Sun, Sexuality & Power – The Poetics of Domestic Violence in Modern Caribbean Literature

Volume 1 of 2

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## Abstract

Volume 1 of this thesis undertakes a feminist reading of selected novels from the Anglophone Caribbean, published between 1950 and 2021, to explore the poetics employed by modern Caribbean fiction writers in writing about domestic violence. While an etiological examination of domestic violence is beyond the scope of this thesis, it accepts that domestic violence is grounded in and supported by patriarchal performances of gender, that literature plays a decisive role in social change, and that narratives utilising radical poetics, which subvert and interrogate patriarchal gender positioning, are required to achieve transformative social change in our understanding of and attitudes to domestic violence. The thesis therefore examines how modern Caribbean writers have contributed to the discourse on domestic violence through the poetics employed in the selected texts. Volume 1 also examines the creative process undertaken and the poetics employed in thematically addressing domestic violence in my novel *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House,* thereby placing this novel within the modern Caribbean literary discourse on violence against women.

Volume 2 of the thesis consists of my novel *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House.*

The critical element of the thesis examines the selected texts within the broad themes of employment of the male gaze and the reflection of the Caribbean oral tradition, including the 'calypso poetic,' and evaluates the extent to which the texts surveyed may be said to have employed 'radical poetics' within these contexts, in addressing domestic violence.

My research reveals a general pre-eminence of themes of nationhood in the novels published in the 1950s and 1960s and subordination of thematic

treatment of women's concerns, including domestic violence. While there is evidence of engagement of radical poetics in novels from this period, their discernible object would generally appear to be concerns of disenfranchisement of a poor, black underclass, and the realisation of a nationhood which mirrors colonial society in its patriarchal structure and resulting subordination of women. This study suggests a prominence in the employment of the male gaze in the earlier novels examined but also reveals a movement towards the employment of alternative ways of looking in later Caribbean literary discourse. It also suggests a continuing oral tradition whose focus has moved away from (only) nationalist concerns of empire to address the role, position and oppression of women through violence. I adopt and modify Kamau Brathwaite's three-pronged evaluation of Caribbean literature of the 1960s to assess the extent to which modern writers demonstrate in the texts surveyed, an attempt to signpost an alternative reality for Caribbean women as it relates to domestic violence.

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## Introduction

The critical element of this thesis consists of a survey of selected texts by modern Anglophone Caribbean[1] writers and explores the poetics employed by those writers to address the theme of domestic violence in their fiction writing. The selected texts were published over the period 1950 to 2021, a timespan of particular interest because it maps the movement of several of the Anglophone countries in the Caribbean archipelago from a burgeoning pre-Independence national and literary interest in shaping a national identity through to the present day, over half a century after several of these islands became independent[2]. For the purposes of my research the texts examined were grouped into two groups with reference to whether they were published before or after the 1960s. The thesis adopts a feminist reading of the selected texts to examine the extent to which concerns about domestic violence formed part of a pre-1960s literary thrust towards self-determination, persisted in published work throughout the next five decades and the extent to which a thematic engagement with domestic violence remains evident today. It examines the employment of so-called "radical poetics" (Rudin 5) in these novels and the extent to which these radical poetics are applied to write against domestic violence and the gender dynamics

[1] Defining what satisfies the designation 'Caribbean' is about as challenging as trying to delineate what constitutes 'contemporary' writing. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis, references to 'Caribbean' writers signify writers from the Anglophone Caribbean, those islands which share a common history of colonisation, indentured labour and a confluence of the identities and experiences of several colonising cultures. Caribbean writers are those who were born in the region or who claim the region as origin whether by virtue of birth or ancestry and who, in addition, have published work which is set in the region or its diaspora. All work selected for this examination is written by writers within these parameters.

[2] Of the islands linked to the texts analysed, Jamaica gained independence from colonial rule on 06 August, 1962, Trinidad & Tobago on 31 August, 1962, Guyana on 26 May, 1966 and Barbados on 30 November, 1966.

and performances which support it and to signpost an alternative future for women.

The novels included in the analysis are: *Miguel Street* by V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad), *The Hills Were Joyful Together* by Roger Mais (Jamaica), *The Lonely Londoners* by Samuel Selvon (Trinidad), *The Hills of Hebron* by Sylvia Wynter (Jamaica) and *In Praise of Love and Children* by Beryl Gilroy (Guyana), as examples of pre-1960s writing and *No Pain Like This Body* by Harold Ladoo (Trinidad), *Harriet's Daughter* by Marlene NourbeSe Philip (Tobago) and *The Bread the Devil Knead* by Lisa Allen-Agostini (Trinidad) as examples of Caribbean novels post-1960s which thematically addresses domestic violence.

The novels surveyed reveal a progression in the creative discourse on domestic violence in Anglophone Caribbean writing from the 1950s through to the present day and map an evolution from the primarily realist, linear, classical novel tradition of 1950s Caribbean writers (including the adoption of the 'male gaze' by both male and female writers) to the non-linear structuring and revolutionary poetics of later writers whose storytelling employs Caribbean oral tradition, nation-language, testimonial narratives and community voices in feminocentric narratives which provide alternatives to the 'male gaze' and subvert patriarchal gender positioning in new and interesting ways. My research suggests that more recent texts clearly demonstrate the employment of radical poetics to not only foreground domestic violence, but to map a blueprint for social transformation in this context, and examines how this approach is evident in my novel *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*, which forms the creative element of this thesis (at Volume 2 of 2).

*How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* is the story of Lala, a hair-braider who works on Baxter's Beach in Barbados, braiding the hair of tourists for money. She lives in poverty on the beach with her husband Adan, a thief and career criminal, and the story starts on the night that their first child is born – a girl they never manage to name. On that same night, a robbery occurs in one of the luxury villas on the beach, and a wealthy white tourist, Peter Whalen, is killed in gruesome circumstances, leaving his wife, Mira, a local girl made good, suffering crippling grief. The novel is about how these two events – the birth of the baby and the murder of Peter Whalen - are connected, and explores themes of domestic violence, race, class and survival in the underbelly of an island presented as Paradise to the tourists on whom its economy depends.

The critical element of the thesis therefore also places my own novel within the modern Caribbean creative discourse on domestic violence and compares and contrasts some of my creative choices and 'meaning-making' in writing the novel, with the poetics of the other Caribbean writers whose work is examined.

This thesis adopts the definition of "violence against women" articulated in Article 1 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* and references to "domestic violence" are to be understood to signify "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UN General Assembly Art.1). Further, "violence against women" (VAW) and "domestic violence" (DV) are used interchangeably in this context.

In the novels surveyed, domestic violence most often involves violence perpetrated by a woman's partner or love interest within the context of an intimate relationship, but domestic violence in these novels also includes violence meted out to women by other male relatives.

## The Problem of Poetics

'Poetics' refers not only to the literary devices employed by the authors of the selected texts, but to all the ways in which those texts discernibly convey meaning about domestic violence, including via the structure and presentation of their narratives. Meaning is made from any text via a tripartite experience among author, text and reader. Since an author's intention is not often easily ascertained from the narrative (in some respects the text may elicit a response from a reader which the author did not consciously intend), text cannot be divorced from context and a reader's engagement with any text is not an objective thing, but is subjective, and largely determined by his or her own lived experience, understanding and ideals brought to the reading of that text, meaning is personal and plural, not universal or singular.

As such, poetics is not simply a matter of hermeneutics and cannot be separated from discernible intent and actual impact. Insofar as poetics are understood to be the methodology of conveying meaning, therefore, they cannot be examined without an understanding of the particular meaning which is to be conveyed or is actually made, and this meaning is influenced by the type of critical reading being applied to the text or by the reader engaging with the text.

Caribbean feminist ideology asserts that domestic violence is premised on a patriarchal performance of gender which sees the female subordinated

and ‘othered’ to the primacy and centrality of the male, a positioning that is reasserted by force on the part of the male if necessary, and accepted as normative by a society structured on this positioning, despite its conflict with realities including the matrifocality of many Caribbean families (Morgan and Youssef 137; Haniff 362; Hosein 93; Maisier 58-59). It further asserts that the ideal would be an egalitarian society which recognises all genders and regards them all as equal, without ascribing any performative requirements to any of them, and permits self-actualisation within this context. This thesis is therefore concerned with the extent to which the texts surveyed, through the poetics employed, reveal and interrogate oppressive gender positioning and violence against women in the Anglophone Caribbean and map a path towards the ideal. It draws on the theories of Shai Rudin, Diana Miles and Veronique Maisier, to posit that transformative representations of domestic violence in modern Caribbean literary discourse of necessity employ revolutionary poetics and adapts Kamau Brathwaite’s three-pronged test of 1960s Caribbean novels to an assessment of Anglophone Caribbean novels about domestic violence to highlight novels which discernibly signpost a new reality for Caribbean women through the employment of renegade poetics.

## Theories on the Poetics of Domestic Violence

Rudin, Miles and Maisier have addressed the poetics used to represent violence against women in contemporary literature in Israel, the USA and the Francophone Caribbean, respectively. They share the common premise that the traditional, linear novel form is inadequate for depicting domestic violence in a way that results in meaningful transformation on the part of the reader.

According to Rudin “a radical feminist poetics that combines different genres is better able to reflect the individual female trauma; hence female testimony cannot be bound to the existing realistic codes – in literature and outside of it - because horror has poetics of its own” (27).

Referring to the examples of Israeli women’s literature he surveys, Rudin posits that “there is a particular aesthetics for representing violence against women” (5). These include “radical poetics” (4) comprising of the departure by (Israeli) female authors from chronological realistic narrative (as opposed to (Israeli) male authors who maintain the realist approach) and the employment of alternative techniques including impressionism, stream of consciousness, symbolism, fictional confession and surrealism’ and other non-realistic ways of representing domestic abuse of women (3). Rudin notes that the writers he surveys are “re-writing patriarchal sexual codes by representing abusive and violent male behaviour against women in literature in a way that promotes a shift in the relationship between the sexes, and clarifies that the common traditional patterns do not allow women to live fully or even survive” (26).

Miles (with specific reference to the work of Zora Neale Hurston) explores a theory of testimonial writing which subverts the violent control of women (a patriarchal ideal) by giving testimony to the trauma of violence against women and strengthens the community of women and promotes healing while simultaneously questioning the social order that allows these atrocities to take place (6). This testimonial writing is accomplished partly by writing in the 1st person in a way that suggests the inhabitation of the narrative ‘I’ by the author and encourages identification on the part of the reader with the trauma suffered by the ‘I’ of the story. In making the problem personal, the

narrative simultaneously builds community and promotes sensitivity to suffering. An example of this within the novels surveyed in this thesis would be Lisa Allen Agostini's *The Bread the Devil Knead* where a present-day first-person testimonial narrative is interspersed with a third-person depiction of the heroine's past self.

Maisier identifies a range of poetics employed by various Francophone Caribbean writers when dealing with the theme of gendered violence including the use of an 'innocent' protagonist, usually a child just before adolescence and at the point of dawning awareness; use of symbolism in the use of colours; hesitation to name and ascribe blame and horror to incidents involving resistance to the violence and portrayal of Caribbean women as "trapped in cycles of fear, resignation and violence" despite appearances of strength (71). While families may be matrifocal, she asserts, they are not matriarchal. Within the Anglophone texts surveyed, Harold Sonny Ladoo's *No Pain Like This Body*, M. NourbeSe Philips' *Harriet's Daughter* and V.S Naipaul's *Miguel Street* for example, exemplify the use of the narrative voice of a child and its impact when writing about violence as well as demonstrate the matrifocality of West Indian families, despite the social disempowerment of females.

