

The Tragedy on Females in V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*

LUO Jia-qi

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The tragic features of V. S. Naipaul's short story collection *Miguel Street* are more typical in the female characters. This paper attempts to analyze the typical female tragic characters in the book. Starting from their stories and experiences, it deeply explores the survival pressure and challenges faced by females on the post-colonial land under the influence of colonial rule. Through in-depth analysis of typical female tragedies, the author tries to provide more possibilities for the survival of post-colonial females, and further illustrates that the tragedy of post-colonial females is caused by marginal males and imperial colonial hegemony in *Miguel Street*.

Keywords: tragic, female, Miguel Street

Introduction

In the male-dominated social environment, female's survival pressure, circumstance, and status have always been the focus of our attention. Different from the common description of the difference between the status of males and females in literary works, the features of the female image in *Miguel Street* is that the book involves the life of female characters but does not have many words to describe them. The stories in the book provide a bleak picture of the lives of females. Female characters are depicted as subservient, passive, and oppressed, with their worth and value being determined by males. They are often shown to be victims of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Zhang's views on the book believe that the work seems to depict the daily life on the street. In fact, it shows oppression and violence between males and females everywhere (Zhang, 2018). The author finds that the number of female characters in the book is far less than that of males, not to mention the length of the description of female stories. Xu suggests that there are only two short stories with female protagonists in the whole book. One is Laura in the Chapter X "The Maternal Instinct" and the other is Mrs. Hereira in the Chapter XII "Love, Love, Love, Alone". In other stories, females can only be inserted into the story as anonymous appendages (Xu, 2014). The whole work presents a typical male-lead society, in which females can only exist as the appendages of males. The oppression and violent against females also reflect females' dependence on males for survival in *Miguel Street*. In addition, female characters are rarely given names and are mostly addressed as the wife of a male character. It seems that the only method for females to show themselves is to be a wife of a male. Such description and character arrangement in the work further reflect that under the circumstance of low status of females at that time, the life of females living in the colonies was full of oppression and violence, and appeared as the property of males.

LUO Jia-qi, Master of English Language and Literature, School of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

About the causes of violence between the sexes, Xu agrees that the economic exploitation of colonial countries by colonialism is the underlying reason that colonists resort to domestic violence under the pressure of survival (Xu, 2010). The females on the street are at the bottom of the fringe, suffering oppression and violence while still satisfying males' sense of self-actualization and existence. Wu claims that females bear most of the labor and endure the violence of males in the small society of the family. Domestic violence has become part of the "view of females" (Wu, 2022). Males, on the other hand, spend their days just having fun and doing nothing, using domestic violence to practice their manhood. A typical tragic female in the book, Mrs. Hereira, is a rich upper-class wife, but she is tired of the day to day life with her husband. She hopes to find true love in with Toni Miguel Street. It turns out to be a fantasy in the end. Su argues that this brave but abnormal love just like the family life of other females in the street. Violence and abuse become the main theme in their love, which also becomes the reasons for Mrs. Hereira to leave Toni (Su, 2014). Another female also tries to overturn the complete control of males over females in the patriarchal society, and she tries to put the hope on the next generation to escape from such violence and live in an environment of equality. However, Yuan argues that such personal revolt is repeating the tragedy. Only by completely destroying the colonial discourse system and the male-centered discourse system can females be liberated from the double oppression (Yuan, 2013). The females also have different views on marriage and life, such as being opportunistic females who dumps the burden to males, while those traditional good wives are often rewarded by violence and abuse. There is also female who insists in chasing true love and who seeks to change their children life. Li thinks that Naipaul's description of different female concepts reflects the diversity of female groups (Li, 2018). All in all, the fate waits for them are tragic.

The article will discuss the tragedy on females in Miguel Street, and they will be divided into three kinds of females to analyze. The related analysis on females will explore that tragedies happening on them are caused by the marginal males and the imperial colonial hegemony.

The Ordinary Females in *Miguel Street*

The portrayal of ordinary females in *Miguel Street* highlights the patriarchal nature of Trinidadian society and the ways in which females are marginalized and disadvantaged. The females described in the book can be roughly divided into three groups, of which the largest group should be these ordinary females.

