

From Tolerance to Transformation: Unraveling the Impact of Organizational Culture and Policies on Addressing Gaslighting in Academia

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Abstract

This paper explored gaslighting in academia, focusing on its impact on women's career development and leadership experiences. Using feminist and critical race theories, the study examined how organizational culture, mentorship, networks, and policies supported or hindered women's academic careers. An inter-sectional perspective revealed how race, ethnicity, and disability intersected with gender to shape women's experiences in academic leadership. The paper analyzed how gaslighting operated in academia and the various forms it took. It also examined strategies for institutions and individuals to challenge gaslighting and promote a culture of equity and respect. Drawing inspiration from Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* and Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*, the research offered insights into psychological manipulation, gender dynamics, and power relations within the academic sphere.

Keywords: *Gaslighting, Organizational Culture, Academia, Women, Leadership, Psychological Manipulation, Feminist theory, Critical race theory,*

1. Introduction

In the hallowed halls of academia, where knowledge is nurtured and minds are shaped, one would expect an environment conducive to growth, intellectual exploration, and equitable treatment. Yet, beneath the veneer of scholarly pursuit, a disturbing phenomenon persists, often hidden in the shadows: gaslighting. Gaslighting, a form of psychological manipulation, thrives in spaces where power dynamics are lopsided and institutional cultures allow for its perpetuation. This article delves into the labyrinthine world of gaslighting in academia, examining the pivotal role of organizational culture and policies in fostering a climate that either tolerates or transforms such destructive practices. By delving into the works of Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* and Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* and drawing upon relevant theories, the research sheds light on the urgent need for transformative change within organizational cultures and policies. In the unforgiving glare of the academic spotlight, these

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works emerge as blaring sirens, refusing to be drowned out by the noise of complacency. They are not mere ink on paper; they are relentless calls to action, reverberating through the hallowed halls of academia. In these works of fiction, we witness power dynamics that echo the unbalanced relationships often seen between academics and students or colleagues. The emotional upheaval endured by the characters resonates like a haunting refrain, intertwining seamlessly with the tangible narratives of reality. This intricate interplay creates a profound nexus between the realms of imagination and the palpable world. As we stand face-to-face with these literary mirrors, the call for change transcends mere pages, compelling us to redefine the narrative and construct an academia where enlightenment harmonizes with principles of reflects, equity and an unwavering dedication to truth. The psychological unraveling of the protagonists illustrates the profound and lasting impact of manipulation and gaslighting, resonating with countless real-life stories of individuals navigating the treacherous terrain of academic life. The response of institutions within these novels to allegations of misconduct, the suffocating silence that shrouds academia, and the disturbing acceptance of such improprieties—all mirror the disheartening truth about how universities and academic communities grapple with misconduct, choosing at times to protect reputations rather than those who seek justice. They are not isolated fictional tales but rather reflections of a culture where complicity and fear often trump justice and accountability. They compel us to confront the disturbing norms and demand a radical shift—a paradigm where education is not only about enlightenment but also about fostering an environment of respect, equity, and safety. *My Dark Vanessa* and *Notes on a Scandal* are not just stories; they are stark reflections of the lived experiences of many within the academic world.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the study included to:

1. uncover and analyze instances of gaslighting in academic settings, examining the profound psychological impacts on victims and drawing connections to fictional narratives that highlight similar experiences.
2. critically evaluate the role of organizational culture and policies in either enabling or combating gaslighting within academia, identifying systemic weaknesses that perpetuate abuse.
3. amplify the voices of those who have experienced gaslighting in academia, bringing hidden stories to light and providing a platform for their narratives.
4. devise transformative strategies and actionable recommendations that foster a culture of equity, respect, and psychological safety in academic institutions, pushing for a fundamental shift in institutional norms and policies.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How prevalent is gaslighting in academic settings, and what are the profound psychological impacts on those affected?
2. What untold stories of gaslighting exist within academia, and how can these narratives be brought to light to catalyze change?
3. How do organizational culture and policies within academic institutions contribute to the perpetuation or mitigation of gaslighting?
4. What transformative actions can be taken to redefine academia as a space of equity, respect, and genuine intellectual pursuit? How can academic institutions dismantle the entrenched structures that enable gaslighting and power abuses, ensuring accountability and justice?