## The Role of the Caribbean Novel & The Poetics of Oppression

Morgan and Youssef assert that "imaginative participation" by readers in literary texts contribute to the alteration of attitudes and opinions (4). They further confirm that the poetics employed are critical to this being achieved:

> The aim of literature is to draw readers into imaginative participation in the fictional scenario and perchance to alter their attitudes and opinions by the

> bombardment of their senses and sensibilities. The literary devices used to induce the willing suspension of disbelief compound the impact of fiction on readers. Readers are moved by more than the bare facts, and this moving can translate into a desire to motivate and contribute to change (Morgan and Youssef 4).

By extension, literature which thematically addresses domestic violence presents an opportunity for achieving transformation of national and regional attitudes to violence, through meaning-making which writes against domestic violence and the patriarchal gender positioning which underpins it. Morgan and Youssef have suggested that a discernible intent to write a transformative narrative should be evident in the work of contemporary Caribbean authors when addressing domestic violence (150).

In examining how the Caribbean novel addressed issues of poverty, social and political disenfranchisement, selfhood and nationhood in and around the decade when many of the territories in this analysis attained independence from Britain, Brathwaite separates the Caribbean novels of the 1960s into three categories:

> (1) Novels of a "descriptive/narrative character" that portray the reality of the Caribbean situation as it [was];
> (2) Novels which reach beyond mere description of a state of affairs to "imply dissatisfaction with the situation" and
> (3) Novels which suggest "outlines of an alternative tradition." ("West Indian Prose Fiction" 8)

Brathwaite implies that the former categories (1 & 2) are inadequate to achieve genuine social change and transformation and further highlights as a hallmark

of the third category, alternative poetics which transcend “the demands of conventional narrative or explanation” (13). He thereby asserts the necessity for renegade poetics in presenting a new vision of transformative social change. Put simply, Brathwaite highlights that a critical factor in the success of story as signal for change within the Caribbean context is not merely the content of the narrative, but the way in which it is rendered, making clear that the transformative novel requires revolutionary poetics, including stylistic innovation outside of the strictures of colonial language and textual forms. With reference to George Lamming’s *Season of Adventure,* Brathwaite asserts that the poetics of the oppressor cannot be used to allow the reader to imagine the world outside of oppression and therefore heralds the employment of revolutionary poetics including an alternative language and novel tradition to accomplish the vision of a new egalitarian Caribbean society (“History of the Voice” 15). Brathwaite’s concept of revolutionary poetics focused on the rejection of colonial English expression within Caribbean narratives nationhood and recognised the legitimacy of ‘nation language’ which, although lexically proximate to the English language, and including many of its words and phrases, also internalised the rhythms, language traditions and other elements of African language, resulting in a language more suited to cultural expressions of the Caribbean experience.

Brathwaite’s categorisation of 1960s narratives lends itself to this examination of modern Caribbean novels which explore domestic violence. Adopting Brathwaite’s categorisation, one might therefore expect Caribbean novels about domestic violence to not only embody an accurate and authentic portrayal of the reality of domestic violence in the Caribbean, but to go beyond that to demonstrate dis-satisfaction with domestic violence and the subordinate

positioning of women, and to suggest alternative realities for Caribbean women and the region as a whole, through the employment of poetics which inherently challenge patriarchal structure and approaches, including language and form which is outside of classical traditions and ideals.

What then, are radical poetics, in this context? Radical poetics are those which discard traditional methods of meaning-making to subvert patriarchal, hierarchical gender positioning or performance and lend themselves to meaning-making which supports equality among the sexes and decries violence against women. The poetics of the novels surveyed are examined with reference to the ways in which their narrative structures manifest alternative ways of looking, instead of the adoption of the 'male gaze' and the ways in which the Caribbean oral tradition is used in opposition to patriarchal gendering.

The thesis explores the methods of meaning-making Caribbean writers have applied in writing about domestic violence, questions what is the discernible impact of these poetics and examines the extent to which these poetics demonstrate a clear objective to have a transformative impact on individual and collective attitudes to violence against women and to write a more empowering script for Caribbean women.

## Narrative Context – The Prevalence of Domestic Violence in the Caribbean

Violence against women is a pervasive social problem in the Caribbean. Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navanethem Pillay, in a statement at the end of her visit to Barbados in April, 2012, is reported to have said "Domestic violence against women and children, and sexual harassment, occur all over the world. However, reports suggest that they are particularly

serious problems here in Barbados and in other Caribbean countries, and rape is shockingly commonplace" (UN News Service 05 April, 2012).

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the scourge of DV in the region, it is similarly acknowledged that legal and social responses have so far failed to arrest the problem. Gibbons asserts that while activism, awareness and legal responses to domestic violence have increased throughout the world as a whole and the Caribbean region in particular since 1975, incidents of gender-based violence seem to be growing exponentially within the English-speaking Caribbean, reaching epidemic levels within the first two decades of the 21st century (2).

Caribbean theorists have extensively explored the etiological basis of domestic violence and have variously attributed it to several factors including the region's "colonial history of violence" (Brereton 13), "entrenched traditional views of gender roles" (Morgan and Youssef 19) and "loss of masculinity" (Gibbons 8). Despite some divergence in theory on the causes of violence, however, these theorists all seem to concede a link between the existence of domestic violence and patriarchal gender performance and positioning. Brereton notes, for example "While the culture of violence in many respects transcended both ethnicity and gender, there is no doubt that a gender dimension was salient" (13).

Whatever its etiological premise, the gender dimension to the perpetuation and growth of violence against women in the Caribbean, indicates that a cultural, as opposed to (a merely) legal or social response to violence, is warranted (Morgan and Youssef 235; Gibbons 2-3; Holder Dolly 63).

This culture-centred approach to understanding and eradicating violence of necessity requires interrogation of the gender positioning reflected in

Caribbean literature and identification of the ways in which our literature seeks to write against gender performance and positioning which supports domestic violence. Further, it is important that Caribbean literature which thematically addresses domestic violence, be examined for evidence of how it seeks to inscribe a new social order which imagines women as equal, and as worthy of self-realisation as men. It is in signposting this new order that Caribbean literature moves beyond the mimetic and enters the realm of the transformative, performing a critical recuperative role in reversing what has become a regional scourge.

In Chapter 1 "Beyond the Male Gaze – The Evolution of Alternative Ways of Looking at Domestic Violence in Modern Caribbean Writing*",* I consider the ways in which modern Caribbean writing on domestic violence, as exemplified in the novels surveyed, demonstrates an evolution of approach that transcends the male gaze to employ alternative ways of looking in writing about domestic violence. I attribute the adoption of the male gaze in the work of pre-Independence narratives like *The Hills Were Joyful Together* and *The Lonely Londoners* to a literary tradition which had its genesis in the adaptation of that of the classical English novel tradition, and focussed on elevating the people and concerns of the black, socially disenfranchised regional underclass to the subject of an emerging literary canon modelled on that of the colonisers. This resulted in new narratives of Caribbean nationhood reflecting the same systemic prejudices against women that characterised their Western counterparts (Morgan & Youssef 7). These narratives generally fail to perceive and relay any alternative reality for women, a fact I link to their poetics. This narrative bias against women persists even in the novels of that period by female authors like Wynter and Gilroy, whose works similarly do not imagine the

transformation required to resolve problematic social positioning of women. This thesis argues that even though Naipaul's *Miguel Street* might be viewed as unique among the pre-Independence novels in that it does not so obviously replicate the male gaze evident in some of its contemporaries, it fails to move past the suggestion of an alternative way of looking to herald a definitive roadmap for positive change.

This is to be contrasted with post-1960s novels by Allen-Agostini and Ladoo, for example, who appear to discard the objectification of women and voyeuristic depictions of violence to suggest alternative ways of looking at domestic violence that give primacy to the female perspective, rehumanise female victims and focus an empathetic lens on victims of domestic violence, choosing to describe the impact of violence on the individual and community psyche rather than to glorify the violent act in and of itself.

In Chapter 2 "The Oral Tradition as Renegade Poetic – Domestic Violence and Calypso" my research focuses on Naipaul's employment of the calypso poetic in *Miguel Street*, exploring his employment of the oral tradition in this narrative as a revolutionary structural device used to undermine the patriarchal social system which supports domestic violence. My research distinguishes the facility and focus with which Naipaul employs the calypso poetic to highlight the fallacies inherent in prevailing gender hierarchy, from the approaches of Mais and Selvon, the former of whom fails to fully integrate orature within the narrative structure. This thesis does not however suggest that Naipaul's employment of the calypso poetic is targeted at changing the social reality for Caribbean women. Rather, his use of the calypso poetic, by the very nature of the artform, reveals the paradox between patriarchal gender positioning and values and the reality of life for Caribbean women. In so doing,

Naipaul is effective at highlighting the fallacy of the superordination of the male in patriarchal positioning and dismantling the tropes about the Caribbean woman, but not as effective in highlighting what alternative social order is to be pursued.

In contrast, the more recent Anglophone Caribbean narratives which address violence against women within the novels surveyed, appear to employ (especially) the performative element of the oral tradition in crafting poetics of horror which mimic the unsettlement experienced by victims of violence. Readers are forced into a more immediate engagement with the story, with the replication of aural elements of the story requiring, in some cases, unforeseen switching of sensory engagement with the text. Further, Allen-Agostini's very recent narrative employs the musicality, paradoxical meaning-making and use of nonsense words characteristic of the calypso poetic, to offer a glimpse of an alternative future.

In my conclusion I summarise my research findings and examine how representations of community in recent post-Independence narratives interrogate the traditional superordination of community cohesion in upholding patriarchal values over the hearing and healing of victims of violence. These narratives subvert the status quo by questioning the relevance and importance of established community values (such as the sacredness of Judaeo-Christian religion) which appear to support a patriarchal value system. Narratives by Allen-Agostini and Ladoo undermine the notion that patriarchal positioning is sacrosanct, supported by an unquestionable God and therefore to be endured by female victims of violence. Rather, these texts question the goodness and relevance of God and do so in a way that suggests that a faith which supports the subordination of women is no faith for women. In my own novel, in

acknowledgment of the relational importance of community in building identity, the community is made character, embodying a singular voice which highlights the ostracization of female victims of violence while questioning the relevance of identification with any collective which would perpetuate it. I identify the concept of community as a possibility for further creative engagement in my own work in the future.

## Chapter 1 – Beyond the Male Gaze – The Evolution of Alternative Ways of Looking at Domestic Violence in Modern Caribbean Writing

Twentieth century literary theorists have explored the pervasiveness in contemporary literature, of the 'male gaze', a term coined by Laura Mulvey to signify the narrative or cinematic reflection of patriarchal, heteronormative gender ideals which place the male in a position of power and relay and define the world story with primacy being given to his perspective. The male gaze is therefore a way of seeing, interpreting and engaging which perpetuates the subordination of women, promotes the exercise of absolute male power and undergirds a system which supports domestic violence. The attribution of the term 'male' to this way of looking is admittedly problematic, because it smacks of the very essentialism it (rightly) problematises, a difficulty acknowledged by Snow (31). Nevertheless, it is used here as it is generally understood, to signify the way in which the narratives surveyed demonstrate phallocentricity, and to assess the extent to which they interrogate it. Specifically, I examine the ways in which some of the texts surveyed demonstrate scopophilic traits in the rendering of violent acts against women, ascribe narrative primacy to the male perspective, and manifest objectification of women generally and intra-narrative ostracism of women who either do not subscribe to the primacy of the male viewpoint or cannot demonstrate value to the male within its strictures.

