# Cultural Hybridity and Ambivalent Identity in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*

## Srishti
*Student, Miranda House, University of Delhi*

***Abstract:*** *This paper examines V.S. Naipaul's novel Miguel Street as a reflection of the broader context of post-colonial Trinidad and the challenges faced by its inhabitants. The characters' identities are shaped by the legacy of British colonial rule and the subsequent struggle for independence. The book explores how cultural hybridity emerges as a response to this complex historical background. Naipaul's portrayal showcases the intricacies and complexities of these hybrid identities, highlighting the tensions and disruptions caused by the imposition of colonial cultural norms. While Naipaul critiques the changing lifestyles, he also demonstrates a certain level of ambivalence and hesitancy to fully mirror the underlying aspects of Third World nations.*
***Keywords:*** *Cultural Hybridity, Identity, V.S Naipaul, Indian Diaspora, Third World Countries, Post Colonialism, Indian Caribbean Literature*

In the early 17th century, British imperialism and colonialism had a profound impact on various regions worldwide, including America, Canada, Australia, parts of Africa, the Caribbean Islands, India, and others. The Industrial Revolution, occurring in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, marked a significant turning point in global history. This era brought about extensive social and economic changes, such as rapid population growth, increased production, and a heightened demand for resources and labor. Industrialised nations sought new markets for their goods and inexpensive labor for their factories, leading to the establishment of imperial structures in underdeveloped countries. This pursuit proved profitable for imperial powers as it facilitated land acquisition, the utilisation of slave labor, and the creation of fresh markets for their products.

Throughout the process of colonisation and its aftermath, the colonised nations underwent profound and far-reaching transformations in their social and cultural fabric, precipitating intricate challenges of cultural identity, religious discord, and ethnic instability. Exposed to Western colonial endeavours, these nations became amalgams of compromised cultural norms, altered religious and ethnic constructs, and socio-political exploitation. This adoption of colonial practices occurred either under duress or with varying degrees of acquiescence, sowing seeds of unrest within their respective communities. The colonial enterprise engendered the forced displacement of indigenous populations and the consequential annihilation of local regions, encompassing the disruption of socio-cultural, religious, political, and economic frameworks. Indigenous peoples were either marooned within their homelands, bereft of agency, or forcibly uprooted to serve the interests of the colonising powers. Of notable significance, the British Empire adroitly deployed diverse stratagems to undermine the cultural existence of indigenous populations, consolidating its own colonial dominion over the newly acquired territories. As the colonizers espoused notions of supremacy, civilization, and dominion, the colonized were relegated to inferior status, denigrated as subhuman, uncivilised beings, and often caricatured as savages or untamed entities. The British Empire ardently pursued cultural assimilation by accentuating the virtues of white culture while denigrating indigenous cultures and peoples. This calculated approach sought to supplant indigenous cultural mores and engender a sense of cultural subjugation. Consequently, the exigency to revive and reassert indigenous cultural heritage became a paramount endeavour, heralding an era where the rediscovery of identity assumes cardinal significance.

During the colonial and postcolonial epochs, the question of "identity" has assumed widespread significance not only for Third World nations but also for the British Empire itself. As the Empire endeavoured to enforce its cultural norms, Third World societies grappled with the preservation and safeguarding of their own

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cultural values. However, the postcolonial period has witnessed a discernible erosion of colonialist hegemony over Third World societies, giving rise to a complex interplay between the cultures of "self" and "other." Consequently, this juncture has fostered a reevaluation and reconstitution of indigenous cultural values, thereby engendering a pursuit of cultural authenticity. The reclamation and restoration of indigenous culture have engendered an epoch characterised by the imperative rediscovery of "identity" as a foundational constituent.

Miguel Street stands as one of V.S. Naipaul's earliest literary works, comprising seventeen distinct stories centered around the lives of various characters residing on a single street in the Port of Spain, Trinidad. Throughout the narrative structure, each character embarks on a quest for identity that has been tainted, hindered, or hybridized by the influences of dominant colonising cultures. This predicament is particularly characteristic of underdeveloped Third World nations and their indigenous populations. The entire street strives to uphold the ideals of a patriarchal-dominated family life, while Naipaul deconstructs this ideology by subverting the roles and situations of male characters within society. Naipaul's underlying intention in creating a sense of shared values within Miguel Street is to introduce a new understanding of familial life, largely influenced by Western cultures. As Mustafa[1] (1995) asserts, the characters of Port of Spain street are loosely held together by Naipaul's boy-narrator, who himself departs for studies abroad by the end of the novel. Many of the events within the narrative revolve around themes such as the consequences of impoverished, despairing lives and the tumultuous blending of cultures, resulting in fantasies, brutality, violence, and corruption, as elucidated by King[2] (2003). This thematic undercurrent is evident throughout every chapter. Although the narrator in the novel bears a striking resemblance to Naipaul himself, he acknowledges that the main character is "more in tune with the life of the street than I had been"(Page 9)[3]. This implies that the narrator of the novel harmoniously coexists with the complexities and challenges of Miguel Street, which arise from the amalgamation of identities, imposed cultural values, and numerous external interventions.

