# Unmasking Coloniality: Perspective by Incongruity in Naipaul's *Miguel Street*

**Brian Sibanda**
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5189-6132
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
sibandab@uj.ac.za

## Abstract

Various debates and contradictions characterise the life and fiction of Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul. While many critics view Naipaul as a prominent figure who perpetuates colonial narratives through his literary oeuvre, this article proposes an alternative perspective, particularly in the context of *Miguel Street*. To deviate from the lens of colonial racism and clichés, this article employs Kenneth Burke's concept of "perspective by incongruity" as an alternative reading of the text. In so doing, *Miguel Street* is thus interpreted as a collection of short stories that unveil the coloniality of existence within Trinidad's flawed modernity. Perspective by incongruity is a rhetorical resource that unmasks coloniality's inhumanity by subverting and challenging known pieties in the novel. This article demonstrates how Naipaul uses character portrayals to shock the audience to the tragedy of humanity under coloniality, thus connecting the text to broader social and political realities. Arguably, the success of *Miguel Street* lies in violating the audience's expectations and introducing ambiguity into their perceptions. Naipaul inadvertently assumes the metaphorical role of an evangelist who asks the audience to alter their orientations and give them new meanings. As such, the article examines Burke's rhetorical tool of perspective by incongruity as an alternative lens in interpreting the short stories without seeking to sanitise Naipaul's debatable legacy.

**Keywords:** perspective by incongruity; coloniality of being; decoloniality; *Miguel Street*; V.S. Naipaul

UNISA LASA
Journal of Literary Studies
Volume 41 | 2025 | #19079 | 17 pages
https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/19079
ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

## Introduction

*Miguel Street* (1959), although perennially categorised as a "novel," is structurally an interwoven collection of 17 vignettes recounted by a nameless narrator. A critical precis of the work's setting and form, therefore, becomes indispensable as there is a debate about its genre. Although read as an interlinked short-story cycle, with each chapter as self-contained and focusing on a specific character, the plot and characterisation accumulate across chapters. Importantly, the episodes are chronological and follow one narrator's coming-of-age. The final story, "How I Left Miguel Street," where the narrator (a young boy) leaves for England to study, becomes a concluding gathering scene, where all the remaining street characters give the narrator symbolic farewell gifts. It is this narrative arc, from childhood innocence to reluctant departure, that lends the work novelistic unity.

*Miguel Street* was published in 1959 but is set in the 1940s in the colonial Trinidad and Tobago's capital of Port of Spain, which became independent in 1962. Written on the eve of decolonisation, Naipaul does not witness the existence of coloniality in the post-colonial Trinidadian society. However, through his fictive imagination and his visualisation of the post-independence crisis, he, in the context of Frantz Fanon's *Towards an African Revolution* (1964), sets the stage for despair and crisis in post-independent Trinidad. It occupies a liminal space that mirrors the colonised psyche. Each chapter contributes to a communal portrait of a modern/colonial town devoid of any ethics (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 12), where Naipaul's misunderstood impatience with colonial inertia is evident in the characters who are Fanon's "wretched of the earth," the *damnés* who embody "colonised madness" precisely because their world denies them authentic subjectivity (Fanon 1963, 35).

Interestingly, early admirers celebrated Naipaul's "vivid snapshots" of West Indian life, and the work won the Somerset Maugham Award in 1961 (Huggan 1994, 202). However, in violating what ought to be, *Miguel Street* attracted negative reviews and criticism, with the text being referred to as "forced tragedy" (Tirivangana 2015), albeit with the highly comedic elements. Meanwhile, Walcott (as quoted in Stavans 1999, 126) implies that Naipaul's fiction is "style without truth" and his sense of history is "pluperfect tense." JanMohamed (1985, 87) posits that Naipaul is a native colonialist writer whose writing "reeks of contempt and reveals only the operation of colonialist mentality."

Although Naipaul has been praised for his beautiful prose, posthumously, he remains condemned as a personification of the double throng of colonialism and racism. Dabashi (2018), in mourning the passing away of Naipaul, harshly called him a self-punishing, self-loathing, world-loathing and furious, cruel man. Dabashi (2018) contends with Edward Said (1978) that Naipaul became a witness for the Western prosecution. He is perceived as an author who became a willing tool and ventriloquist of colonialism and whose work exists to arrogantly and confidently reinforce colonial clichés of the Caribbean other. C.L.R. James notes that Naipaul's fiction is a brazen voice of

coloniality, which echoes "what the whites want to say but dare not" (as quoted in Dabashi 2018, n.p.). Dabashi (2018, n.p.) sums up the commonly held view of Naipaul and his work when he states that:

> He was a misogynist, for that was what the British liberal imperialism had taught him he was. He acted the role to perfection. He crafted a dark soul in himself to prove his racist masters right. When he wrote of our criminalities, his masters loved it, "you see he is one of them, but he writes our language so well", and when he acted like a brute, his masters sniggered and said, "you see still the Indian from Trinidad". For them he was win-win, for us, lose-lose.

