

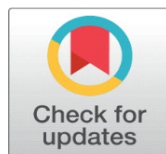
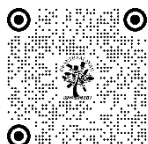
# BIOREGIONAL IDENTITY AND DISPLACEMENT: A STUDY OF HOME, MEMORY AND SPATIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN 'A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS'

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines V.S. Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas' through the lens of bioregionalism, focusing on the interplay between identity, displacement, and spatial consciousness. By analyzing the protagonist's quest for a home within the context of colonial Trinidad, this study explores how bioregional identity is shaped, challenged, and reimagined in the face of cultural and geographical displacement. The research employs close textual analysis and draws on theoretical frameworks from bioregional studies, postcolonial theory, and spatial theory to investigate the novel's portrayal of home, memory, and place-based identity. Findings suggest that Biswas's struggle for a house represents a broader search for bioregional belonging in a colonized space, highlighting the complex relationship between individual identity and place in postcolonial contexts. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on bioregional approaches to postcolonial studies and offers new insights into Naipaul's seminal work.

**Keywords:** Bioregionalism, Postcolonial Literature, Spatial Consciousness, Displacement, V.S. Naipaul, Identity Formation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

V.S. Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas' (1961) is widely recognized as a masterpiece of postcolonial literature, offering a nuanced exploration of identity, belonging, and the struggle for self-determination in colonial Trinidad. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the novel's postcolonial themes and autobiographical elements, less focus has been placed on examining the work through the lens of bioregionalism. This paper aims to address this gap by investigating how bioregional identity and spatial consciousness are portrayed and problematized in Naipaul's seminal novel.

Bioregionalism, as defined by Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, is "a geographic area defined by natural characteristics, including landforms, watersheds, soils, geological qualities, native plants and animals, climate, and weather" [1]. More than just a geographical concept, bioregionalism encompasses a way of living and thinking that is deeply connected to place. It emphasizes the importance of local knowledge, sustainable practices, and a sense of belonging to a specific ecological region [2].

In the context of 'A House for Mr. Biswas', the concept of bioregionalism takes on added complexity due to the colonial setting. Trinidad, as portrayed in the novel, is a place of cultural hybridity and displacement, where the indigenous landscape has been transformed by colonial exploitation and the importation of labor from other parts of the world. Mohun Biswas, the novel's protagonist, is a descendant of Indian indentured laborers, twice removed from his ancestral homeland. His quest for a house of his own can be read not just as a search for personal autonomy, but as an attempt to establish a bioregional identity in a place that is simultaneously home and not-home.

This paper seeks to explore the following research questions:

- 1) How does 'A House for Mr. Biswas' represent the concept of bioregional identity in a colonial and postcolonial context?
- 2) In what ways does the novel portray the relationship between spatial consciousness and identity formation?
- 3) How does Naipaul use the motif of the house to explore themes of displacement, belonging, and bioregional connection?
- 4) What insights does a bioregional reading of the novel offer to our understanding of postcolonial literature and identity formation?

To address these questions, this study will employ close textual analysis of 'A House for Mr. Biswas', drawing on theoretical frameworks from bioregional studies, postcolonial theory, and spatial theory. The paper will be structured as follows:

- Section 2 will provide a literature review, examining existing scholarship on bioregionalism, postcolonial studies, and spatial theory, with a focus on how these fields intersect in literary analysis.
- Section 3 will outline the methodology used in this study, including the rationale for choosing 'A House for Mr. Biswas' as the primary text and the analytical approach employed.
- Section 4 will present the findings of the textual analysis, organized around key themes such as the representation of place in the novel, the symbolism of the house, and the portrayal of displacement and belonging.
- Section 5 will discuss the implications of these findings, considering how a bioregional reading of the novel contributes to our understanding of postcolonial identity formation and the role of place in literature.
- Section 6 will conclude the paper, summarizing the key findings and suggesting directions for future research.

By examining 'A House for Mr. Biswas' through a bioregional lens, this paper aims to contribute to the growing body of literature that explores the intersection of environmental consciousness and postcolonial studies. It seeks to offer new insights into Naipaul's work and to demonstrate the potential of bioregional

approaches for understanding the complex relationships between identity, place, and displacement in postcolonial contexts.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. BIOREGIONALISM: CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS**

Bioregionalism emerged in the 1970s as an ecological and social philosophy that emphasizes the importance of living within the natural boundaries of a specific geographic area. Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, pioneers of the bioregional movement, defined a bioregion as "a geographic area defined by natural characteristics, including landforms, watersheds, soils, geological qualities, native plants and animals, climate, and weather" [1]. This concept goes beyond mere geographical delineation; it encompasses a way of living and thinking that is deeply connected to place.