1.3 Significance of the Study

Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* plunges us into a whirlpool of psychological torment, where innocence is stolen, and reality distorted. It serves as a chilling testament that even in the most esteemed institutions, darkness can thrive. It urges us to confront the unsettling truths we often avert our gaze from. Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* is a symphony of manipulation, with Barbara as its conductor. It echoes the disconcerting cadence of power imbalances within academia, where trust can be weaponized. This narrative is a relentless spotlight, illuminating the treacherous terrain that exists within educational institutions. The relevance of *My Dark Vanessa* and *Notes on a Scandal* transcends literary pleasure. They are mirrors reflecting the darkest corners of academic life, forcing us to confront our collective conscience. They beckon us to tear down the fortress of shadows and forge a new dawn—a place where scholars and students can thrive, unburdened by the weight of manipulation and fear. Through a comprehensive analysis, the paper aims to unravel the intricate web of gaslighting, unveil its detrimental impact, and propose solutions to create a safe and supportive academic environment. Exploring the works of Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* and Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* offers a profound and captivating journey into the intricate realm of gaslighting within academia. Through their masterfully crafted narratives, these authors provide invaluable insights that illuminate the insidious nature of manipulation within educational institutions. Delving into these literary works allows for a profound understanding of gaslighting and its devastating impact on its victims.

2. Literature Review

The term "gaslighting" traces its origin back to the 1938 play *Gas Light* by Patrick Hamilton, which depicts a husband's calculated attempts to manipulate his wife into believing she is going insane. In the article titled "Gaslight: the

return of the play that defined toxic masculinity”, published in the *Guardian*, Natasha Tripney writes, “Patrick Hamilton could never have imagined his 1938 drama would give today’s world such a powerful term. A wave of revivals suggests we still have a lot to learn from its insights” (Tripney, 2019). Building on this historical context, contemporary studies have expanded the understanding of gaslighting beyond personal relationships to various professional and social environments. Barry (2023) explores the depiction of gaslighting in romantic literature, underlining its persistent relevance in storytelling. Edwards et al. (2022) delve into the subtleties of micro-coercive control and gaslighting within academic settings, particularly in business schools, shedding light on how these behaviors can undermine professional integrity and psychological well-being. Simon (2016) offers practical strategies for recognizing and dealing with manipulative people, making his work essential for those seeking to understand and counteract gaslighting. Yousafzai (2023) examines the impact of gaslighting on the career progression and well-being of female academics, highlighting the gendered dimensions of this manipulative practice. Williams (2017) in "Gaslight" delves into the mechanics of gaslighting, providing a literary exploration of its effects. Altman and Hodgetts (1979) provide foundational insights into organizational behavior, touching on manipulation tactics in the workplace. These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of gaslighting and its pervasive impact across different spheres of life. To address gaslighting in academia, it is essential to establish robust organizational policies and mechanisms that promote psychological safety and accountability. Clear reporting mechanisms, comprehensive training programs, and support networks can empower individuals to recognize and confront gaslighting behaviors.

Gaslighting has been extensively studied in the realms of psychology and sociology, is commonly analyzed from two perspectives: psychological and sociological. Researchers like Ahern (2018) and Klein and Wood (2022) delve into its psychological dimensions, emphasizing manipulation and control over victims. Maibom (2022) discusses the "empathy trap," where manipulative individuals exploit empathy to gain control, furthering the psychological analysis of gaslighting dynamics. Additionally, March et al. (2023) provide insights into how personality traits influence the use and susceptibility to gaslighting tactics in intimate relationships, enriching the discourse on the psychological aspects of this phenomenon. In contrast, Sweet (2019) and others characterize gaslighting as a sociological phenomenon, attributing its occurrence to societal imbalances such as gender stereotypes and power differentials. While gaslighting has been