The interference of colonial powers disrupted the cultural values and accelerated the process of acculturation, primarily through the translation of the education system into that of the West. This strategic approach effectively established an environment in which the knowledge-power relationship, as underscored by Foucault, became pivotal in designing and managing the colonial enterprise. Education, often equated with "knowledge," indeed wield a suppressive function in the process, as power aligns with those who possess knowledge. Similar to Naipaul's protagonist, who secures a scholarship to study in England, leaving behind Miguel Street and his family, the individual carries within them the formative influence of the street but must depart from it (Rigik, 1995)[4]. Education emerged as one of the ideological mechanisms imposed by colonial powers on Third World countries, providing a pretext for the displacement of indigenous peoples. It remained a potent instrument for subjugation in social and cultural dimensions within colonized societies. Abandoning one's cultural embodiment became a prevalent trend during the colonial era. In Miguel Street, "The year before his mother died, Elias sat for the Cambridge Senior School Certificate. ... Errol said, Everything Elias write not remaining here, you know. Every word that boy write going to England"(Miguel Street, Page 13). Educational institutions form an integral part of imperial dissemination, as colonizers recognise the significance of knowledge in accomplishing their objectives in colonized regions. Naipaul directs readers' attention to the reality of educational institutions and the indigenous people's aspirations to gain acceptance within these schools, whether situated in colonized lands or the metropolis. The provision of suitable educational institutions assumes crucial importance in facilitating cultural transformation and the dissemination of Western ideals.

The coloniser employed various mechanisms to facilitate the formation of transcultural societies, often resorting to strategies that aimed at reshaping, segregating, and weakening the colonized nations. These methods encompassed practices such as establishing settler colonies, enforcing displacement, exploiting resources, displacing indigenous populations, subjecting them to slavery, fostering brain drain, and generating a class devoid of cultural roots. These collective actions ultimately contributed to the cultural displacement of the colonized communities. 'Hybridity' as Ashcroft points out was "one of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in postcolonial theory, commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural form within the contact zone produced by colonization"(Ashcroft 2000, Page- 108)[5]. The creation of a hybrid culture emerged as a seemingly secure pathway for the adaptation, integration, and eventual assimilation of the subjugated nation into the dominant

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[1] Mustafa, F. (1995). V.S. Naipaul. Cambridge University Press.
[2] King, B. (1992). "The Commonwealth Writer in Exile," in From Commonwealth to Post-ColoniaL Anna Rutherford, ed. Sydney: Dangaroo P.
[3] Naipaul, V.S. (2002). Miguel Street. Vintage International
[4] Rigik, E. (1995). Autobiography in the Fiction of V.S. Naipaul. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
[5] Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., Tiffin, H. (2000). Post-Colonial Studies- The Key Concepts. Routledge

metropolitan culture. Repeatedly scanning the list in the Guardian, Hat meticulously searched for Elias' name, acknowledging the possibility of errors, particularly when confronted with an extensive roster of names. This highlights the reliance on the colonizer's newspapers for information, and Elias' story continues as he seizes the opportunity to pursue his studies at Cambridge Senior School after retaking the exam. "The boy (Elias) has passed the Cambridge Senior School Certificate. Hat whistled. The Cambridge Senior School Certificate? Titus Hoyt smiled. That's right. He achieved a third-grade pass. His name will be published in tomorrow's papers"(Miguel Street, Page 13). However, Elias' aspirations extend beyond mere recognition, as he hopes to secure a higher rank among those who passed the exam, which is essential for establishing his identity within a society undergoing cultural transformation. Mr. Cambridge symbolizes the embodiment of colonising cultural identity and simultaneously acts as a cultural barrier for the colonized, denying them access to proper job opportunities in Third World countries.

In Miguel Street, many of the characters can be seen as embodiments of a hybrid cultural identity, resulting from the amalgamation of diverse cultures. In the chapter "Man-Man," the narrator unintentionally imitates Man-man's precise and distinctly English accent, saying, "I said automatically, 'Yes, I goes to school.' And I found that without intending it I had imitated Man-man's correct and very English accent..His accent. If you shut your eyes while he spoke, you would believe an Englishman—good-class Englishman who wasn't particular about who was talking to you" (Page 16). Language, being an integral part of culture, holds significant importance, and Naipaul highlights the act of mimicking language as a catalyst for the formation of a hybrid culture by the colonized subjects. Naipaul's portrayal of the formation of hybrid cultures arises from the migration of individuals originating from various regions within the Third World countries. This blending of identities, however, gives rise to social tensions and disrupts the establishment of harmonious relationships within families and among the inhabitants of newly formed communities, exemplified by the microcosm of Miguel Street. This microcosm serves as a representation of colonized territories, illustrating the challenges and complexities that arise from the unbalanced amalgamation of cultural identities.

