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Discourse and domination: How postmodern novels expose institutional power

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern fiction is often described in aesthetic terms: irony, fragmentation, parody, and metafictional play. Yet its most durable political contribution may be its sustained attention to how institutions manufacture consent through language, narrative, and everyday routines. This article argues that many canonical postmodern novels function as laboratories for studying domination. They stage encounters between subjects and institutions (state, market, media, bureaucracy, patriarchy) and then destabilize the discursive mechanisms that make those institutions appear neutral or inevitable. Bringing together Foucauldian discourse theory, critical discourse analysis, and theories of hegemony and symbolic power, the article develops an operational framework for reading institutional domination in narrative. It then applies that framework comparatively to seven novels: Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and Gravity's Rainbow, Don DeLillo's White Noise, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, and J. M. Coetzee's Foe, and Toni Morrison's Beloved. Across these texts, domination is exposed not only by what institutions do but by how they speak: through bureaucratic registers, risk and expertise discourse, propaganda, archival genres, and naming practices that position subjects. Postmodern formal devices such as paranoia plots, collage, historiographic metafiction, and self-reflexive framing are shown to operate as counter-discursive strategies, training readers to perceive the politics of language and the contingency of institutional truth-claims.

KEYWORDS: postmodernism, institutional power, discourse, critical discourse analysis, Foucault, metafiction, hegemony, surveillance

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Introduction

Institutional power rarely arrives with the theatrical clarity of the tyrant or the dictator. More often, it comes as paperwork, protocol, "best practice," common sense, the neutral tone of expertise, and the apparently natural story a culture tells about itself. In modern societies, domination is therefore inseparable from discourse: from the categories and narratives through which social life becomes intelligible and through which some actions become thinkable while others are rendered deviant, irrational, or invisible. Fiction, and especially the experimental fiction usually grouped under "postmodernism," has long been attuned to this problem. Postmodern novels do not merely depict institutions as external forces; they interrogate the linguistic and narrative conditions under which institutions claim legitimacy.

This article argues that postmodern novels expose institutional power not only by representing it but by interrupting the discursive mechanisms that sustain it. The interruption occurs at the level of form: in unreliable narration, discontinuous temporality, citation and collage, parody of bureaucratic genres, and reflexive attention to the conditions of storytelling. When narration becomes suspicious of its own authority, it begins to model suspicion toward the authority of institutions. In this sense, postmodern fiction teaches a kind of literacy in domination: it makes readers attentive to how official truths are produced, how subjects are positioned, and how everyday language can be a technology of rule.

The term "institution" is used here broadly to include formal organizations (governments, courts, churches, corporations, universities, laboratories, militaries) as well as routinized regimes of knowledge and practice (media systems, scientific risk discourse, patriarchal kinship structures, archival memory). Institutions dominate through both coercion and consent. They set the rules of what can be said, what counts as evidence, who is authorized to speak, and which lives are recognized as fully human. They also naturalize these rules by embedding them in genres that feel technical rather than political: the report, the memo, the sermon, the expert interview, the standardized test, the medical diagnosis.

To make this argument concrete, the article offers a discourse-analytic reading of seven influential postmodern novels: Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) and Gravity's Rainbow (1973), Don DeLillo's White Noise (1985), Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985), Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981), and J. M. Coetzee's Foe (1986), and Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987). These texts differ in geography, genre, and political stakes, but they share an insistence that institutions speak through genres. Each novel embeds institutional registers into its narrative texture, often by importing documents, slogans, or technical vocabularies that carry their own implied authority. The novels also share a set of formal strategies that refuse a single stable viewpoint. The result is a readerly experience in which the institutional voice is both omnipresent and untrustworthy.

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it synthesizes theoretical lenses from discourse theory (Foucault), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough; van Dijk), hegemony theory (Gramsci), and symbolic power (Bourdieu) into a practical framework for reading institutional domination in narrative. Second, it demonstrates that postmodern form is not merely ornamental. Form functions as epistemology: it stages the conditions under which knowledge is produced and invites readers to notice the linguistic moves by which authority is built. The claim, therefore, is modest but consequential. Postmodern novels can be read as critical models of institutional life, showing how domination is enacted in discourse and how counter-discourse might be imagined.

Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism and the Politics of Form

Postmodernism is an uneasy label, and it often collapses heterogeneous works into a single period style. Nonetheless, a shared cluster of formal features appears across many texts associated with the term: self-reflexivity, intertextuality, skepticism toward totalizing explanations, and a tendency to stage the world as mediated by signs. Jean-Francois Lyotard's account of the "postmodern condition" emphasizes incredulity toward grand narratives that once claimed to legitimate knowledge, while Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that postmodernism often combines self-reflexive play with historical critique, producing what she calls historiographic metafiction (Lyotard, 1979; Hutcheon, 1988). In both accounts, the politics of postmodernism is not a direct program but a change in the conditions of credibility: the reader learns to distrust the rhetorical smoothness of authority.