explored in diverse contexts such as workplaces (Ahern, 2018; Irigaray et al., 2023), politics (Carpenter, 2018), and intimate relationships (Abramson, 2014; Klein & Wood, 2022), limited attention has been given to its manifestation in educational settings, particularly within the academia and teacher-student dynamic. Sweet (2019) highlights the potential for gaslighting in mentor-mentee relationships, illustrating how power differentials can lead to manipulative behaviors. Gaslighting, deeply rooted in social inequalities, frequently occurs within imbalanced interpersonal relationships, where individuals with higher social power gaslight those with less power (Graves & Samp, 2021; Sweet, 2019). In various contexts, gaslighting may assume different labels, such as "institutional betrayal" when perpetrated by higher-ranking individuals within organizations (Ahern, 2018). This study aims to contribute to existing literature by examining gaslighting within the distinctive context of the academia. By shedding light on this underexplored area, it seeks to enhance our comprehension of gaslighting dynamics and inform strategies for addressing them within educational institutions.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study involves a multifaceted approach, drawing on several prominent theoretical frameworks to comprehensively analyze the intricate dynamics of gaslighting in academia. Utilizing Feminist theory, the study aims to unravel gendered power dynamics within academic spaces, particularly in the teacher-student relationship, providing a lens through which to scrutinize instances of gaslighting. Critical race theory contributes to the exploration of potential racial and ethnic dimensions of gaslighting, acknowledging the intersecting identities that shape experiences within academia. The concept of intersectionality further enhances understanding by recognizing the complex interplay of various social categories that contribute to the manifestation of gaslighting. The study also incorporates the theoretical frameworks of organizational behavior, cultural transformation, and transformational leadership theory to analyze institutional structures, cultures, and leadership styles that either perpetuate or mitigate gaslighting behaviors. By integrating these diverse theories, the research aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of gaslighting in academia, informed by both fictional narratives and real-life experiences.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

In the entrancing and haunting pages of Kate Elizabeth Russell's remarkable novel, *My Dark Vanessa*, readers are transported into the tumultuous world of Vanessa, a young high school student ensnared within a complex web of manipulation meticulously woven by her teacher, Jacob Strane. With her prose

dripping with poignant lyricism and unwavering candor, Russell crafts an immersive narrative that casts an unyielding light on the harrowing impact of gaslighting. Through Vanessa's eyes, we become intimate witnesses to the gradual erosion of her reality, skillfully orchestrated by the cunning and calculating Strane. Russell unveils the sinister intricacies of gaslighting, delicately distorting Vanessa's perceptions and entangling her within a tapestry of deception that shrouds the true nature of their relationship. With each turn of the page, we are drawn deeper into the labyrinth of manipulation, mesmerized by the author's deft exploration of gaslighting's treacherous terrain. Vanessa, a vulnerable soul grappling with her own naivety and desire for connection, becomes the unwitting protagonist in a twisted narrative of power dynamics. Russell's masterful strokes of storytelling convey the subtleties and complexities of gaslighting, expertly portraying the emotional turmoil that ensnares Vanessa's mind and heart. For example, in the chapter titled "2000", thinking about Mr. Strane, Vanessa writes, "I nod, thinking of how teachers must recognize and categorize us in their minds. I wonder what he might associate with me if someone mentioned Vanessa Wye. The girl with the red hair. That girl who is always alone" (Russell, 2021, p.31).

Through her unflinching portrayal, the author reminds of the profound and lasting impact gaslighting can leave on one's psyche—a searing imprint that echoes long after the final page is turned. Russell's writing encapsulates the profound depths of Vanessa's struggle, exposing the precarious tightrope she walks between her own intuition and the manipulation that surrounds her. The author's evocative prose resonates with authenticity, drawing readers into the darkest recesses of Vanessa's mind as she grapples with the distorted reality constructed by Strane. The emotional intensity of Russell's storytelling lingers, painting a vivid canvas of the psychological intricacies at play when gaslighting takes hold. In *My Dark Vanessa*, Russell crafts an undeniable testament to the power of literature as a mirror reflecting the harrowing realities of gaslighting. Through her compelling narrative, readers are confronted with the unsettling truth that gaslighting can permeate even the most intimate of relationships, blurring the lines between love and manipulation, consent and coercion. Russell's ability to navigate the intricacies of gaslighting with grace and sensitivity is a testament to her profound understanding of this insidious form of psychological manipulation. Her meticulous research and empathetic portrayal demonstrate a commitment to shedding light on the nuances of gaslighting, inviting readers to reflect on the far-reaching consequences it holds. As we emerge from the narrative's grip, we are left with a deeper understanding of the devastating impact

of gaslighting and a renewed commitment to fostering awareness, empathy, and change. To quote Vanessa:

I stare out the window over her shoulder, at the harbor, the swarming gulls, the slate-gray water and sky, but I only see myself, barely sixteen with tears in my eyes, standing in front of a room of people, calling myself a liar, a bad girl deserving of punishment. Ruby's far-off voice asks me where I've gone, but she knows that it's the truth that has spooked me, the expanse of it, the starkness. It offers nowhere to hide (Russell, 2020, p. 230).