Amidst the historical and social transformations, multicultural societies are confronted with the disruptive consequences stemming from the existence of hybrid cultures. Naipaul's depiction exemplifies this unrest within Miguel Street. The imposition of cultural elements by the colonizers has led to domestic violence and societal discord. An example of such turmoil is seen in the character of Big Foot, who, as a result of childhood humiliations, adopts a confrontational and aggressive demeanour. However, despite his apparent toughness, Big Foot is ultimately defeated and left emotionally vulnerable. This portrayal reflects the impact of the hybrid cultural reformation and highlights the reactions of individuals within these societies, grappling with the consequences of the imposed culture and its inherent complexities. The characters of Miguel Street, devoid of societal heroes, resort to creating fantasies inspired by the film world, such as emulating figures like Bogart. These fantasies serve as a means for the Third World subjects to navigate their existence within or outside their homelands, constructing makeshift cultural identities as a way of preserving their place in the world.

The exercise of power is deeply rooted in Western cultural identity and ideology which exert a significant influence particularly on the male characters portrayed in Miguel Street. Each chapter showcases these characters' efforts to project a sense of power and dominance. However, Naipaul deliberately disrupts these power dynamics, deconstructing the social order prevalent in Third World communities. An Englishman's claim of being a boxer and Royal Air Force champion, as reported in the papers, triggers a fervent response among the locals, with Big Foot stepping forward as a fearless contender. Ultimately, Big Foot suffers a humiliating defeat, discovering that the supposed RAF champion has no affiliation with the organization and lacks any renowned boxing prowess. This blow to Big Foot's reputation drives him to leave the island in despair. The poignant remark of his close friend, Hat, underscores the abnormality and unpredictability of events in such a place: "Well, what you expect in a place like this?" (Page 27). Through this narrative, Naipaul exposes Big Foot as a victim of the colonizer's ideology, further reinforcing the notion of white supremacy and the perceived superiority of the white race over Third World individuals.

He then challenges the patriarchal structure inherent in Third World societies through his portrayal of female characters, particularly Mrs. Morgan, and her response to her husband's infidelity with another woman from the same street. In stark contrast to the prevailing patriarchal norms, Mrs. Morgan takes a decisive stand by expelling Mr. Morgan from their home. The incident unfolds with an air of mystery, accompanied by shouts and the woman involved disappearing into darkness. Soon after, Mrs. Morgan's anguished cry echoes through the street: "Teresa Blake, Teresa Blake, what you doing with my man?"(Page 32). In her reaction, Mrs. Morgan exhibits a complete lack of tolerance or forgiveness towards her unfaithful husband, defying the social expectations and cultural doctrines that traditionally demand women's submission to patriarchal dominance. Naipaul's portrayal challenges and subverts the patriarchal power dynamics, highlighting the agency and resistance displayed by female characters within the narrative.

In Miguel Street, Naipaul explores the role of women within the context of a contrasting mentality, diverging from the conventions of colonized nations. In line with the patriarchal framework that underpins Third World family structures, polygamy is typically rejected for women while plural marriage for men is normalised in society. However, Naipaul introduces Laura in the chapter titled "The Maternal Instinct" as a complex female character who defies the societal gender stereotypes prevalent in the colonized mentality. "I suppose Laura holds a world record. Laura had eight children. There is nothing surprising in that. The eight children had seven fathers"(Page 40). Through Laura, Naipaul challenges the restrictions and taboos imposed by the patriarchal understanding, contributing to the formation of a hybrid understanding of gender balance within the society. Her story serves as a means of deconstructing and questioning the existing patriarchal norms.

Naipaul's through his Miguel Street successfully reflects the broader context of post-colonial Trinidad and the challenges faced by its inhabitants. The characters' identities are shaped by the legacy of British colonial rule and the subsequent struggle for independence. The book successfully explores how cultural hybridity emerges as a response to this complex historical background. However, Naipaul, while expressing critique towards evolving lifestyles, also exhibits a certain level of support for these changes. As a mimic and hybrid individual, Naipaul's criticism lacks certainty, and he hesitates to fully mirror the occurrences within these micro-environments, which serve as reflections of the larger, underlying aspects that may not be readily apparent in Third World nations.

*"Then the front door flung open, we saw. Mrs Morgan was holding up Morgan by his waist. He was practically naked, and he looked so thin, he was like a boy with an old man's face. He wasn't looking at us, but at Mrs. Morgan's face, and he was squirming in her grasp, trying to get away. But Mrs. Morgan was a strong woman."*

*-Miguel Street, Page 32*

## References

[1]. Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., Tiffin, H. (2000). Post-Colonial Studies- The Key Concepts. Routledge
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