

**FROM A HOUSE OF KNOWLEDGE TO A FIELD OF POWER: GENDERED
AUTHORITY AND INSTITUTIONAL INEQUALITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY
ANGLO-AMERICAN CAMPUS NOVEL**

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of the university as a gendered field of power in the contemporary Anglo-American campus novel. Drawing on A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*, Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*, Mona Awad's *Bunny*, and Michelle de Kretser's *Theory & Practice*, the study argues that the university in campus fiction is not merely a neutral site of knowledge transmission, but a complex institutional space in which academic authority, symbolic capital, gendered recognition, pedagogical hierarchy, and exclusionary practices are produced and negotiated. The article employs feminist literary criticism, discourse analysis, Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of academic field and symbolic capital. The analysis shows that female academic subjects in these novels occupy unstable and differentiated positions: they appear as researchers, students, doctoral candidates, creative writers, wives of academics, and intellectual agents whose voices are mediated by institutional norms. The study concludes that the campus novel exposes the hidden grammar of gendered power within the university by dramatizing who is allowed to speak, who is evaluated, who is recognized, and who remains structurally marginalized.

Keywords: campus novel, gendered power, university fiction, female academic subject, institutional inequality, academic hierarchy, symbolic capital, feminist criticism, Foucault, Bourdieu.

1. Introduction

The university has long been imagined as a privileged site of knowledge, rational inquiry, intellectual freedom, and social mobility. Yet contemporary campus fiction repeatedly unsettles this idealized image by presenting the academy as an institution governed by competition, hierarchy, symbolic distinction, disciplinary norms, and unequal access to recognition. In the Anglo-American literary tradition, the campus novel has become one of the most productive genres for examining how academic life is structured not only by ideas, but also by power.

In this article, the university is approached not as a neutral background for fictional events, but as a gendered institutional field. This means that academic space is understood as a system of positions, rules, rituals, exclusions, evaluations, and symbolic rewards. Within this field, subjects do not simply speak or act freely; rather, their speech, authority, intellectual legitimacy, and professional identities are shaped by institutional conditions. Such an approach is particularly important for analysing female academic subjects, whose presence in university fiction often reveals the concealed mechanisms through which gendered authority operates.

The relevance of this study lies in its focus on the gendered structure of academic power in contemporary campus novels. While the campus novel has often been discussed as satire,

institutional critique, or fiction of academic self-reflection, its gender politics require more sustained analysis. The selected novels — A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*, Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*, Mona Awad's *Bunny*, and Michelle de Kretser's *Theory & Practice* — offer diverse representations of women in academic space. These women appear as researchers, students, doctoral candidates, creative writers, wives, intellectuals, and aspiring scholars. Their positions differ, yet they are all shaped by the same central question: how does the university authorize, limit, recognize, or silence female intellectual agency?

The dissertation draft on which this article is based defines the university as a complex social institution that operates through assessment, selection, surveillance, recognition, and exclusion. This definition provides the conceptual foundation for the present article. The university in campus fiction is not simply a place where knowledge is produced; it is also a place where subjects are classified, disciplined, legitimized, and hierarchized. Consequently, gender power in the university does not always appear as direct oppression. More often, it is embedded in ordinary academic practices: seminar discussion, supervision, publication, evaluation, archival access, departmental politics, creative workshops, and the distribution of prestige.

The central research question of the article is therefore: how do contemporary Anglo-American campus novels represent the university as a gendered field of power? This question is developed through three subsidiary questions. First, how do the selected novels construct academic space as an institutional field? Second, how are female academic subjects positioned within this field? Third, how do recognition, silence, symbolic capital, and pedagogical authority shape gendered academic identity?

The article argues that the selected campus novels reveal the university as a paradoxical institution. On the one hand, it offers women access to intellectual formation, research, writing, and professional self-definition. On the other hand, it reproduces gendered hierarchies through symbolic, discursive, and institutional mechanisms. The female academic subject is therefore neither simply empowered nor simply victimized; she is represented as a figure in process, negotiating the conditions under which she may speak, be heard, and be recognized.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Critical studies of the campus novel have emphasized the genre's capacity to expose academic culture from within. Elaine Showalter's *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* remains a major contribution to the study of academic fiction. Showalter argues that the campus novel stages the anxieties, rivalries, absurdities, and ideological tensions of university life. In her account, academic fiction is not merely comic entertainment; it is a mode of institutional self-analysis that reveals the contradictions of higher education.

