicry to assume airs of importance. But "I" doesn't find out the mistake and begins to imitate, making the same mistake without knowing. "I" adopts colonial education at school, and seems to be wiser than the rest of the neighbors. In many places, "I" seems to disagree with the neighbors' opinion. But in this dialog, "I" cannot realize the mistake, which proves that "I" not only shows a strong desire to imitate the language of the colonists, but also internalized it into his subconscious mind, for standard English is the symbol of identity and fame in Miguel street and Trinidad. "I" hopes that through mimicry, "I" could get a higher social status. It is his way of growing up and facing the challenge of life.

3 Subversion: The Awakening of Self

In *Miguel Street*, "I" experiences the process of awakening of himself, confusing and finally gets an epiphany. Hat in the book is the negative mentor. He appears in the first story and frequently appeared in other stories, but not until the end of the novel does he have his own story. In his story, "I" no longer has anyone to listen to. Especially after Hat goes to jail, "I" has to rely on himself. The sad ending of Hat leads the narrator's beginning of the awakening of himself.

3.1 Self-Awakening

After the children enter their puberty, they begin to either be-

come dissatisfied with their lives which are full of care thus ordinary without change, or they become doubtful of the rationality of the real life because of a sudden event like Hat's going to the jail in the novel. Structurally, Hat's last appearance symbolizes the end of a period of time. Contently, Hat's turning from the edge of the voice to the central character, and his failures and setbacks similar to the other people symbolizes his functions as a mentor is dissipated and becomes only another object of the narrator's observer. "When Hat went to jail, part of me had died" (172). This sentence shows the beginning of his self-awakening.

Things happens after this event are not being depicted enough. "I" is fifteen when Hat goes to jail, and eighteen when he comes out. Three years are enough to change a person. "A lot happened in those three years. I left school and I began working in the customs. I was no longer a boy. I was a man, earning money" (171). When he gets his own self, he begins to have critical thinking, and looks critically at the people around him. "Titus Hoyt was stupid and boring, and not funny at all. Everything had changed" (172).

In the novel, Titus Hoyt is an incompetent teacher who cares too much about fame—the symbol of colonial education. He not only internalizes the colonial ideology, expecting the approval and praise from the colonial rulers, but also actively teaches these to others, especially to young children. When "I" is directed by him to get home one afternoon, he comes again that night to train him to write a letter to *The Trinidad Guardian* to thank him. He "spen[t] all afternoon making up this letter" (75). This event is not only a manifestation of his vanity, but also an indication of his desire to get the recognition of the colonial rulers in order to gain a higher social status.

Once "I" realizes how "stupid and boring" of him, "I" realizes the stupidity and hypocrisy of the colonial education. "I" begins to hate him, and even "everything" on Miguel Street. The narrator's opinion towards everyone has changed. He realizes their inaction, poverty, backwardness, and failure in life without any future. This is an evidence of his self-awakening.

3.2 Confusion and Epiphany

The state of self-awakening once begins, the protagonists would experience the pressure from life which makes them confused. In this confusing state, some people would fall into ruin; some would experience something and finally get epiphany and become adults successfully (Rui 85). "I" in the novel belongs to the second kind. Hat's unsuccessful ending leads "I" to confirm the universality of the tragic life of Miguel street which caused his confusion.

When Hat comes out from the jail, "I" has the feeling that "Hat too had changed. Some of the brightness had left him, and conversation was hard to make" (Naipaul 171). The once handsome with an easy grace, high-flying Hat has gone, replaced by a middle-aged man who has been beaten down by life and fall into conventions. The narrator's last hope is on Hat: he thinks Hat could still give him some guidance, but that is destroyed and leads to his confusing state. "Without really knowing it, I had become a little wild" (173). He didn't know what he could do to solve his problematic state.

After the process of confusing, the changing point is epiphany. Epiphany is an important state in initiation stories. People's under-

standings of themselves and the world have a continuous development and deepening process. It is impossible to know anything in one step, because the dynamic things will continuously develop and change, and people as the subject of cognition will also change. The definition of epiphany is "a sudden spiritual manifestation in which the 'whatness' of a common object or gesture appears radiant to the observer" (Baldick 72). The narrator's epiphany happens because of an accidental event.

