

# The Aesthetic Function Of The Calypso Style In V.S. Naipaul's Collection Of Sketches, Miguel Street

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## Abstract

*The study is based on the assumption that literary style is paramount to literary communication and the meaning we derive out of a work of literature. Literary meaning cannot therefore be divorced from literary style. The purpose of the study is to examine how the style of calypso communicates meaning in V.S. Naipaul's collection of sketches, Miguel Street. The technique of calypso is analyzed to show its aesthetic function in the text. The main objective of the study is to evaluate the text and show how the technique is used by the writer to communicate meaning and artistic vision. The rationale of the study is based on the recognition of Naipaul as one of the best world writers and more important that though his works have received extensive literary attention, little has been done on the aesthetic function of the calypso in the text under study. The study therefore gives a new direction of reading Naipaul's works and thus contributes not only to the understanding of Naipaul's idiosyncratic manner of artistic communication but also to the richness of his literature. The sampled text was purposively chosen based on the aim of the study. The study is grounded in the New Historicism literary theory and more specifically the theory's tenets that emphasize the study of literary works from a historical context.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Douglas and Conrad (2009) argue that language is a common tool for all human beings and the different ways in which language is used leads to different results, whether the language is written or spoken. Their general view of language is that it is a tool that performs different purposes depending on the usage. On register they observe that core linguistic features like pronouns and verbs which are functional, are commonly used in association with the communicative purposes and situational contexts. In written texts, they note that these registers could vary from sports, medical fields and even religious fields. In their comparison of the written and the spoken registers and the impact of each to the recipient, they note, there has been less agreement among linguists on how the language of speech compares to the language of writing. In many studies, conversation and academic writing are treated as the two stereotypical registers representing the spoken and written modes (Douglas and Conrad, p. 290).

Douglas and Conrad(2009) further explore how the written genre achieves the varying purposes depending on the context and purpose. They note that there is a big difference between an academic writing where writers employ different registers and when the register is applied in creative writing. The academic registers are highly distinctive in their typical linguistic features, with a frequent use of nouns and technical vocabulary, and extremely complex noun phrase constructions. Unlike all other registers – including creatively written ones – these specialists written registers tend to rely on complex phrases, with relatively few verbs.

In his study on register and dialogue as forms of literary style, William (1958) discusses how register in dialogues can be used to reveal the character of the speaker. He notes that in writing, the purposes of both dialogue and register are similar. Both reveal and define characters in a multitude of ways as well as give much-needed information to the reader. While well-written dialogue advances plot, shapes and interprets the fictional events, and makes important and complicated story development understandable, badly written dialogues will tear down a story.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

- William(1958) pays attention to the purpose of register in dialogues, in a written text. He observes that dialogues provide an opportunity to assess the plot and events that happen in the written text. While he observes the purpose of style in interpreting events and following up in the sequential flow of events, he however does not look at how style can be used to identify themes and asses the aesthetic value of a text.
- As Ngugi(1986) correctly observes, literature does not grow out of a vacuum, it is given impetus and direction by society. Literature reflects societal aesthetics, values and norms. A writer comes from a particular background which shapes his/her perspective and perception of the social and physical environments. This recognition puts history at the centre of many literary texts. In our study of style in

V.S. Naipaul's collection of sketches we focus on the technique of calypso and how it communicates Naipaul's meaning and artistic vision. Literary style is a creation of the individual writer. However as New historicists argue, this style may sometimes be influenced by the writer's background, history and even individual inclinations in terms of religion, ethical beliefs, philosophy among others.