Jeffrey J. Williams also identifies the campus novel as an important genre for understanding the transformation of academic life. For Williams, the rise of the academic novel is tied to changes in the humanities, the professionalization of literary study, and the changing public image of professors and students. These perspectives make it possible to read campus fiction as a diagnostic genre — one that makes visible the symbolic and institutional arrangements of the university.

However, the gendered dimension of the campus novel requires further theoretical elaboration. Feminist literary criticism allows us to ask not only how universities are represented, but whose intellectual labour is recognized within them. It shifts the focus from the general figure of the professor or student to the gendered conditions under which academic authority is produced. Feminist criticism also challenges the assumption that knowledge is disembodied, neutral, and universally accessible. Instead, it insists that knowledge is shaped by positionality, embodiment, institutional location, and power relations.

Michel Foucault's theory of power/knowledge is particularly useful for analysing the university as an institutional space. In Foucault's view, power does not operate only through prohibition or coercion. It also operates productively by creating norms, categories, disciplines, and subject positions. The university, in this sense, is not only an institution that transmits knowledge; it is an institution that produces subjects who are classified as competent, promising, original, disciplined, marginal, excessive, or unprofessional.

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the academic field further clarifies how symbolic power operates in university settings. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu conceptualizes the academy as a field structured by competition for academic capital. This capital includes credentials, institutional affiliation, publications, reputation, intellectual authority, and access to networks. Academic capital appears meritocratic, but it is distributed through historically embedded structures of privilege. For female academic subjects, access to this capital is often mediated by gendered expectations, stereotypes, and unequal recognition.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity also contributes to the analysis by showing that gender is not a fixed essence but a repeated social performance regulated by norms. Within the academic context, this suggests that the female professor, female student, or female scholar is often expected to perform academic authority in ways that are simultaneously professional and gender-appropriate. A woman who appears too assertive may be read as aggressive; a woman who appears uncertain may be judged as intellectually weak. Thus, gendered academic identity is produced through contradictory expectations.

The present article combines these theoretical perspectives to examine the selected novels. The aim is not to impose abstract theory upon literary texts, but to show how the novels themselves dramatize the everyday workings of gendered academic power. The dissertation draft similarly emphasizes that the analysis should not force a ready-made theoretical scheme onto the texts, but should examine how gendered power is produced through characters, dialogues, evaluative practices, and spatial signs within the novels.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative literary methodology based on close reading, comparative textual analysis, feminist criticism, and discourse analysis. The corpus consists of six contemporary Anglo-American campus novels: A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance*, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*, Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*, Mona Awad's *Bunny*, and Michelle de Kretser's *Theory & Practice*. These texts were selected because they represent different forms of academic space and different positions occupied by female academic subjects.

The analytical procedure consists of three stages. First, the study identifies the institutional spaces represented in each novel: archive, classroom, faculty office, seminar room, family home, creative writing programme, postgraduate environment, and academic community. Second, it examines how female characters are positioned within these spaces. Third, it analyses the mechanisms through which academic authority is distributed: recognition, evaluation, supervision, authorship, intellectual legitimacy, symbolic prestige, and exclusion.

The research design is comparative rather than purely descriptive. Each novel is examined as an individual literary text, but the broader aim is to identify patterns across the corpus. The dissertation draft defines the selected corpus as a set of novels that represent female academic subjectivity in different positions: in some texts, women stand near institutional authority as professors or researchers; in others, they appear as students or doctoral candidates subjected to authority. This distinction is central to the present method.

The study does not claim to offer a sociological account of real universities. Rather, it analyses the literary representation of academic institutions. Nevertheless, the theoretical

concepts of Foucault and Bourdieu allow the fictional university to be read as an imaginative model of institutional power. In this sense, campus fiction does not merely reflect academic life; it interprets, dramatizes, and critiques it.