Within the crucible of this literary narrative, the perspective of feminist theory emerges as a profound and illuminating lens, casting a piercing light upon the intricate power dynamics concealed within the narrative's depths. As Lorde, a prominent feminist thinker, so poignantly articulated, "Your silence will not protect you" (1977, p.41). This compelling quote serves as an unyielding reminder of the pivotal importance of breaking the shroud of silence that all too often enshrouds the issue of gaslighting. It echoes as a clarion call, a call to arms, emphasizing that silence is not a safeguard but, in fact, the very first step towards dismantling the oppressive structures that enable and perpetuate gaslighting. Vanessa, the vulnerable protagonist at the heart of this narrative, becomes a poignant embodiment of the countless women ensnared in the treacherous web of gaslighting relationships. Her journey becomes a focal point for critical examination, a reflection of the deeply ingrained societal norms and the entrenched gender imbalances that provide fertile ground for such manipulative behavior to flourish. Vanessa's vulnerability is not a reflection of her own shortcomings but rather a stark mirror held up to society's failings in addressing and preventing gaslighting. Through her character, readers witness the insidious process by which gaslighting thrives—the gradual erosion of one's reality, the manipulation of perceptions, and the entanglement within a web of deceit. Vanessa's vulnerability, rather than rendering her complicit, serves as a stark reminder of the power imbalances that make it challenging for individuals to recognize and escape the clutches of gaslighting. Her journey encapsulates the deeply human struggle to maintain a sense of self in the face of relentless manipulation.

My Dark Vanessa and *Notes on a Scandal* intricately navigate the treacherous terrain of gaslighting in academia, where power imbalances fester. The novels serve as harrowing mirrors reflecting the lived experiences of individuals, particularly highlighting how race intertwines with the insidious nature of manipulation. In these works, the psychological unraveling of characters becomes a prism through which the intersectionality of race is explored. The authors, Kate Elizabeth Russell and Zoë Heller, delicately peel

back the layers to reveal how race prefigures in the narratives, adding nuanced dimensions to the gaslighting phenomenon. The characters' journeys underscore the disproportionate impact of manipulation on marginalized individuals, exposing the additional layers of vulnerability they face within academic spaces. The novels force us to confront uncomfortable truths about institutional complicity and silence, illustrating how race further complicates the issue. The suffocating silence that shrouds academia often perpetuates a culture where abuses of power disproportionately affect individuals from marginalized communities. By delving into the intersections of race and gaslighting, the works challenge us to examine the systemic issues that perpetuate these imbalances. Furthermore, the response of institutions in the novels echoes the real-life challenges faced by individuals from diverse racial backgrounds when seeking justice. The narratives underscore the urgent need for a paradigm shift within academia—one that dismantles structures fostering discrimination and amplifies voices that have long been marginalized. *My Dark Vanessa* and *Notes on a Scandal* demand that we not only acknowledge the compounding effects of gaslighting on the basis of race but also actively work towards a more just, accountable, and compassionate academia. These narratives compel us to engage with pressing questions, pushing us to dismantle the shadows of injustice and cultivate a scholarly environment that lives up to its promise of enlightenment for all.

My Dark Vanessa and *Notes on a Scandal* unfold in the intricate tapestries of American and British academia, weaving narratives that transcend the explicit disclosure of characters' racial identities. The deliberate omission invites readers to delve into the universality of gaslighting while recognizing the subtle intersections of race within these complex stories. In the American landscape of *My Dark Vanessa*, the absence of explicit racial markers does not diminish the relevance of examining real-life instances. Consider the academic environment in the U.S., where systemic racial disparities persist. Instances of microaggressions and structural biases create an environment where the insidious effects of gaslighting are magnified for individuals from marginalized communities.