Kirkpatrick Sale's seminal work "Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision" (1985) further developed the philosophical underpinnings of bioregionalism, arguing for a reorganization of society based on naturally defined areas [3]. Sale posited that bioregional awareness could lead to more sustainable and fulfilling ways of life, countering the alienation and environmental degradation associated with modern industrial society.

In recent years, scholars have expanded the application of bioregional thinking to various fields, including literature and cultural studies. Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Karla Armbruster's edited volume "The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place" (2012) demonstrates how bioregional perspectives can enrich literary analysis, offering new ways to understand the relationship between texts, authors, and their environments [4].

### **2.2. POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND SPATIAL THEORY**

Postcolonial studies have long been concerned with questions of place, displacement, and identity. Edward Said's concept of "imaginative geography" in "Orientalism" (1978) highlighted how colonial powers constructed and manipulated spatial representations to assert dominance [5]. Homi Bhabha's notion of the "Third Space" in "The Location of Culture" (1994) further complicated understandings of cultural identity and place, suggesting a hybrid space of cultural negotiation [6].

Spatial theory, particularly the work of Henri Lefebvre in "The Production of Space" (1974), has provided valuable insights into how space is socially produced and how it, in turn, shapes social relations [7]. Doreen Massey's conceptualization of space as a product of interrelations, always under construction, has been influential in understanding the dynamic nature of place and identity [8].

In the context of postcolonial literature, scholars such as Sara Upstone have examined how colonial and postcolonial writers engage with and subvert spatial representations. Upstone's "Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel" (2009) explores how postcolonial authors use spatial tropes to challenge colonial narratives and assert alternative identities [9].

## 2.3. INTERSECTIONS OF BIOREGIONALISM AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

While bioregionalism and postcolonial studies have developed as separate fields, there is growing recognition of their potential intersections. Rob Nixon's "Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor" (2011) brings together postcolonial and environmental concerns, examining how environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities [10].

Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's edited collection "Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment" (2011) explores the relationship between postcolonial and ecocritical approaches to literature, highlighting how environmental issues are inextricably linked to colonial histories and power structures [11].

In the specific context of Caribbean literature, scholars such as Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey have examined how writers engage with landscape and ecology to articulate postcolonial identities. DeLoughrey's "Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures" (2007) explores how island writers negotiate complex relationships with place, history, and identity [12].

## 2.4. STUDIES ON 'A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS'

Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas' has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, with much focus on its portrayal of colonial and postcolonial identities. Gordon Rohlehr's "The Ironic Approach: The Novels of V.S. Naipaul" (1968) was one of the earliest critical examinations of the novel, highlighting its ironic treatment of the protagonist's quest for independence [13].

More recent scholarship has explored the novel's engagement with space and place. Shanthini Pillai's "Manichean Aesthetics Revisited: V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas and the Poetics of Spatial Dialectics" (2005) examines how the novel uses spatial representations to challenge binary colonial thinking [14].

However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the application of bioregional perspectives to 'A House for Mr. Biswas'. This paper aims to address this gap by examining how bioregional concepts can provide new insights into the novel's treatment of identity, place, and displacement.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on close textual analysis of V.S. Naipaul's 'A House for Mr. Biswas'. The choice of this novel as the primary text is based on its rich exploration of themes related to place, identity, and belonging in a postcolonial context. The novel's detailed portrayal of Trinidad's landscape and its protagonist's quest for a home make it particularly suitable for a bioregional analysis.

The analytical framework for this study draws on three main theoretical areas:

- 1) **Bioregional theory:** Concepts from bioregional studies, particularly those related to place-based identity and the relationship between humans and their local environments, will be used to interpret the novel's portrayal of space and place.
- 2) **Postcolonial theory:** Insights from postcolonial studies, especially those concerning hybridity, displacement, and the construction of identity in

colonial and postcolonial contexts, will inform the analysis of the characters' experiences and relationships to place.

- 3) **Spatial theory:** Concepts from spatial theory, including the social production of space and the relationship between space and power, will be applied to analyze the novel's representation of different spaces and places.

