

# Learning Valuable Things from Words of Poverty in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*

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## Abstract

*In addition to consisting of an interesting story, a novel may consist of lessons to learn. V.S. Naipaul's Miguel Street reflected realities of People in Trinidad. The cynical words in the novel tell how people live in poverty. It is not only a story of past events but also a valuable text to see and learn actual realities of education. There are two lessons that readers can learn from the words. First, what adult people do are lessons for the teenagers. When the adult show bad characters teach how to do bad conducts, the teenagers will easily see and do the same things. When the adults resort to violence in their families, the teenagers will resort to the same things outside homes. When the adults drink alcohol and consume drugs, the teenagers will try and do the same, or even, worse. They will run out of their homes and find other places to live. The matters will deteriorate when the teenagers do not have proper education. It is a threat of character education. Second, there are always heroes in communities. Parents are some of them. The heroes provide poor children and teenagers with proper education. They show that there is always a valuable thing to do in poor condition. It shows that poverty does not only supply threats of character education but also opportunities of it. The schools should conduct good education. The schools should educate mind and heart.*

**Keywords:** *learning, reading, reality, proper education, mind, heart*

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## Introduction

Words are powerful to articulate what a speaker thinks and what a speaker wants to say. When producing words, a speaker expresses the experience that he has in his mind. The experience that he shares strengthens the meanings. The meanings can be valuable to others when they represent important interest of human beings. The words can be arranged in a story.

A literary work is not only a book of beautiful words, but also a book of history and knowledge. A reader can feel amused when reading a literary work. Also, he can find good things to know in the work. An author of a literary work tells a story of his imagination and expression, and in the same

time he records what happens at the time he writes the story.

A novel, as a literary work, is not only a book to get the beautiful words and amusement inside, but also a book that has a lesson to learn. From a novel, a reader can have what really happens in a specific time. Then, the reader can use the story as a reference to compare to a real condition. As a result of it, a reader can make an analysis on something that he concerns. An interesting concern of many others to see in a work is how character education of older people is learned by the teenagers and children in the setting of place.

When creating good, useful and valuable characters become and objective of education, educators spend a lot of time to talk about the principles, definition, and

effectiveness. In addition, it is important to consider the strategy and the factors that support and burden the strategy.

We should pay an intensive attention to the relation of poverty and schools. Poverty is one of many threats and opportunities of education. It will make schools inconsistent with their primary purpose. The primary purpose of an education process at school is to make students know how to make a life, not how to make a living (Postman, 1996). However a school must turn into a purpose to the economy of their community when poverty rises.

Poverty that is related to how people regard money and happiness is an urgent point to consider. It is difficult to talk about good character to people who seldom see good things in their lives. There must be certain and specific actions to resolve the problems, and there must be certain person who can become distinct character to change the condition.

### **Reading a Text and Writing an Interpretation**

Even though in literary studies, the debate on literature's main function has been going on till today, it is pleasant and relieving to find what Bressler (1994) wrote in his book when giving a comment on the two opposing sides of critics,

*Tracing their arguments to Plato, many contend that literature's primary function is moral, its chief value being its usefulness for hidden or undisclosed purposes. But others, like Aristotle, hold that a work of art can be analyzed and broken down into its various parts, with each part contributing to the overall enjoyment of the work itself. For critics, the value of a text is found within it or inseparably linked to the work itself. (1994: 12)*

When reading a literary work, a reader does his or her activity on two questions. The questions refer to if literature is merely a fun reading, or if it is also a reading activity to study and learn from the work.

I myself choose the latter although I also feel necessary to examine the intrinsic elements of a work. I must recall what Newton (1988) concluded to say in his book that in any case anyone who retains an interest in literature has no option but to vote. It shows that a reader is given an authority to do something with the text in literature.

This study is an effort to observe how an author tries to show the condition of his society. I choose to think the same as what Wolfgang Iser thought. He said,

*At the same time it must be pointed out that a text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader... (Iser in Newton, 1988: 227)*

I can find that a reader has a big role to create another valuable work derived from a work or a text. A reader's creation may also become one of the possible realizations of a text (Iser in Newton: 1988).