In V. S. Naipaul's description, stories about them are not long, and their images often appear in the description of their related males, such as George's wife in the Chapter III "George and the Pink House". Naipaul's description of her is an oppressive image of labor. She labors for the family, the husband, and the children until the violent death led by her husband. George's wife is like a perpetual motion machine for the family. From the viewpoints of the nameless narrator, he has the following opinions of her. "George's wife was never a proper person. I always thought of her just as George's wife, and that was all. And I always thought, too, that George's wife was nearly always in the cow-pen" (Naipaul, 2013, p. 13). George's wife was like a voiceless female, unable to speak up for herself and her children, and unable to raise a voice of resistance to what has happened to her. George's violence runs through the family and his children. Their daughter Dolly, like her mother, endures as a patient female. And the violence she has endured for a long time as a female only worsens when her mother dies. Instead of waking up to the violent consequences after wife leaves, George continues the

violence and inflict violence and abuse on Dolly, who has been exposed to violence for a long period in the past. She regards it as a normal thing, as if it has become a part of her life. However, unlike her mother, Dolly still feels wrong and sad in the face of violence instead of being accustomed to violence like her mother and already numb. On the contrary, George's son did not resist such violence as a male. From their reactions facing violence, it can be thought that George's wife and daughter face violence under the dual pressure of imperial colonial hegemony and patriarchal society. That is to say, their tragedy is caused by both imperial colonial hegemony and patriarchal society. Living in such a society, they must overtake more pressure than males coming from a patriarchal society. Therefore, George's son, Elias, still does not resist against George when facing the violence, just as the males does not resist against imperial colonial hegemony when facing the violence. Naipaul's depiction of females reveals the ways in which colonialism impacted the lives of them. Life for females in the colonies is far more difficult than males.

The image of a good wife that a female tries to play in her family life is also reflected in another female. The nameless narrator's uncle Bhakcu is called a mechanical genius by himself. One day, as he inspects the car under it, what the nameless narrator fears happens and the car slips off the jack and falls on him. When his wife finds him, she bursts into tears and rushes to him to ask about the situation. However, Bhakcu says, "How the hell I all right? You mean you so blind you ain't see the whole motor-car break up my arse?" (Naipaul, 2013, p. 68). From this part, the author sees a good wife showing extreme concern for her husband, while the husband responds to this concern with verbal violence. Although verbal violence does not leave traces of violence on the body like physical violence, which can intuitively be seen the traces of violence, verbal violence will cause psychological damage to the victims. Such kind of damage is not directly felt, but the consequences are immeasurable. There is a more ironic description in this chapter that Bhakcu has a bat to beat his wife, and the idea of beating his wife with a bat seems to come from another male. But the most ironic and strangest thing for the nameless narrator to understand is that "The strangest thing about this was that Mrs. Bhakcu herself kept the bat clean and well-oiled. Boyee tried many times to borrow the bat, but Mrs. Bhakcu never lent it" (Naipaul, 2013, p. 71). It can be seen that when females face the absolute authority and violence from their husbands in the family, they not only simply accept them, but also start to internalize such authority and violence into a normal thing that they should accept them from the deep heart. This internalization is even more frightening than being restricted by authority and violence since when it is internalized as part of a female's body. It is difficult for her to remove them from her body. Thus, it can be compared that the behavior of females internalizing absolute authority and violence is just like the obedience and servility displayed by people in colonies when facing the imperial colonial hegemony. Female tragedy is due to colonial rule, male authority, and sexual inequality.

The Persistent Females in *Miguel Street*

In the environment of social and economic underdevelopment, female marriage and life are more challenging. Female is the protagonist in the Chapter X "The Maternal Instinct". Laura, as the mother of eight children, is exposed to oppression and violence while exerting her maternal instincts on her children without reservation. One point mentioned in the book is that Laura has eight children which is not a surprising thing at that time. However, Naipaul writes "These eight children had seven fathers. Beat that!" (Naipaul, 2013, p. 49) Apart from whether a female bearing eight children has any effect or damage on her body, Naipaul's description

thinks that it is fatal for her eight children to have seven fathers. There is no mention of Laura's attitude to have eight children, nor how she feels about having eight children with seven fathers. Her own thoughts and opinions only refer to the evil of males and there are some rumors about her. This also reflects the unequal treatment of female group at that time, and attempts to slander and to denigrate the image of female groups.