Notably, such critiques often fail to account for Naipaul's (inadvertent) technique of perspective by incongruity (Burke 1935) and thus misread his subversive deployment of dissonance. Indeed, the same textual features vex naysayers as Burkean contrivances that unseat complacent readings. Meanwhile, some postcolonial studies have interrogated Naipaul's politics; for example, Huggan (1994) faulted him for his "political incorrectness" and reluctant embrace of identity politics. Others, like Slemon (1987) and Gikandi (1991), have located Naipaul's "double-voiced" narrative strategy within later postcolonial irony, a way of "bearing witness" to the island's reality while recognising the ineffability of that reality. One useful intervention comes from Balfour's (2010) analysis, which underscores how Naipaul's portrayal of "unhomed" subjects echoes Frantz Fanon's (1963) notion of a people who exist in the "Zone of Nonbeing." Conversely, decolonial theorists such as Mignolo (2013) and Grosfoguel (2011) have extended critique to the concept of "coloniality," examining how European epistemic regimes persist beyond formal decolonisation. Maldonado-Torres (2007) diagnoses "coloniality of being" as an ontological disfigurement that reduces colonised persons to "nonbeings." By layering these frameworks with Burke's perspective by incongruity (1935, 1954), one can comprehend how Naipaul's textual strategy abruptly shifts between satirical comedy and stark tragedy, exposing the irreconcilable tensions underpinning a colonial and post-colonial society.

Nonetheless, this article does not seek to sanitise Naipaul or absolve him of the label of racist bogie; instead, it aims to provide an alternative perspective on *Miguel Street*, by reading it from a perspective-by-incongruity lens. This article, therefore, seeks to rebalance what Shilliam (2015) calls "the telling of colonial suffering" by showing how Naipaul's ostensibly pessimistic and distasteful narrative inscribes a decolonial impulse, an astringent, satirical denunciation of coloniality's "wretched town" (Gordon 2010; Maldonado-Torres 2007). The alternative approach allows for reading the novel not as a voice of coloniality, but rather, unmasking coloniality and a condemnation of Trinidad's flawed modernity that has rendered its inhabitants into "colonial clowns" (Lagji 2021, 211). While Naipaul's characterisation has received backlash, these portrayals precisely underscore the effectiveness of the perspective by incongruity in reframing orientations and offering a new angle for reading *Miguel Street*. Thus, the proposed lens highlights *Miguel Street*'s exposure of coloniality. Drawing on Fanon and decolonial theorists, as well as Burke's concept of perspective by incongruity, Naipaul,

through *Miguel Street*, intentionally or not, dramatises the zone of colonial nonbeing inhabited by the damned people of Miguel Street. In other words, the street and its characters resemble the Fanonian "native town" or "negro village," a place of deprivation and dislocation.

Rather than reaffirm colonial stereotypes, Naipaul subverts them by juxtaposing absurd comedy with hidden tragedy, a rhetorical strategy that forces readers to confront colonial inhumanity. Therefore, this article proceeds by surveying the relevant theoretical frameworks (Fanon's zone of nonbeing and Maldonado-Torres's coloniality of being), then performing close readings of key characters and stories to show how Naipaul's portrayal unearths coloniality.

From a perspective-by-incongruity lens, the effectiveness of a work of art, among others, lies in the dissonance that it creates in its audience (Burke 1935). Therefore, the perspective-by-incongruity approach seeks to supplant a traditional way of perceiving what ought to be, thereby forcing the re-interpretation of meaning. The effectiveness of a text lies in opposing the grain and challenging the normal way of doing things to create new ways, behaviours, and motives. By applying this lens, one can argue that *Miguel Street* can be alternatively understood as an attempt to create dissonance and incongruity by transforming the accepted portrayal of the "other" and the role of a writer in a colonial context. The aim of the incongruity created through the tragic, self-loathing, fractured, and helpless characters roaming the "rubbish heap" called Miguel Street can be interpreted as an invitation to the readers to re-engage with the coloniality of being in a community in transition from slavery and colonisation to political independence. The characters in *Miguel Street* are unpeople whose lives are tragic and comical, simultaneously. Such representation contradicts the historical context on which the stories are based; similar to other societies, the Trinidadian society had distinguished people, heroes, revolutionaries, and role models (Thieme 1981). From a perspective-by-incongruity lens, this article thus argues that the omission of distinguished people and role models from Miguel Street, which is generally interpreted as an act of loathing Trinidad, is, alternatively, an invitation to the readers to reflect on the complexities of identity and existence within a colonial framework. Further, this challenges the notion of what it means to be human in a society marked by socio-economic struggles and cultural dislocation. Therefore, the perspective-by-incongruity lens undoubtedly exposes the dehumanising and grave impact of colonialism on the cultural identity and existence of Trinidadians, as portrayed in the grimly humorous *Miguel Street*.

## Incongruity, Coloniality of Being, and the *Damné*

Propounded by Burke (1935), perspective by incongruity is a rhetorical strategy that provides an alternative "way-in" to *Miguel Street*. It involves deliberately introducing contradiction and fragmentation to provoke shifts in perspective. Burke (1935, 89) describes this as transforming "the use of a term by taking it from the context in which it was habitually used and applying it to another." This rhetorical dissonance, juxtaposing images or representations outside their expected context, challenges what

Burke (1935, 89) calls the audience's learned pieties, or "the sense of what properly goes with what." Therefore, it destabilises the familiar and generates new modes of understanding. Applied to *Miguel Street*, this framework helps us understand how the text disrupts conventional representations of colonial and post-colonial life. What may appear as mere character failure or satire (such as B. Wordsworth pretending to be a poet or Man-man a prophet), becomes a site of rhetorical and ideological dissonance. These incongruities provoke discomfort and force the reader to interrogate underlying assumptions about colonial subjects. Kaur (2023) reads this dissonance as Naipaul's oversight, a reduction of structural oppression into personal failure. However, through Burke's lens, this "oversight" becomes the mechanism by which the text exposes the iron grip of coloniality.