That several pre-Independence Caribbean narratives inhabited the male gaze in storytelling is often attributed to the modelling of the postcolonial Caribbean literary tradition on that of its former colonisers (Morgan and Youssef 7; Toland-Dix 60). The phallocentricity of these texts is reflected, to a greater or lesser degree, in their narrative treatment of violence against women, and the

poetics employed in writing about violence, most notably the absence of discernible attempts to write against it.

## Scopophilic Renderings of Violence Against Women

Of the texts examined*, The Hills Were Joyful Together* perhaps most clearly inhabits the male gaze in inviting the reader to share a scopophilic pleasure in the gore of the violent incidents the text relays, with little to no narrative space allocated to the psychic damage to the female victim of the violent act or the wider community. The narrative effect of this technique is to minimise the trauma suffered by the female victim of violence and to inspire an almost pathological fascination and desensitisation in the reader to the impact of the violent act on the victim, engendering instead a distracting curiosity about the spectacle of the act itself, dehumanising both reader and narrative victim and leading to tolerance instead of transformation.

When Shag relays a story about his friend Wallacy, who killed his girlfriend after he discovered that she was cheating on him, for example, the circumstances of her death are told in voyeuristic detail and in the telling she is rendered voiceless, not even attributed a sound of protest "…and Wallacy reached under the mattress where he kept his machete, sharp, and chopped up Susu like cuts of meat. First he chopped her head off and then the rest of her he chunked up, and he did it so quick and business-like nobody in the apartment house even heard a sound" (53).

Near the end of the novel, Euphemia is also murdered by her lover for infidelity and again, the killing is relayed in gory detail, without reference to the trauma of the victim:

> Shag was standing over her with the machete raised aloft. It was stained with blood. She put up her hands as though to ward off the blow. Three fingers were shorn off clean. They fell into her lap. She screamed again, long and high-pitched. And that was the last time. The very next blow severed her windpipe, and the point of the machete travelled diagonally in a straight line across her right breast. But she was still alive, and her eyes stared up at him in horror as he slashed and slashed at her with the machete. One blow lopped off the left arm clean, above the elbow, and laid her abdomen open. Her entrails spilled out upon her lap. (265)

Tellings of this sort, devoid of any reference to the feeling and anguish of the victim of the violent act or any meaningful indication of protest or resistance by the victim, do little to imply dissatisfaction with the status quo as it relates to violence against women or to contribute to the transformation in cultural attitudes to domestic violence. This narrative inhabitation of the male gaze is consistent across all renderings of violent episodes in Mais' novel, including those against men, and might at first suggest a poetics of violence which is unconcerned with the gender of the victim.

Near the beginning of the novel, for example, Mais describes a fight between Manny and Euphemia, started when Manny is rude to Euphemia. In that fight, the female is the aggressor and the narrative account includes the following "Two long weals lumped up and reddened at his side. Her other hand with the heavy gold ring she wore for Shag cut his top lip so that the two axe-teeth in front showed through it, pinning the lip stiff against his face"' (35)

Similarly, the male-on-male ambush of Flitters for betraying Surjue is an equally graphic rendering of physical carnage:

> Crawfish stabbed him in the side of the face with his knife. The point of the blade went in just below the eye. It laid his cheek open to the bone, came to a jarring stop against the teeth in his lower jaw … The knife struck him again…in the neck and sheer through the jugular…the point came out through the other side of his throat. (234)

However, the fallacy of equality in narrative treatment of violence, irrespective of the gender of the victim, is exposed on closer examination. The difference in narrative treatment of violence against women and violence against and among men, is that the text allows the omniscient narrator to inhabit the mind and perspective of the male victim, attributing to him a fight and a protest that make him equal in humanity to the aggressor, irrespective of the outcome, rather than a mute object of violence. In the depiction of Flitter's murder, referenced above, for example, Flitter's resistance is rendered over several pages and includes the following "He had nothing to fight back at them with but his fists. His breath came from him with a hoarse, rasping sob. But he was fighting with the bitter end of that berserk rage. He hit out blindly with both fists, his breath jerking from him with those big rasping sobs" (234).

The violent incidents against women in the novel generally do not afford the reader a similar excursion into the sentiment and emotion of the female victim of violence, making it difficult to find evidence of an implied empathy for her, or disapproval of the act of violence against the female, far less evidence of a transformative vision. Mais' depiction suggests a lack of narrative intent to foreground domestic violence or prescribe an alternative. Rather, the narrative representation simultaneously represents violence as an explicit source of pleasure to the reader and a performance in which the female victim is objectified and silenced and the male victim is presented as a present, powerful

and active opponent. In producing a narrative which appears to so fully inhabit the male gaze in describing the violent act itself, Mais fails to interrogate the patriarchal model of masculinity undergirding domestic violence, or to suggest that the ideal society should reject it.

Yet the survey suggests that it would be an error to regard scopophilic renderings of violence to be characteristic of all the pre-1960s postcolonial narratives examined as part of this research, including those written by women. In Gilroy's *In Praise of Love and Children* there is no voyeuristic pleasure evident in the rendering of Arnie's beating of his girlfriend, Trudi, which is almost cold in its matter-of-factness - "He slapped her hard. She and the baby both shrieked again. She took a jug and threw it at Arnie. It shattered at his feet." (66) Yet, far from a discernible narrative effort to write against domestic violence, there is evidence of narrative complicity in the implied appropriateness of this beating when the narrator suggests that it is brought on by Trudi's attempts to "(make) a 'batty-man'" (66) of Arnie's son and her relentless tendency to defy her partner's authority. Similarly, in *The Hills of Hebron*, the rape which resolves one of the dramatic tensions central to the story is relayed in a manner which, though not graphic, perpetuates the objectification of the victim, depicting the victim's protests as obliterated by the sound within the male aggressor's head, and suggesting that the victim arches her body towards that of the rapist after the act (271).

Similarly, the scopophilic rendering of violent acts in *The Hills Were Joyful Together* is to be contrasted with Selvon's referential narration of wife-beating in *The Lonely Londoners* and Naipaul's employment of a poetics of omission in his contemporaneous *Miguel Street*. Naipaul and Selvon omit the details of the physical battle altogether, with their narratives addressing

occurrences of beating only after the fact or allusively. Lewis' beating his wife in *The Lonely Londoners*, for example, is rendered without descriptive detail – "And as soon as he get home he starting to beat up Agnes, even though the poor girl don't know what for" (68).

Similarly, Tony's beatings of Mrs. Hereira in *Miguel Street* are relayed almost through a veil - "Then the beatings began. The woman used to run out screaming. We would hear the terrible dog barking and we would hear the man shouting and cursing and using language so coarse that we were all shocked" (133). This shifts the reader's focus from the gore of the act itself, to its impact on the wider community - the terror of the beaten woman, the shock of the neighbours, the fact that even the dog, who has no capacity to reason, is discombobulated by the trauma of the event. In this way, the text accomplishes not only the reflection of the reality of violence against women, but its impact on the wider community in which they live, thereby interrogating its impact on the collective psyche and forcing the reader to question its relevance.

In fact, instead of manifesting scopophilic pleasure in looking at the violent act, *Miguel Street* elevates its performance to the realm of the surreal and uses a subversive humour in relaying some incidents of violence against women. In *George and the Pink House*, for example, the narrator observes:

> He had his wife and his daughter and his son. He beat them all. And when the boy Elias grew too big. George beat his daughter and his wife more than ever. The blows didn't appear to do the mother any good. She just grew thinner and thinner; but the daughter, Dolly, thrived on it. She grew fatter and fatter, and giggled more and more every year. (27)

Naipaul's representations therefore more clearly interrogate the reality of domestic violence and suggest, consistent with the theories of Rudin and Maisier, the inadequacy of traditional, descriptive narration to capture the horror of the violent act. By elevating the performance of violence to the realm of the freakishly funny and incomprehensibly absurd, he forces reader engagement with the text in a way that calls into question the place of domestic violence in Caribbean socio-cultural realities, highlights pathos, and implies dis-satisfaction. *Miguel Street* therefore meets the requirements of Brathwaite's second category of assessment.

In the novels surveyed from the post-1960s period, there is clear evidence of a movement from gratuitous relays of violent acts and evolution of the poetics of omission in narrative representations of violence. In Ladoo's *No Pain Like This Body,* for example, several of the descriptions of violence, rendered from the perspective of the child narrator, while relatively detailed, are almost cartoonish in their naiveté, and therefore more tragic in their significance and narrative import:

> Pa hated Ma … so he picked up Ma as if he was picking up a little child and he held her in the air. Ma bawled like a cow hard hard hard …Ma didn't want to go inside the tub; she was turning and twisting as a worm; just turning and twisting and bawling; just bawling and trying to get away. The water in the tub was full of soap suds. Pa held her high, and he held her tight… (13-14)

In writing *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* it was important for me to achieve a narrative balance between authentically portraying the horror and trauma intrinsic to the lived reality of so many female victims of domestic violence and not engaging in gratuitous renderings of the violent act

itself. For me, my sense of social responsibility and my understanding of the story demanded the employment of an alternative way of looking, including what I considered to be appropriate depictions of the violent acts endured by many of the women in the novel.

There is therefore no voyeuristic depiction of violence in *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* characteristic of Mais. In chapter 27, for example, when Lala interrupts Adan while he is praying before a robbery, and suffers his violence as a result, there is no gratuitous, grisly description of the act or the injury. The impact is shown on other inanimate objects reminiscent of Naipaul's poetic of omission:

> Lala sighs without thinking. She makes a loud sound that reminds her of tearing paper. She watches Adan's lips stop their caress of David's words and she sighs loudly again, for a different reason. She watches her hand jerk, sees the cup fall, the rice scatter, watches the pages of the Bible flutter, sees the psalms of David submerged. (212-213)

In other accounts, violent incidents are not only not described in physical detail, but are relayed in an almost hypothetical manner, as if we are uncertain whether the incident actually took place at all:

> In this other world, Lala imagines, coconut trees do not exist, neither do centipedes, nor men who hold your right hand so tightly you could wet yourself … There is a physical state beyond pain, a sort of numbness that allows Lala to remain standing while the flesh and bones of her right hand are forced upwards, so that her wrist looks like it is wrapped in bracelets of warm red. In her mind her bones break with the explosive *pop-pop* of fireworks. Maybe they do, maybe they don't, but at first, she is screaming, and then she is in such pain that she is not. (105)

This 'poetics of omission' is manifest in Allen-Agostini's novel also, where violent incidents against women are relayed without explicit detail of the act itself and more emphasis on its impact on the victim:

> I take one sip – the mauby was bitter. I skin up my face before I could control the expression. I know he see. I try to sit the glass exactly in the ring of water that show where Leo first put it down for me. Just so, the plate, the glass and my face went flying to the floor. Callalloo was dripping from my hair. I had mauby in my eye. (42-43)

## Narrative Primacy of the Male Perspective

While not all of the pre-1960s texts examined demonstrate scopophilia in representations of violence against women, they all appear to reflect the narrative primacy of the male perspective and the marginalisation of the feminine. In the yard society of *The Hills Were Joyful Together* for example, this is accomplished in a number of ways, not only by the telling of the story from an overwhelmingly male perspective, but also by the intra-text marginalisation and oppression of the female characters and a series of textual images and references that relay and reinforce this marginalisation. In one scene near the start of the novel, Rema comes home from a hard day's work to the image of her boyfriend, Surjue, sprawled across the middle of their bed where he has been all day, forcing her to inhabit a small space on the side of the bed, begging him to move over a bit so she, tired, can rest. This image visually translates the position of woman in yard society – a beast of burden of only peripheral importance.

