



The Futility of Higher Education in Elif Batuman's *The Idiot*

Elif Batuman'ın *The Idiot* Romanında Yüksek Öğrenimin
Beyhudeliği

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Abstract

Elif Batuman's first novel, *The Idiot* (2017) tells the events in the freshman year of its protagonist, Selin. Selin's story reveals the condition of university education and how it is observed from a student's point of view. In this respect, *The Idiot* can best be classified as a campus novel. The campus novel has developed as a postwar subgenre of the contemporary novel since the 1950s. Most of these works were written by professors and their protagonists were, again, professors. In *The Idiot*, on the other hand, Selin mirrors a reverse view of academia. This study focuses on *The Idiot* as a contemporary campus novel and points out its different

Geliş tarihi (Received): 14-12-2025 Kabul tarihi (Accepted): 01-06-2026

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and subversive aspects, separating it from conventional examples of the genre. In this regard, this study argues, *The Idiot* is much more than a sentimental love story and the novel criticizes the higher education in terms of its inefficiency and futility in modern life. It is a story of disappointment of a student who had higher expectations from the higher education than the higher education could offer. Selin has some solid remarks about the gaps between the intended outcomes of the courses she takes and what she actually learns from them. According to Selin, the conventional higher education system should be reformed and improved so that she can witness its positive effects in life. The novel's focus on the entry of digital communication and language into the campus and social life, together with the students' point of view in the narrative make it a distinctive example of its genre.

Keywords: *Elif Batuman, higher education, The Idiot, campus novel*

Öz

Elif Batuman'ın ilk romanı, *The Idiot* (2017), baş karakter Selin'in üniversitenin ilk yılında başından geçenleri anlatmaktadır. Selin'in hikayesi üniversite öğreniminin durumunu ve bu durumun bir öğrencinin bakış açısıyla nasıl algılandığını gözler önüne sermektedir. Bu bağlamda, *The Idiot*'ı bir kampüs romanı olarak sınıflandırmak en doğrusudur. Kampüs romanı çağdaş romanın bir alt türü olarak ortaya çıkmıştır ve 1950'lerden günümüze değin varlığını sürdürmektedir. Bu türdeki eserlerin çoğu öğretim üyeleri tarafından yazılmış ve yine çoğunun baş karakterleri öğretim üyeleridir. *The Idiot*'da ise bir öğrenci olan baş karakter Selin akademinin bu görünümünü tersine çevirmektedir ve bir öğrencinin gözünden okuyucuya farklı bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Bu perspektiften bakıldığında okuyucunun gözünde çok farklı bir akademik dünya oluşmaktadır. Bu çalışma *The Idiot*'a çağdaş bir kampüs romanı olarak odaklanmakta ve onu türün alışlagelmiş örneklerinden farklı kılan ve ezber bozan unsurlarını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, bu açıdan, *The Idiot*'ın duygusal bir aşk hikayesi veya genç bir kadının başından geçenlerin sıralanmasından çok daha fazlası olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Roman yüksek öğrenimi modern yaşamda etkisizliği ve anlamsızlığı yönünden eleştirmektedir. Üstelik dünyanın en saygın yüksek öğretim kurumlarından birinde okuyan Selin ve gözlemleri üzerinden yapılan bu eleştiri, yüksek öğretimden ve yüksek öğretimin ona sunabildiklerinden daha fazlasını bekleyen bir öğrencinin hayal kırıklığının öyküsüdür. Aldığı derslerin hedeflenen sonuçları ile onlardan gerçekte öğrendikleri arasındaki uçurumla ilgili Selin'in somut yorumları ve çıkarımları özellikle dikkat çekmektedir. Selin'e göre geleneksel yüksek öğretim sistemi hayatında bu öğrenimin olumlu etkilerini görebileceği şekilde yenilenmeli ve geliştirilmelidir. Dahası, roman dijital iletişimin akademide ve özel hayatta etki ve etkisizliği üzerine önemli gözlemler içermektedir. Dijital iletişimin ve dilin

kampüs hayatına ve sosyal hayata girişi üzerindeki odağı, anlatıda öğrencilerin bakış açısının kullanılması ile birlikte ele alındığında, *The Idiot* alışlagelmiş kampüs romanlarından ayrılmaktadır. Aynı zamanda günümüz akademisine ve mevcut problemlerine ışık tutan roman, bu bağlamda, geleneksel yüksek öğretim sisteminin öğrencilerin gözünden nasıl gözüktüğünü de gözler önüne sermektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Elif Batuman, yüksek öğrenim, The Idiot, kampüs romanı*

1. About the author and the novel

Born in New York, in 1977, raised in New Jersey, Elif Batuman is a Turkish-American writer from United States. Daughter of Turkish immigrant parents, she is a Turkish-American journalist and a writer. She is a graduate of Harvard College and has a PhD in Comparative Literature from Stanford University. She has been working for *The New Yorker* magazine as a staff writer since 2010 (Furlanetto, 2017: 253). She is included among the first and second-generation migrants that moved from Turkey to the United States, such as Shirin Devrim, Selma Ekrem and Guneli Gun (Furlanetto, 2016: 181).

Her first book, *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (2010), was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2010 and a PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award. As a writer who wants to write and read literature that is about literature (Rosefield, 2017:45), Batuman is considered one of the new and promising writers of Turkish-American writing. She is especially talented at combining American and Turkish perceptions of language, education, love, family and other cross-cultural aspects in her writing (Payne & O'Neill, 2016: 220). Although she is bilingual, she prefers writing in English.