- Scholars and researchers who have studied Caribbean literature point out the unique styles used by Caribbean writers and also the important link between Caribbean literature and the Caribbean history. According to Ramchand (1976), the common experience of colonization, displacement, slavery, indenture, emancipation and nationalism has shaped most West Indies environments, creating a unity of experience that can be identified as Caribbean. Caribbean literature is in the main a product of this experience. Its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, its explosions in the 1930's and 50's, and its growth into new dimensions in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century reflect the progress of a Caribbean engagement with history, with political and social adjustments and with problems of definition, identity and aesthetics. The concern with the consequences of history, with the social world and its impact on Caribbean sensibility, led almost naturally to another major theme in the 1950's and 60's: the theme of emigration. The concern was a response to a historical phenomenon and a psychological colonial problem.
- Writing about Samuel Selvon's fiction, Ramchand(1970) notes that in Selvon's Trinidad books we see both sides of East Indian life: the close-knit, almost exclusively Indian village communities in the countryside and the more open, less rigid lives of Indians in the urban and sub-urban areas. The idea of emigration is prominent in Selvon's works. However, unlike his fellow Caribbean writer, V.S Naipaul, there is hope in his works. Selvon shows that Trinidad has something to offer to its people. The people are rooted in the land. Selvon is also aware of the white stereotypes but chooses characters who exist outside the stereotypes (e.g. Franklin and Johnson in *Ways of Sunlight*). Ramchand(1970) also notes that use of dialect for both thematic and aesthetic purposes is preeminent in Selvon's fiction. This criticism of Selvon's fiction shades more light on Caribbean literature; its form and content. In the proposed study we specifically examine the link between style and meaning.
- In his study of African Caribbean consciousness, Ngugi(1978) sheds insight into the African Caribbean consciousness in terms of their own history, social conditions and quest for identity in the Caribbean literature. Ngugi makes a link between the concerns in Caribbean literature and those in East African literature. He specifically evaluates George Lamming's novel, *In the Castle of my Skin* and notes how the three-tier structure in the novel's plot communicates Lamming's concerns. Ngugi also examines how the fragmented point of view in the novel communicates Lamming's artistic vision on Barbados. This study is monumental for any study on style and meaning in Caribbean literature.

- Thieme (1981) focuses on calypso allusions in V.S. Naipaul text, *Miguel Street*. The study appreciates how the text is informed by allusions to calypso songs. Thieme(1981) treats the songs as mere literary allusions and not a recurring style in *Miguel Street*. However the paper makes significant observations on the not less than ten calypso allusions identified in *Miguel Street*. He writes:

*Elsewhere the allusions sometimes the prerogative  
of the narrator and sometimes viewed by characters  
within the stores, function as incidental counter-point  
to situations being described( Thieme 1981, p.18)*

- Thieme goes on to point out that usually the effect of such allusions is ironic. Most of the calypso at times comes close to the calypsonian's own extremely ironic view of the society. He argues that the calypso tradition furnishes the most significant body of allusions in *Miguel Street* and that Naipaul 's use of such allusions has the effect of firmly rooting the work within the experience of Trinidad's urban black populace.
- Calypso and masking appears in over ten of the seventeen sketches in the book. Apart from quoting ten calypsos in the text, Naipaul also appears to be alluding to others in a more oblique fashion. Writing about the use of the calypso in West Indies literature Babydeen and Wilson-Tagoe(1987) argue that as subject and theme the calypso has functioned in the West Indian literature as a depiction of an aspect of West Indian life, and calypsos have often been evoked to illustrate and confirm observations and judgments held by general mass of the population. They further note that in other Caribbean works, the calypso them feature as delineations of the Calypsonian and a dramatization of the potency, power and traps of his craft. The paper benefits from Babydeen and Wilson-Tagoe(1987) particularly in their appreciation of the role of the calypso in Caribbean literature. The paper focuses on the calypso as style in V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* and examines how the calypso and masking styles communicate Naipaul's concerns.
  - Farahmandian (2012) examines the tragedy in the heart of overstated humour in *Miguel Street*. His observations on how the characters live in fantasy and escapism sheds more light on aspects of calypso as a style used in the collection of the sketches.
  - Morgan(2005) studies the calypso and its relation to cultural identity in Indo-Caribbean fiction. He observes that the calypso is an icon in Caribbean literature. That it is a barometer of public opinion, a reflector of collective identity and a manifestation of the construction of the individual and communal identity through performance. In terms of verbal dimension, the calypso is one facet of a diverse oral tradition, which has been used by all ethnic groups to express racial antipathy, a deep rooted self-derision and contempt for other through music and childhood rhymes. Indeed the intra-racial and inter-racial diatribes are an extension of the self-contempt and reductive laughter which Caribbean folk art forms, reflecting an historical legacy of ethnic denigration and disempowerment through naming,



democratically employ within the ethnic group and toward other ethnicities (Morgan2005)