Fredric Jameson's influential argument links postmodern culture to late capitalism and to the saturation of

everyday life by commodities and media images (Jameson, 1991). This diagnosis clarifies why postmodern novels so often dramatize advertising, simulation, and corporate spectacle. Yet it can understate the degree to which many postmodern texts also function as critiques of institutional rationality. Postmodern novels are not only symptoms of a cultural moment; they can be diagnostic instruments. They make visible the infrastructures of communication, surveillance, and expertise through which modern institutions organize populations.

Discourse, Power, and The Institutional Production of Truth

Michel Foucault provides the primary conceptual anchor for understanding these infrastructures. For Foucault, discourse is not merely language but a historically specific system that produces objects of knowledge and positions subjects within fields of authority (Foucault, 1972). Institutions are sites where discourse stabilizes into regimes of truth: ways of speaking and seeing that define what counts as real, normal, and legitimate (Foucault, 1980). Importantly, such regimes do not simply repress; they produce. They produce categories such as "delinquent," "patient," "citizen," and "deviant" and thereby generate the subjects they claim to describe.
Foucault's later work on governmentality extends this view by emphasizing how modern power often operates through the management of life, conduct, and probabilities rather than through spectacular sovereign force (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 1991). Risk assessment, actuarial calculation, and security discourse become central techniques. Postmodern fiction frequently dramatizes these techniques. When a novel floods its pages with statistics, acronyms, and technical jargon, it is not simply mimicking modern life; it is staging how the language of expertise governs perception and choice.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers complementary tools. CDA asks how texts reproduce social domination by shaping what is taken as natural or commonsensical. Norman Fairclough emphasizes that discourse is a form of social practice and that textual features (vocabulary, modality, grammar) are linked to institutional power and ideology (Fairclough, 1992). Teun A. van Dijk highlights how discourse manages mental models and group relations, legitimating in-groups and stigmatizing out-groups (van Dijk, 1993). Although CDA is often applied to policy, media, or organizational communication, fiction can be read as a site where such discourses are rehearsed, contested, and made strange. Postmodern novels often perform a kind of literary CDA by placing institutional registers side by side and exposing their contradictions.

Hegemony, Ideology, and Symbolic Power

Because institutions dominate through consent as well as coercion, theories of hegemony and ideology are indispensable. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony describes how ruling groups secure leadership by making their worldview appear universal, aligning coercion with consent through culture and common sense (Gramsci, 1971). Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses describes how institutions such as schools, churches, and media interpellate individuals as subjects, recruiting them into identities that reproduce the social order (Althusser, 1971). These theories clarify why the novels examined here devote such attention to everyday speech: the slogan, the lesson, the sermon, the advertisement. These are not decorative details; they are the micro-mechanisms by which hegemony is lived.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power further illuminates how domination is misrecognized as legitimacy. Symbolic power is the power to name, to classify, and to define reality in ways that appear natural (Bourdieu, 1991). The authority to impose categories such as "civilized," "terrorist," "traditional," or "normal" is a form of domination that operates through language and cultural capital. Postmodern fiction often exposes symbolic power by foregrounding acts of naming and by dramatizing how characters struggle to speak in registers that institutions will recognize.

Why Novels? Narrative as A Site of Institutional Struggle

Finally, the novel is a privileged site for analyzing discursive domination because it is a heteroglossic genre. Bakhtin argues that the novel brings multiple social languages into contact, staging ideological struggle within style itself (Bakhtin, 1981). Postmodern novels intensify this heteroglossia by inserting institutional genres directly into the narrative and by refusing to grant any single voice a stable claim to truth. In doing so, they offer a critical pedagogy: they train readers to hear the social stakes of language.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative interpretive approach that combines close reading with concepts from CDA and Foucauldian discourse analysis. The goal is not to count linguistic features but to trace how novels stage, circulate, and contest institutional discourses. Fictional discourse is treated as socially diagnostic: it condenses and stylizes the registers through which institutions operate, making them available for analysis.