I choose to do like what Iser suggested to do. I read a novel, *Miguel Street* written by V.S. Naipaul and firstly published in 1959. Then, I highlight what I find from the novel. After presenting my findings, I am going to write my interpretation as a realization of a text.

In addition to reading the text as a reader, I am also willing to be a good teacher with things to discuss with my students. Teaching students in classrooms means using valuable things to present precious things to the students to know and do. It needs teachers' creativity and development. The creativity includes how to get valuable references. The references also show how teachers develop their teaching materials. One of many good references is a literary work.

For teachers, a literary work can become a good book to learn the intrinsic nature of the work. It can also become a book of life issues to discuss in the classrooms. The teachers can focus on the literary elements of the work, or on the issues brought by the

author in the work. Even many teachers use a literary work to do both.

When focusing on the intrinsic nature of a literary work, teachers have their students see the setting, characters, tone, and style etc. The students will present their reading and show how they understand the work by detailing the literary elements. It is good activity of reading. The students can understand the meaning of the words in a literary work and show how the words support the work.

In the other side, a literary work can provide the teachers and students with life issues. When using the work this way, the class can become a reading class and a writing class. Firstly, the teachers give a set time to the students to read and understand the work. Then, the students write how they understand the work. They can use a specific critical theory to analyze the work.

Therefore in this article, I show that in a novel, *Miguel Street* written by V. S. Naipaul, there are many people who live in poverty deal with other people in their neighborhood. The vocal points are the words, poverty, and education. Their words and their daily interaction tell how they live in poverty. Education is another interesting part of life to observe in the novel.

After reading the novel, I try to find some data regarding the same or similar matters in real society, especially in Indonesia. Then, I will show how character education is something to see more because of its urgency in our society.

### **Miguel Street: The Words and Poverty**

*Miguel Street* is a novel that tells us about a different place in the world. It is different from the place where people speaking English such as the United States of America, England, Australia and some other countries where English is spoken in education standard ways. Miguel Street is in Port of Spain, Trinidad. The author, V.S. Naipaul attempted to tell us other world and in the same time, he mentioned some enjoyment which was standardized by the first world, prosperous countries. In the novel

he used words *Coca-Cola*, *Pepsi-Cola* and *Cambridge School* to represent the higher level standards of life.

The story shows limited economic opportunities and aborted ambition. Although he wrote all condition with humor rather than sadness, readers still feel the sadden situations. The characters lauged at the others and Naipaul attempted to make readers think that they were stupid. It is shown in the dialogue.

*What you making, Mr. Popo? I asked. Popo would always say."ha boy! That's the question. I making the thing without a name (p. 17).*

The English which is used in the dialogue strengthens the notion of restricted socio-cultural condition. In their dialogues, the characters use a distinct nonnative English variety that is different from the Standard English of higher class people.

The author wanted to show us that the characters are uneducated and poor. Because of the poor condition, they have just a small and easy hope. We can read it in the novel.

*After midnight there were two regular noises in the street. At about two o'clock you heard the sweepers; and then just before dawn, the scavenging-carts came and you heard the men scraping off the rubbish the sweepers had gathered into heaps. No boy in the street particularly wished to be a sweeper. But if you asked any boy what he would like to be, he would say, I going be a cart-driver. .... There was certainly a glamour to driving the blue carts. The men were aristocrats. They worked early in the morning and had the rest of the day free. And then they were always going on strike. They didn't strike for much. They struck for things like a cent more a day; they struck if someone was laid off. They struck when the war began; they struck when the war ended. They struck when India got independence. They struck when Gandhi died. (p. 36)*

The states in the story are mixed and they regard the states as their world. Almost all words in the story tell us that they live in cynical, funny and pessimistic atmosphere.

*Miguel Street* is an example of Trinidad Society. It tells about Indian and black residents drawn from Trinidad's urban lower class that usually faces unpleasant condition as what Naipaul wrote some words of Elias, a character in *Miguel Street*.

