

Inknivory Publishing House



ROLE OF MULTILINGUALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

NOVEMBER 2025

EDITORS

Dr.A.Banupriya
Dr.H.Kalaivani



Blurring the Geographical Boundaries: Spatial Ambiguity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Dr. N. Sumathi, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vels Institute of Science Technology and Advanced Studies.

Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* analyses the complex role of spatial ambiguity at large in bringing out the gothic structure of the plot. Morrison constructs a geography in which physical spaces are inseparable from the psychological, historical and supernatural forces that shape the lives of formerly enslaved people. The novel deals with the gothic elements to reveal the harsh themes of slavery and women suffering through the supernatural forces that shape the pain and trauma of a character, Sethe which represents the entire community of people. The presentation of setting as a stable or neutral backdrop is the conventional style of narrative structure of the plot but Morrison here transforms the spaces such as 124 Bluestone Road, the Clearing, Sweet Home and the fugitive landscape into fluid and more unstable environments that resist fixed interpretation. These spaces shift in meaning depending on the memory, trauma and haunting, creating a narrative world where boundaries are blurred between past and present, real and supernatural and interior and exterior.

The narrative strategy adopted by Morrison in this novel elevates the style of writing through disoriented view of slavery which fractures the characters' ability to inhabit space securely or coherently. The haunted house at 124 becomes a living, reactive entity that embodies unresolved trauma and the Clearing oscillates between a site of communal healing and a space of psychic rupture, and the enslavement and escape are rendered deliberately unmapped to show the inner conflict and spatial ambiguity through the characters' shift in places and not able to fix in a place. It also represents the fugitive movements of the characters and also the dangers of such movements made by these characters especially women characters. It challenges the readers to face the ways in which historical violence continues to occupy physical and emotional spaces. The destabilizing of spatial coordinates the fragmentation of memory and identity experienced by her characters. This paper analyses how spatial ambiguity places a vital role in shaping the narrative structure of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a novel in which space refuses stability. Houses shift in meaning, landscapes blur between memory and reality, and the boundaries between the living and the dead collapse into one another. From the opening line - "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom"-Morrison signals that physical settings in the novel are not passive backdrops but volatile, emotionally charged environments that shape and are shaped by the trauma of slavery. The house at 124 Bluestone Road is not merely a location; it is a living presence, a site where history erupts into the present and where the past refuses to remain contained. As Morrison herself notes in *Playing in the Dark*, American literature is haunted by "the shadow of a presence that is not quite present," and *Beloved* literalizes this haunting through its unstable, ambiguous spaces.

Spatial ambiguity in *Beloved* emerges from the novel's central concern: the afterlives of slavery and the ways trauma distorts one's relationship to place. Scholars have long recognized that Morrison's narrative structure disrupts linear time, but fewer have emphasized how the novel also disrupts coherent space. As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy argues, *Beloved* "collapses the geography of memory and the geography of the present," creating a world in which characters inhabit multiple spatial realities simultaneously. Similarly, Katherine Clay Bassard notes that Morrison's landscapes are "sites of both terror and transcendence," where the physical environment becomes inseparable from the psychological scars of enslavement.

This spatial instability is most evident in the novel's key locations. The house at 124, described alternately as "loud," "quiet," and "full of spite," shifts in atmosphere depending on who occupies it and what memories surface within it.

Spatial Ambiguity

Spatial ambiguity refers to the deliberate blurring, destabilization, or indeterminacy of physical setting within a literary text. Instead of presenting space as fixed, coherent, or mappable, authors create environments that are shifting, contradictory, symbolic, or difficult to locate, thereby disrupting the reader's sense of orientation. This ambiguity often reflects deeper thematic concerns such as trauma, memory, identity, or the instability of reality.

Sethe's escape route is described in fragments:

"She walked until she couldn't walk anymore." (p. 93)

"A boatman had rowed her across." (p. 94)

Sweet Home is remembered differently by each character. Paul D recalls:

“It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home.” (p. 14)

The geography of *Beloved* is intentionally fragmented. Sethe’s escape is unmappable - a series of disconnected images rather than a coherent route. Sweet Home is remembered inconsistently, showing how trauma fractures spatial memory.