4. Results

Across the selected novels, the university appears as an institutional field rather than a neutral educational setting. Its spaces – the archive, classroom, seminar, office, department, creative workshop, and domestic academic household – are structured by visible and invisible hierarchies. These hierarchies determine who can speak with authority, whose knowledge counts, and whose presence remains conditional.

The most important finding is that gender power is embedded in ordinary academic procedures. It does not necessarily appear as explicit discrimination. Instead, it is enacted through seemingly neutral practices: evaluation, mentoring, interpretation, citation, selection, and recognition. The female academic subject is repeatedly placed in a position where she must prove the legitimacy of her voice.

This is why the campus novel is an especially effective genre for representing institutional inequality. It allows the university to be seen from within, through its rituals and everyday interactions. The dissertation draft notes that spaces such as the classroom, faculty meeting, supervisor's office, library, and student residence distribute opportunities differently among characters. The novels examined here confirm this point: academic space is never merely physical; it is symbolic and hierarchical.

In A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, gendered power is articulated through questions of archive, authorship, and literary inheritance. The novel centres on scholarly investigation, but this investigation is inseparable from academic competition and symbolic ownership. The archive becomes a site where authority is negotiated: who has the right to interpret literary history, to claim discovery, and to restore forgotten voices?

Maud Bailey embodies a form of female scholarly agency that differs from possessive academic ambition. Her research is not simply a pursuit of prestige; it is also an ethical engagement with buried female authorship. In the context of this article, Maud's significance lies in her ability to expose the gendered structure of literary inheritance. She does not only interpret the past; she contests the conditions under which the past has been preserved, authorized, and canonized.

The novel therefore presents the archive as a gendered field of power. Academic authority is linked to access, interpretation, and symbolic possession. By recovering marginalized female voices, Maud challenges the masculine economy of scholarly ownership. This corresponds to the dissertation draft's observation that *Possession* foregrounds scientific or scholarly inheritance and the archive as key issues.

Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* expands the university beyond official academic spaces. Here, academic power operates through the family, marriage, class, race, cultural taste, and social capital. The academic household becomes an extension of institutional life. Intellectual rivalry, aesthetic judgment, and professional status enter domestic space, showing that the university's hierarchies do not stop at the campus boundary.

The novel is especially important because it reveals gendered labour that is often invisible within academic life. Women in academic households may not always occupy formal institutional positions, yet their emotional, social, and domestic labour sustains academic careers and reputations. The novel therefore complicates the concept of academic subjectivity. Recognition within the university is not only a matter of scholarship; it is also shaped by social relations, cultural legitimacy, and domestic arrangements.

In *On Beauty*, the university's liberal self-image is repeatedly contradicted by its everyday practices. It speaks the language of openness and critique, but it remains structured by privilege, competition, and unequal recognition. The dissertation draft identifies *On Beauty* as a novel concerned with academic family and social capital. The present analysis extends this point by arguing that gendered power in the novel is produced through the intersection of academic prestige and domestic labour.

Francine Prose's *Blue Angel* offers one of the sharpest representations of pedagogical power in the contemporary campus novel. The professor-student relationship is presented as structurally unequal. The professor evaluates; the student is evaluated. The professor possesses institutional authority; the student seeks recognition. The professor's reading can authorize or diminish the student's creative voice.

The novel's significance lies in its refusal to present intellectual formation as linear empowerment. The female student does not simply acquire knowledge and become autonomous. Instead, she experiences confusion, misrecognition, emotional vulnerability, and linguistic uncertainty. These are not signs of intellectual failure; they are part of the gendered process of entering academic discourse.

The university in *The Idiot* thus appears as both enabling and disorienting. It provides access to books, languages, and ideas, but it also produces uncertainty about how to speak, what to desire, and how to become intelligible within academic culture. The dissertation draft identifies the novel as a representation of student experience. This article reads that student experience as a gendered process of intellectual formation.