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, each novel is mapped in terms of its central institutional fields: communication infrastructures, state security, corporate media, patriarchal law, nationalist historiography, and colonial archival authorship. Second, embedded institutional genres are identified, including official announcements, bureaucratic memos, advertisements, sermons, expert interviews, and archival documents. Third, the analysis examines subject positioning: how characters are hailed into roles by institutional language and how they internalize or resist those roles (Althusser, 1971). Particular attention is paid to modality (must, should, cannot), euphemism, passive constructions that obscure agency, and evaluative adjectives that smuggle judgments as facts, because these are common linguistic routes to legitimation (Fairclough, 1992). Fourth, the analysis treats postmodern formal disruption (metafiction, fragmentation, paranoia plots, intertextual parody) as a counter-discursive strategy. Form is analyzed as a way of producing knowledge about power, not merely as an aesthetic choice.

To increase analytic transparency, the reading was guided by a compact set of discourse heuristics that were applied across all novels: (a) authorization, where legitimacy is claimed through institutional titles, expertise, or sacred sources; (b) depersonalization, where agency is obscured by passives and nominalizations (for example, “mistakes were made”); (c) quantification, where value is expressed as numbers, risk levels, or performance indicators; (d) moralization, where evaluative labels are smuggled into apparently descriptive language; and (e) archival framing, where what counts as evidence is controlled through documentation and citation practices. During drafting, short analytic memos were written for each heuristic within each novel and then compared to identify recurring patterns and text-specific variations. This procedure aligns with CDA’s emphasis on linking textual detail to social practice while remaining explicit about interpretive steps (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

The corpus of novels was selected for two reasons. Each is widely cited as postmodern or postmodern-adjacent and has sustained critical attention, allowing the analysis to build on a shared scholarly context. More importantly, each novel places institutional discourse at the center of its drama: the postal system and corporate communication network in The Crying of Lot 49, the military-industrial complex and scientific bureaucracy in Gravity’s Rainbow, the media-expert apparatus of risk in White Noise, the theocratic legal regime in The Handmaid’s Tale, the nationalist state and its histories in Midnight’s Children, and the colonial archive and literary marketplace in Foe. The aim is comparative demonstration, not comprehensive coverage of the period.

Table 1. Corpus and analytic focus

Novel	Year	Institutional field	Dominant institutional discourses/genres	Key counter-discursive device(s)
The Crying of Lot 49	1966	Communication infrastructure; legal-bureaucratic culture	Wills, corporate communications, postal bureaucracy, semiotic systems	Paranoia plot; interpretive overload; refusal of closure
Gravity’s Rainbow	1973	Military-industrial complex; scientific bureaucracy	Acronyms, technical expertise, statistics, behavioral science, documentation	Collage; fragmentation; shifting focalization
White Noise	1985	Media-expert apparatus; consumer capitalism; risk governance	Broadcast talk, expert pronouncements, risk bulletins, advertising slogans	Ambient discourse saturation; irony; simulation
The Handmaid’s Tale	1985	Patriarchal theocracy; surveillance regime	Scripture-as-policy, ritual greetings, legal prohibitions, naming protocols	Testimonial voice; archival frame; meta-historical notes

Midnight's Children	1981	Nation-state; official historiography; emergency governance	Speeches, slogans, legal exceptionalism, modernization rhetoric, public myth	Historiographic metafiction; revision; polyphony
Foe	1986	Colonial archive; publishing market; authorship as institution	Depositions, letters, travel-writing conventions, protocols of legibility	Silence; self-reflexive authorship; ethical refusal of closure
Beloved	1987	Slavery as racialized legal-property regime; national memory	Property registers, euphemistic violence, capture/ownership language, archival gaps	Haunting as counter-memory; polyphony; fragmented testimony

Analysis

1. Infrastructures of communication and the bureaucracy of meaning in The Crying of Lot 49

Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 is often read as a novel of paranoia, a text in which every sign seems to point to a hidden system and every coincidence becomes evidence. From a discourse perspective, the novel is also about infrastructure. Oedipa Maas, tasked with executing a will, is drawn into the postal labyrinth of San Narciso and into a possible shadow network called Tristero. The institutional power at stake is less the police state than the everyday bureaucracy of communication: the postal system, the legal apparatus of inheritance, and the corporate culture of information management.

One way the novel exposes domination is by parodying the bureaucratic genres through which institutions authorize meaning. Oedipa's journey begins with legal paperwork and estate documentation. These documents presume that meaning is stable: property can be cataloged, ownership can be determined, intention can be interpreted. Yet the more Oedipa reads, the more interpretation multiplies. The novel turns the reader into a suspicious archivist, confronting the fact that institutional documents do not simply record reality; they create a reality that can be managed.

The postal system functions as a metaphor for discourse itself: a network that promises delivery of meaning but that also filters, delays, and sometimes misroutes. Stamps, postmarks, symbols, and muted horns proliferate. The institution's authority lies in its claim to be an invisible public good, a neutral channel. Pynchon destabilizes that neutrality by suggesting that infrastructures select what counts as legitimate communication. If Tristero exists, it represents not only conspiracy but counter-publicity: an alternative distribution of messages for those excluded from official channels. The conflict is therefore between authorized and unauthorized circuits of discourse.