This unmappability reflects the historical reality that enslaved people were denied stable relationships to land, home, and geography. Ashraf Rushdy argues that *Beloved* “collapses the geography of memory and the geography of the present,” creating a world where space cannot be coherently mapped (*Remembering Generations*, 2001).

Morrison opens the novel with the line:

“124 was spiteful.” (*Beloved*, p. 3)

Later, the house is described differently:

“124 was loud.” (p. 199) “124 was quiet.” (p. 281)

These shifting descriptions show that 124 is not a fixed physical structure but a volatile emotional environment. Its atmosphere changes depending on who occupies it and what memories surface. The instability of the house mirrors Sethe’s unstable psychological state, where trauma continually resurfaces and reshapes her perception of space. Linda Krumholz argues that Morrison’s spaces “refuse to be fixed,” reflecting the instability of identity and memory after slavery (“The Ghosts of Slavery,” *African American Review*, 1992).

124 is described as:

“Full of a baby’s venom.” (p. 3)

The Clearing is described as a place where Baby Suggs “called to the women to cry” and “let the children come.” (pp. 87–88)

The Clearing, once a place of communal healing under Baby Suggs, becomes a site of psychic rupture when Sethe is attacked by the ghostly presence of Beloved. Even Sweet Home, the plantation where Sethe was enslaved, is remembered in contradictory ways-sometimes pastoral, sometimes horrific - revealing how trauma fractures the ability to perceive or recall

space consistently. The Clearing, where Baby Suggs preaches self-love, is another ambiguous space. The Clearing is both a physical place in the woods, a symbolic space of spiritual renewal and memory-space that the characters revisit internally. Its boundaries are porous, shifting between literal and metaphorical. When Sethe is attacked by the ghostly presence of Beloved in the Clearing, the space becomes unstable again. A place once associated with healing becomes a site of terror, showing how trauma can retroactively alter the meaning of space. As critic Linda Krumholz observes, Morrison's spaces "refuse to be fixed," mirroring the instability of identity and memory in the aftermath of slavery. Both spaces carry symbolic weight far beyond their physical descriptions.¹²⁴ symbolizes trauma, guilt, and the unresolved presence of the dead. The Clearing symbolizes healing, community, and spiritual renewal - until Beloved's presence transforms it into a site of terror. These spaces are symbolically overloaded, meaning they function simultaneously as physical locations and as metaphors for emotional and historical forces. Katherine Clay Bassard notes that Morrison's landscapes are "sites of both terror and transcendence," where physical space becomes inseparable from spiritual and historical meaning (*Spiritual Interrogations*, 1999).

Beloved is rich in spatial ambiguity which is a key aspect of its narrative and thematic depth. It allows the readers to explore the psychological and social dimensions of the characters' experiences. Each physical and mental space mentioned in the novel symbolizes the gothic structure, search for identity, gothic power and its influences and instability of characters in both physical and mental spaces.

124 Bluestone house symbolizes the past and the entrapment of memory as Sethe and Denver are trapped in a persistent memory that refuses to set them free. The Clearing, the backyard over which 124 Bluestone overlooks represent a place of renewal, where memory is encouraged to reacquaint with itself with its bodies that have been violated by slavery. Paul D's heart is described as "tobacco tin lodged in his chest." is a spatially configured representation of his traumatic memories, which he protects from being overwhelmed by the perpetual loss of identity, family and friends. This reveals the memory and identity associated with Sethe in connection to Paul D. The whitefolk's fear of and desire for power over their slaves is metaphorized as a jungle of their own creation, highlighting the oppressive dynamics of their relationship with the enslaved. The characters perceive and experience trauma in an unstable spatial order challenging the linear temporality of western thought. This disruption allows Morrison to shift remembering the past as a trauma of the individual psyche to the collective

national sphere. These elements of spatial ambiguity in *Beloved* invite multiple interpretations and meditations on various levels, making the novel a complex and thought - provoking work.