- Debydeen and Wilson-Tagoe (1987) observe that V.S Naipaul uses the calypso as both theme and form and that there is a special sense in which its technique as a folk and oral form gives shape to the writings of V.S Naipaul. In this section of chapter four, we examine how the style of calypso is used by V.S Naipaul to communicate meaning in his collection of sketches, *Miguel street*. Indeed as Dabydeen and Wilson- Tagoe (1987, p 75) further observe, in *Miguel Street* the calypso is evoked both as social commentary and as caustic satire because often the very consciousness that its observation and judgments confirm is the consciousness that Naipaul exposes as a negative manifestation of slum life. Often the levity and irresponsibility that York beneath the calypso melody reflects similar qualities in the characters themselves and the similarity explains their continual wish to be linked to those made popular by the calypso.
- In *Miguel street* the calypso style features the calypso theme as delineations of the calypsonian and a dramatization of the potency, power and troops of the craft. In this section we specifically focus on particular sketches that prominently feature the calypso style and communicates the playwrights meaning.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in the literary theory of New Historicism. According to Myers(1989) New Historicism is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic. Based on the literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and influenced by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, New Historicism acknowledges not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but that the critic's response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs, and prejudices.

A New Historicist looks at literature in a wider historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times, in turn recognizing that current cultural contexts color that critic's conclusions.

New Historicism, then, underscores the impermanence of literary criticism. Current literary criticism is affected by and reveals the beliefs of our times in the same way that literature reflects and is reflected by its own historical contexts. Mikics(2007) notes that Foucault's idea that structures of thought shape everyone and everything within a culture did influence New historicism as a literary theory.

Veese (1989) summarizes the tenets of New historicism theory as; interpretation of works of literature from a historical perspective, the appreciation of how the historical context affect the crafting of works of literature, that the writer's artistic vision is affected by time and space, the writer's viewpoint is influenced by his/her historical background, each text is only one example of many types of discourses that reveal history. The study uses these key assumptions and theorizations of the new historicism literary theory to evaluate V.S. Naipaul's text, *Miguel Street* and examine how the techniques of masking and calypso illuminate Naipaul's intended meaning and historical imagination.

*The Aesthetic Function of the Calypso in V.S. Naipaul's collection of sketches, Miguel Street*

In the sketches, **love, love, love, love** and **until the soldiers come calypso** features prominently as style. The titles of the sketches are allusions drawn from the lyrics of particular calypsos. Sometimes the allusions and the calypso as style function as incidental counter-point to situations being described. Usually the effect of the calypso as style is ironic as when Eddoes' girlfriend delivers to him the baby whose father he is supposed to be and Boyee whistles the calypso;

*Chinese children calling me daddy*

*I black like jet*

*My wife like tar-baby*

*And still*

*Chinese children calling me daddy*

*Oh God, somebody putting milk in my coffee (p. 127)*

In this incident calypso as style provides an ironic comment on gender relations, especially man-woman relationship in post-war Trinidad.

In the sketches, **Love, Love, Love Alone**, the relationship between Toni and Mrs Christiani is quite intriguing. Perhaps this rather mechanical relationship reflects and echoes the philosophy and attitudes addressed in other calypso that features In this sketch, **The Maternal Instinct**. In this sketch the calypso goes as;

*Every now and then just knock them down*

*Every now and then just throw them down*

*Black up their eye and bruise up their knee*

*And then they love you eternally (p. 111)*

In the **Maternal instinct** the calypso as style serves both aesthetic and thematic purposes. It becomes a point of reference in supporting Nathaniel's sadistic attitude towards women.

In the above story, Naipaul shows how the degradation of women is only a pose fulfilling the street's concept of manliness; a perverted concept that is at the same time satirized by the writer himself. The satire comes out clearly when, ironically, it is Nathaniel himself who is beaten up by his woman.

The battle of the sexes features prominently in calypsos from West Indies. As Kunapipi (1981, p. 23) observes, the battle of the sexes has been the most important subject of

the calypsos of the last forty years and it is central in *Miguel Street*. A critical analysis of the different sketches reveal that far from being a collection of only loosely related stories, *Miguel Street* is a carefully crafted critique of the concept of manliness as dramatized in post-war Trinidad.

The opening sketch in *Miguel Street* centres around an inhabitant of Miguel street referred to as Bogart. It is interesting that Bogart imitates an American film star whom the story adopts his name. In this story Bogart has a double persona. Superficially he is silent man who has no need of women or family. It is ironical when it actually turns out that Bogart is a Bigamist.

The sketch ends with Eddoes inquiring from Hat why Bogart left his second wife and went to the street of Miguel. Hat's answer summarizes Naipaul's view on man-woman relationship in post-war Trinidad; 'to be a man among we men' (p16). The calypso style thus communicates the ideal of manliness on Miguel Street and Naipaul's satire of the same.