Within that text, this gender positioning is reinforced in a number of ways, including textual references to the supremacy of an unwritten male code which all characters, male and female, seem to understand and accept. When Surjue, in prison, holds a number of guards hostage, the Superintendent of the prison seeks to solve the impasse with a promise of fairness and an appeal to this code, which works in placating him, and which is expressed to be a higher ideal even than the law the Superintendent is duty bound to administer and enforce - "Listen man, I give you my word, in the presence of all these officers and prisoners, that I will give you a fair hearing, and a square deal. Not according to the book, either, as man to man" (175).

While Naipaul's text similarly reflects the realities of the performance of masculinity in Caribbean societies, including the 'othering' of the female and the perceived right of the male to discipline her, *Miguel Street* demonstrates a more obvious interrogation of these realities through the employment of non-traditional poetics. In employing the male child-narrator of Maisier's theory, for example, at a stage of dawning self-awareness, the narrative is able to capture the moment at which the young male is on the cusp of incorporation into the world of the dominant gender. His innocence appeals to the reader, who must question the values the young narrator is beginning to internalise, and therefore their wider acceptance.

In Naipaul's first chapter, he acknowledges the imitative value of American phallocentricity with his reference to the film Casablanca "I don't know if you remember the year the film Casablanca was made. That was the year when Bogart's fame spread like fire through Port of Spain and hundreds of young men began adopting the hardboiled Bogartian attitude" (9)

Yet the eponymous Bogart of the chapter is arrested on a charge of bigamy, which the narrator suggests is the result of a broken heart over the inability of his first wife to bear children. When Eddoes questions why Bogart left this wife, Hat responds "To be a man, among we men*"* (16) in a way that inspires empathy and suggests to the young narrator and to the reader, that the Bogart braggadocio is unfulfilling.

Of the more recently published narratives surveyed, M. NourbeSe Philips appears to write most obviously in direct opposition to the employment of the male gaze in a narrative which overtly superordinates the female perspective, thereby boldly rejecting phallocentricity. NourbeSe-Philip's young female narrator overtly questions the patriarchal gender positioning which is evident around her:

> 'How come HE,' I asked, pointing to my brother, 'never gets to do any work around here? I don't see my name on these dishes or on this floor. His hands don't seem broken to me.'
>
> My Mother told me to shut up, that he was a boy, and that he had better things to do.
>
> 'Like what?' I said. (34)

Further, in *Harriet's Daughter* it is the female characters who are given complexity and depth in intra-textual interaction, with the male characters retaining peripheral, yet ominous roles in the narrative drama. This is arguably a less successful route to Brathwaite's third category – and *Harriet's Daughter* perhaps surprisingly, does not quite achieve the status of transformative text. For all their intelligence and sensitivity, the female characters remain constrained in deed by the spectre of their husbands' power, the fissure in the male/female relations is never reconciled or resolved, and some of the female

characters who appeal to the female protagonist, seem to be valued for characteristics which hearken back to traditional performances of gender, including the attribution of softness, affection and household skills to the feminine - “Hugging Mrs. B was like hugging a great big soft pillow. She held me close for a minute or so and I could smell her clean floury smell” (54). Moreover, we get no glimpse of alternative imagined gender positioning or performance, based on equality, in the diasporic Caribbean.

In approaching a more feminocentric rendering in my own novel, I considered having the story told as a testimonial narrative, in the first person. However, I encountered problems linked to the gap between story and reality. The reality is that survivors of domestic violence are often voiceless. Their experiences can cause, over time, a literal and connotative loss of voice and a heightened sense of fear caused by post-traumatic stress (Morgan and Youssef 8; Haniff 367). I had to find a way to make the story unquestionably Lala’s story while reflecting her lack of agency in telling it, which is generally the case in real life. Early drafts of the novel were written in the first person, from Lala’s point of view, but this was creatively problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it allowed Lala an agency and vocal power not supported by real life accounts and which could therefore undermine the authenticity of the narrative. Secondly, the truth is that many survivors are so traumatised by their experiences as to be stuck in patterns of unhelpful rumination in their retelling, or to demonstrate dissociation in other ways, which could negatively impact pacing as well as elevate Lala’s unreliability as a narrator to the point that the reader could have found it difficult to identify with her. For example, in earlier drafts, Lala repeatedly ruminated on the incident that resulted in the death of her baby. In those early drafts Baby’s death was portrayed over several chapters which always involved Lala retelling

the incident with additional details added or removed by which the reader was expected to proximate what had actually happened on the night that Baby was killed and who was at fault for her death. However, while the repeated rumination on the incident might have been authentic and consistent with the real and expected psychological trauma of the abuse suffered, to include it in the narrative in this way would have negatively impacted the pacing of the novel in a manner that was difficult to alleviate through other means. I therefore changed the (main) point of view to that of a limited omniscient narrator in third person and generally made this the same for all main characters.

However, Rudin's theory of the inadequacy of traditional linear story-telling in novel format, for the telling of stories about violence against women, was true for me in writing this novel. A simple third-person account felt somehow insufficient in the rendering of this story, inadequate to truly represent the horror of the violence suffered by Lala. Further, a heightened level of empathy was required to ensure reader identification with the characters in the novel, especially Lala, that I felt would not be adequately addressed by the distance afforded by a simple third-person rendering, which allows for the illusion of separation between a woman in Lala's circumstances and the wider community, including the reader, and perhaps a resulting tendency to judge or blame Lala. At the same time, while I wanted the reader to identify with Lala and to empathise with her, I did not want the reader to over-identify with Lala to such an extent that they would be unable to appreciate Adan's character, for example, and by extension, to appreciate the fact that many abusers were themselves abused at one point or another. La Capra's ideal of achieving 'empathetic unsettlement' in the reader, an objective endorsed by Vickeroy (xi)

was therefore a consideration for me when making creative choices about the narrative point of view and the telling of the story generally.

I eventually chose to tell the story using a number of points of view. For example, chapter 1 starts with a third-person account of the birth of Baby and the narrator follows Lala through the harrowing circumstances surrounding that birth. By chapter 3, however, the narration has shifted to second person and the use of the pronoun ‘you’ becomes both an invocation to the reader to inhabit the action in the story and evocative of the dissociation Lala suffers as a result of the trauma of the violence she suffers at her husband’s hands:

> Even now, with Baby sleeping open-mouthed between the both of you, when you are reassured of reality by the chirping of birds, the swish of the coconut leaves and the roar and retreat of the waves below, even now, you can look into the face of the man snoring on the other side of that small baby and wonder who he is. You can see those thin, spiteful lips, slackened into pleasantry by sleep, and forget how they feel when he kisses you. (27)

I felt that the structure of the novel had to allow the reader to experience first-hand not necessarily the gruesome acts of violence, but the psychological trauma, community alienation, hypervigilance and stress suffered by Lala and by extension, other victims of violence. Switching points of view in telling the story helped to establish the sense of dislocation, alienation and distortion of reality suffered by female victims of violence as the reader also endures a series of foundational shifts in narrative which mirror the fundamental shifts in experience and understanding of reality which Lala would have suffered as a result of the violence meted out to her.

The novel therefore slips in and out of a variety of other points of view and perspectives, including 1st person plural (a point of view rarely employed in traditional novels) from the point of view of the village in which Lala lives. This rendering highlights Lala's alienation from the village collective, an alienation which is mirrored in the narrative:

> Had we not been aware that she was wedded to another man, we might have told her, we would have taken this Tone for her husband. Were we not aware that this Tone sells his body to the tourist women on the beach, we would believe that his body is hers, so studiously does she avoid devouring it with her eyes in the way her client cannot help doing. But this is not before the death of Lala's baby, this is after. This is a time when we do not talk to Lala, when our good hawkers hesitate to refer tourists in need of braids and beading to her, although we know she is our best. (152)

## Intra-Narrative Objectification and Ostracism of Women

The pre-1960s postcolonial narratives examined perpetuated a number of female tropes, which reflected and reinforced the positioning of women as subordinate to the male, powerless and valueless save as defined in relation to the male. Other writers seem to suggest this finding is representative of a larger truth. Toland-Dix, citing Wigmoore Francis, notes, for example that "Francis concludes that because of the role representations play in 'relations and structures of power' ….'portrayals of black women in the discourses of these radical black male thinkers in the Caribbean functioned to perpetuate their subjugation and disempowerment." (60)

The intra-text objectification of women and marginalisation of women who do not demonstrate value to males within the narrative, or who do not meet traditional performative requirements of gender is another way in which some of the novels surveyed manifest the male gaze. The extent to which these narratives interrogate this reality is a matter of poetics.

Mais' consistent depiction of woman as object in relation to the male and his relegation of women to the marginal space both in the narrative as a whole and as among the characters who inhabit the text, does relatively little to advance the cause or concerns of women. Witness, for example, the objectification of the women in *The Hills Were Joyful Together*. Within the first few pages of the novel, the female characters are all described with reference to male characters – Cassie, for example, is introduced as the woman of Ras and Zephyr, a prostitute, is described with reference to her refusal to sleep with Lennie. Moreover, the female characters are generally consistently objectified with reference to the pleasure, service or attention they bring to or receive from the male.

Euphemia is introduced with a detailed description of her physique – she is "magnificently statuesque" and is described as having "blossomed out like one of those big, juicy mallow flowers that only opened fully when they had the full sun on them…." (12), and this 'blossoming' is attributed to the attention of her new lover Bajun Man, with whom she is cheating on her partner Shag. Mais therefore also early and easily establishes certain female tropes – Cassie is the woman of virtue who dutifully serves her man, Zephyr is the wise, irreverent whore with no heart and Euphemia is the beautiful, unfaithful temptress.

It is important to note that it is Mais' lack of narrative interrogation of this positioning, which relegates the narrative to Brathwaite's first category of simple

reflection of society as is. The novel fails to move beyond the mimetic to a true interrogation of the positioning of women in yard society, far less an empowering alternative. This is to be contrasted with Naipaul's narrative in *Miguel Street*, where a no less realistic depiction of the reality of 'othering' is writ large, but there is simultaneously a clear questioning of that positioning. In *Miguel Street* women are outside of the community of men both in the dramatic action and the writing of the story. They are excluded from Hat's room where the men go to talk about life and draw strength from each other and they are simultaneously not allocated the status of main protagonist of any but one of the 17 stories which make up the novel. Even in that single story about the character Laura, much space is allocated to Nathaniel, her lover, with whom the men of the street appear to empathise. Yet, Miguel Street makes clear that it is the women who support their families and are otherwise generally the backbone of home and community life.

Mais does reflect the complexity of gender positioning in the yard community and the matrifocality of wider Caribbean society by demonstrating, for example, the fact that within the relationship between Surjue and Rema, Rema is the one who works and earns to support him and their household, despite Surjue's bragging to the contrary. Further, she is the one who intuits first that Flitters is not to be trusted. However, this apparent wisdom is not maintained when Flitters eventually betrays Surjue, causing Surjue to be jailed as a result of a botched robbery. At that point Rema is portrayed as losing her mind, as if the narrative suggests that she is hopeless and rudderless without her man.