This rhetorical disruption aligns with Fanon's (1952) concept of the zone of nonbeing, which frames the lived experience of colonised peoples not merely as materially disadvantaged but as existentially distorted. Fanon (1952, 89) describes the colonised subject as locked in a world where they are denied full humanity, "an object among other objects," unable to appear as a subject in the eyes of the coloniser. This "nonbeing" is not simply social exclusion but ontological negation; the colonised inhabit a psychic and existential zone where they are always becoming, never fully being. In *Miguel Street*, this Fanonian structure manifests in the repetitive failure of characters to realise coherent identities or futures. Characters mimic poets, prophets, cowboys, or priests, not out of delusion, but because colonial modernity offers no viable scripts of selfhood. Their absurd gestures are attempts to position themselves in a world that defines them as nonbeing. The novel's pathetic humour is not trivial; it captures what Fanon (1952) calls the "absurdity" of colonised life, where desire, dignity, and action are systematically thwarted.

Gordon (2007) elaborates that the zone of nonbeing is a "hellish" space of invisibility, in which the colonised suffer a form of social death. Naipaul's street-dwellers, while vividly drawn, operate within a world not curated for them. The moments of incongruity, like B. Wordsworth's monthly poetry line or Hat's mock-heroic criminality, reflect the absurdity of asserting personhood in a structure that devalues it. The reader's discomfort at these characters is the rhetorical result Burke anticipates—to disturb so deeply that one must reinterpret the entire system that produces such figures.

This existential disruption is further clarified through Maldonado-Torres's (2007) notion of the coloniality of "being." He extends Fanon's insights by arguing that coloniality persists not only in politics and economics but in the very structure of subjectivity. According to Maldonado-Torres (2007), the colonised subject is not "ordinary Dasein" but one who lives under constant exposure to erasure, death, surveillance, and dehumanisation. The colonial world is structured around a division between humans (colonisers) and *Others* (colonised). This ontological divide informs how people live, talk, behave, relate, and think, creating the colonised Dasein, an

existence defined by negation, dependency, and the impossibility of self-grounded being.

In *Miguel Street*, this dynamic is omnipresent. The street exists outside the centres of power and being; its inhabitants are confined to humiliation, failure, escape, imitation, mimicry, and repetition. Their aspirations, to be poets, priests, tailors, carpenters, or patriarchs, collapse into farce not because of personal flaws but because the colonial structure denies them legitimacy and subjectivity. Burke's (1935) idea of violated piety here converges with Maldonado-Torres's (2007) description of the disrupted self. The incongruity between the characters' ambitions and their outcomes mirrors the ontological instability that coloniality enforces.

Furthermore, the narrative form of *Miguel Street*, episodic and fragmented, echoes this ontological discontinuity. Each story is self-contained, but together they map a world where continuity, coherence, and closure are impossible. This formal incongruity mirrors the condition of colonial life described by Fanon (1952) and Maldonado-Torres (2007) as not only chaotic and irrational but deliberately structured to prevent self-realisation. The fragmentation is not merely aesthetic; it is ideological, reflecting a society where the colonised can neither exist fully nor escape entirely.

Ultimately, Burke's (1935) rhetorical framework, when placed in dialogue with Fanon's (1952) and Maldonado-Torres's (2007) ontological critiques, enables a more expansive reading of *Miguel Street*. The text's incongruous characters and jarring tonal shifts are not signs of Naipaul's detachment or cynicism but evidence of a strategy, deliberate or not, to unmask coloniality. In Burke's (1935) terms, Naipaul takes the role of the evangelist-writer, troubling the reader's mental patterns and provoking anger, shame, or recognition. This disorientation is the first step towards what Burke (1935) calls a "new orientation" and what Dussel (2013) calls the decolonial liberation.

## The Damned of *Miguel Street*

There are expectations of what and how a writer from the Global South ought to write. Trinidadian by birth and Indian by descent, Naipaul and his family existed in a colonial world that questioned their humanity, and piety demands that his role as a writer becomes that of righting the wrong, standing in the gap of the "in-between" space to cause a representation of their unrepresented society (Achebe 1965). The role of a writer from the marginalised communities is that of a teacher, a cultural nationalist, a motivator, a social critic, and an actor (Ogungbesan 1974). A writer whose community exists on the darker side of modernity must help society regain self-belief and eliminate the complexes of the years of denigration (Achebe 1966). In the observation of the decolonial philosopher Grosfoguel (2012), a writer needs to be enmeshed in the experience of their communities and "walk with" their people while "asking questions" and "listening" to them instead of "walking while preaching" their inventions to the people. In the case of Trinidad, like any other colonial context, a writer is expected to

be a decolonial "rearguard" as opposed to the colonial "vanguard" as Naipaul is often labelled.