In the sketch, *The Thing Without a Name*, Naipaul shows that the values that people hold are not values that foster ambition and uplift. The calypso style is used to reinforce his negative attitude and comic satire. Naipaul; reverses the concept of Bogart. Bogart runs away from his wives but Popo the carpenter hero of the story, runs to his wife. He just discovers that he has never been popular in the street as he is to his wife. The calypso that immortalizes Popo is a calypso that sings of the jail sentence, when he acts responsibly he is Shunned as an outsider. When he returns to the fold and becomes a criminal his reputation is re-established and the street proudly links itself to the calypso that sings of his crime.

In *The Thing Without a Name*, the concept of manliness is overtly perverted. Emelda deserts Popo. When popo's manhood is questioned, Hat gives a satirical answer; 'popo is a man- woman. Not a proper man (p. 19). The sketch's irony comes out at the resolution section when Popo is reinstated as one of the boys (p. 25). He steals furniture and paints to renovate his home for Emelda; he is caught and sent to jail. After release, he retains both Emelda and the respect of the street's men.

In *Miguel street*, the calypso style is used to dramatize and communicate the theme of manliness. Indeed this theme appears in no less than twelve of the seventeen sketches. However it is interesting how in some of the sketches Naipaul portrays women as being complacent. Mrs, Bhacku;s cleaning and oiling the cricket bat with which her husband beats her and Mrs Christiani's masochistic obsession with Toni, suggests Women's complicity in the macho ethic preached in calypsos like 'knock them down'. It is however interesting to note that though the calypso style emphasizes the concept of manliness on Miguel street, Naipaul goes ahead to use the same style to satirize the perverted concept of manliness . It is an ironic exposure of the pretence of manliness. In the next section of this concern is explored through the manner in which the writer uses the technique of masking.

The sketch **Until the Soldiers Came** dramatizes the impact of the Americans on the values of the people in Trinidad. The calypso's observations about the American take – over is acted out. In this sketch Lord invader sings the calypso first and subsequently Edward's wife mouths the calypsonian's scripted words when he begs her to come back to him; she responds;

*Invader, I change my mind  
I living with Yankee soldier (p. 197)*

This is exactly what happened to Edward. In **Until the Soldiers Came** the calypso is used to communicate the central theme of the disruption caused by the American military presence in Trinidad in world war II and the Americanization of Hat's brother, Edward.

The power of the Yankee dollar disrupts the traditional pattern of man-woman relationship in Trinidad. Edward marries a modern white wife and claims that he is forced to marry her because she is expectant with his baby, though we know that it is not true. When the marriage proves childless and Edward's virility is impinged, the street's reaction destroys Edward. He becomes not only a victim of the 'tough guy' notion but also a victim of the white man's notion of love. The final straw comes when his wife abandons him for an American.

Edward finally finds himself a living example of the calypso by Invader to which Naipaul alludes in the title of the sketch; 'I was living with my descent contented wife/ until the soldiers came and broke up my life' (pp 185 and 196) Edward cannot withstand the disgrace. He leaves Miguel street and emigrates. The ultimate affront to the street's concept of manliness is when news filters in the streets that his wife has had a baby by an American man.

In the sketch **Hat** the focus is on Hat who acts as a surrogate father to the child narrator; hat is the father voice in the text and his presence together with that of the boy narrator and the setting of the street are used to create coherence in the sketches. Naipaul uses hat to see through the marks assumed by the other characters:

*I always feel he(Morgan)  
Over doing everything, I always  
Feel the man lying about everything, I feel that  
He even lying to himself (p 98)*

But Hat has come to accept life as it in Miguel street. He says;

*life is a heluva thing. you  
Can see trouble coming  
And you cant do a  
damn thing to  
Prevent it coming. you  
Just go sit and watch  
and wait (p 116)*

Hat's life changes when he brings Dolly home to live with him. The changes are metaphors of Hat's having surrendered his free spirit as a result of having brought Dolly into his life. The calypso echoes that of a perfidious woman:



*Matilda, Matilda,  
Matilda, you thief my money  
And gone Venezuela (p. 210)*

Ironically Dolly leaves Hat for another man. His pursuit of Dolly lands him in jail for three years. When he is released from prison after three years, he finds his friend, boy narrator, grown up. He is now eighteen years old and he has grown psychologically and emotionally. He is able to see through the double persona of the people of Miguel Street. He understands the reality underlying the surface gaiety of Miguel street life.

Ironically, the narrator is no different from the other Miguel street dwellers. He turns to drinking and womanizing. Confronted by his mother, he says; is not my fault. In just Trinidad what else anybody can do here except drink?? (p216).