The woman of Mais' yard remains an inanimate object, defined by her sexual appeal and devoid of the aspiration to self-actualise that is the aim of all

humanity. Ditty's character is particularly interesting in this respect. She is hypersexualised, her actions often absent of apparent motive and her stated sexual desire devalued by its lack of depth. She appears to seek the sexual favours of several male characters with no rhyme, reason or rationale to her choices. Narrative references to her character focus on her physical appearance. Mais describes Ditty as follows:

> Ditty … gave him a warm smile. Got up, walked slowly across the yard, something in her face, the shape of her mouth, her eyes, the way she carried herself, exuding sex like a warm pungent odour, like some over-scented flower, every time she looked at a man she was just asking to be laid. (27)

Other female characters receive similar narrative treatment. Save for the religious and the older women, female characters are generally described with reference to their visual appeal to males or to their sexuality, and the older females not so described are presented as understanding that their age or religion or both, make them undesirable or less worthy of male attention, which attention is therefore understood to be prized among females. On confronting her husband about an open act of infidelity with a younger woman, the mature Charlotta asserts "I only want for things to go right, but I'm an old fowl now, chicken is what you want. "(69)

The women of Mais' yard generally have no agency over their sexuality. Sex is a demonstration of power by the male performed on the body of the female, who is portrayed as passive recipient, to be chased and conquered. In the pre-1960s novels, women who own their sexuality are therefore marginalised to the fringes of the community within the narratives examined, often irredeemably so. Laura from *Miguel Street*; Ditty and Zephyr from *The*

*Hills Were Joyful Together*, and Trudi in Gilroy's *In Praise of Love and Children* are examples of this estrangement from community after demonstration of sexual agency.

In contrast, the modern-day woman of Agostini's *The Bread the Devil Knead*, reflects a changed sexual dynamic where woman is both the object of sexual power as well as its savvy practitioner, embodied in the main female protagonist who maintains the central focus and narrative voice of the text.

In my own novel it was also important for me to interrogate the traditional gender stereotyping which has been accepted as fundamental to the existence and acceptance of violence against women in the Caribbean. I was specifically interested in exploring the trope of woman as either shameless whore/ thief/ liar or mother/ virgin/ saint. I believe that women must be portrayed as the complex, flawed humans we all are, irrespective of gender. Women must be portrayed as deserving of respect and love despite our (human) flaws and foibles, not because such a portrayal contradicts current scripting, but because such a portrayal is true, and truth is the only foundation upon which transformational change can take place. The whores in this book are therefore both female (Queen of Sheba and Mira) and male (Tone), it is a man (Adan) who steals from a woman (Lala) in the context of a romantic relationship and Tone's interest in and love for Lala transcends physical appearance. He is depicted as being moved by Lala's inner qualities and not her physical appearance, which is hardly described at all.

Similarly, Tone is Lala's lover although she is already married to Adan. In accordance with colonial ideals this might have subjected Lala to condemnation and censure, however, it was important to me that the narrative manifest an empathetic rendering of that affair, that it question the ideal of romantic love and

that a man, as man, (Tone) demonstrate a transcendental love for a flawed female character (Lala) by not only assisting her escape from Baxter's Beach but also by being willing to take the blame for the death of her Baby so that Lala could be free.

My research therefore suggests that the texts in which the adoption of the male gaze was manifest, were of less transformative value in addressing domestic violence, however, this appeared to also hold true for the one novel surveyed which clearly and directly superordinated femicentric concerns. Moreover, my analysis showed that the time of publication was not determinative of the likelihood of narrative inhabitation of the male gaze as *Miguel Street*, in contrast to the other early postcolonial texts examined, employed an alternative way of looking that promoted empathy for the plight of abused women, although it fell short of scripting an alternative reality.

## Chapter 2 - The Oral Tradition as Renegade Poetic – Domestic Violence and Calypso

The Caribbean oral tradition signifies the spoken and sung expressions of Caribbean people which draw on the traditions of African traditional storytelling and includes folktales, songs and myths. Vété-Congolo terms this mode of expression "Caribbean pawol" and asserts:

> Caribbean pawol (is) the product of the long and constant epistemological and ethical struggle of the African enslaved in the Caribbean to proffer speech whose meaning, significance and purpose are outside of the unethical and a-human terms of the enslaver's paradigm of thought and speech. (2)

Caribbean orality is therefore often contextualised within early postcolonial creative discourses in opposition to colonialism and its reinforcing institutions. Calypso is widely accepted as one of the more obvious examples of orature in regional culture, recognised as a medium of social protest, considered the mouthpiece of male sensibilities (Thieme 25), referenced as a reliable barometer of gender relations in Trinidad (Mahabir 36; Munro-Smith 38; Thieme 23) and said to embody an overwhelmingly negative sentiment towards women, including the promotion of the use of violence by the male to control her (Elder 25; Gottreich 3; Rohlehr "Man Talking to Man"1). Gottreich asserts:

> Traditional (male-composed) calypsos are generally disparaging in their portrayal of women. Images of women in calypso range from physical characteristics of dirtiness and ugliness, to woman's unfaithfulness, her being overly sexual or not sexual enough, to her manipulativeness and

her greedy nature. Prominent throughout these images is the advocation of the need for violence to control her (3).

Considering the employment of orality, and calypso in particular, as a form of social protest in the Caribbean, and in view of the fact that, despite the preponderance of male calypsonians, the artform was descended from “the praise-songs of West African women” (Mahabir 411) I examined the texts surveyed for evidence of the employment of the oral tradition, especially calypso, in writing against domestic violence and inscribing an alternative future on the regional imagination as it relates to the social status and domestic abuse of women.

In this regard, I focus on Naipaul’s employment of the calypso poetic in thematically addressing domestic violence in *Miguel Street*, while examining elements of the oral tradition evident in other novels in the survey and comparing and contrasting these narrative approaches with my own incorporation of features of the oral tradition in meaning-making about domestic violence in *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House*. I examine the extent to which the novels surveyed go beyond merely incorporating elements of the oral tradition in their narratives to having that tradition inform the narrative structure and analyse how orature might be considered revolutionary poetic in the modern Caribbean novel, and the extent to which is it used to write against, not colonialism, but gender oppression and the abuse of women.

Miguel Street and the Calypso Poetic

In *Miguel Street*, Naipaul masterfully employs the oral tradition, and specifically what I call the ‘calypso poetic’ to subvert our understanding of domestic violence and patriarchal gender positioning in Caribbean society. In

this, Naipaul, as a male writer of the realist tradition, is unique in terms of the thematic space allocated to the issue of domestic violence, and his employment of a traditionally masculine art-form to subvert patriarchy, even if his poetics cannot be said to extend to an effort to write a new script for Trinidadian women. Naipaul, like Selvon and Mais, relies heavily on the poetics of orature to reflect Caribbean gender realities, although it is arguably only Naipaul who uses this poetic to subvert the Western patriarchal gender roles to which his characters are expected to adhere as an inherited normative feature of colonial society. Naipaul suggests that it is in the inability of the Caribbean male of the era of *Miguel Street*, at a time of burgeoning national and regional awareness and quest for self-direction, to assume the gender roles assigned by the patriarchal colonial society, or even to self-actualise in accordance with his own ideals, that he turns to violence against his woman and the world. In *Miguel Street*, Naipaul shows us the reality of the marginalisation, oppression and victimisation of women at the hands of Trinidadian males. He asks us whether the accepted gender positioning of the time reflected the reality of women's contribution to society, but he stops just short of writing a new script for women which allows them to be seen as the same complex, imperfect, aspirational beings that the men of *Miguel Street* are shown to be.

*Miguel Street* was published in 1959 and reflects general postcolonial themes of identity and the quest for individual and national self-actualisation. Naipaul admits to having written the book over six weeks in 1955 and the timespan of the constituent stories is between 1935 and 1947.[3] Although *Miguel*

[3] For an interview with the author in which his early writing ambitions and complex relationship with Trinidad is discussed, see Rosen, J. & Tejpaul, T. "V.S. Naipaul, The Art of Fiction, No. 154". *The Paris Review* (Issue 148) (1998) accessed online at https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1069/v-s-naipaul-the-art-of-fiction-no-154-v-s-naipaul on 10 October 2017.

*Street* is Naipaul's third published work, it is reportedly the first of his novels, and as one of the earliest examples of the Caribbean novel tradition, its inclusion in this survey is therefore justified. It is the main text examined in this chapter because of its clear thematic treatment of domestic violence and equally manifest application of Caribbean orature within that context.

Gendered violence is a consistent theme in *Miguel Street*. While not all the stories deal directly with this theme, the ones that do not deal with it help to contextualise the violence which is represented in other stories within broader concerns of masculinity, femininity, self-actualisation and individual and national aspiration. They convey the reality of gender relations in Trinidadian society of the time and provide a narrative context in which social norms on the issue are highlighted and examined.

## Trinidad 1930 – 1955 – Historical, Socio-Political & Cultural Context

The quarter century prior to the writing and publication of *Miguel Street* epitomised the social, cultural and political awakening of Trinidad and Tobago, an awakening which found expression in the Trinidadian calypso.

Cudjoe asserts that the pre- Independence social and political quest for self-actualisation in Trinidad was mirrored by the struggle to self-actualise in literary and cultural terms ("Tradition, Miguel Street and other Short Stories" 16). This concern with national self-realisation was therefore also reflected in Trinidad's music, and specifically calypso (Mohammed 19). In the quest for self-determination, nascent postcolonial literature therefore employed the oral tradition, unique poetics which reflected the narrative engagement of 'nation language', including the employment of alternative Englishes, the creolised

language of the region which reflected classical influences as well as those of other ethnicities and cultures.

Elder divided the songs of calypso's golden age and beyond into nine distinct tropes on the male/female dynamic consisting of separation anxiety, sexual jealousy, female rejection, female magic, seduction tales, conquest tales, derision, pejorative accounts and disgust and found that major 'areas of stress' were pejorative accounts, conquest tales, derision, separation anxiety and sexual jealousy' (27-32). Calypsos of the time period of some of the stories in *Miguel Street* are therefore rife with references to women as liars, thieves, crafty, unfaithful and prone to prostitution, the cause of lunacy on the part of the male, advocates for their own abuse at the hands of the male or somehow deserving of violence and generally unworthy of the romantic attention of the male. Mahabir connects these negative depictions to calypsonians advocating the use of physical violence to put women in their rightful place, subordinate to men (426). It is against this backdrop that Naipaul wields the calypso poetic against the issue of domestic violence.

## Calypso Poetics

Naipaul himself acknowledged the artistry of the calypso, its connection to the West Indian psyche, and lamented (whether correctly or incorrectly) that this artistry was not present in West Indian novels of the time (Cudjoe 28). He perhaps therefore sought to incorporate the calypso poetic in *Miguel Street*. More than the mere "allusion to calypso" recognised by Thieme (19), *Miguel Street* fully inhabits and embraces the poetics of the calypso artform as structuring device, and further, does so to imply dis-satisfaction with the subordinate positioning of women. Aside from the obvious references to calypso

lyrics in his stories to enrich narrative meaning, there are a number of elements of calypso which Naipaul uses in *Miguel Street* to thematically address gender relations and domestic violence – aspirational naming, antiphony and paradoxical meaning-making are three of the most obvious, with the last of these perhaps being the most important in subverting the status quo on domestic violence.

## Aspirational Naming

Within the context of being the music of the underclass within a colonial system in which the calypsonian and the average black Trinidadian would have been 'other', calypsonians sought to subvert this social positioning through grand self-naming. The 'braggadacio' and performative nature of the stick-licking tradition also contributed to the nomenclature of the practitioners of calypso who declared themselves, through their stage names, equal to the royal and elite leaders of the colonial system which oppressed them. Calypsonians therefore assumed names like The Roaring Lion, Lord Carresser, Lord Executor, Lord Invader and Lord Nelson.