In a claustrophobic colonial environment, a writer needs to become what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1997) calls a writer in politics, that is, a writer who positions him or herself on "the side of the people" and sees the people not only as objects of their writing but powerful and knowing subjects, which, at a surface level, is not the case in *Miguel Street*. Eastly (2008, 51) states that Naipaul is "not insensitive to this issue of the importance of properly representing the complexities of lived experiences in literature," with his characters presented as figures of lack in a nightmare society with no glimmer of hope and sparkle of optimism. Achebe (1965, 157) states that:

> The worst thing that can happen to any person is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them and what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man can't tell where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all, the novelist's duty is not to beat this morning's headline in topicality; it is to explore the human condition in-depth.

Achebe's understanding of the role of a writer is critical because it is this understanding that led him to find Naipaul's writing as "downright outrageous" and "pompous rubbish" as it lacks "one common thread running … the thread of a shared humanity linking the author to the world of his creation; a sense that even in the most tempting moments of grave disappointment with this world, the author remains painfully aware that he is of the same flesh and blood, the same humanity as its human inhabitants" (Achebe 2001, 85). Achebe further referred to Naipaul as "a new purveyor of the old comforting myths of the white race" (Achebe 1988, 18). Naipaul violated what ought to be; he transgressed the pious role carved out for writers of the Global South in terms of locus of enunciation. Naipaul committed an impious act by going against what was expected. However, for Burke (1935), such impious acts are effective tools of conversion that force a change in orientations to create new ones. In *Miguel Street*, Naipaul is wrenched loose from tradition, rationality, and expectations through the portrayal of his characters to force the readers to confront the myth of postcoloniality and post-colonial Trinidad where the "modern subjects … breathe coloniality all the time every day" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). While *Miguel Street*'s setting is "post-colonial," the condemned existence of the characters attests to enduring coloniality that remains post colonialism. Maldonado-Torres (2007) defines coloniality as different from colonialism and as having a systemic endurance to survive colonialism and continue systematic domination and exploitation of peripheral communities and peoples long after administrative colonialism:

> Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism but that define culture,

> labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. (2007, 243)

Coloniality is a remnant of colonialism that continues to plague the inhabitants of Miguel Street. Through impious character portrayal, Naipaul re-frames the debate on the nightmarish effects of coloniality in Trinidad. The helplessness and fantasy living of the characters is a deliberate escape and violation of the "normal" or congruent characterisation of those who exist in the margins and their resistance to coloniality. His characterisation violates the cliché of colonised beings, giving hope to the hopeless, as the normal expectation would be considering that Naipaul was writing about a community under coloniality. Naipaul defies the expected subaltern representation as his characters are portrayed as figures of lack, thus deliberately creating the incongruity to shock or upset his audience into re-interpreting the effects of coloniality that have produced a community of unpeople. There are no heroes, leaders, revolutionaries or role models in this community of the damned but pathetic people who live mediocre and inconsequential lives. As such, the perspective by incongruity elucidates that such a disruption of the normal way of doing and perceiving things is a valid attempt to unveil or get closer to the truth. Though Naipaul's failure to adhere to what ought to be is interpreted as "laughing at his people" (Cudjoe 1988, 123), this is necessary to bring in new perspectives and to "illuminate aspects of reality that might have otherwise passed unobserved" (Hughes 1958, 92).

The characters in *Miguel Street* are violent, amoral, outcasts, eccentrics, mavericks, imitators, and tricksters; none of them achieve anything in this community. They are neither role models nor ideal, but mere fantasists in a tragic society to the extent that the narrator feels that "I used to wonder whether they knew how much worry they caused, and how uncertain their own position was" (Naipaul 1959, 67) as the residents of this street are preoccupied with pretending to be working on something which always leads to failure. For example, "Man-man was mad; George was stupid; Big Foot was a bully; Hat was an adventurer; Popo was a philosopher; and Morgan was our comedian" (36). Bogart pretends to be making a living by tailoring, yet he never stitches anything. Popo, who masquerades as a carpenter, pretends to be making a "thing without a name" but never completes anything resembling furniture. Popo's role exemplifies what Maldonado-Torres (2007) calls colonised Dasein, a symbol of an existence denied full being. Popo remains perpetually becoming but never actualising, just as a colonial subject is deprived of authentic selfhood. In this way, Popo's "philosophy" and endless workshop become a metaphor for coloniality; he is celebrated only for mediocrity (even prison earns him acclaim), reflecting a world where the colonised inhabit a state of nonbeing more than being.

Man-man contests every election, and every time he receives only three votes, he declares himself the new Messiah, thus normalising madness in *Miguel Street*. Man-man eventually tries to crucify himself on the cross and compels the people to stone him, only to shout, "What the hell is this? What the hell you people think you doing?

Look, get me down from this quick, let me down quick and I go settle the son of bitch who pelt a stone at me" (Naipaul 1959, 26). Man-man's fanaticism and madness illustrate Fanon's insights into colonial absurdity.