In *Miguel street* Naipaul uses the calypso style to reveal society as the villain which renders the individual powerless to achieve lasting self-fulfilment. Society has no defined goals to aid its citizens in social mobility and self-fulfilment. The narrator has to be saved from such a society

In the last sketch, **How I left Miguel Street**, the narrator is saved from Miguel street by the mother. He is sent abroad for a metropolitan education. He succeeds where Elias failed. Ultimately this kind of escapism seems to be the only possible road to success to those born in the land of calypso.

*Miguel Street's* main communication is done through the style of calypso and masking. In other sketches such as **The Coward**, **The pyrotechnics** and **Caution** the central concern of the writer are communicated through the style of calypso and masking. **The Coward** centres on Big foot, the bad John of the street. It is an ironical portrait of the street's bad boy for who carnival and street bands are like ritual and religion. The calypso is his main source of reference and he lives its words, becomes the bully and terror of the street though inwardly he is a frightened little man, He only wears a social façade so as to survive the harsh realities of the street.

In the **Pyrotechnist**, the focus is on Morgan who tries all his life to be a comedian, to stir up laughter. When he finally succeeds it is for something not at all funny. His true nature is exposed. In **Caution** Naipaul celebrates calypso as a spontaneous creative art. News of the end of the World War II and of the coming peace brings on a carnival and a calypso springs out though the song that the inhabitants of the street sing is rather negative not related to the peace.

It is noteworthy that in *Miguel Street* Naipaul uses the calypso style to communicate his meaning and vision. In literature, content and style are inseparable; the implication is that writers deliberately make particular choices of language and literary techniques so as to pass on particular messages to their readers. Style therefore is the writer's instrument of effective literary communication, for both aesthetic and thematic purposes.

In *Miguel Street*, V.S. Naipaul has structured the seventeen sketches in a rather loosely connected pattern with a deliberate purpose of communicating to his readers. These loosely connected sketches are however linked up by use of three main links; the setting of Miguel Street in which all the characters that form the focus of each sketch inhabit, Hat,

the factor voice of the fatherless narrator and lastly the boy narrator through whose perspective and views we are able to learn more not only about the street but the inhabitants of the street, their values, aspirations struggles and tensions.

The analysis of *Miguel Street* clearly reveals that the style of calypso and masking has in effect contributed to the aesthetic communication of the writer's message and meaning. It is through the style of calypso that we learn of the ironies and absurdities that surround the inhabitants of Miguel Street.

Though the calypso style the writer uses comic and ironic situations that reinforce the satire in the text at the same time communicating the struggles of a people trying to cope up with effects of colonialism and the clash with foreign values. Characters such as Popo' Bogart, Morgan and others become victims of a society descending from European colonialism and western value system. The calypso just like other forms of orator and verbal arts functions as a vehicle of exposing the underbelly of the society portrayed. The writer's aim is to use comic satire through the calypso and thus entertain, ridicule and emphasize the important communication on human values, traits, ironies and how society contributes to the uncertainty in human nature and destiny. In terms of the construction of national unity, the Miguel Street dweller lives side by side, for the most part, blissfully ignorant of markers of ethnic divisiveness. In the Miguel Street world, there is no contestation over national identity. Hat, subtly signalling his potency, is surrogate father to children of all ethnicities whom he proudly instructs in the intricacies of the national game-cricket.

Calypso is the common repository into which all characters chip variously for reference points. Indeed, the calypso is also indicative of patriotism and the good life. Morgan the pyrotechnics turned arsonist sings:

*The more they try to do me bad/  
is the better I live in Trinidad (p.82)*

Calypso in *Miguel Street* becomes a unifying force in its promotion of patriotism and in its construction of the nation as shared homeland. Its barbs and balms are applied in an egalitarian manner to all ethnicities and classes. As a marker of community identity and affirmation, it functions as an indigenous boundary marker.

In his other book *The Middle Passage* Naipaul summarizes how calypso functions in his fiction. This summary goes into summarizing how calypso as a style functions in communicating meaning in *Miguel Street*. Naipaul writes:

*It is only in calypso that the Trinidadian touches  
reality, the calypso is a purely local form.  
The calypso deals with local incidents, local attitudes  
and it does so in local language. (The Middle Passage p 75 – 76)*

Naipaul's observation means that the calypso functions both as style and form in his works. Our analysis of *Miguel Street* confirms that the calypso as style communicates meaning in Naipaul's fictional world as reflected in *Miguel Street*.

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