This assumption of names and therefore personae of power and status, plucked from colonial icons and institutions of power, is also to be found in the naming of male characters in *Miguel Street,* despite the fact that the realities of the lives of these men and the constraints of the societies in which they live, do not make the realisation of such personae possible. Characters to whom savoir faire and sophistication (Bogart), strength (Big Foot), esteem (Titus Hoyte I.A.) or colonial linguistic acumen (Black Wordsworth or "B. Wordsworth") are attributed are therefore named accordingly, although the realities of these characters' lives is often the opposite of what their names suggest. In the

eponymously named chapter about B. Wordsworth, for example, B. Wordsworth aspires to write a great poem, much like his English counterpart. The text however highlights the irrelevance and inadequacy of the Queen's English to the real poetry of life in Miguel Street. The narrator's mother is said to worry at B. Wordsworth's unnatural use of the English language and she beats the narrator for visiting the poet's home. B. Wordsworth is unable to make a living from selling his poems and makes his money singing calypsos in season. His aspirations to write the world's greatest poem in the colonial tradition come to naught and a year later his magical home and all it represented are no longer there, swallowed by the physical evidence of progress in line with colonial ideals (brick and concrete). The message is that in aspiring to the colonial ideologies of language and expression, and failing to recognise the intrinsic poetry of his own, the Trinidadian man is devoured by them, leaving no trace of himself, the greatest tragedy. In this way, the apparently aspirational name given to B. Wordsworth is shown to be of little value.

In contrast, female characters in the text are not allowed to transcend their given names (Laura) or are named only with reference to the men who have, by approved means, acquired a level of power over them (Mrs. Backhu, Mrs. Herreira) and the narrator, a young boy, and relatively powerless, is not named at all. Paradoxically, it is this young, unnamed narrator through whose eyes we view Miguel Street, and his centrality in the narrative challenges his apparent lack of recognition in the prevailing order of things. Similarly, it is the women who are not heralded by grand names, who do the majority of the work required to transcend the bleakness of life in the street. In this way, Naipaul's calypso poetic challenges the marginalisation and oppression of women and children. By refusing to ascribe transcendent names to the narrator, certain

female characters and male characters who do not fill the shoes of the male script, Naipaul underscores the primacy of the male and the patriarchal system in Miguel Street, as in calypso and wider Trinidad. Yet, his narrative reminds us, in life as in calypso, the reality is quite the opposite.

In *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* I was certain that the names of the characters had to be of significance to their role and function in the narrative, but was less concerned with names that referred to or assumed the iconography of empire. For example, in the tradition of aspirational self-naming, Lala insists on being called ‘Lala’ instead of her given name ‘Stella’, but there is no narrative intention to adopt the ideals or personae of status of a colonising system. Her name can only be sung, rather than said, and the text therefore reaches towards the expression of something that is best understood orally, in line with the performative aspects of the oral tradition. What is aspired to is therefore the musicality of an oral tradition which is not easily lexically expressed and which connotes an elemental expression of maternal love. What is presented in this name is an inherent desire to step outside the strictures of a lexical rendering, somewhat like the way in which the female characters, including Lala, struggle to step outside of the social limits imposed on them by virtue of gender.

Other characters in the book are also symbolically named but with reference to alternative regional cultural realities. For example Adan is, in name and nature, ‘a dan’ (Jamaican: “Don”), which signifies his power, sharp dressing and virility in the lingo of Caribbean counter-culture. Similarly, Tone is nick-named after a Vincentian colloquial expression for the male sexual organ, and therefore embodies his job as a sex-worker. In *How the One-Armed Sister*

*Sweeps Her House*, the aspirational self-naming of calypso is modified to hearken back, past colonial referents, to a time before colonisation.

## Antiphony – Narrative Call and Response

The calypso of the Golden Age was known for its call and response structure, which featured the calypsonian singing a verse or refrain and then that verse or refrain being echoed by a male chorus[4]. This is a function of the didacticism of the oral tradition – the repetition of the elements said or sung by the storyteller works to reinforce the lesson, social value or ideal being conveyed. In the calypso of the pre-1960s era, this lesson would often be the transmission of certain tropes about the female and the ways in which she could trick or trap a man, or the reinforcement of the male's primacy of place as between the genders.

In *Miguel Street* Naipaul uses extracts and titles of popular calypsos on gender relations to act as the narrative 'call' within the text, and by the inability of reality as rendered through the body of that narrative to echo that 'call' by bearing out its values in response, *Miguel Street* demonstrates the rupture between ideal and reality in a way which questions, not the reality, but the patriarchal ideal, forcing us to consider whether such ideals should truly be the subject of our aspiration. In "Until the Soldiers Came" for example, there are overt references in title and text to a calypso by Lord Invader which contains the

[4] Listen, for example to '*Edward VIII'* (which contains the refrain 'Love, love, love alone') (1937) by Lord Caresser at https://youtu.be/o-x1vRJ91AY '*Rum and Coca Cola'* by Lord Invader at https://youtu.be/nMWUF3LYd88, '*Loving Woman is Waste of Time'* by Duke of Iron (1957) at https://youtu.be/apWyB183iOw or to '*Mathilda*' by King Radio at https://youtu.be/YkrB4oL3SW0 in which the call and response technique between the male calypsonian and male chorus is evident, as is the perpetuation of negative female tropes.

following lines “I was living with my decent and contented wife/Until the soldiers came and broke up my life” (185).

The lines suggest a happy marriage, ruined by the American soldiers stationed at the army base at Chaguanas. The reality of the story in which it appears is the opposite – it is Edward, one of the men of Miguel Street, who appears to chase after an American wife, assuming American idiom and dress along the way, while insisting to his male community that it is the American woman chasing after him. When the woman appears unhappy, Edward’s story is that she is sad over her inability to bear him a child, eventually claiming that she runs away because of it. The truth is that she runs away with another man, for whom she happily bears a child. In Naipaul’s text, the ‘call’ of the title falls flat in the singing and the textual ‘chorus’ does not return the expected echo. In this way, the narrative insists that the reader (re)assess the legitimacy of the call.

Similarly, in “The Maternal Instinct” Nathanial tries to assume the accepted patriarchal practice of beating his woman when she falls out of line. In this vein he quotes a stanza from the calypso ‘*Calypso*’ by the Mighty Sparrow to make it appear to the community of men that he has Laura well under his control:

> He used to say, ‘Woman and them like a good dose of blows, you know. You know the calypso:
>
> *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*. (111)

However, in true calypso style, Naipaul crafts a truth that is subversively ironic. The body of the narrative reveals that is in fact Nathaniel who is being beaten, badly enough that he appears bruised in public, by the very spouse he wants to appear to be controlling with physical violence, leading Eddoes to cheekily comment “It look like they make up that calypso about men, not women.” (112) Once again, the chorus falls flat in response to the stated ideal.

In effect, the quotation of select calypso lyrics becomes the ballad within the ballad of each story and while the lyric appears to establish and reflect a certain social-cultural patriarchal script on the role of women and often, their control by the male through violence, the body of the story interrogates this script and questions its relevance in a Caribbean reality, just as the remaining calypso lyrics may interrogate and subvert the literal meaning of the quoted lyrics. In his elevation of calypso from mere textual referent in *Miguel Street*, to the aesthetic and ideological ethos of its narrative structure, Naipaul is without parallel among the other authors surveyed.

## Paradoxical Meaning-Making & the Calypso Poetic

Duality of meaning is however, perhaps the most overt and extensively used calypso poetic in *Miguel Street*. My refusal to refer to this aspect of the calypso tradition as ambivalence is deliberate – there is no contradictory intention in calypso - the real meaning of the song is overwhelmingly the one which lies beneath that suggested by a Western interpretation of the Queen’s English. Here, in part, lies the art.

Calypso is therefore often at once a literal record and a sly subversion, an ode and a farce, literary and literal, straightforward and heavy with plural

connotative meanings. In keeping with the nationalist, anti-colonial sentiment of the time, some of the best examples of the art-form in the quarter century prior to the publication of *Miguel Street*, constitute a rejection of colonial/ Western ideals, often cleverly masked as an endorsement of these ideals.

This external and internal plotting in calypso, this inherent characteristic of hiding the truth within the lie and appearing to endorse that lie, is unsurprising considering its historical need to be overtly consistent with colonial ideals while covertly derisive or critical of those same ideals.

In his application of this wilfully paradoxical element of the calypso poetic to his narrative, Naipaul derides the Judeo-Christian morals and Western ideals locals are expected to subscribe to, including the dominance of males and their socially recognised right to beat women, by interrogating and subverting the social positioning of women (as inferior to males) that he so carefully establishes.

Muehlenhard traces wife-beating to a Judaeo-Christian value - the so-called 'rule of thumb' attributed to Sir William Blackstone in 1768, which allowed a husband to beat his wife so long as the implement he used was no thicker than his thumb, and explains that the rationale for this rule was related to the husband's legal responsibility for his wife (Muehlenhard). In *Miguel Street* we understand that the patriarchal gender role for the pre-Independence Trinidadian male requires him to beat his wife, but not too much, so that it is the extent and not the fact of the beating that is (gently) decried in the face of the wife's loss of life. In "George and the Pink House" when George beats his wife to the point of her death, the narrator expresses sympathy for George and then Hat notes, in a 'post-mortem' of the matter by the men of the street that "He did beat she too bad'" (30). Similarly, in "Love, Love, Love Alone" Hat notes,

disapprovingly “Is a good thing for a man to beat his woman every now and then, but this man does do it like exercise, man.” (136)

Consistent with the paradoxical meaning-making of the calypso poetic, Naipaul therefore has his characters appear to endorse wife-beating, while the reality of his story clearly questions it.

Echoing the duality in meaning of many calypsos of the time of the novel, *Miguel Street* similarly replicates this sense of open subscription to an ideal which is simultaneously covertly derided in the song. Several chapters of the narrative suggest subscription to certain patriarchal ideals as it relates to the performance of gender by the male sex and the related subordination of women. We understand through the narrative that the social norm is that men are the breadwinners in the family unit as in “The Thing Without A Name”, yet the narrator acknowledges that Popo never made any money and it is in fact his wife who works outside of the home and supports the family. And Hat, in whom earlier stories established the embodiment of Western masculinity says “Popo is a man-woman. Not a proper man.” (19) the implication being that a proper man is one who works outside the home to support his household.

We appear to be told that a man must be in the front line of defence of himself and his family and not tolerate obstinance from his wife or other female partner. In “The Mechanical Genius” for example, Mrs. Bhakcu argues with a neighbour in defence of her husband. In response to her husband’s directive that she shut up, Mrs. Bhakcu asserts “You is my husband, and I have to stand up for you…” (153) to which Mr. Bhakcu replies “You only stand up for me when I tell you, you hear.” (153) When Mrs. Bhakcu keeps asserting her right to stand up for him, we are told “In the end Bhakcu had to beat his wife.” (153)

We variously understand throughout *Miguel Street* that the female is expected to defer to the financial wisdom of the male and take care of the household and children and to tolerate and expect physical violence from the male partner, yet we also see how women bear financial responsibility for families, work outside of the home and how some men are in fact the ones on the receiving end of domestic abuse. Further, we understand that some women are complicit in their subordination and abuse. In “The Mechanical Genius” for example, it is Mrs. Bhakcu who oils and preserves the cricket bat with which her husband beats her, suggesting complicity in violence as a form of control of the female partner. In this way, the conflicting influences of a plural society and complex approaches to gender performance are reflected and questioned in the narrative of *Miguel Street*.