George is an alcoholic who has failed both as a father and as a husband. B. Wordsworth claims to be the greatest poet in the world, but he never completes a poem; he dies (escapes) without uttering a single line. Big Foot is a terror, but he is afraid of a dog. He works as a postman, driver, carpenter, and mason, but remains unskilful at any trade. Morgan is a pyrotechnist, but he never succeeded in his profession. Uncle Bhakcu markets himself as a mechanical genius but cannot repair even his car. Laura, though not beautiful, has been married seven times. Bolo, always busy with the "missing ball," does not commit to his business. Hat, who always gets involved in trouble with the police, eventually kills his wife. The narrator rejects Miguel Street and escapes to London through a scholarship sponsored by Mr Ganesh Ramsumair. Eddoes, an aristocrat of Miguel Street, "a man of leisure, well dressed, and keen on women" (51), acts like a commoner. Elias fails his Cambridge Senior School Certificate examinations and becomes a cart driver despite his numerous attempts. B. Wordsworth and George reveal the violence of denied recognition. B. Wordsworth's grand claim to be the world's greatest poet ends in silent failure, highlighting the incongruity of aspiration amid colonial oppression. His silence at death demonstrates how a colonial environment forecloses the colonised voice, an ontological violence that Maldonado-Torres (2007) would see as erasing subjectivity. George, similarly, projects toughness through his Alsatian dogs, but wallows in impotence and anger; his abusiveness and ultimate banishment reflect the internalised violence Fanon describes when dignity is impossible.

The characters' emptiness beneath loud fronts underscores Burke's (1935) claim that incongruous characterisation "pries apart existing linkages" (Selby 2002, 56), forcing readers to sense the colonial violence lurking beneath their farcical lives. Elias's failed attempt at education exemplifies what Maldonado-Torres (2007) describes as the colonial negation of Dasein. His desire to become a doctor is thwarted by a system that "never required efficiency" (Naipaul 2001, 53). In the colonial schema, the colonised have no place among scientists or leaders (as Walsh notes). Elias thus ends up confined to invisibility, showing how coloniality prohibits even the possibility of self-fulfilment. Walsh observes that:

> There is a kind of sadness folded into the quick lines of sketches in *Miguel Street*: It is unemphatic and never despairing because neither author nor character take up any indignant stance about what happens to them. They accept it. And they do so because of a conviction, or if that is too explicit and articulate, because of profound attitude or a posture in the bones and nerves, that one part of being human is simply hopelessness and another part is practicing a ritual to make that tolerable. (1970, 67)

It is this portrayal of characters in a colonial community that has seen Naipaul being branded as a literary sell-out who has not lived up to the expectations of "his" people. His portrayal of black characters as immoral, hopeless, and devoid of hope has led

Cudjoe (1988) to accuse him of being an agent of the colonisers who only has disdain for his people, a writer who only touches the soul of his people for wrong reasons. Said (1978, 41) stated that Naipaul in the Western World is "considered a master novelist and an important witness to the disintegration and hypocrisy of the Third World, in the post-colonial world he's a marked man as a purveyor of stereotypes and disgust for the world that produced him—though that doesn't exclude people thinking he's a gifted writer." The seemingly negative portrayal of the residents of Miguel Street has contributed to the stigma of Naipaul as an ally of the Western world as he has become one of "them" and is comfortable portraying his people as pretentious, distasteful, liars, and eccentric in a society devoid of ideas, heroes, and role models. In short, the criticism against *Miguel Street* is that the novel is a creative work that has lost its centre. Naipaul uses this impious characterisation to force the readers to change or examine their perspectives and to unmask the coloniality of being in colonial and post-independence societies.

The pathetic characters, in their hellish and damned existence, are designed to shock and move the audiences to anger. In this shock and anger, the dehumanising effects of coloniality are observed from new senses, thus re-orienting perspectives. Naipaul deliberately subverts the thousands of East Indians who had distinguished themselves professionally by the time he was born in 1932 (Eastly 2008), contrary to the portrayal of his characters, who are perceived to be a mockery of East Indians. Therefore, Eastly asks:

> Where are the true tailors implied by the clothes (certainly not imported) that the people in the stories wear? Where are the carpenters who have made the furniture and houses in the street? Where are the skilled mechanics—glimpsed in the margins of Uncle Bhacku's story? (2008, 49)

This does not mean that Naipaul was not aware of such concerns, but the expected or "normal" characterisation of the East Indians in *Miguel Street* cannot create the needed dissonance and anger to shock the audience into recognising the evils of coloniality and to force them to question their traditional logic and pieties and the myth of the post-colonial. The objective of Naipaul's pathetic characters is for the audience to feel sincere pathos for the plight of the Trinidadians and anger at the system that has turned them into lesser beings.

By deviating from logic and tradition, Naipaul pushed the limit of the audience's ability to generate meaning and make sense of the world through rational, pragmatic means. Perspective by incongruity, therefore, becomes a violation of piety for the sake of firmly asserting new piety. The pitiful and meaningless existence of the residents of Miguel Street, combined with negative criticism of Naipaul, is a testimony to Naipaul's disruption of existing orientations to force the audience to re-think the dehumanising effects of coloniality. The beings that roam Miguel Street invalidate the long-held myth perpetuated that colonialism has long ended and narrations of colonial wounds should end. Grosfoguel (2007, 219) clarifies that:

> One of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the notion that the elimination of colonial administrations amounted to decolonisation of the world. This led to the myth of a "postcolonial" world. The heterogeneous and multiple global structures put in over 450 years did not evaporate with the juridical political decolonisation of the periphery over the past 50 years. We continue to live under the same colonial power matrix. With juridical political decolonisation, we moved from a period of global colonialism to the current period of global coloniality.