At the level of language, Pynchon repeatedly foregrounds the problem of naming. The term "Tristero" is a sign without stable referent, an empty category that nonetheless organizes Oedipa's perception. This resembles what Foucault calls the productive role of discourse: a name can create an object by gathering disparate phenomena under a single label (Foucault, 1972). As Oedipa's interpretive labor intensifies, she becomes an emblem of the modern subject confronted with institutional semiotics. Institutions dominate not only by enforcing rules but by forcing subjects to interpret within available categories. Oedipa is trapped between official rationality (legal and corporate explanation) and paranoid counter-rationality (conspiracy), and both rely on textual evidence.

The novel's formal structure performs this trap. It provides abundant clues but refuses closure. Such refusal can be read as political rather than merely playful: it denies the reader the satisfactions of an authoritative explanatory narrative. The result is a critique of institutional epistemology. Bureaucracies demand decision under uncertainty, and they often conceal uncertainty behind procedural language. Pynchon makes uncertainty loud. By saturating the narrative with competing interpretations, he exposes the conditions under which institutions present contingency as necessity.

2. The Military-Industrial Discourse Machine in Gravity's Rainbow

Where The Crying of Lot 49 follows the threads of communication infrastructure, Gravity's Rainbow expands the scale to the wartime and postwar apparatus of the military-industrial complex. The novel's world is organized by scientific management, intelligence agencies, and corporate research. The recurring pronoun "They" is less a literal cabal than a linguistic condensation of institutional opacity: a way to name power when its agencies are distributed across bureaucracies and supply chains.

A central institutional register in Gravity's Rainbow is the language of scientific expertise. Engineers, statisticians, psychologists, and military planners speak in acronyms, measurements, and procedural descriptions. This register performs what Bourdieu would call symbolic power: it claims legitimacy by presenting itself as technical rather than political (Bourdieu, 1991). Decisions about bodies, territory, and death appear as problems of calculation. The V-2 rocket is a technological object, but it is also a discursive object: it generates a vocabulary that organizes desire, fear, and authority.

Pynchon repeatedly shows how expertise discourse hides agency. Passive constructions and nominalizations convert actions into abstract processes. People are "processed," "evaluated," "conditioned," "assigned." Agency is diffused across offices and laboratories. This linguistic diffusion is a technology of domination. If no one is doing the action, accountability dissolves. CDA has long noted that bureaucratic language often suppresses agents in order to present outcomes as inevitable (Fairclough, 1992). Gravity's Rainbow dramatizes this suppression as a moral catastrophe.

The novel also stages interpellation. Characters are hailed into institutional roles: soldier, statistician, subject of experimentation, consumer of postwar goods. Their identities are not merely personal traits but products of a system that assigns functions. Althusser's notion that ideology recruits individuals by positioning them as subjects is rendered literally, even grotesquely, in the novel's scenes of behavioral conditioning and experimentation (Althusser, 1971). The subject is produced as measurable response.

Formal fragmentation is crucial to the critique. The narrative shifts abruptly in voice and perspective, interrupts itself with songs, cartoons, and documentary fragments, and refuses a stable center. Rather than treating this as mere aesthetic excess, we can read it as an attempt to mimic and expose the discontinuities of institutional power. Modern domination operates through distributed systems: supply chains, data flows, intelligence networks. A coherent realist narrative might falsely suggest that power has a coherent face. Pynchon's collage form insists that power is systemic and that any attempt to tell the system as a single story is itself a form of ideological smoothing.

At the same time, the novel interrogates how institutions capture even resistance. Countercultural energies, erotic desires, and marginal communities are repeatedly absorbed, repurposed, or monitored. Here Jameson's insight about late capitalism's capacity to incorporate critique becomes relevant (Jameson, 1991). Gravity's Rainbow does not offer a clean outside. Its bleak lesson is discursive: domination persists partly because it can translate everything, including rebellion, into its own vocabularies. The political force of the novel lies in making that translation visible.

3. Risk, Simulation, and The Expert Voice in White Noise

Don DeLillo's White Noise stages institutional power through the everyday life of media saturation and consumer capitalism. The protagonist, Jack Gladney, teaches at a university and inhabits a world where language is thick with brands, expert commentary, and simulated images. Institutional domination here is less a visible command than a management of perception. The novel's title itself points to an ambient discourse environment: an ongoing static of messages that shapes what is thinkable.