Mona Awad's *Bunny* shifts the focus from traditional academic hierarchy to the creative writing programme as a specialized institutional field. The novel is valuable for gender analysis because it shows that power does not operate only through male authority figures. It may also emerge within female groups, aesthetic communities, and peer networks.

The women's collective in *Bunny* appears at first as a form of intimacy and creative belonging. Yet it also functions as a mechanism of discipline, exclusion, and symbolic control. To belong to the group, the subject must adapt to its language, rituals, aesthetic codes, and affective norms. The creative writing workshop becomes a site where originality is paradoxically regulated.

This novel complicates simplistic models of gender power. It shows that female academic subjects may experience pressure not only from patriarchal institutions but also from gendered communities that reproduce their own hierarchies. In Bourdieusian terms, the creative programme is a field in which aesthetic capital and group recognition determine value. The dissertation draft identifies *Bunny* as a novel concerned with group dynamics in the creative institution.

The novel suggests that feminist theory within the university is both empowering and vulnerable. It provides language for critique, but it is also situated within the very institution it critiques. The dissertation draft links *Theory & Practice* with postgraduate life, feminist supervision, and the contradiction between theory and practice. The present article argues that this contradiction is central to understanding the university as a gendered field of power.

5. Discussion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the contemporary campus novel represents the university as a field in which knowledge and power are inseparable. The selected novels do not reject the university altogether; rather, they expose the ambivalence of academic life. The university is a place of intellectual possibility, but it is also a place of hierarchy, surveillance, symbolic competition, and unequal recognition.

The first major implication of the analysis is that gendered power in the university is often indirect. It operates through forms that appear neutral: academic evaluation, supervision, interpretation, professional standards, aesthetic judgment, and intellectual recognition. These mechanisms are powerful precisely because they are normalized. A grade, a recommendation, an interpretation, an invitation, or a citation may appear objective, yet each can participate in the distribution of gendered academic capital.

The second implication is that female academic subjectivity is positionally diverse. The female academic subject is not a single figure. In *Possession*, she is a researcher negotiating archival authority. In *On Beauty*, she is entangled in academic family and social capital. In *Blue Angel*, she is a student whose creative voice is mediated by pedagogical hierarchy. In *The Idiot*, she is an intellectually forming subject. In *Bunny*, she is a creative writer caught in group discipline. In *Theory & Practice*, she is a postgraduate subject confronting the gap between feminist theory and institutional practice.

The third implication is that the campus novel functions as a critique of meritocratic ideology. Universities often present themselves as spaces where talent and intelligence determine success. The novels challenge this assumption by showing that academic recognition depends on symbolic capital, institutional access, social networks, gendered perception, and interpretive authority. In Bourdieu's terms, the academic field converts privilege into merit by disguising the social conditions of recognition.

Finally, the novels show that academic identity is produced through conflict. Female academic subjects are not represented as fully formed professionals who simply occupy institutional roles. Rather, they become academic subjects through negotiation, failure, resistance, adaptation, and reinterpretation. This dynamic representation is one of the major contributions of the contemporary campus novel to feminist literary criticism.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the university as a gendered field of power in six contemporary Anglo-American campus novels. The analysis has shown that the university in these texts is not a neutral house of knowledge, but a complex institutional formation structured by hierarchy, symbolic capital, pedagogical authority, recognition, and exclusion.

In *Possession*, gendered power operates through archive, authorship, and literary inheritance. In *On Beauty*, it appears through academic family, cultural capital, race, class, and gendered labour. In *Blue Angel*, it is concentrated in the asymmetrical relationship between professor and student. In *The Idiot*, it shapes the linguistic and intellectual formation of the female student. In *Bunny*, it emerges within the creative institution and women's group dynamics. In *Theory & Practice*, it becomes visible through the contradiction between feminist theory and academic practice.

The broader contribution of this article lies in its integration of feminist criticism, Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, and Bourdieu's theory of academic capital in the analysis of contemporary campus fiction. Such an approach allows the university to be read not simply as setting, but as an active literary and ideological structure. Future research may extend this analysis by examining non-Anglophone campus fiction, postcolonial academic novels, or comparative representations of race, class, and gender in global university fiction.

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