In the chapter “Love Love Love Alone”, the classic calypso poetic of overt support of a Western or colonial ideal and simultaneous subversion of that ideal is apparent. The title of the story and of the calypso appears to be a reference to the Opera *Semele* by William Congreve in which appears the line “Love, Love alone…has both undone!’ and concretises the idea of love as a classical Western virtue and worthy of suffering great loss in its pursuit. However, in the calypso, as in the story, this apparent endorsement is turned on its head in the context of contemporary Caribbean reality.

In the calypso, Lord Invader appears to uphold the idealised Western model of love, in which power, prestige and influence are sublimated to genuine love and affection. For the first two stanzas the calypsonian assumes the position of loyal subject to King Edward VIII, asserting that only (an emotion as deep and noble as) love could cause a King to surrender his power and influence for the woman that he loves. Morgan (6) accepts the quotation of

these lyrics in *Miguel Street* at face value i.e.  the quoted lyrics refer to a transcendent love for which a King surrenders his power, the story in which the lyrics are quoted and in which a woman leaves a man to live with a poorer one who abuses her, must be the counterpoint to the lyrics. For Morgan the counterpoint in the story is the portrayal of the person surrendering all for love as the female, as opposed to the male in the calypso.

However, in keeping with the subversive tone of *calypso*, reflection on the stanzas of the calypso which follow the quoted lyrics suggest a different interpretation of the abdication and the classical concept of love. King Edward is variously painted as a national disappointment, the cause of grief to his mother, suffering a type of madness which renders him delusional at best and deranged at worst and irresponsible, as evidenced by his utter disregard of his position and duty for the sake of a mere woman. Further, while at the start of the song the singer appears to support his noble King, by the end of the song he has assumed the persona of that King and made it apparent that the love which has caused him to abdicate is a type of madness caused by ‘Ms Simpson’. The calypso referred to in the text is therefore on the surface a ballad of support and understanding for a King who makes the ultimate sacrifice for the classical Western ideal of Love but it at the same time a derisory ditty about a King making himself a fool for the fictional notion of ‘love’ as a result of the wiles of ‘Ms Simpson’. As such, Western love is interrogated and derided.

Naipaul mimics this duality of meaning in the chapter of the same name. In Naipaul’s story, it is the woman and not the man who leaves a position of wealth and prestige for the love of a man way beneath her class and unlike King Edward’s ‘happy’ ending, our heroine is finally forced to come to her senses and return to her previous standing with her husband – her gender does not appear

to permit her the freedom to take such flights of fancy as King Edward might have. The woman is portrayed as pretty, refined and out of place among the jostling women of Miguel Street “She was a little too pretty and a little too refined, and it was funny to see how she tried to jostle with the other women at Mary’s shop trying to get scarce things like flour and rice.” (132)

She is portrayed as the embodiment of colonial femininity that the common women of the street (should) aspire to and she is similarly derided for it. The fact that her status and position are linked to the wealth and status of her husband is evident when we understand that in leaving her husband and subjecting herself to Tony’s abuse she becomes unworthy of the efforts of the other women of the village to speak properly in her presence. Similarly, they become almost contemptuous in their responses to her when she is reduced to seeking their advice and counsel on the matter of her lover’s abuse.

She is also expressed to lack the shame which we immediately understand is the prescribed position of women being beaten in full view of the neighbourhood, and this by her openly seeking the help of the community. Yet her repeated beatings at the hands of her lover help to integrate her into the *Miguel Street* community and simultaneously let us see that violence against women is not only a normative social value but is also not delimited by class considerations. She is reminded that she is not like King Edward and in fact, should leave her lover. This story is perhaps a stronger comment on the futility of love or community across the classes, than it is about an attempt to subvert patriarchy or write an empowering script for women. It is noteworthy that Mrs. Hereira’s husband takes her back, even after publicly disowning her in the newspapers, and that when she finally returns to him the narrator comments on the shiny new motorcar in the driveway.

In *The Blue Cart* the trope of woman as prostitute and after a man only for his money is established. Similarly, the story refers to the practice of women pinning babies on men for the purpose of gaining additional income from those men (ostensibly) for the care of the child. Yet, the story later reveals that the woman has no intention whatsoever of using the baby to gain money from Eddoes. In fact, her real concern is that he takes the baby and frees her of it completely, which he eventually does.

Notwithstanding the irony of Naipaul's use of calypso poetics in addressing violence against women, and the fact that his poetics would appear to mirror some of the radical poetics which Rudin, Miles and Maisier attribute to female writers developing an appropriate aesthetic to capture the horror of violence, I believe that Naipaul's poetics are not necessarily representative of a politics of female empowerment and equality in *Miguel Street*. The fallacy in highlighting *Miguel Street* as a narrative which contributes to the empowerment of women, encourages Caribbean society to see women as equal and to expose the injustice of domestic violence as the social tragedy which it really is, is evident when we more carefully examine the discernible purpose of his poetics.

In determining how Naipaul has contributed to the discourse on domestic violence, we cannot just assess whether he has faithfully represented the reality of this scourge for Caribbean society of the time under review, we must go further to ask whether there is a discernible purpose to which his poetics may be said to apply, that extends to an attempt to rebalance the disenfranchisement of women, to signpost the redemptive path for the Caribbean psyche. In this vein, we must not only ask whether the depiction of violence is empathetic to the plight of abused women, we must also ask

whether an alternative role and positioning is depicted as possible for her. We not only examine whether the theme of domestic violence is given dramatic prominence in the crafting of the story, we must ask whether the woman is fully represented as a complex person with a voice that is heard in the telling? It is in the application of this analysis that *Miguel Street* is found wanting.

Other Writers, Orality & Domestic Violence

The application of calypso poetics to the theme of violence against women is not unique to Naipaul and is similarly employed by Sam Selvon in *The Lonely Londoners* in which musicality is, similarly, both overt and covert throughout the novel. Musical references to reflect the gender dimensions of characters' lives are abundant. If a man and a woman get along they are said to 'make a note'. Infidelity is referred to as a 'horn'. A soft story about heart-break is termed a 'ballad' and 'tone' is a type of teasing. Similarly, the grand braggadocio in naming and story-telling is identical to that employed in calypso contemporaneous to the writing of the novel. For example, a character known as 'Big City' talks about being picked up in a limo by royalty and places himself in high-class parties in London where his status as a black immigrant would indicate that he would typically be excluded.

Like calypso, and as in *Miguel Street*, certain established tropes about the role and object of women are repeated, and women are similarly cast as 'other' to the community of men who inhabit the story-telling space. In reference to a woman Bart is dating Moses calls him a 'darn fool' simply because the women enjoys certain pastimes not attributed to 'decent' women. Bart therefore asks Moses in rather pejorative terms "is ***that*** you would married?" (65)

Domestic violence as a normal feature of relations between a man and woman is also established. Tanty asks a wife "Why you don't leave that man for good? …He always beating you for nothing. Why he beat you this time?" (69) as if, as portrayed in *Miguel Street*, beating, in certain cases, is justifiable. When the wife finally leaves Lewis, he thinks she has gone by Tanty for the '*usual cool-off'*. As in *Miguel Street*, we therefore understand that the beating of a wife or woman is to be expected and can be justified, although excessive beating may not be.

However, while orality is used to help establish certain truths about gender performance and polarity, in *The Lonely Londoners* there is no clearly apparent attempt to subvert this positioning of the female gender within diasporic West Indian society, far less a discernible intent to prescribe an alternative for Caribbean women or their role in the community.

In Mais' *The Hills were Joyful Together* we also see the musicality of the oral tradition making its way into text. In Mais' novel, it is folk and religious songs which help to reflect and delineate the ideals of the yard society and to reinforce the communal values and traditions which appear to uphold patriarchal gender positioning. One verse of a hymn, which appears to refer to the biblical narrative of Mary being the first to witness the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and thereby to suggest a reward for women after weeping and in exercise of a logically futile faith, is sung, almost like an opiate, by Charlotta, when faced with difficult circumstances occasioned by her gender:

> "Lo, when the day of rest was past
>
> The Lord, the Christ, was seen again;
>
> Unknown at first, he grew to sight:
>
> 'Mary' he said – she knew him then;

Alleluya!''

> That was Charlotta over the ironing board inside her room singing to keep from breaking down and weeping." (141)

Mais' narrative, however, does not surpass the suggestion that religiosity is futile and irrelevant, and does not deploy any transformative features of the oral tradition to interrogate domestic violence, despite the narrative acknowledgment of its unifying capacity. In an early scene, a depressed community is enlivened by a group rendition of "Ribber Ben Come Down" led by Lennie, who manages to get all members of the community, old and young, male and female, to participate in the performance of the song.

Central to the oral tradition is its performative aspect, and of interest is the extent to which many of the narratives surveyed sought to textually reflect actual patterns of native speech. From the early syncretizations of Mais, whose classical references and Queen's English co-exist (uncomfortably, at times) with his representations of Jamaican yard speech, through Naipaul's narration in the lilt of the street rab, through to Ladoo's representations of the speech of the Trinidadian child, Brathwaite's recommended nation language emerges in the narratives surveyed. It can be argued, however, that the more recent narratives surveyed demonstrate a wholesale inhabitation of the oral tradition in Caribbean storytelling, moving it from a tool of experimentation to the status of Caribbean "classical norm" (Brathwaite, "History of the Voice" 301).

In *The Bread the Devil Knead* for example, Allen-Agostini's narrator renders her entire testimony of violence in the cadence and vocabulary of the average Trinidadian female. Her textual rendition is replete with the musicality "soft-soft" (6) and "something something" (7) and colloquialisms "which part she

went” (7) ‘zandolie’ (58) “ramfle” (17) and “marish and the parish” (25) of Trinidadian language. To the extent that she can, she textually reproduces the sound of Trinidadian life and speech – “…and the police siren and them going eaaaahhh-eaaahhhh outside” (59).

Text does not easily incorporate the performative element of the oral tradition. The novels surveyed have nevertheless employed the oral tradition to varying degrees by seeking to lexically represent the performative aspects of orality, often to further a narrative point or perspective. In *No Pain Like This Body* the text represents the sounds of the narrator’s childhood in a way that almost demands we read it aloud “Rama was vomiting *orks sputs orks sputs” (46)*; “The cloth went *took took took* as the water wetted it.” (94); “Den de wardman put me on dat ting wid de wheels and roll me *chooi chooi chooi* to a bed in the hospital.” (103) The repetitive speech and representation of the sounds of life as experienced by the child bring to life the wonder and adventure of childhood and, when juxtaposed with the sheer cruelty and horror of the surrounding circumstances, including the abuse of the children and their mother, highlight the tragedy of life for the innocent narrator in a way that establishes a serious indictment of the society in which they live. Orature is more than mere technique in Ladoo’s novel, it is the embodiment of the story.

I employ the oral tradition in my novel also, including the narrative use of the myth which forms the prologue. In this novel, Lala’s grandmother, an elder, seeks to warn her away from wandering by telling the tale of the one-armed sister. This sister, one of a twin, explores a dark tunnel she has been warned away from and loses one of her arms to a monster as a result. Lala’s obstinacy means that she does not readily accept the received wisdom inherent in the tale.