White Noise is especially attentive to the discourse of risk. The "Airborne Toxic Event" introduces a crisis that is immediately mediated by institutional communication. Authorities name the event, classify the danger, issue instructions, and generate a timeline. The language of the crisis is simultaneously reassuring and coercive: it tells citizens what to do and, more importantly, what to believe about the situation. Foucault's governmentality is relevant here. The management of populations often takes the form of managing probabilities and producing compliant conduct through information (Foucault, 1991). DeLillo dramatizes how this information is never neutral. It is shaped by institutional interests, liability concerns, and the need to preserve legitimacy.

The novel repeatedly shows how the expert voice functions as a form of symbolic power. Experts speak in technical idioms that ordinary subjects cannot easily challenge. Yet the experts themselves are often uncertain, contradictory, or dependent on models. The authority of expertise is therefore partly performative. It relies on tone, register, and institutional position. In CDA terms, the expert discourse uses modality and evaluation to convert uncertain models into actionable imperatives: residents must evacuate; exposure levels are safe; symptoms are psychosomatic; the data is "inconclusive" but the policy is firm. DeLillo's irony exposes the gap between linguistic certainty and epistemic uncertainty.

Consumer discourse operates alongside risk discourse. Advertisements, brand names, and shopping routines provide a grammar for desire. The supermarket becomes a quasi-sacred space where institutional order is experienced as comfort and abundance. Here hegemony is not imposed; it is enjoyed. The novel suggests that the market governs partly by providing scripts of normality. Even fear is commodified. The quest for Dylar, the experimental drug that promises relief from the fear of death, turns existential anxiety into a purchasable solution and thus into a new institutional dependency.

Formally, White Noise exposes domination by rehearsing the saturation of speech. Dialogue is filled with repeated phrases, media catchwords, and disembodied announcements. The result is a sense that individual voice is constantly ventriloquized by institutional language. Bakhtin's heteroglossia is present, but the competing languages often feel less like democratic plurality than like market competition among slogans. The novel's critical force lies in making the reader feel this ventriloquism: to recognize that one's own inner monologue may be built from institutional fragments.

At the novel's end, the "white noise" does not disappear. The implication is political. Institutional domination in consumer modernity is not an event but an atmosphere. It is sustained by the everyday circulation of discourse, by the normalization of expertise, and by the comfort of scripted consumption. The postmodern technique here is not radical fragmentation but a meticulous reproduction of ambient discourse, rendered strange by subtle exaggeration.

4. Patriarchal Theocracy and The Discipline of Speech in The Handmaid's Tale

Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale presents one of the clearest fictional laboratories of institutional domination: the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic regime that reorganizes social life around patriarchal reproduction. The novel is often read as dystopian warning, but its most precise contribution is discourse-analytic. Gilead governs by controlling speech genres, naming practices, and ritual language. Domination is enacted in the everyday: greetings, prayers, formulas of obedience, and the policing of what can be said.

A striking feature of Gilead is its manipulation of sacred discourse. Biblical fragments are quoted, misquoted, or strategically edited in public ceremonies. The regime legitimates itself by presenting its laws as divine necessity rather than political choice. This is a classic hegemonic move: to make a historically contingent arrangement appear natural and timeless (Gramsci, 1971). In CDA terms, the regime relies on presupposition: it presupposes that women are naturally reproductive vessels, that fertility is a public resource, and that surveillance is protection. These presuppositions are embedded not only in policy but in ritual language.

Naming is a direct technology of domination. Handmaids are renamed as patronymic property, "Of-Fred," "Of-Glen," and so on. Bourdieu's symbolic power is literalized: the power to name becomes the power to possess (Bourdieu, 1991). The name erases prior identity and rewrites the subject as function. Offred's private narration becomes an act of counter-discourse because it insists on memory, on the persistence of a self that exceeds the institutional label. Yet even her narration is constrained by fear and by the internalization of the regime's categories.

Gilead also disciplines bodies through spatial discourse. The Commander's house, the market, the Wall, and the Red Center are organized as zones with distinct speech rules. What can be said where is a map of power. Language is regulated not only by censorship but by habit. Ritual greetings such as "Blessed be the fruit" perform what speech-act theory would call illocutionary force: they do not describe reality; they enact the subject's position within the regime. Refusing the greeting is a political act, but it is also dangerous because it reveals the refusal to be interpellated.

The novel's postmodern contribution lies in its framing devices. Offred's narrative is presented as a set of recorded "tapes" later discussed in the "Historical Notes" section, where male academics analyze her testimony with detached irony. This frame is a powerful critique of institutional knowledge production. Even after Gilead, the archive continues to be governed by institutional genres. The academics' discourse turns suffering into an object of scholarly play and thus repeats domination at the level of interpretation. The metafictional frame therefore exposes a second-order institution: the university and its protocols of evidence.