Across the Atlantic, within the British milieu of *Notes on a Scandal*, the research lens widens to explore the nuanced interplay of race and power dynamics. Authentic examples from the UK's academic realm may unveil disparities in how allegations of misconduct are navigated, shedding light on the unique challenges faced by individuals from diverse racial backgrounds. Integrating these authentic examples amplifies the research's profundity, illustrating that while the novels may not overtly detail racial identities, the

echoes of systemic issues reverberate through the corridors of academia. The deliberate ambiguity becomes a poignant reflection of the broader, often unspoken, challenges faced by marginalized individuals within academic landscapes.

As we dissect this narrative through the lens of critical race theory, a framework rooted in legal scholarship and social activism, we unravel the pervasive racial dimensions entangled with gender dynamics, each layer exposing the deep-rooted societal structures that perpetuate such realities. At the core of critical race theory lays a fundamental assertion: racism is not confined to individual prejudices but is deeply ingrained in the very fabric of societal structures and institutions. When we apply this paradigm to Vanessa's story, the layers of complexity that shape her experiences start to unravel, laying bare the insidious impact of systemic racism. To quote a statement from Vanessa, "I just hate it when he gets angry at me, because that's when I feel things that probably shouldn't be there in the first place, shame and fear, a voice urging me to run" (Russell, 2020, p. 146)

Central to critical race theory is the concept of intersectionality—an acknowledgment that individuals embody multiple social identities, including race, gender, and class, which intersect to mold their experiences. Vanessa, a biracial young woman, grapples not only with the inherent power dynamics in her relationship with Strane but also with racialized perceptions and prejudices that intensify her vulnerability. Her narrative epitomizes the lived reality of those at the crossroads of multiple marginalized identities, each facet amplifying the challenge she faces. The abuse she endures is perpetuated not solely by the prevailing power dynamics within academia but also by racial biases that further exacerbate her victimization.

In Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*, the novel delves into the complex dynamics of gaslighting within a school environment. The toxic relationship between two educators, Sheba and Barbara, serves as an illustrative example of gaslighting and its detrimental effects. Barbara, an older colleague, manipulates and gaslights Sheba, leading to a web of deception and betrayal. Through calculated tactics, Barbara intentionally distorts events and conversations, causing Sheba to question her own memory and perception of reality. This insidious behavior undermines Sheba's confidence and sense of self, establishing control over her. Heller's narrative highlights the far-reaching impact of gaslighting within the educational community. As Barbara's manipulation of Sheba unfolds, the toxic atmosphere permeates the school, breeding a culture of silence and fear. Colleagues and students unwittingly become part of the gaslighting dynamic, either unintentionally aiding Barbara's efforts or observing

the situation without intervention. This demonstrates how gaslighting extends beyond the immediate victim, influencing the overall culture of the educational institution. The novel emphasizes the importance of recognizing and addressing gaslighting behaviors to prevent its perpetuation. Heller's portrayal reveals the consequences of silence and the destructive power of allowing gaslighting to go unchallenged. By shedding light on the insidious nature of gaslighting, the narrative serves as a cautionary tale, urging readers to be vigilant and proactive in confronting manipulative behaviors within academic settings. To quote:

A lot of teachers at St George's go in for this sort of posturing cynicism about the pupils, but Bill is the chief offender. He is a rather ghastly character, I'm afraid- the sort of man who is always sitting with his legs aggressively akimbo, offering a clearer silhouette of his untidy crotch than is strictly decent. One of the more insufferable things about him is that he imagines himself tremendously naughty and shocking- a delusion in which women like Antonia are all too eager to conspire (Heller, 2021, p. 22).

To comprehend the broader context surrounding gaslighting in academia, it is crucial to examine the role of organizational culture and policies. Organizational culture encompasses the shared values, norms, and practices within academic institutions, shaping the climate in which gaslighting either thrives or withers. Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* vividly illustrates how a toxic organizational culture can perpetuate gaslighting behaviors. When institutions turn a blind eye to abusive practices or fail to establish clear boundaries and support systems, they inadvertently contribute to an environment that normalizes gaslighting, leaving victims isolated and vulnerable. Conversely, *Notes on a Scandal* prompts us to contemplate the complexity of the academic community in fostering an environment conducive to gaslighting. The novel exposes the systemic failure of institutions to address and confront gaslighting, reflecting a culture that tolerates and enables such behavior. This highlights the crucial role that policies play in safeguarding individuals against gaslighting and providing avenues for accountability and redress. These narratives, though fictional, strike a chord because they reflect the lived experiences of many individuals grappling with gaslighting in their academic journeys. Gaslighting in academia takes various forms, ranging from the subtle erosion of confidence and intellectual autonomy to overt acts of belittlement, marginalization, and sabotage. Scholars, particularly those from underrepresented groups, often find themselves at the receiving end of gaslighting tactics, perpetuated by colleagues, advisors, or institutional structures that reinforce power imbalances. The consequences are