The characters embody the struggles and the dehumanisation of individuals trapped in a socio-political landscape infected with coloniality that continues to marginalise their existence as they all amount to nothing in their "post-colonial" world. By unconventionally presenting these characters in a state of absurdity and despair, Naipaul unconventionally forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truths about the effects of colonialism in a society on the verge of political independence. *Miguel Street* presents a critique of the romanticised view of post-colonial societies, which often overlooks the complexities and harsh realities faced by their inhabitants and the continuity of colonial conditions and power relations beyond administrative colonialism and a power structure that pervades the culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). The residents of Miguel Street are not merely victims of their circumstances; they are also products of a colonial legacy that has stripped them of agency and dignity. This portrayal invites readers to engage with the uncomfortable realities of coloniality, prompting a re-evaluation of their assumptions about progress and development in post-colonial contexts.

Burke (1935, 103) noted that the "universe would appear to be something like a cheese; it can be sliced in an infinite number of ways—and when one has chosen his own pattern of slicing, he finds that other men's cuts fall at the wrong place." Based on the negative criticism of Naipaul and *Miguel Street*, one can interpret it to mean that Naipaul's crime (advertently or not) was to challenge the existing pattern of slicing cheese and that his "cuts fall at the wrong place." To this end, Whedbee (2001, 8) adds that "the rhetor must expect to meet the fury when desecrating the alters of an audience's pieties." Desecrating the altars of acceptable characterisation and the role of the writer in the Global South is an effective way to challenge existing orientations as it forces society to re-imagine, sometimes grudgingly so, the inhuman existence of those who exist on the darker side of modernity. This is in line with Burke's (1935, 169) observation that "the ultimate result is the need of a reorientation, a direct attempt to force the critical structure by shifts of perspective." In a colonial world, the shifts in perspective must be from both the coloniser and the colonised.

Instead of presenting resilient residents who challenge coloniality as piety dictates, Naipaul violates such pieties; he challenges the sense of what properly goes with what by having characters who are blind, if not happy, to their tragedy. For example, Bogart, with his dubious adventures and the quest for colonial ideals of success, is detached from his tragedy; Man-man's own crucifixion is a clinging to religious piety at the expense of confronting his oppressive environment and Elias's, whose dream is to

become a doctor. Still, the unattainable ideas of progress set up by colonial systems did not allow that to happen. The effectiveness of the characterisation comes from the dissonance created by subverting the norm of giving hope to the hopeless. Through this dissonance, a new perspective emerges, providing alternative lenses to view coloniality. The anger directed at such characterisation is an indictment of coloniality. *Miguel Street* thus pushes the audience to reconsider the existing order of things. Naipaul breaks down previously unbreakable symbolic systems, and, as Waisanen (2009, 135) adds, this forces the audience to continually perceive issues "from more than one angle, creating shocks of insight." Moving away from the accustomed way of characterising the wretched of the earth by one of their own writers creates shocks of insights that unmask the devastating horror of coloniality that continues to deny the residents of Miguel Street their humanity.

Piety demands a sense of order in orientation, a Miguel Street with heroic characters who fight the unjust system, who fight the tragedy and who carry hope for the community. Piety demands that we see the world as consistent, and any rocking of the boat or symbolic disruptions to the sense of order are severely dealt with, hence the unforgiving negativity assigned to *Miguel Street*. Naipaul turns orientations upside down to create impiety. All the characters are failures and have a sad and disappointing ending. George dies; B. Wordsworth and Edward leave Miguel Street as failures; Titus and Uncle Bhakcu remain trapped in their illusions of grandeur; Man-man is imprisoned, just as Popo and Hat go to jail. These few examples point to the sad ending of characters in this traditionless and valueless society, where imitation becomes the order of society, and individuals submit themselves to fantasies. Swidene (1984, 214) points out that, "in fact, almost all the inhabitants of Miguel Street are hopeless failures. But most of them fail with style and in their terms that is to succeed." This is in line with the designs of coloniality, as *Miguel Street* is inhabited by the wretched of the earth:

> The degrading fact of the colonial society; it never required efficiency, it never required quality, and these things, because unrequired, become undesirable. This is the world without scientists, engineers, explorers, soldiers or posts, without tradition or standard which shapes the people of Miguel Street. (Walsh 1970, 65)

Miguel Street becomes a community that celebrates mediocrity, a typical example being Popo, who, after his prison sentence for robbery, gets the necessary recognition as a "man" from the residents of Miguel Street. Similar to other residents of Miguel Street, mediocrity brought Popo popularity and respect.

The dogs in *Miguel Street*, just like all the other characters, are also used to further the dissonance as they behave in an impious manner, thus debunking what ought to be. Awkwardly, the dogs resemble their owners in this hellish street: "George has a mean mongrel. Toni's dog is a terrible savage. Hat's dog is an Alsatian with a sense of humour" (Naipaul 1959, 83). George's two Alsatian dogs, which are mean, resemble their master as he abuses anybody and in the same way, his two dogs are ready to bark

at anyone anytime. Tony's dog, which he neglects, also neglects him in return. Man-man also has a dog, which behaves like him:

> The dog was like Man-man in a way; too, it was a curious dog. It never barked, never looked at you, and if you looked at it, it looked away. It never made friends with any other dog, and if some dog tried either to get friendly or aggressive, Man-man's dog gave it a brief look of disdain and ambled away, without looking back. (24)

Confronting coloniality requires a discourse that shocks and disturbs in a way that "pries apart existing linkages and upsets normal patterns of association" (Selby 2002, 56), and *Miguel Street* should be read as an exercise that deliberately upsets the normal as seen in the residents of Miguel Street and their pets.