By juxtaposing the immediacy of Offred's voice with the cold authority of the later commentary, Atwood demonstrates that institutional power survives in interpretive regimes. The lesson is not simply that totalitarian states are dangerous. It is that domination often operates through apparently neutral practices of

documentation, classification, and academic discourse. The Handmaid's Tale thus exemplifies how postmodern self-reflexivity can function as political critique: it reveals that the struggle over power is also a struggle over how stories are archived and authorized.

5. Nationalist Historiography and The Politics of Memory in Midnight's Children

Rushdie's Midnight's Children is frequently read as a novel of nationhood and narrative excess, a text that links the life of its narrator, Saleem Sinai, to the history of India from partition onward. The novel exposes institutional power by treating the nation-state as a narrative institution: a producer of official histories, heroic myths, and bureaucratic categories. Saleem's life becomes a contest between personal memory and nationalist historiography.

From the opening, the novel foregrounds the instability of historical truth. Saleem repeatedly revises his story, admits errors, and stages his narration as performance addressed to an audience. This self-correction is not mere play; it is a refusal of official certainty. Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction clarifies the politics of this refusal. The novel insists that history is narratively constructed and that competing narratives reflect competing power claims (Hutcheon, 1988). Institutions dominate partly by monopolizing historical narration: by defining what counts as an origin, a trauma, a victory.

The state appears in the novel through bureaucratic language and through the rhetoric of national unity. Slogans, speeches, and administrative categories attempt to homogenize a diverse population. Yet the novel's form resists homogenization. It multiplies voices, languages, and registers. This multiplicity can be read as Bakhtinian heteroglossia weaponized against the monologic voice of the state (Bakhtin, 1981). The novel makes the reader feel that national discourse is always a simplification, an act of symbolic violence against plural life. The Emergency period in the 1970s is a crucial episode for analyzing institutional domination. State power is exercised through extraordinary legal measures, surveillance, and bodily control, including forced sterilizations. The language of modernization and national discipline serves as legitimation. CDA would note the euphemistic framing of coercion as "development" or "public good." Rushdie exposes this framing by juxtaposing it with bodily pain and with the grotesque imagery of violated lives. The institutional register of policy is made to clash with the lived register of suffering.

Saleem's body functions as an archive. His telepathic connection to other midnight-born children suggests a counter-public sphere, a network of voices that the state cannot easily manage. Yet this counter-sphere is also fragile, vulnerable to fragmentation and betrayal. The novel thereby acknowledges a central problem in resistance: counter-discourse can reproduce the hierarchies it opposes. This is not a defeatist message but a realistic one. Institutions dominate partly because alternatives are difficult to sustain, and because the desire for unity can mimic the state's monologic impulse.

Midnight's Children ultimately suggests that the nation is an institution that governs by story. The postmodern strategy of excessive narration, revision, and self-interruption becomes an ethical stance: it keeps history open, refuses closure, and insists that memory is political. In doing so, Rushdie demonstrates that contesting domination requires not only opposing policies but also challenging the narratives that make those policies appear legitimate.

6. The Colonial Archive, Authorship, and The Silencing of Subaltern Speech in Foe

Coetzee's Foe rewrites and troubles the canonical story associated with Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. The novel centers on Susan Barton, who seeks to tell her story after a shipwreck, and on Friday, an enslaved man whose tongue has been cut out. The institution exposed here is the colonial archive: the network of travel writing, publishing, and imperial knowledge through which colonized subjects are represented and managed. Domination appears not only as physical violence but as narrative control.

Foe is explicitly concerned with authorship as an institution. Susan attempts to have her story written and published, negotiating with the author figure Foe (a stand-in for Defoe). The process reveals how stories are shaped by market expectations, genre conventions, and the demands of legibility. What counts as a tellable story is determined by institutional gatekeepers. This is symbolic power operating through literary form (Bourdieu, 1991). The novel asks who has the authority to narrate and what happens to experiences that do not fit authorized genres.

Friday's silence is the novel's most devastating figure of domination. His inability to speak is not only a personal tragedy; it is a structural condition of colonial discourse. Postcolonial theory has emphasized how colonial power often speaks for the colonized, producing them as objects of knowledge rather than subjects of speech (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Coetzee dramatizes this problem by making Friday's interiority inaccessible and by forcing the reader to confront the desire to interpret him. The novel thereby turns reading into an ethical test: will we fill the silence with our own narratives, repeating colonial appropriation, or will we recognize the limits of interpretation?