*Elias began saying, "but what the hell you expect in Trinidad? You got to bribe everybody if you want to get your toenail cut". (p. 44)*

Even in more cynical words when Elias knew that the boy (Naipaul) sat in Cambridge Senior School certificate and he saw the boy wearing the uniform of a job in the customs. He said "What your mother do to get you that?" He shouted (p. 44). The words in the two dialogues show that with the cynical words, Naipaul was trying to describe the big social relation problems that occurred to the characters in his society. The social problems were shown in their daily life interaction, the way they make their living, and how they attempted to have education.

A story that tells how difficult people in *Miguel Street* get education is "His Chosen Calling" that tells how a character tried hard to achieve more valuable and prosperous life through education. It is read in what Naipaul wrote in one of the pages,

*"So you don't want to be a cart-driver? What you want to be then? A sweeper?. Elias spat neatly into the gutter and looked down. He said very earnestly, "I think I going be a doctor, you hear." If Boyee or Errol had said something like that, we would all have laughed. But we recognized that Elias was different, that Elias had brains.....We All felt sorry for Elias. His father brutalized the boy with blows, but Elias never cried, never spoke a word against his father.....Elias began going to school at the other end of Miguel Street. It didn't really look like a school at all. It just like any house to me, but there was a sign outside that said: TITUS HOYT, I. A*

*(London, External) passes in the Cambridge School Certificate Guaranteed.....The year before his mother died, Elias sat for the Cambridge Senior School Certificate. Titus Hoyt came down to our end of street. "That boy going pass with honours," Titus Hoyt said. "With honours.....We saw Elias dressed in neat khaki trousers and white shirt, going to the examination room, and we looked at him with awe. Errol said "Everything Elias write not remaining here, you know. Every word that the boy write going to England." It didn't sound true. "What you think it is at all?" Errol said. "Elias have brains, you know." ..... Elias's mother died in January, and the results came out in March. Elias hadn't passed. (pp. 37 - 39)*

Elias kept taking exams but he failed and failed again. People talked about how he struggled. They supported him, but they also felt pity. Then he felt frustrated. He finally got back to the common idea of boys of *Miguel Street*, a cart-driver, the street aristocrat. When he was driving a scavenging cart, he said cynically to the boy, "No theory here." "This is the practical. I really like the work." (p. 45).

Nevertheless, there is always something to change the condition. The crucial point to read is a story that tells how the boy left *Miguel Street*. Naipaul wrote,

*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." I said, "All right. You think about it and decide." My mother said, I go go and talk to Ganesh Pundit about it. He was a friend of your father. But you must go from here. You getting too wild." I suppose my mother was right. Without really knowing it, I had become a little wild. I was drinking like a fish, and doing a lot besides. The drinking started in the*

*customs, where we confiscated liquor on the slightest pretext. At first the smell of spirits upset me, but I used to say to myself, "you must get over this. Drink it like medicine. Hold your nose and close your eyes." In time I had become a first class drinker, and I began suffering from drinker's pride. (p. 215)*

No matter how a mother behaves daily, but a mother is a mother. The boy's mother made the boy leave Miguel Street. She did not like the wild way her son lived in the community. She wanted to save her son by sending him to a better place. In the better place, she expected bigger opportunities to her son to have better characters.

In addition she attempted to send her son to have better education. Naipaul wrote

*About two months later, my mother said, "You must come with me next week. We going to see Ganesh Pundit."..... He was a minister of something or the other in the government..... We went to his big house in St Clair and we found the great man, not dressed in dhoti and koortah, as in the mystic days, but in an expensive-looking lounge suit. (p. 216)*

The boy's mother asked for help to Ganesh Pundit. She did not think to let the boy stay in Miguel Street. She pushed the boy to study anything but not in Trinidad, and the boy agreed with her mother. With the help of Ganesh Pundit, her mother sent the boy to England.