This paper argues that spatial ambiguity in *Beloved* is a deliberate narrative strategy that reflects the disorienting legacy of enslavement. By destabilizing place, Morrison reveals how trauma disrupts one's ability to inhabit space securely, coherently, or fully. It argues that Morrison's use of spatial ambiguity is central to the novel's exploration of trauma, haunting, and historical memory. It reveals how the past persists not only in the mind but also in the very spaces people inhabit, turning geography into a site of both suffering and potential healing. Through this lens, *Beloved* emerges as a work in which space itself becomes a dynamic participant in the narrative, shaping and being shaped by the characters' ongoing struggle to reclaim their lives in the aftermath of slavery. It examines spatial ambiguity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, arguing that the novel's unstable, shifting, and haunted spaces function as narrative mechanisms that embody the trauma of slavery and the fragmentation of memory. Through an analysis of 124 Bluestone Road, the Clearing, and the broader geography of the post-Civil War United States, the paper demonstrates how Morrison destabilizes physical space to reflect psychological dislocation, historical erasure, and the spectral presence of the past.

Spatial ambiguity refers to the deliberate construction of settings that resist stability, clarity, or fixed meaning. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses this ambiguity not as a stylistic flourish but as a structural and thematic device that mirrors the fractured realities of formerly enslaved people. Each dimension of spatial ambiguity—instability, symbolic overload, unmappability, and haunting—corresponds directly to the psychological and historical dislocations produced by slavery.

In *Beloved*, spaces do not remain constant. They shift in atmosphere, meaning, and emotional resonance depending on who occupies them and what memories surface. The 124 Bluestone Road is a shifting environment and the house is described as “spiteful”, “loud”, “quiet” and “full of a baby’s venom”. These contradictory descriptions show that 124 is not a fixed physical structure but a volatile emotional landscape. Its instability reflects the instability of Sethe’s inner world, where trauma continually resurfaces.

The house changes depending on who occupies it. When Baby Suggs is alive, it is a place of community and healing. After Sethe kills her child, it becomes a site of haunting and isolation. When Beloved returns, the house becomes claustrophobic, oppressive, and almost spatially distorted. The house’s instability mirrors the instability of memory and identity.

Slavery destabilizes one's relationship to place. Enslaved people were moved without consent, denied ownership of land or home and forced to live in spaces of violence. Morrison's unstable spaces mirror the instability imposed by enslavement. Spatial ambiguity also emerges when spaces carry more symbolic weight than physical detail. Morrison's settings are saturated with emotional, historical, and supernatural significance. 124 symbolizes a tomb, a memory vault, a site of haunting and a physical manifestation of guilt and grief. Its symbolic density makes it impossible to read as a simple domestic space.

The Clearing is depicted as a place of healing under Baby Suggs, a site of spiritual gathering and later, a site of psychic attack. Its symbolic meaning shifts depending on the emotional and historical forces acting upon it. It also reflects how trauma transforms ordinary spaces into sites of memory and meaning. For formerly enslaved people, no space is neutral; every place carries the weight of what happened there.

Morrison deliberately avoids giving readers a clear geographical map of the novel's world. The result is a landscape that feels disjointed, fragmented, and difficult to orient within.

The unmappability of the route of Sethe's escape is described in fragments: a riverbank, a cornfield, a boat, a shed. Sweet Home is remembered differently by each character-sometimes idyllic, sometimes horrific. The community around 124 is vaguely sketched, with no clear boundaries or landmarks. Sweet Home is both a plantation of brutal enslavement, a place Sethe remembers with moments of beauty and a site that shifts in memory depending on who recalls it. Its contradictory nature makes it spatially ambiguous - a place that cannot be fully known or fixed.

Slavery destroys the ability to claim or understand space. Enslaved people had no legal right to land, were uprooted repeatedly and lived in spaces designed to control and confine them. The fragmented geography of *Beloved* reflects this historical reality. The inability to map space mirrors the characters' inability to map their own pasts.

Spatial ambiguity in *Beloved* is haunting. Spaces are literally and metaphorically occupied by the past, haunted by memory, trauma and supernatural. 124 is haunted by the baby ghost and later by *Beloved* herself. The past intrudes into the present physically, not just psychologically. Rooms, fields, and landscapes become sites where memory materializes. Haunting collapses the boundary between past and present, living and dead and physical and psychological. This collapse

is a direct representation of trauma. As trauma theorists note, traumatic memory is not “past”-it is ever-present, intrusive, and spatially embodied.