Archival genres appear throughout the novel: depositions, letters, and the implied protocols of publishing. These genres are not neutral containers; they impose forms of coherence. Susan is repeatedly urged to supply plot, motivation, and moral lesson. The institution demands narrative economy and explanatory clarity. Yet Friday resists such demands precisely because his silence cannot be translated into the expected register. The novel thus exposes the violence of legibility: to be recognized by the institution, one must be made narratable in institutional terms.

The novel's final section intensifies its postmodern self-reflexivity. Narrative shifts become dreamlike and allegorical, undermining the possibility of a definitive account. This refusal of closure functions as critique. The colonial archive promises knowledge and mastery, but it is built on gaps, silences, and coercions. By refusing to resolve Friday's story, Coetzee refuses to offer the reader the comfort of interpretive domination.

Foe therefore demonstrates that institutional power operates through storytelling itself. The empire does not only conquer territories; it organizes the world through narratives that classify, exoticize, and silence. Postmodern form, in this case, becomes a politics of restraint: it shows that ethical reading may require acknowledging what cannot be recuperated into the institution's discourse.

7. Haunting, Testimony, and The Racialized Archive in Beloved

Toni Morrison's Beloved, while often situated within African American historical fiction, also employs techniques closely aligned with postmodernism: fragmented chronology, polyphonic voice, and an explicit concern with the archive and the limits of representation. The novel centers on Sethe, an escaped enslaved woman haunted by the daughter she killed rather than allow to be returned to slavery. Institutional power is not confined to a single organization; it is the regime of slavery as a racialized institution that governs through law, property relations, and the bureaucratic documentation of human beings.

A discourse-analytic reading begins with the language of property. Enslaved people are named, counted, advertised, and recorded. The institutional register of slavery converts personhood into inventory. This is symbolic power at its most brutal: the power to define a human as a thing. The novel repeatedly juxtaposes this register with intimate speech, memory fragments, and bodily sensation, making the reader feel the collision between institutional classification and lived subjectivity. The very difficulty of narration becomes evidence of domination: the institution has not only inflicted trauma but has also damaged the conditions of tellability.

Beloved exposes domination by making official discourse appear partial and obscene. When the past is glimpsed through documents or through the talk of slave catchers, the language tends to be euphemistic. Violence is rendered as "discipline" or "correction"; capture is framed as the restoration of lawful ownership. Such euphemisms are not merely rhetorical; they are mechanisms of moral laundering. CDA emphasizes that euphemism and agency suppression allow institutions to present harm as normal administration. Morrison counters this by insisting on sensory detail and by allowing the horror to remain in the texture of language rather than being resolved into explanation.

The novel also demonstrates how institutions govern memory. The archive of slavery is incomplete, distorted, and organized around the perspective of the powerful. Sethe's memories come as flashes, not as linear history, and this fragmentation can be read as both psychological trauma and political commentary. The institution has shaped what can be remembered publicly. Official histories of the nation often minimize the violence of slavery or package it as a regrettable chapter now closed. Beloved refuses closure. Its non-linear form insists that the past persists in the present as an unresolved claim.

Haunting functions as a counter-discursive strategy. The figure of Beloved, whether read as ghost, embodied trauma, or collective memory, interrupts the rationalist language that institutions prefer. Ghosts are what archives cannot contain. They mark the return of what was excluded from the official record. In

Foucauldian terms, haunting resembles a counter-memory: a practice that contests the authorized narrative by bringing back suppressed experiences and by disrupting the smooth continuity of institutional history (Foucault, 1977). The novel thus invents a form for what cannot easily be said in the institution's language.

Polyphony is crucial. Morrison distributes narration across voices, including Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and the collective "we" of the community. This heteroglossia resists the monologic voice of institutional history. The community's talk, gossip, judgment, and eventual solidarity show how power is not only imposed from above but also mediated through local discourses. Shame and respectability can become internalized forms of domination; solidarity can become a counter-force. The novel therefore complicates a simple oppressor-victim binary by showing how institutional violence reorganizes the social field, shaping how people speak about one another.

Beloved also foregrounds the politics of testimony. The question is not only what happened but how to speak it and to whom. Sethe's story is repeatedly difficult to tell because institutional discourse has already named her as criminal, as deviant mother, as property. The act of narrating becomes a struggle to reclaim the right to define the meaning of one's actions. This struggle resonates with Spivak's question of subaltern speech: when institutions structure the terms of intelligibility, speaking can become a form of translation into the master's language, and silence can be both imposed and strategic (Spivak, 1988). Morrison refuses to translate fully. The novel asks readers to inhabit partial understanding and to recognize that the demand for complete transparency can itself be a domination tactic.