In the state of confusion, "I drank so much in one evening and remains drunk for two whole days afterwards. When he sobered up, he "made a vow neither to smoke nor drink again" (Naipaul 174). This is the point of epiphany which caused by the dead drunk of him. He realizes there is no possible way out in Trinidad. "Is not my fault really. Is just Trinidad. What else anybody can do here except drink?" (174). After that, his mom decides to send him abroad. He agrees immediately, for he has realized what he has to do—leave Trinidad for an uncertain future. Finally, he found his solution. When he saw his shadow before him, he saw "a dancing dwarf on the tarmac" (179). He goes out of his predicament and he could dance freely now. He is going to discover the unknown world.

4 Narrative Strategy: Double Vision

In order to show the subtle changes in the inner world of the protagonist, initiation stories usually choose the first-person perspective. "Because many protagonists are immature and have cognitive limitations, the transformation of perspectives between young and adult narrators is an important narrative strategy to improve the depth of the work's thought" (Rui and Fan 310). In the study of the initiation theme of the novel, a well understanding of the narrative strategy becomes important.

In postcolonial context, the colonial subject has double vision, which is "a consciousness or a way of perceiving the world that is divided between two antagonistic cultures: that of the colonizer and that of the indigenous community" (Tyson 421). This novel has been narrated in double vision: both from the vision of a little boy and a vision from an adult, from the vision of the colonized and the colonizer, from the vision out of the colonial center and within the center of the mainstream colonial discourse. "I" is both the narrator and a character of the novel. "I" sometimes is recognized as a boy, sometimes as an adult. "The narrative strategy of *Miguel Street* responds to a split between the author's Trinidad and English cultural selves and attempts to resolve that split through double perspective" (Weiss 23). "I", as one of the many characters, has been involved in many events, experiencing the contradictions among the characters and observing the various states in the street. As a child, his eyes are naive, curious and lively, and he is curious and lovely about the dirty and chaotic characteristics and the ignorant and backward city, which makes the originally absurd and sad stories romantic and interesting, and the sadness is covered up, with the contradictions lightened. He can see what the other people cannot see and feel the special emotions or wits of his neighbors, but he cannot see the nature of life there.

The boy narrator stands for the dramatic elements of Miguel Street while the adult narrator stands for the potential harsh realities there. "Many stories start with the admiration of the boy narrator to the people around him, but the results are always disappointing. Every character is a mockery of an ideal" (Sun 114). The narra-

tion from the boy narrator is often opposite to the adult narrator, the author, and the readers. What the boy thinks humorous, the author and readers think sad. The double vision often produces discord. The boy's eyes can refract the real life. Through his eyes, small things become big things; clowns become kings; liars become heroes. But he cannot see the uniformity of the local people: they are "the others" standing on the edge who are abandoned by the mainstream society. No matter how hard they try, they would always be at the bottom of their lives, and the fate of oppression is unchangeable. The uniformity in the novel is specially manifested in the ending of each story: every story is inevitably ended in tragedy. The characters are either in prison for breaking the law or escaping from the law, committing suicide or going mad. All of them cannot escape the tragic fate. The adult narrator clearly shows their poverty, backwardness, ignorance, and blind worship and mimicry of the West.

The double vision of the boy narrator and the adult narrator has vividly represented the original scenes of the colonial life and highlighted the tragedy which the colonial people cannot change their destiny.

5 Conclusion

The initiation theme of *Miguel Street* is very typical. From the narrator's growing process, a whole panorama of the colonial society is shown in front of the readers. On the one hand, the process of growing up is the process of exploring one's inner self; on the other hand, "it is the process of exploring the world and observing others, or by exploring and observing others to return to one's own heart to observe one's own inner self" (Zhang Deming 128). The novel pays more attention to the latter aspect which the narrator's observation and description of the growing process of some of the other teenage neighbors on Miguel Street also shows the general characteristics and personalities of the growth of the colonial teenagers.

The novel uses double vision to highlight the fatalism that the colonial people cannot change their own destiny. Through the growing process of "I", it can be said that for individuals living in the former colonies, the ways trying to find order in chaos, to seek identity in confusion and to assimilate himself in mimicry are all in vain. The result will only be a more chaotic order, a more ambiguous identity, a weaker sense of wandering, and a more serious marginalization. The only solution is to escape from the confusing state. Influenced by colonial hegemony culture and some other colonial sequelae, it is a long way to grow up either for individuals or for a country.

Notes:

1. In the book, Rui defines "Initiation Stories" as "Growth Sto-

ries", whereas "Bildungsroman" as "Education Stories" which focus on the protagonist's inner shaping of personality (See Rui 2-3).

2. In this paper, "I" has been used as the name of the protagonist.

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【通联编辑:王力】