### **Miguel Street and What Happens in Indonesia**

In realism style, *Miguel Street* shows the reader what really happens in Trinidad. Dolly Zulakha Hassan (1989) said that

*Miguel Street, then, presents a gallery of people who are frustrated in their efforts to make something of themselves in Trinidad, but who, nevertheless, are characterized by their vitality and resilience, and imagination (1989: 112).*

The poorness and sadness are not the merely things to show, but the author also attempts to tell a story of hope and ideal. To tell more about the attempts of the characters to change their lives, he wrote in some specific pages some story that tells how people want to get a proper education, but it is not easy to get it. Even, some people faced impossibilities.

*Miguel Street* gave me two important lessons. The first, in their poor condition, the adult characters in the story becomes "teachers" for the boys living surroundings. They realize that they live in poor condition, but unconsciously they feel that the way they live was the best for people like them including for the boy and the other boys in *Miguel Street*. In my opinion, the boy and the other boys in *Miguel Street* represents teenagers who live in similar conditions in the world.

*Miguel Street* described how teenagers live with people who behave badly. They learn the bad habits every day. They read the real text in their daily real lives. They easily imitate what the adults do in his community. They see how a father blows his son and daughter, and the violence is recorded in their mind. They see how a husband knocks his wife out and when many husbands do the same, they think that it is a common and natural thing to do.

In Indonesia, it happens in the real life. The following is a summary of news that may represent the big number of violence cases:

### **Bunuh Anak Gara-gara Piring, Soleha Divonis 12 Tahun Penjara**

Diringkas dari Kompas.com. Senin, 16 Februari 2015 | 17:32 WIB

**JEMBER, KOMPAS.com** - Soleha (39), warga Desa Yosorati, Kecamatan Sumberbaru, Jember, Jawa Timur, yang menjadi terdakwa kasus pembunuhan terhadap anak kandungnya sendiri, Iin (18), divonis 12 tahun penjara oleh Majelis Hakim Pengadilan Negeri Jember, Senin (16/2/2015). Dalam putusannya, Majelis Hakim yang diketuai Nur Kholis menilai, Soleha terbukti bersalah membunuh anaknya

sendiri pada tahun 2012 silam. "Terdakwa melanggar Pasal 44 UU No 23 Tahun 2004 tentang Kekerasan Dalam Rumah Tangga (KDRT). Sebagai seorang ibu, Soleha melakukan kekerasan terhadap anaknya hingga mengakibatkan meninggal," terang Nur Kholis sesuai persidangan.

Seperti diberitakan beberapa waktu yang lalu, Soleha tega menghabisi nyawa anak kandungnya sendiri Iin, lalu membuangnya ke *septic tank*. Ironisnya, motif pembunuhan itu cukup sepele, yakni karena korban menjatuhkan piring hingga pecah (*Kompas.com, 2015*).

In Indonesia, violence happens in families. We must consider the cases not only gender sensitive cases but also human relation cases. The victims are not only women but also children. Even, the very frightening condition, it may happen between a mother and a daughter.

It may happen daily in a community, and when violence occurs habitually, the value will be transparent and susceptible. Easily, it will be learned by teenagers. It is a threat for their character education. It will shape bad characters in them. They will easily internalize or absorb the idea of the characters. Afterwards, they will unconsciously do the same things.

Then, the teenagers will go to street. The parents will wait for the other bad characters shown by their boys and girls. There is nothing that they can do but to be angry. The parents do not give enough time to talk about better things to do, and then the new violence occurs. Homes are not good places for the teenagers.

The teenagers will find better and more comfortable places. Then, they will then run to the places that may give them different situation. They will learn from people in the places. They will do what people do in the places. They will eat and drink what people eat and drink in the places. It will happen every day.