By the end, Beloved suggests that institutional power is exposed not only by analysis but by form. Fragmentation, repetition, and haunting are not aesthetic flourishes; they are ways of representing the afterlife of institutional violence in language. The novel's refusal of neat resolution functions as critique of national narratives that seek to close the archive. In this way, Beloved extends the postmodern project: it makes institutional power readable by making its discursive scars audible.

Discussion

Across these six novels, institutional domination appears as a discursive phenomenon. Institutions govern by producing authorized genres and registers, by controlling infrastructures of communication, by naming subjects, and by regulating the archive. The novels repeatedly show that the most effective domination is the kind that feels ordinary. It is embedded in greetings, memos, expert interviews, advertising slogans, and scholarly footnotes. In Foucauldian terms, power circulates through practices that define what can be said, what counts as knowledge, and who is entitled to speak (Foucault, 1980).

Several recurrent mechanisms stand out. First, institutions legitimate themselves through technicality. Expertise discourse presents political decisions as calculations or procedures, suppressing agency through passive grammar and nominalization, and thereby presenting outcomes as inevitable. Second, institutions govern through presupposition and naturalization. Patriarchal and nationalist regimes embed their assumptions into ritual language so that dissent must first contest what is taken as self-evident (Gramsci, 1971). Third, institutions manage uncertainty by narrating it. Risk is translated into official categories and timelines; crisis becomes a script with authorized roles for experts and citizens. Fourth, institutions control memory by shaping archives, whether those archives are legal records, media imagery, or the protocols of scholarship.

Postmodern form intensifies these insights by refusing the narrative comforts that often accompany institutional authority. Paranoia plots and collage forms model how power is distributed and opaque, resisting the temptation to reduce domination to a single villain. Historiographic metafiction models the contestability of official history and demonstrates that archives are arenas of power rather than neutral repositories (Hutcheon, 1988). Self-reflexive frames reveal that interpretation itself can be institutionalized, turning testimony into data and suffering into spectacle. In each case, formal disruption functions as counter-discourse: it makes the reader experience uncertainty, contradiction, and mediation as conditions of modern life, and therefore as conditions of domination.

At the same time, the novels do not offer a simple outside. They show how institutions absorb resistance, how counter-networks can reproduce hierarchy, and how the desire for coherent meaning can become a demand for domination. Pynchon's recurring "They" is a reminder that naming power can slide into mythology. DeLillo shows that consumer comfort can substitute for critique by giving subjects rituals that feel like agency. Rushdie

demonstrates that the politics of unity can mimic the state's monologic voice. Coetzee forces readers to confront how speaking for the silenced can repeat the violence of representation. The political payoff is not a recipe for escape but a disciplined attentiveness to the ways discourse governs.

For literary studies, this implies that reading postmodernism politically requires attention to micro-level discourse as much as to macro-level theme. For discourse studies, it implies that fiction is not merely illustrative but methodological. Postmodern novels stage discourse in heightened form, allowing readers to observe how institutional registers compete, how subjects are positioned, and how alternative narratives are imagined. In this sense, the novel becomes a thought experiment about power: a space where domination is made readable, and where the reader is trained to notice the linguistic scaffolding of authority.

Two limitations should be noted. First, the analysis is interpretive and selective: it traces dominant discursive patterns rather than offering a comprehensive linguistic inventory. Second, the category "postmodern" is used pragmatically as a cluster of techniques rather than as a strict period boundary. These limits do not weaken the central finding. They clarify that the article's aim is methodological demonstration: to show how discourse theory can illuminate the politics of narrative form and how fiction can illuminate the lived textures of institutional language.

Conclusion

Postmodern novels expose institutional power by making discourse visible. Through parody of bureaucratic genres, saturation of expert registers, and reflexive attention to archives and authorship, they reveal how institutions produce truth and subjects. The novels analyzed here show that domination is not only a matter of force; it is a matter of narrative and naming, of the infrastructures that deliver meaning and the genres that authorize knowledge.

Reading postmodern fiction through discourse and domination therefore yields a double insight. It clarifies how institutions govern by language, and it clarifies why postmodern form matters: fragmentation, metafiction, and heteroglossia are not aesthetic ornaments but techniques for interrupting institutional certainty. In a world where institutional power increasingly operates through data, media, and expertise, the critical literacy cultivated by such novels remains urgently relevant.

Contemporary governance increasingly works through algorithmic classification, platform moderation, and data-driven risk scoring. These developments intensify the tendencies diagnosed by postmodern fiction: the translation of life into administrative categories, the diffusion of accountability across systems, and the transformation of perception by mediated discourse. Revisiting postmodern novels as critiques of institutional language can therefore enrich current debates about surveillance, expertise, and democratic legitimacy. They remind us that resisting domination begins with listening differently: hearing how institutions speak through us and learning how to interrupt those scripts.

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