The myth was included, most of all, because it is authentic in that the use of tales about monsters and mythical creatures to scare children into following relayed wisdom to avoid encountering trouble, is true of Barbados and the wider Caribbean. However, the myth at the beginning of the novel also signals an invitation to the reader to engage in antiphonal exchange – the tale ends with a question, which the reader, in the world of the story, must answer:

> 'Well I bet it not so bad having one arm,' says Lala. 'She can still do things like everybody else, she can still get a husband and some children and a house.'
>
> 'Stupid girl,' says Wilma. 'How she gonna sweep it?' (7-8)

The dissonance of the story which unravels thereafter, does not lend itself to this answering, and the reader is thereby led to examine the relevance and meaning of the narrative call: was this the right question, and is its implied message one the community should be echoing?

In *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* I also use the oral tradition in crafting non-traditional representations of violence. For example, when Adan is questioned by the Police about Baby's disappearance, and beats Lala as a result, the incident is relayed as follows:

> It must have been something she said. *Thwack. Thwack.* Bitch. What did she tell the police? *Thwack*. Stop screaming and answer. Does she know what they do to people who talk to police where he come from? *Bang. Crash. Whir*. Fucking. Rasshole. Bitch. What did she tell the sergeant? What? She want him now? She want the sergeant? *Whizz. Sing. Slap*. Fucking. Rass. Hole. Whore." (218)

Instead of merely leaving out the detail of the fight itself and focussing on its impact, as Naipaul did in *Miguel Street*, or as Allen-Agostini does, my novel attempts to go beyond a poetics of omission to employ the oral tradition in representing the impact of that violence in a way which forces the engagement of other senses by the reader, a subconscious inhabitation of the narrative and therefore a stronger visceral reaction to the violence suffered by the character as a result, while staying away from graphic depictions of the act itself. This moves the reader away from being told (and not told) what happened, and towards a first-hand experience of the act, as much as text can do so.

The novels examined suggest a consistent employment of elements of the oral tradition over time, and a movement away from the employment of the tradition in opposition to empire, to a conscious embodiment of elements of the tradition in personal narratives which examine domestic violence.

## Conclusion

Considering the prevalence of domestic violence in the Caribbean, that several contemporary Caribbean writers have reflected violence against women in their work is perhaps to be expected, that their work has implied dis-satisfaction with this social scourge is commendable, but the apparent (general) inability of the writers examined to deliver truly transformational narratives which effectively employ revolutionary poetics is regrettable.

The texts examined reflect a conscious employment of indigenous and alternative poetics which are impactful in portraying and questioning the role and positioning of women in Caribbean society. Naipaul's employment of the 'calypso poetic' and his subversive use of the traditionally male-dominated art-form to question the supremacy of the male and to juxtapose and ridicule the Western ideal with the Caribbean reality, for example, is exciting, but his inability to depict an alternative is disappointing. *Miguel Street* fares better than many of its pre-Independence contemporaries, authored by both male and female writers, in contributing to the transformation of the collective psyche through its narrative on the matter of violence against women, but does not quite meet the requirements of Brathwaite's third category as it relates to domestic violence.

For post-1960s writers, Ladoo is notable for his wielding of poetics which reinforce the irrelevance of violence against women in a modern Caribbean society, and for doing so in a manner so dark and relentless that the reader is gripped, almost traumatised, into an examination of the issue of violence and an abhorrence of its employment, but while he leaves us certain that traditional

gender positioning has no place in a (new) society genuinely interested in the self-realisation and fulfilment of its women (and therefore itself) he fails to grant us a glimpse of what this new society would look like.

My research reveals that the pre-Independence novels surveyed generally subordinate the theme of domestic violence to wider concerns of nationhood, and generally do not succeed in writing a different script, a transformative narrative from which a new 'nation knowledge' of the role and function of women and the true tragedy of domestic violence can be constructed.

The female authors of the pre-Independence period appear to have fared no better than their male counterparts in the task of wielding radical poetics into truly transformational narrative about domestic violence, generally subsuming the thematic treatment of women's issues to wider issues of community, class, race and poverty. Toland-Dix, writing about Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron,* supports this view:

> Thus, like other writers of Caribbean narratives of the nation, [Wynter] is engaged in what she describes as 'a poetics whose primary referent/topic is, rather than the subjective and intimate life of an individual, that of the blocked individuality and fulfilment of a people … of their realisation as a new collectivity. (62)

In *The Hills of Hebron* Wynter adopts the same approach as her male literary contemporaries Naipaul, Selvon and Mais - her poetics are, in relation to the creation of a national identity, radical, but their objective does not appear to move far enough beyond the mimetic, the call to question as it relates to violence against women. She does not dare to envision a different future in her

writing and we do not glimpse the fictional blueprint of the egalitarian Caribbean society.

Women's concerns, including domestic violence, are examined only insofar as they undermine the attainment of a new socially conscious national collective. In this way Wynter appears complicit in contributing to the narrative impotence of the literature of the time as it relates to violence against women. In literature as in life, the Caribbean woman is asked to subjugate her concerns to those of a collective whose ethos and interest is overwhelmingly male. Interestingly, this primacy of community over individual may be linked to a colonial moral ideology that gives primacy to collective wellness over individual concerns, a fundamental untruth that pre and post-Independence Caribbean novelists, male and female, appear to have internalised in their narratives.

Within Gilroy's novel linear, realist rendering of the immigrant experience of Melda Hayley, domestic violence is a theme, but is given secondary importance while themes of race, class and economic disenfranchisement of the black immigrant community are foregrounded. The structure of the novel does not internalise the trauma experience and the novel as a whole does not surpass Brathwaite's first category of achievement as it relates to the theme of domestic violence.

Gilroy's text appears to support the etiological connection between the colonial history of the Caribbean, and specifically the legacy of slavery, to the violence suffered in the time of the novel, including domestic violence, but the narrative does not appear to specifically concern itself with writing against domestic violence - "Slave days is still with us, between man and wife, brother and sister, family and friend. When we fight with one another, we still in the slaveyards…." (29)

The reasons for this are no doubt complex, but may be linked to the fact that the early practitioners modelled their narratives on a colonial form which internalised patriarchal approaches which would have given little prominence to women's issues. Within the Caribbean context, however, it would be a mistake to oversimplify this phenomenon, by attributing it solely to concerns of colonialism. While it is true that colonialism, and its attendant imposition of Judeo-Christian morals and ideals on Caribbean communities, appeared to value the collective over the self, it is also true to say that the plurality of Caribbean societies and the complexity of its histories meant that some of the value systems influencing this approach might have originated outside of the colonising societies. Whatever the influence, it is true to say that non-progressive approaches to community and selfhood characterised the pre-1960s novels in this survey.

The post-1960s novels surveyed demonstrate more widespread employment of radical poetics to foreground and address the theme of domestic violence. However, some of these narratives also seem to collectively fall short of accomplishing the ideal. Morgan & Youssef find this true, for example, of post-Independence writer Harold Ladoo's *No Pain Like This Body* of which they note "Ladoo's sympathetic rendering of his female characters speaks reams in terms of positive cross-gender representation but his female character, as surely was the case for the overwhelming majority of his time and generation, remains a disempowered victim" (151).

Similarly, NourbesSe – Phillip's *Harriet's Daughter* would appear to embody the saying 'too far right is left'. In its unapologetic and uncompromising rendering of a feminocentric narrative, it seeks to right several wrongs related to the embodiment of the male gaze, but in so doing, it becomes its equivalent –

reconfiguring the imbalance so apparent in phallocentric narratives so that it wears a feminine face.

A feminist reading of the novels examined makes manifest a general insufficiency of literary imagining of an alternative future for women on which a new consciousness and self-direction about violence against women can be premised at the individual, national and regional levels, although more recent work appears to signal the arrival of change in this regard.

## Writing About Community – Signposting the Future

As a way of concluding this study, I want to briefly examine the ways in which the narratives surveyed represent community and its relation to self with reference to gender dynamics and domestic violence. Further, to suggest as worthy of future creative engagement the pursuit of representation of new concepts of community which support egalitarianism and self-actualisation within a meaningful, inclusive collective.

The texts surveyed underscore the importance of community inclusion to both sexes, although the earlier texts might reflect to a greater or lesser degree that the community of men is the only one that matters. Further, there is evidence of the internalisation of subordination of self within earlier postcolonial narratives by women explored in this survey. The truth is that the transformation of community, whether narratively or otherwise, is not an external, collective objective to be achieved on the altar of self-sacrifice. Community transformation can only be achieved by individual transformation which, individual by individual, ultimately leads to the healing and transformation of the whole. This

is one of the reasons why the personal narratives of marginalised subjects, including women, delivered using radical poetics which challenge patriarchal structures, have a potentially transformative effect on the collective consciousness and why texts which have assumed a narrative stance of sacrifice of self in favour of the collective, ultimately fail in signposting true change.

Community is central to the development and maintenance of identity and selfhood and one of the unfortunate realities of domestic violence in the Caribbean is the additional trauma suffered by female victims of violence who are shamed by the communities in which they live for their circumstances as victims. Women are made to feel culpable for making the choice to be with the male perpetrator of violence, for not being sufficiently aware that violence is to be expected in man-woman relationships, for committing whatever act or omission ‘caused’ the violence or for seeking the protection of the law. More than this, Caribbean communities often expect the complicity of the victim of violence in not disrupting the calm of the community and its hierarchical structures through complaint or pursuit of justice. The edict of this unspoken community code is that the victim is expected to remain silent, at peril of loss of community inclusion (Gibbons 7; Haniff 365). The price battered women pay for speaking out and seeking justice is, unfortunately, ostracision at the level of family and community, which magnifies the psychic damage caused by the violent act(s) and threatens basic concepts of self, safety and community. Haniff notes “For a woman who is a victim of violence by a male partner, there is more support in the community and the legal system for her silence than her voice.” (365)

Within the novels explored, the only narrative solutions proffered to resolve oppression and abuse, would appear to be those which demonstrate, within the text, separation of the abused female self from communities which, through endorsement of patriarchal values or otherwise, support abuse. This separation might be forced or voluntary, physical (via departure or death) (e.g. *Euphemia in The Hills of Hebron* or Trudi in *In Praise of Love and Children)* or psychic (loss of sanity, as happened to the character of Ma in *No Pain Like This Body*) but the fissure is represented as inevitable. In the narratives examined, the abused female appears to often suffer first physical violence and then the psychological violence of separation.

This certainly was true for my novel. The chapter within which Sergeant Beckles interrogates Lala about what role she might have played in the death of her baby is written from the perspective of the community and highlights Lala's marginalisation within it - "But this is not before the death of Lala's baby, this is after. This is a time when we do not talk to Lala, when our good hawkers hesitate to refer tourists in need of braids and beading to her, although we know she is our best." (109)

The inaction of this community, its complicit observation of her suffering generally and while she is questioned, leaves Lala no apparent choice but to leave it, which she does at the end of the novel, when she transcends the reach even of the text. The reader is left to surmise that she is safely inside of an aeroplane which Tone observes lifting into the sky.

In *How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* there is therefore no reconciliation at the level of community – Lala is forced to reject the collective which nurtured her in the interests of her own safety. The narrative may suggest

that the only option for self-healing for the abused woman, is to reject the community from which she is already marginalised and possibly ostracised. An option for future creative projects may be to imagine reconciliation and reintegration for victims of abuse at the community level, a possibility Allen-Agostini has already started to creatively explore in *The Bread the Devil Kneads.* Allen-Agostini's narrative provides a more optimistic ending, demonstrating healing and reconciliation through the support and attention of a therapeutic community and a wider collective intolerance of domestic violence, heralding a bold excursion into the imagined future Brathwaite's third category advocates.

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