When things are out of control, many legal cases involving teenagers occur. The

cases happen since the teenagers feel free to do anything that they like. They may see bad things outside homes. They have a lot of choices to do. They only need to choose to do one thing and feel happy. The condition will make them grow up and wild. They will waste their money, time, and life. They will commit crime easily. The following news is only an example:

Kamis, 20/02/2014 08:54 WIB

**Polisi: Sebelum Beraksi Geng Tengky Boys Tenggak Miras dan Pakai Narkoba -**

**Edward Febriyatri Kusuma - detikNews**

**Jakarta** - Polisi telah menetapkan sebelas tersangka terkait keributan yang dilakoni Geng Tengky Boyz. Sebelum beraksi pelajar-pelajar tersebut minum-minuman keras terlebih dahulu. "Mereka murni menamakan Tengky Boys anak-anak di bawah umur yang melakukan kenakalan dan dalam aksinya mereka menggunakan narkoba dan minuman keras supaya berani," ujar Kapolsek Pondok Gede, Kompol Kunto Wibisono kepada detikcom, Kamis (20/2/2014).

Di setiap aksinya para pelaku selalu melakukan aksi kekerasan untuk merampas harta benda orang lain. Mereka pun melakukan aksinya secara bergerombol.

"Mereka juga tidak segan-segan melukai korban yang melakukan perlawanan," ujar Kunto. Menurut Kunto mereka hanya melakukan kenakalan remaja biasa. "Kami juga menyampaikan di wilayah Polsek Pondok Gede tidak ada geng motor atau Geng Amerika," ungkapnya (*detikNews, 2014*).

When teenagers are close to alcohol and drugs, other bad conducts will be easily committed. They will do the bad conducts together with their friends. Alcohol and drugs make them wilder. They will not have control on themselves. Then the police and law will take the control on them.

However there is always hope in life, even in the poorest life condition. I can read it in the second lesson that I can get from

*Miguel Street*. It is the moment when the mother determined to send them out from Miguel Street. It occurs to me that there is an opportunity for someone to become a hero in his or her community. The hero can come up with a good decision to change a bad condition to be a better one or at least the decision may become a new hope.

In the story, the mother believed that a change must be done radically. She wanted her son to have better an environment and school. She put a hope on a new place and education. She realized what her son needed to have for his life. Even, she did not care what subject that her son wanted to take, but she was very sure that her son had to be out of the wild condition in her country and she was willing to sacrifice to make it happen.

It is not only in the story but it is real. In families, parents should have the same will as what the mother has in *Miguel Street*. Education should become one of the first priority needs to meet. They should have distinguished determination to provide good education for their sons and daughters. They should work hard to send their children to good schools.

In a real society, there are people who take this opportunity to become heroes. They are willing to sacrifice their lives for humanities. There are many people who dedicate their lives to providing education for poor children. They are heroes for others. They are valuable people who do valuable activities for humans' sake. The following is a real news case;

Senin, 23/06/2014 12:38 WIB

**Tampung Anak Jalanan, Sekolah Darurat Kartini Jadi Percontohan Dunia - Taufan Noor Ismailian - detikNews**

**Jakarta** - Dua guru kembar pemilik Sekolah Darurat Kartini di Ancol, Sri Rossyati dan Sri Irianingsih mendapat kunjungan dari 7 Ordo Fransiskan dari beberapa negara. Kedatangan tersebut tak lain karena mereka terkesan dengan pengelolaan pendidikan untuk anak jalanan yang diberikan oleh ibu guru kembar tersebut. 7 Negara Ordo

Fransiscan yang berkunjung diantaranya dari USA, Brazil, Jerman, Mozambik, Meksiko, Slovenia, dan 1 perwakilan dari Indonesia. Perwakilan Ordo Fransiskan dari Brazil, Joe Rozansky/OFM sungguh terkesan dengan usaha keras yang dilakukan kedua guru kembar terhadap pendidikan anak jalanan. "Ini sekolah yang sangat bagus, sungguh inisiatif yang bagus yang dilakukan ibu guru kembar untuk mengatasi kemiskinan kota. Di Brazil memiliki permasalahan yang sama tentang anak jalanan, ini sangat menarik, bisa dicontoh," kata Joe Rozansky di Sekolah Darurat Kartini, Jalan Lodan Raya, Ancol, Pademangan, Jakarta Utara, Senin (23/6/2014) (*detikNews, 2014*)

Again, the news shows how people can do something for other people. Sri Rossyati and Sri Irianingsih provide free school for poor children. When their parents cannot afford the school fees for their children, Sri Rossyati and Sri Irianingsih dedicate their lives to giving free education for the children. What they do may become an example for other next heroes of human beings.