While Naipaul is easily misconceived as a traitor who has abandoned his debt to society as a writer by "walking away" instead of "walking with" his people, in the introduction to a collection of papers presented at a symposium on East Indians in the Caribbean in 1975, Naipaul denounced a colonialist perspective on Caribbean societies typified by "a kind of lumping together of all the groups that are not European into one nondescript, brownish mass … and such a view concedes humanity, it concedes a past, a particularity, and a pride, only to one particular group" (Eastly 2008, 51). This shows that Naipaul is not interested in being a native colonialist writer; he is conscious of his role as the colonial rearguard in colonial Trinidad and Tobago. The misconception and labelling of Naipaul stem from the issue that Naipaul carries out his role as a writer differently from other subaltern writers but probably with the same objective of unmasking the inhumanity of coloniality. The superficial, violent, hopeless, amoral, and childlike characters that walk the pessimistic street of Miguel Street only serve to shock the audience by heightening the state of paralysis the community is in due to the lingering effects of coloniality. The effectiveness of the impious portrayal of characters by Naipaul is in the anger generated by the reading of *Miguel Street* and its awkward characters who meet a dead-end; therefore, *Miguel Street* is not a call to surrender by Naipaul but enables the audience to go beyond the sense of pathos and question the system that created such characters. The only blemish staining Naipaul is the excessive radicalism in creating dissonance by hyperbolising the negatives in his characters. Excessive radicalism usually brings about the opposite of the desired response and alienates the audience as they retreat to their self-created reality. Foss (1979, 14) warns about a writer being highly radical in that:

> The more radical the juxtaposition of images, the more threatening to the reality the rhetoric will be, at the same time, the greater potential for failure the technique will have. For if a juxtaposition is too radical, audience members will feel so threatened that they simply will retreat into their own special reality and refuse to consider the arguments of the rhetor. Communicators who use perspective by incongruity, then, must employ it cautiously. They must introduce a notion that is jarring enough to initiate the process of re-thinking, but at the same time, they must not present an image that is so strong that it immediately alienates the audience.

Whether Naipaul's characterisation in *Miguel Street* is more radical and possibly a threat to the reality that he created, what remains is that the violation of the pieties portrayed in the nightmarish text is due to Naipaul having his "cuts falling at the wrong place" in the process of challenging the existing orientations and forcing society to re-think the horror of coloniality.

The ultimate impact of *Miguel Street* is the creation of a re-orientation, a critical attempt to force the critical structure by shifts of perspective. The violated principle of order is exemplified in the bogus tailor, the bogus carpenter, the student genius who fails exams, the student's instructor who fails to prepare him for those exams, the poet who does not write any poetry, the inept fireworks maker who burns down his own house, the mechanic who breaks things, the prophet without the conviction to become a martyr, and the cowardly tough man petrified of a small dog. All this forces the reader to re-think and question the dehumanising effects of coloniality and how they interpret the social realities of Trinidad's flawed modernity.

## Conclusion

Naipaul's' *Miguel Street* creates a perspective by incongruity in audiences by portraying the residents of this street as crooked and contemptible, in a society that celebrates tragedy over dignity. This contradicts the role of an author writing from the margins and the expected characterisation by such an author. The created juxtapositions of what should be and what Miguel Street is challenge the calcified symbolic systems and force the audience to look outside their normal and traditional symbolic orientations. While the conclusion is that Naipaul committed an impious act in *Miguel Street* to force a different interpretation of social realities, it is not dismissive of other conclusions that have been made regarding Naipaul and *Miguel Street*. Ultimately, Naipaul's *Miguel Street* remains provocatively ambivalent; it resists facile readings, replicates colonial registers, yet simultaneously radicalises through perspective by incongruity. Its characters incarnate both Fanon's "violence of the wretched" and Maldonado-Torres's (2007) "ontic violation" of coloniality. To read *Miguel Street* is to inhabit a "town on its knees," where dignity has been traded for spectacle and tragedy has been vogued as comedy. However, in that unmasking, a space opens for decolonial reflection; the reader, compelled by dissonance, can imagine worlds beyond Miguel Street's fatal confines. What has been presented here is an alternative lens to appreciating *Miguel Street*, away from the negative criticism to which the text has been subjected. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* effectively gives the audience "new eyes" and re-creates the debate around the dehumanising effects of coloniality outside the dictates of good taste, propriety, and conventional rationality.

## References

Achebe, C. 1965. *English and the African Writer*. London: Heinemann Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/2934835.

Achebe, A. 1966. “The Burden of the Black Writer.” *Presence Africaine* 21 (59): 135–140. https://doi.org/10.3917/presa.059.0142.

Achebe, A. 1988. *Hopes and Impediments*. New York: Doubleday.

Achebe, C. 2001. *Home and Exile*. New York: Anchor Books.

Balfour, R. 2010. “Home as Postcolonial Trope in the Fiction of V.S. Naipaul.” *Journal of Literary Studies* 26 (3): 16–33. https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/jls/article/view/14978.