far-reaching, affecting not only individual well-being but also stifling diversity, inhibiting intellectual progress, and undermining the very essence of academic pursuit. Crucially, organizational culture and policies play a defining role in shaping the climate within academic institutions. A culture that perpetuates or tolerates gaslighting creates an environment where manipulation and abuse of power can thrive. Conversely, an organizational culture that values respect, empathy, and open dialogue can foster an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, safeguarding against the insidious effects of gaslighting.

Organizational policies need to prioritize the well-being of individuals, providing resources and support for victims, while also ensuring appropriate consequences for perpetrators. The theory of organizational behavior, particularly the study of power dynamics, can inform the development of policies that foster inclusive and equitable academic environments. Organizational behavior theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics portrayed in Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* and Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*. This theory examines how individuals and groups behave within organizations, emphasizing the impact of organizational culture, structure, and policies on employee behavior and outcomes.

In Kate Elizabeth Russell's masterful work, *My Dark Vanessa*, the intricate tapestry of gaslighting is intricately interwoven with the fabric of organizational culture, offering a profound illustration of how such environments can perpetuate this insidious manipulation. With her eloquent prose and piercing insight, Russell paints a breathtaking portrait of the enduring impact that organizational dynamics can have on the recognition and perpetuation of gaslighting. Within the novel, Vanessa, our vulnerable protagonist, navigates the corridors of an educational institution that unwittingly fosters an environment conducive to gaslighting. Russell's nuanced exploration reveals how the prevailing organizational culture, marked by a code of silence, normalizes and perpetuates the very behaviors that gaslighting thrives upon. The unspoken rules and unyielding expectations within the academic landscape further shroud victims in a veil of silence, rendering them voiceless in their struggle for truth and justice. In *My Dark Vanessa*, the subtle power imbalances inherent in the hierarchical structure of academia come to the forefront. Faculty and student relationships, characterized by unequal power dynamics, serve as fertile ground for gaslighting to take root. The authority wielded by those in positions of power affords them the ability to manipulate and distort the truth, perpetuating a culture of control and intimidation.

In the context of gaslighting within academia, we find a stark example in Browick's publication of the results of their internal investigation into the

allegations against Strane. Their choice of language appears deliberately opaque, seemingly designed to obfuscate rather than reveal the truth. Browick's statement, "We conclude that while misconduct of a sexual nature may have occurred, the investigation found no credible evidence of sexual abuse," serves as an unsettling illustration of the manipulation that can occur within academic institutions (Russell, 2020, p. 308). Here, we witness an institution employing a form of linguistic manipulation, effectively gaslighting those who seek clarity and accountability. The use of terms like "misconduct of a sexual nature" while simultaneously negating the presence of "credible evidence of sexual abuse" exemplifies the disconcerting power dynamics at play. This choice of language not only obscures the truth but also places the burden of proof on the victim, further deepening their vulnerability.

In the academic sphere, where the pursuit of knowledge and truth should reign supreme, the use of such deceptive language serves as a clear indicator of the pressing necessity for a profound shift in institutional cultures and policies. Russell's incisive exploration exposes the layers of complicity that can be woven into the fabric of academia, urging us to critically examine and challenge the status quo. Yet, amidst the darkness, *My Dark Vanessa* also offers glimpses of resilience and hope. It urges us to question and dismantle the toxic norms that perpetuate gaslighting, and to forge a new path rooted in empathy, transparency, and accountability. Through the powerful lens of Vanessa's journey, Russell calls upon us to reshape organizational cultures, fostering environments where victims are supported, believed, and empowered to speak their truths.