### **The Character Education**

Education should consider any situations as opportunities in character education. The educators should learn the threats and subsequently see the factors that may provide students with better condition. Education should make schools good places to be. The schools should present real morally right characters to learn.

Schools should become comfortable and free from worry and pain places. The teachers, the educators, should become adults that will not show any violence. They should be able to show how to solve any problem and conflict with negotiation and legal actions. They should become characters that behave well.

Education should provide all good aspects needed by students for their lives. Schools and the educators who are involved should not only focus on knowledge but other necessary aspects such as emotion and

behavior. Comparini (2011) wrote in the Jakarta Post:

*The renowned Italian psychologist and pedagogue Mario Polito, for instance, in his book Educare il cuore (To educate the heart), criticizes a system focusing on factual knowledge but lacking on emotional and behavioral aspects. Because this kind of school is not supporting the formation of good persons and a better society, "...therefore this school is useless. It is useless for life as it is useless for mankind". The enumeration of problem areas and contradictions existing in school education could be very long. The subject is very complex and can be only sketched in this short context. What can be done is to try to draw, from the mentioned aspects, common factors that could help to build better schools with better education. One of these could be that a good school education, especially for young pupils, respects children's needs and their evolution stages. Moreover, more space should be given to formative teaching, including emotions' education, to support both individual and social wellbeing. (the Jakarta Post, 2011)*

Schools should provide rational lessons for students' mind and examples of good conducts for their heart. Henceforth, Education can become a valuable system to encourage students to perform good characters.

In Indonesia, character education is conducted to show good values to students. The values are shown with examples. According to Pusat Kurikulum Departemen Pendidikan Nasional 2010, some good values that can be shown to students are being religious, being honest, being tolerant, being disciplined, being hard-working, being creative, being independent and the other good conducts supporting students' lives.

It is not very easy to share the good conducts to students when the teachers face the reality. When a teacher is teaching students who come from happy families and neighborhoods, he will not need to try to find other references but the students' families

and neighborhoods. The teacher only needs to make the students remember what their parents do at home.

However it is not very easy for teachers who teach students coming from broken home families, poor families and families who live in slum places. The students do not have good examples at home. They will easily get the opposite condition of what their teachers try to show. In this case teachers must fight against realities. Their explanation must be stronger than what their students easily have from their neighborhoods and families.

At least what the teachers can do is to make better environment at schools. The schools must be better homes for students. No violence shows and nobody bullies others. The students must be respected humans. They must be given responsibility to take care of their schools' conducive and peaceful situation.

## Conclusion

Reading a literary work is not only reading the intrinsic nature of the work but also reading the lessons that I can also find in reality. A novel teaches the readers. It may show a story in a specific place and time. Then, the readers can use the story as a reference to see a reality.

*Miguel Street* teaches the readers some lessons as follows:

1. Adult people can become teachers for the teenagers that live surroundings. In a poor community people live in a slum situation. The adult people easily commit violence to their wives or husband, and their daughter and sons. The teenagers see that as a lesson that they can also do to others. It is a specific threat for character education.
2. When the teenagers do not have any comfort their homes, they will run away and find the comfort outside homes. They will do anything that is possible to do. They will be familiar with alcohol and drugs. They will commit crime easily after drinking alcohol and consuming drugs.
3. In a poor condition parents should have good determination to send their children to schools. They should dedicate their lives



to giving an opportunity for their children to get education. They should save their children from the social problems of poverty.

4. In addition some people take their opportunities to become heroes for other people. They provide free education for poor children. Other people in other places can take the actions as example. This case may become a good lesson in character education.
5. Education has an opportunity in character education. It should conduct schools that become better places for students. Education or schools are suggested to provide students with rational lessons to students' mind and good character examples to their heart.
6. Teachers have a significant role to succeed character education schools. They must give good conducts to their students. They must keep the comfortable situations at schools.

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