As a persistent female, Laura's experience is not understood and helped by people around her, but she shows some different places from ordinary females. She is very optimistic about her pregnancy experience and speaks out about it in a relaxed tone. "This thing happening again, but you get used to it after the first three four times. Is a damn nuisance, though" (Naipaul, 2013, p. 49). Laura can be seen as an optimistic and strong female. Although her partners all choose to abandon her and leave her children to be raised by herself, she never gives up in such life and circumstances. She chooses to bring up her children by herself, and the same as many ordinary mothers, she puts great hope on her children. She hopes that they will not live a life the same as hers in the future and believes that they will have a brighter and more brilliant life.

Different from the tolerance of George's wife which has been mentioned above, Laura is a figure of persistence. Despite the double oppression of colonial oppression and patriarchal society, she is still strong enough to face everything happening on her. Her heart never gives in to the world. There is a certain awakening inside her, and she wants to escape this crazy, depressing place. She despises husbands who beat their wives at random, and she throws her husband out of the house bravely. All these can be seen as Laura's challenge to males as a female. She also recognizes the importance of education as a significant way to change her children's life. She insists on sending her oldest daughters Lorna to learn something in the hope that she will not repeat the life in Miguel Street. However, her ideas were unrealistic at that time. She cannot change the already formed social concept and operation mode by herself. All her efforts and persistence collapse when she knows that Lorna is pregnant. She begins to understand that it is difficult for females to escape from Miguel Street, to get rid of tragic fate and to realize real independence under the society of colonial hegemony and male power.

The Brave Females in *Miguel Street*

If the poor females in Miguel Street cannot escape their tragic fate and pursue independence, what about the female who does not belong to Miguel Street? What about female from the upper class? Can they escape their tragic fate and pursue their dreams? Mrs. Hereira is a prime example in the book. Mrs. Hereira is tired of her husband and his smell makes her feel suffocated. The reason why Mrs. Hereira leaves everything to live with Toni in Miguel Street can be found in a calypso. "Is love, love, love, alone. That cause King Edward to leave the throne" (Naipaul, 2013, p. 62). She is a female who pursues love courageously. Unlike all kinds of tragedies in other females, her tragedy is that she cannot gain the love she wants. Getting tired of the marriage with her husband, the marriage just leaves her a sense of suffocation. She desperately wants to escape such loveless marriage, to find true love. Therefore, when she finds Toni, she throws away everything she owns for the so-called love defiantly. However, when she begins to look for love and independent herself, Toni does not give her love and respect. Toni has the vices almost every male has in Miguel Street. He drinks excessively, beats females, and even tries to kill Mrs. Hereira. Although Mrs. Hereira's heart is full of sadness and fear, she still insists on following Toni who has nothing. In practice, females who give up everything they own and devote

themselves to the pursuit of love are doomed to fail. And what Mrs. Hereira wants is just to meet the demand of her empty heart.

Mrs. Hereira's final defeat also portends the failure of female resistance. She fights bravely and attempts to change the male-dominated society by herself. However, it is impractical for females to realize themselves and pursue love at that time. Author also finds that even Mrs. Hereira who lives in the upper class can only be addressed by her husband's surname in the book. It proves that females always appear as the appendages of males, even in the upper class. It also illustrates that female status is lower than that of males throughout the whole society.

Conclusion

Naipaul's early work as a whole unfolds in a light and witty tone, describing the daily life of people living in Miguel Street. In the social environment of that time, these people are regarded as marginal figures, and they are deeply influenced and oppressed by the colonial hegemony. However, females living in Miguel Street will be oppressed not only by the colonial hegemony, but also by males under the patriarchal society. The oppression to females involves all aspects. The book highlights the ways in which patriarchal attitudes and practices have a devastating impact on the life of females, and serves as a testament to the ongoing struggle for female rights and equality. Females have tried all the ways to fight against the inequality but the resistant struggle is bound to end in failure. Colonial hegemony and the marginal males cause the tragic fate of females, which cannot be changed at that time.

In this paper, the females described in the book are simply divided into three groups: ordinary females who obey the male authority, Laura who insists on independence in life, and Mrs. Hereira who pursues love bravely. No matter whether these females rebel against the tragic fate, they cannot change the final tragedy since the circumstance of imperial colonial hegemony and the influence of marginal males cannot be changed. However, the females who are able to make resistance are very strong and brave, and they raise their own voice and make contribution for females.

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