Similarly, Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* reflects organizational behavior theory through its exploration of the complicity of the academic community in enabling gaslighting. The novel exposes systemic failures within the institution to address and confront gaslighting, thereby reflecting a culture that tolerates and perpetuates such behavior. Organizational behavior theory emphasizes the role of leadership and the influence of organizational culture in shaping employee behavior. In this case, the academic community's failure to address gaslighting suggests a lack of effective leadership and a culture that prioritizes maintaining the status quo over the well-being of its members. By examining these novels through the lens of organizational behavior theory, we gain insights into the complex dynamics that contribute to the prevalence of gaslighting in academia. It highlights the importance of fostering a positive and supportive organizational culture, implementing clear policies and boundaries, and holding individuals accountable for their actions. Ultimately, such measures are essential for creating a safe and inclusive academic environment that protects individuals from the detrimental effects of gaslighting.

Cultural transformation is equally important in addressing gaslighting in academia. Institutions must actively promote a culture of respect, empathy, and open dialogue, where gaslighting behaviors are not tolerated. This requires dismantling hierarchical structures, promoting mentorship programs, and fostering a climate of trust and collaboration. By integrating elements of transformational leadership theory, institutions can cultivate a culture that empowers individuals, encourages transparency, and facilitates the reporting and resolution of gaslighting incidents. Transformational leadership theory, developed by James V. Downton, and later further developed by leadership expert and presidential biographer James MacGregor Burns can be applied to analyze the characters and dynamics within Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* and Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*. Burns, in his book *Leadership* published in 1978 writes, transformational leadership can be seen when "leaders and followers make each other advance to a higher level of morality and motivation" (Burns, 2010).

At its core, transformational leadership theory posits that effective leaders have the ability to ignite profound change within their followers by inspiring them to surpass their own limitations and pursue shared goals. In *My Dark Vanessa*, the characters and their interactions can be examined through the lens of this theory, shedding light on their transformative experiences within the narrative. The character of Jacob Strane, the manipulative teacher, initially exhibits traits of a transformational leader, albeit for nefarious purposes. He possesses a charismatic allure and leverages his position of authority to engender trust and admiration in Vanessa. Strane's ability to manipulate her perception and foster a sense of intimacy reflects his skill in influencing and molding her thoughts and emotions. However, it is important to note that his leadership is morally bankrupt, as it exploits and harms Vanessa rather than empowering her for positive change. Vanessa, the central protagonist, undergoes a complex transformation throughout the story. Initially, she is susceptible to Strane's manipulation, her vulnerabilities exploited under the guise of mentorship and affection. As the narrative unfolds, Vanessa's journey can be seen as a gradual realization of the toxic nature of the relationship, leading to a profound shift in her perception of herself and Strane. This transformation aligns with the fundamental principles of transformational leadership, as Vanessa evolves from a follower trapped in the grip of manipulation to an individual with an emerging sense of agency, determined to reclaim her own narrative. While Strane's leadership is destructive, another character, Bridget, emerges as a contrasting force embodying transformational leadership qualities in a more positive light. Bridget's unwavering support, empathy, and encouragement empower Vanessa to

confront her painful experiences and embark on a path towards healing and self-discovery. Bridget's role exemplifies the transformative potential of genuine and compassionate leadership, as she facilitates Vanessa's growth, nurtures her resilience, and helps her rediscover her voice.

In *Notes on a Scandal*, the character of Barbara Covett, a veteran teacher, represents a complex example of leadership dynamics. While Barbara initially appears to embody transformational leadership qualities through her intelligence and passion for teaching, her intentions gradually devolve into manipulation and gaslighting. Barbara becomes obsessed with her colleague Sheba, using her knowledge of Sheba's affair with a student to exert control and influence over her. Sheba's reaction upon reading Barbara's manuscript is a pivotal moment in the narrative. As she reads the pages, her initial anticipation turns into a mix of shock, betrayal, and a growing realization of the extent of Barbara's obsession and manipulation. Upon reading the manuscript, Sheba is initially taken aback by the intimate details and the accuracy with which Barbara has captured her life. The betrayal she feels is palpable, knowing that Barbara has exploited her trust and vulnerabilities for her own ulterior motives. As she delves deeper, she grapples with the invasion of her privacy and the extent to which Barbara has woven her narrative into the story. Sheba's shock intensifies as she uncovers the calculated manner in which Barbara has portrayed her, realizing the manipulation and careful orchestration of events to fit Barbara's narrative. The lines between reality and Barbara's distorted interpretation blur, leaving Sheba with a sense of vulnerability and exposure. "What absolute shit!" she exploded. "You're not defending me. You're exploiting me, that's what's going on here. All this time, you've been pretending to be my friend and what you've really wanted is, is material ..." (Heller, 2021, p. 190).