The textual analysis will focus on several key aspects of the novel:

- 1) **Descriptions of the physical environment:** How Naipaul portrays Trinidad's landscape, and the various houses Biswas inhabits.
- 2) **Characters' relationships to place:** How different characters, particularly Mr. Biswas, relate to their surroundings and develop (or fail to develop) a sense of belonging.
- 3) **The symbolism of the house:** How the motif of the house is used to explore themes of identity, autonomy, and belonging.
- 4) **Representations of displacement:** How the novel portrays the experience of displacement, both physical and cultural.
- 5) **The intersection of place and memory:** How memories and associations with particular places shape characters' identities and experiences.

The analysis will involve close reading of relevant passages, identifying patterns and themes related to bioregional identity and spatial consciousness. These findings will then be interpreted in light of the theoretical frameworks outlined above.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, the following strategies will be employed:

- 1) **Triangulation:** Findings will be corroborated by drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives and comparing interpretations with existing scholarship on the novel.
- 2) **Reflexivity:** The researcher's own positionality and potential biases will be acknowledged and critically examined throughout the research process.
- 3) **Thick description:** Detailed descriptions of textual evidence will be provided to support interpretations and allow readers to evaluate the analysis.
- 4) **Peer review:** The research will be subject to peer review to ensure the soundness of the methodology and the validity of the findings.

This methodological approach aims to provide a rigorous and nuanced analysis of 'A House for Mr. Biswas' through a bioregional lens, contributing new insights to both Naipaul scholarship and the broader field of postcolonial ecocriticism.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. REPRESENTATIONS OF PLACE IN 'A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS'

Naipaul's portrayal of Trinidad in 'A House for Mr. Biswas' offers a complex representation of place that both aligns with and challenges bioregional concepts. The novel presents Trinidad as a layered landscape, shaped by its natural features, colonial history, and the diverse cultural influences of its inhabitants.

#### **4.1.1. NATURAL LANDSCAPE**

The natural landscape of Trinidad is a constant presence in the novel, providing a backdrop to the characters' lives and influencing their experiences. Naipaul's descriptions often emphasize the lushness and fecundity of the tropical environment:

- "The coconut trees, tall and curved, made a brave show, and below them the bushes were heavy with red and yellow flowers" [15] (p. 67).
- However, this natural abundance is often juxtaposed with the harshness of human existence, particularly for characters like Mr. Biswas who struggle to establish a sense of belonging. The landscape is simultaneously inviting and alienating, reflecting the complex relationship between the characters and their environment.

#### **4.1.2. COLONIAL TRANSFORMATION**

The novel also portrays how colonial exploitation has transformed the landscape. The sugar cane fields, a dominant feature of the rural scenes, serve as a constant reminder of the island's colonial history:

- "They walked for miles through sugar-cane fields. The canes rose sheer on both sides of the narrow path, and met high above their heads" [15] (p. 89).
- This transformed landscape reflects what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence" - the gradual environmental degradation caused by colonial and postcolonial exploitation [10]. The sugar cane fields represent a bioregion altered by external forces, challenging notions of an pristine, pre-colonial nature.

#### **4.1.3. URBAN SPACES**

As the novel progresses, there is an increasing focus on urban spaces, particularly Port of Spain. These urban environments are portrayed as sites of both opportunity and alienation. For Mr. Biswas, the city represents the possibility of escape from rural poverty, but also a place where he feels perpetually out of place:

- "The city was big and crowded and hostile" [15] (p. 201).
- This portrayal of urban space aligns with bioregional critiques of urbanization as a force that can disconnect individuals from their local environments.

### **4.2. THE HOUSE AS A SYMBOL OF BIOREGIONAL IDENTITY**

The central motif of the house in the novel can be interpreted as a symbol of bioregional identity. Mr. Biswas's quest for a house of his own represents not just a search for personal autonomy, but an attempt to establish a sense of place and belonging in a complex, postcolonial environment.

#### **4.2.1. THE HOUSE AS ROOTEDNESS**

Throughout the novel, houses are presented as potential sites of rootedness and belonging. For Mr. Biswas, owning a house represents the possibility of establishing a permanent connection to place:



- "How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one's portion of the earth" [15] (p. 8).
- This desire for "one's portion of the earth" aligns closely with bioregional ideals of developing a deep connection to a specific place.