Burke, K. 1935. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Burke, K. 1954. *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cudjoe, S. R. 1988. *V. S. Naipaul: A Materialist Reading*. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press.

Dabashi, H. 2018. “VS Naipaul: Colonialism in Fact, Fiction, and the Flesh.” Aljazeera, August 13. Accessed June 17, 2020. https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/naipaul-colonialism-fact-fiction-flesh-180813114051602.html.

Dussel, E. D. 2013. *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131d8k.

Eastly, A. 2008. “Naipaul’s Children: Representations of Humor and Ruin in Miguel Street.” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 5 (2): 47–59. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7702&context=facpub.

Fanon, F. 1952. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.

Fanon, F. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.

Fanon, F. 1964. *Toward the African Revolution*. New York: Grove Press.

Foss, S. K. 1979. “Feminism Confront Catholicism: A Study of the Use of Perspective by Incongruity.” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 3 (1): 7–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.1979.11089628.

Gikandi, S. 1991. *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction*. London: James Currey.

Gordon, L. R. 2007. “Through the Hellish Zone of Nonbeing: Thinking through Fanon, Disaster, and the Damned of the Earth.” In “Reflections on Fanon: Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Social Theory Forum; The Violences of Colonialism and Racism, Inner and Global—Conversations with Frantz Fanon on the Meaning of Human Emancipation,” special issue, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5: 5–12. https://www.okcir.com/product/journal-article-through-the-hellish-zone-of-nonbeing-thinking-through-fanon-disaster-and-the-damned-of-the-earth-by-lewis-r-gordon/.

Gordon, L. R. 2010. “Theory in Black: Teleological Suspensions in Philosophy of Culture.” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 18 (2): 193–214. https://doi.org/10.5250/quiparle.18.2.193.

Grosfoguel, R. 2007. “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond Political Economy Paradigms.” *Cultural Studies* 21 (2/3): 203–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514.

Grosfoguel, R. 2011. “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality.” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1 (1). https://doi.org/10.5070/T411000004.

Grosfoguel, R. 2012. “Decolonising Western Uni-versalisms: Decolonial Pluri-versalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas.” *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1 (3): 88–104. https://doi.org/10.5070/T413012884.

Huggan, G. 1994. “V. S. Naipaul and the Political Correctness Debate.” *College Literature* 21 (3): 200–206.

Hughes, S. H. 1958. *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

JanMohamed, A. R. 1985. “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature.” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1): 59–87. https://doi.org/10.1086/448321.

Kaur, K. 2023. “Post-Colonial Review of V. S. Naipaul’s Fiction.” *Indian Journal of Management and Language* 3 (1): 1–5. https://doi.org/10.54105/ijml.A2052.043123.

Lagji, A. 2021. “Colonial Clowns? The Tragicomedy of V. S. Naipaul’s *Miguel Street*.” *Pacific Coast Philology* 56 (2): 211–223. https://doi.org/10.5325/pacicoasphil.56.2.0211.

Maldonado-Torres, N. 2007. “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept.” *Cultural Studies* 21 (2–3): 240–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548.

Mignolo, W. D. 2013. “Introduction: Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking.” In *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, edited by Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, 1–21. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315868448.

Naipaul, V. S. 1959. *Miguel Street*. London: Andre Deutsch.

Naipaul, V. S. 2001. *The Middle Passage*. London: Picador.

Ogungbesan, K. 1974. "Politics and the African Writer." *African Studies Review* 17 (1): 43–53. https://doi.org/10.2307/523576.

Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Selby, G. 2002. "Mocking the Sacred: Frederick Douglass's 'Slaveholder's Sermon' and the Antebellum Debate over Religion and Slavery." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (3): 326–341. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630209384380.

Shilliam, R. 2015. *The Black Pacific: Anti-colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474218788.

Slemon, S. 1987. "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing." *Kunapi* 9 (3): 1–16. https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol9/iss3/3.

Swidene, P., ed. 1984. *The English Novel of History and Society, 1940–80: Richard Hughes, Henry Green, Anthony Powell, Angus Wilson, Kingsley Amis, V. S. Naipaul*. Studies in 20th Century Literature. London: The Macmillan Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-17512-3_6.

Thieme, J. 1981. "Calypso Allusions in Naipaul's *Miguel Street*." *Kunapipi* 3 (2): 18–32. https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol3/iss2/5.

Tirivangana, A. 2015. "An African-Centred Critique of *Miguel Street*." Accessed June 2, 2019. https://www.thepatriot.co.zw/old_posts/an-africa-centred-critique-of-miguel-street-part-two-a-critical-analysis-of-the-setting-and-narrative-structure/.

Stavans, I., ed. 1999. *Mutual Impressions: Writers from the Americas Reading One Another*. Durham: Duke University Press

Waisanen, D. J. 2009. "A Citizen's Guide to Democracy in Action: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism." *Southern Journal of Communication* 74 (2): 119–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802428212.

wa Thiong'o, N. 1997. *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society*. London: James Currey. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781800100527.

Walsh, W. 1970. *A Manifold Voice*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Whedbee, K. 2001. "Perspective by Incongruity in Norman Thomas's 'Some Wrong Roads to Peace.'" *Western Journal of Communication* 65 (1): 45–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310109374691.