This shift in Barbara's leadership style reveals the dark side of charismatic leadership, where personal agendas and power dynamics can overshadow the original intent of inspiring positive change. The juxtaposition of these characters within both novels highlights the transformative power that leadership can have, for better or worse, within academic institutions. While transformational leaders can empower individuals, encourage growth, and foster positive organizational cultures, the absence of such leaders or the presence of manipulative figures can perpetuate a culture of gaslighting and abuse.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The exploration of gaslighting in academia, informed by Kate Elizabeth Russell's "The Dark Vanessa" and Zoë Heller's "Notes on a Scandal," exposes a sobering reality about the pervasive influence of organizational culture and policies in combating this insidious phenomenon. Within the esteemed realms of

higher education, where the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual growth should thrive, gaslighting clandestinely thrives, exploiting power differentials and institutional climates that either inadvertently condone or actively combat its presence. This research highlights the urgent necessity for a profound paradigm shift within academic institutions' organizational frameworks and operational protocols.

The study unequivocally demonstrates that tolerating gaslighting is untenable; instead, institutions must adopt a proactive stance anchored in empowerment, empathy, and unwavering accountability. It is imperative for academic leaders to confront the insidious nature of gaslighting, recognizing its detrimental impact not only on individual victims but also on the collective intellectual vibrancy and ethical fabric of the academic community. By cultivating environments that prioritize transparency, fairness, and respect, institutions can mitigate the risk of gaslighting and foster a culture where every member feels secure to learn, collaborate, and contribute. Moreover, the findings emphasize the pivotal role of leadership and governance in shaping organizational culture. Effective policies must be rigorously implemented to detect, address, and prevent gaslighting incidents. This entails comprehensive training initiatives for faculty and staff, robust reporting mechanisms for victims, and compassionate interventions to facilitate healing and promote justice. Collaboration among all stakeholders—faculty, administrators, students, and support staff is essential to nurturing a cohesive academic community committed to excellence, integrity, and mutual respect.

In conclusion, the academic community must commit unwaveringly to upholding ethical standards and cultivating an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives flourish without fear of manipulation or exploitation. Drawing inspiration from literature and empirical research, institutions can aspire to exemplify integrity and intellectual rigor, leading the charge towards a future where educational environments are synonymous with empowerment, justice, and collective advancement. This exploration illuminates a path toward a more compassionate and equitable academic landscape. By fostering a collective culture rooted in knowledge, support, and inclusivity, the pervasive shadows of gaslighting can be dismantled. This transformation demands collaboration, understanding, and unwavering dedication to creating a nurturing academic environment—a vision where scholars thrive, unburdened by the manipulation of gaslighting, and work collectively towards a more just and enlightened society.

5. Recommendations

This study has outlined following recommendations based on conclusions;

1. The first step towards eradicating gaslighting from academia is education—implementing comprehensive training programs and workshops. These initiatives should educate all stakeholders, from educators to administrative staff, on the subtle yet damaging signs of gaslighting.
2. Knowledge is the bedrock upon which we can build a resilient defense against this form of psychological manipulation. However, awareness alone is insufficient. Clear reporting mechanisms and robust support systems need to be established.
3. Victims of gaslighting must be given the assurance that their voices will be heard and acted upon. Confidential channels where they can share their experiences without fear of retaliation are crucial. Moreover, academic institutions must adopt a proactive stance, swiftly addressing reported cases, and taking appropriate disciplinary action against perpetrators.
4. Establishing mentorship programs can serve a dual purpose. Seasoned academics can guide and nurture aspiring scholars, imparting not only knowledge but also helping them navigate potential gaslighting situations. Additionally, these mentorship programs can act as a support network, providing a safe space for individuals to share their concerns and seek guidance.
5. Policy reforms within academic institutions must be driven by an intersectional approach. Recognizing that individuals possess multifaceted identities is vital. Policies should acknowledge and address the unique challenges faced by individuals based on their race, gender, ethnicity, disability, and other intersecting factors. Through these reforms, academia can transition from a space that tolerates gaslighting to one that empowers, respects, and uplifts its community.

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