#### **4.2.2. THE HOUSE AS CONFINEMENT**

However, the novel also presents houses as potential sites of confinement and alienation. Many of the houses Mr. Biswas inhabits are described in terms of their limitations and discomforts:

- "The house was an oven during the day, and at night it became a cage of noise" [15] (p. 143).
- This dual nature of houses in the novel - as both potential homes and sites of confinement - reflects the complexities of establishing a bioregional identity in a postcolonial context.

#### **4.2.3. BUILDING AND INHABITING**

The process of building and inhabiting houses in the novel can be read as attempts at bioregional practice. Mr. Biswas's efforts to build his own house, though ultimately unsuccessful, represent an attempt to actively shape his environment and establish a direct connection to place:

- "He had thought deeply about this house, and knew exactly what he wanted" [15] (p. 275).
- These attempts at "dwelling" in the Heideggerian sense [16] reflect bioregional ideals of living in harmony with one's local environment.

### **4.3. DISPLACEMENT AND BIOREGIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

The theme of displacement runs throughout the novel, challenging traditional notions of bioregional identity and belonging. Naipaul portrays a society in which multiple displacements - historical, cultural, and personal - shape individuals' relationships to place.

#### **4.3.1. HISTORICAL DISPLACEMENT**

The novel's characters, as descendants of indentured laborers, are historically displaced from their ancestral homelands. This displacement is reflected in the hybrid culture of Trinidad, where Indian traditions persist but are transformed by the new environment:

- "In the arcade there were Indian shops with the images of Hindu gods on the walls; but the gods wore dhotis and looked like businessmen" [15] (p. 199).
- This historical displacement complicates the development of bioregional consciousness, as characters must negotiate between ancestral memories and their present reality.

### 4.3.2. CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT

Cultural displacement is evident in the novel's portrayal of education and social mobility. Mr. Biswas's pursuit of education and his career as a journalist represent a form of cultural displacement from his rural, working-class origins:

- "He was going to be a journalist; and he was going to be a free man. These were his two ambitions" [15] (p. 331).
- This cultural displacement reflects what Homi Bhabha terms the "Third Space" of cultural hybridity [6], challenging simplistic notions of bioregional identity.

### 4.3.3. PERSONAL DISPLACEMENT

On a personal level, Mr. Biswas experiences constant physical displacement as he moves from house to house. Each move represents both a failure to establish roots and a renewed attempt at finding a place of belonging:

- "He had lived in many houses. And how easy it was to think of those houses without him!" [15] (p. 8).
- This personal displacement underscores the challenges of developing a bioregional identity in a society marked by constant change and uncertainty.

## 4.4. MEMORY AND SPATIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The role of memory in shaping spatial consciousness is a significant theme in the novel, offering insights into how bioregional identity is constructed and maintained.

### 4.4.1. CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND PLACE ATTACHMENT

Mr. Biswas's memories of his childhood home and village play a crucial role in shaping his sense of place throughout his life:

- "He thought of the house as it stood in his imagination: ramshackle, unpainted, surrounded by mud and grass" [15] (p. 43).
- These memories, often idealized, represent a form of bioregional attachment that persists despite physical displacement.

### 4.4.2. COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The novel also explores how collective memory shapes perceptions of the landscape. The persistence of Indian cultural practices and beliefs in Trinidad creates a layered cultural landscape:

- "The pundit came and read from the Ramayana. It was the story of Rama's banishment, and it had a special appeal for these people, descendants of men who had been banished" [15] (p. 89).
- This collective memory transforms the physical landscape of Trinidad into a space of cultural significance, reflecting what Arjun Appadurai terms "scapes" - the fluid, irregular shapes of landscapes that characterize global cultural flows [17].



#### **4.4.3. MEMORY AS RESISTANCE**

Memory also functions as a form of resistance to displacement in the novel. Characters' memories of other places and times serve as a way of maintaining a sense of identity in the face of change:

- "Mr. Biswas thought of the paddy fields of Nepal and the Ganges" [15] (p. 191).
- This use of memory aligns with what Rob Nixon calls "spatial vernaculars" - localized ways of perceiving and interacting with place that resist homogenizing global forces [10].