The house is literally haunted:

“The baby’s ghost.” (p. 3)

Beloved’s return collapses time and space:

“She had new skin, lineless and smooth.” (p. 50)

Sethe experiences memory as spatial intrusion:

“It was as though Sethe didn’t really live in the world anymore.” (p. 95)

Haunting is the most powerful form of spatial ambiguity in the novel. The ghost occupies physical rooms, Beloved’s return makes the past physically present and Trauma invades space, collapsing boundaries between past and present. This haunting shows how slavery’s violence continues to inhabit the spaces of the present. Avery Gordon writes that haunting is “a constituent element of modern social life,” where the past “makes itself known in the present” (*Ghostly Matters*, 1997). Morrison dramatizes this idea through the haunted spaces of *Beloved*.

Spatial ambiguity represents the dislocation of slavery through ruptures in identity, memory, family structure, geography and bodily autonomy. It also represents psychological dislocation, historical dislocation and spatial dislocation. Psychological dislocation happens in characters that cannot inhabit space securely because trauma has made space unsafe. Sethe cannot distinguish between the house she lives in and the memories that live in her. Space becomes a psychological battlefield. Slavery disrupts the continuity of history. Morrison shows this by collapsing time within space, allowing the past to occupy the present and refusing linear, mappable geography. The result is a world where history is not behind the characters but around them. Enslaved people were denied stable homes. The geography of enslavement in *Beloved* is intentionally difficult to map. The uncertain route to freedom that is revealed through Sethe’s escape path in fragments – a river bank, a cornfield, a boat and a series of unnamed helpers. This fragmented geography reflects the disorientation of fugitivity. It also reflects the fragmentation in their mindset. There is a space outside time. 124 exists in a temporal blur from the past erupts into the present, trauma collapses chronological boundaries and the house becomes a site where time is spatialized - memories take up physical room. This temporal-spatial collapse is a key form of ambiguity. Thus, Morrison’s characters cannot trust space, cannot claim space, cannot escape

the past embedded in space. Spatial ambiguity becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of rootedness after slavery.

Trauma disrupts the ability to inhabit space coherently. Morrison uses spatial ambiguity to show the collapse of safe boundaries, the body as a haunted space and the past as a physical geography. Haunting in *Beloved* is spatial that the dead enter the living world, memories invade physical rooms and trauma occupies space like a physical presence. The body as a haunted space is represented through Sethe's back, scarred with the "tree," becomes a spatial metaphor - a map of trauma inscribed on the body. The past as a physical geography is depicted through characters "walk into" memories as though entering rooms. Morrison spatializes memory to show how the past remains physically present.

Conclusion

Spatial ambiguity in *Beloved* is far more than a stylistic feature; it is a structural and thematic engine through which Toni Morrison renders the psychological, historical, and emotional ruptures produced by slavery. By crafting spaces that are unstable, symbolically saturated, unmappable, and haunted, Morrison transforms geography into a living archive of trauma. The house at 124 Bluestone Road, the Clearing, Sweet Home, and the fugitive landscape all resist fixed meaning, reflecting the fractured subjectivities of characters whose lives have been shaped by displacement, violence, and the persistent intrusion of the past.

Through these ambiguous spaces, Morrison collapses the boundaries between past and present, physical and supernatural, memory and lived experience. Trauma becomes spatial-occupying rooms, landscapes, and bodies-revealing how the legacy of slavery continues to inhabit the spaces of the present. The instability of 124 mirrors Sethe's unstable sense of self; the symbolic overload of the Clearing reflects the shifting meanings of community and healing; the unmappability of Sweet Home and the escape route exposes the erasure and disorientation inherent in enslavement; and the haunting presence of *Beloved* demonstrates how the past refuses to remain contained.

Morrison's spatial ambiguity challenges traditional Western notions of space as fixed, neutral, or knowable. Instead, she constructs a Black geography shaped by memory, loss, and resilience-a geography where space itself bears witness to historical violence and its afterlives. In *Beloved*, to inhabit space is to confront the ghosts of history, and to reclaim space is to begin the difficult work of healing. Morrison's ambiguous, haunted landscapes thus serve as powerful

metaphors for the enduring impact of slavery and the ongoing struggle to reconstruct identity, community, and belonging in its wake.

Works Cited

1. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
2. Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, 1994.
3. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
4. Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27.
5. Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, 1991.
6. Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press, 1977.
7. Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*. Princeton University Press, 1999.
8. Krumholz, Linda. "The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1992, pp. 395–408.
9. McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
10. Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
11. Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard University Press, 1992.
12. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
13. Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
14. Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.