### **5. DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1. BIOREGIONAL IDENTITY IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT**

The findings of this study suggest that 'A House for Mr. Biswas' offers a complex portrayal of bioregional identity in a postcolonial context. The novel challenges simplistic notions of bioregionalism by presenting a landscape and society shaped by multiple displacements and cultural influences.

Naipaul's portrayal of Trinidad aligns with what Edouard Glissant terms a "poetics of relation" - a way of understanding place and identity that emphasizes connections and interactions rather than fixed roots [18]. The hybrid culture of Trinidad, as depicted in the novel, reflects a bioregional identity that is constantly negotiated and reimagined.

The central motif of the house in the novel can be understood as an attempt to establish a form of bioregional identity in this complex environment. Mr. Biswas's quest for a house of his own represents a desire for rootedness and connection to place. However, the novel's portrayal of houses as both potential homes and sites of confinement reflects the challenges of establishing such connections in a postcolonial society.

#### **5.2. SPATIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTITY FORMATION**

The novel's exploration of spatial consciousness offers insights into how identity is formed in relation to place in postcolonial contexts. Naipaul's portrayal of Mr. Biswas's evolving relationship with his environment aligns with Doreen Massey's conception of space as a product of interrelations, always under construction [8].

The role of memory in shaping spatial consciousness, as depicted in the novel, suggests that bioregional identity is not solely determined by physical presence in a place, but is also constructed through remembered and imagined geographies. This aligns with recent scholarship on the role of memory in environmental consciousness, such as Lawrence Buell's work on "environmental memory" [19].

#### **5.3. DISPLACEMENT AND BIOREGIONAL ADAPTATION**

The theme of displacement in the novel offers a nuanced perspective on bioregional adaptation. While displacement challenges traditional notions of bioregional identity, the novel also portrays how individuals and communities adapt to new environments and create new forms of place-based identity.

This portrayal aligns with recent scholarship on "cosmopolitan bioregionalism" - an approach that recognizes the realities of global mobility while still emphasizing the importance of local, place-based knowledge and practices [20]. The hybrid culture of Trinidad, as depicted in the novel, can be seen as a form of bioregional adaptation to the realities of displacement and cultural mixing.

#### 5.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM

This bioregional reading of 'A House for Mr. Biswas' contributes to the growing field of postcolonial ecocriticism by demonstrating how environmental consciousness and postcolonial identity are intertwined. The novel's portrayal of the relationship between individuals and their environment in a postcolonial context offers insights into what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence" - the gradual, often invisible environmental degradation that disproportionately affects marginalized communities [10].

Furthermore, this analysis suggests that bioregional approaches can offer new ways of understanding postcolonial literature. By focusing on the relationship between characters and their local environments, bioregional readings can reveal nuances of identity formation and cultural adaptation that might be overlooked by other critical approaches.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that a bioregional reading of 'A House for Mr. Biswas' offers valuable insights into the novel's portrayal of identity, place, and displacement in a postcolonial context. By examining the novel through the lens of bioregionalism, we gain a deeper understanding of how Naipaul engages with questions of belonging and identity formation in relation to place.

The findings suggest that bioregional identity in postcolonial contexts is complex and multifaceted, shaped by historical displacements, cultural hybridity, and ongoing negotiations between local and global influences. The novel's portrayal of Mr. Biswas's quest for a house of his own can be understood as a search for bioregional belonging in a world where traditional notions of place-based identity have been disrupted.

This analysis contributes to the field of postcolonial ecocriticism by demonstrating how environmental consciousness and postcolonial identity are inextricably linked. It suggests that bioregional approaches can offer new ways of understanding postcolonial literature, revealing nuances of identity formation and cultural adaptation that might be overlooked by other critical approaches.

Future research could extend this bioregional approach to other works of postcolonial literature, exploring how different authors engage with questions of place, identity, and environmental consciousness. Additionally, comparative studies examining how bioregional themes are treated in literature from different postcolonial contexts could offer valuable insights into the diverse ways in which place-based identities are negotiated in the aftermath of colonialism.

In conclusion, this bioregional reading of 'A House for Mr. Biswas' not only offers new insights into Naipaul's seminal work but also demonstrates the potential of bioregional approaches for understanding the complex relationships between identity, place, and displacement in postcolonial contexts. As we continue to grapple with global environmental challenges and the legacies of colonialism, such place-based approaches to literature may offer valuable perspectives on how individuals

and communities negotiate their relationships with local environments in an increasingly interconnected world.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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