Batuman's second book and the first novel, *The Idiot* (2017) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction in 2018. The novel tells the events in the freshman year of its protagonist, Selin Karadag, at Harvard University, in the mid-nineties. Throughout the story, the reader witnesses a young woman's stepping into a new and wider world and her struggle to understand it. Having left her hometown where she lived with her mother, Selin tries to adapt to her new life, new friends as well as her professors and courses at the university. Defined as "a novelistic alter ego" (Christman, 2017: 37) of Batuman, Selin also tries to grasp the meaning and the purpose of university education and derive the core of every course in order to use in her daily life. Day after day, as she attends a variety of courses, she realizes that most of what is included within the curriculum or lectured by the professors does not coincide with her comprehension of the world and provides little or no solution for her problems. Further in the plot, she gradually steps outside the campus walls and tries to find answers on a broader scale to quench her questioning nature.

Batuman amusingly captures, Leiding argues, "the hyperstimulation and absurdity of the first-year university experience" (2016: 81). Selin is introduced to the new medium of communication, that is e-mail and Harvard concurrently. In Russian class, she makes friends with Svetlana, a Serbian emigrant, and the handsome Hungarian, Ivan. Selin starts to develop feelings for Ivan, but Ivan's affection is obscure. Later, it is revealed that he already

has a lover. Selin's disappointment with Ivan, in this sense, can be read in parallel to her disappointment with the university education. Both of her attempts, one for having love in her life, and the other, learning valuable things from the institution she is in, end in failure.

Following its initial success, so far, the novel has received mostly neutral or negative critical responses. It has been approached by many critics from different perspectives and sometimes regarded as "a comic bildungsroman" (Merrill, 2022: 50) or a common love story as in Chris Townsend's words "the rise and fall of a young Turkish-American student's feelings for her classmate Ivan, an enigmatic Hungarian who is already in a long-term relationship when the two meet" (2022: 589). The novel's fragmented plot structure, which consists of sometimes unrelated and ordinary incidents of Selin's life, seems to be the weakest spot that the critical responses target. However, these seemingly random events, scattered over four hundred pages, add up to each other, eventually, and create a total effect. Batuman has her own rhythm of storytelling and, in this way, she reflects life as it is; fragmented, random and always on the move. Moreover, *The Idiot*, with all its twists and turns, can best be classified as a campus novel. With its setting at one of the most prestigious universities of United States, Selin's story, through its unconventional plot structure, reveals the condition of university education and how it is observed from a student's point of view.

In this respect, this study argues, *The Idiot* is much more than a sentimental love story. It is a campus novel, which criticizes the higher education in terms of its inefficiency and futility in modern life. It tells the story of a student whose expectations from higher education exceed what the system can offer. Selin may be naïve, but she makes some solid remarks about the gap between the intended outcomes of the courses she takes and what she actually learns from them. Moreover, the novel's focus on difficulties of language and digital communication and their effects on academic and personal life also separates it from conventional examples of the subgenre of campus novel. However, before moving on with this argument, it would be a good idea to briefly remember the subgenre of the campus novel, its roots and characteristics. So, what is a campus novel and what kind of a campus novel is *The Idiot*?

2. *The Idiot* as a campus novel in the digital age

As Malcolm Bradbury prefers to call it, the campus novel is a subgenre of the novel, which embodies novels whose plots revolve in and around the university campuses and lives of students, professors and other members of institutions of higher education (1988: 331). In the *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, a campus novel is defined as: "A novel which has a university campus as its setting. The majority has been written by those who were or are academics" (Cuddon, 1999: 107). The campus novel has developed as a postwar subgenre of the contemporary novel since the 1950s and has been popular with readers both inside and outside the academic world.

Starting with Kingsley Amis's famous novel *Lucky Jim* (1954), campus fiction continued to entertain and enlighten its readers about the academic world through the sixties to this day with the works of remarkable authors like Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge, Howard Jacobson, J.M Coetzee, Philip Roth, Michael Chabon and many others. The majority of these

works were written by professors, mostly males from humanities, and their protagonists were, again, professors. As John Schellenberger asserts; “since the appearance of Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* in 1954 there has been a growing body of novels (and plays) written by academics about the life of academics” (1982: 45). Likewise, Robert F. Scott states that the academic novel is a vital and aesthetically rich literary genre that has continually evolved in order to meet the demands of its large and ever-expanding readership. These works commonly focus on, Scott argues, the “absurdity and despair of university life, the colorful, often neurotic personalities who inhabit academia; and the ideological rivalries which thrive in campus communities” (2004: 83). We can see plenty of these colorful and neurotic personalities in *The Idiot* too. The visiting artist, Gary, who taught the course named Constructed Worlds, for instance, believed that museums were hiding art from the public, while the literature professor, who taught The Nineteenth-Century Novel, never understood the questions asked by the students during discussions. These are some examples of these characters in *The Idiot* who are similar to the ones that Scott mentions.

Furthermore, Showalter argues that one of the trademark features of the campus novel is the central character, the academic, who is usually going through a hurtful midlife crisis, having decided that he will not be able to write his masterpiece, that he is no longer qualified in his field, and that he can no longer communicate with his students, and often that his private life is also dull. He becomes, fundamentally, a symbol of the university community as a whole. This symbolic character is also unable to achieve his intellectual responsibilities and control himself (2005: 101). A general assessment of the genre from the 1950s to 2000s shows that the campus novel has depicted a completely generic portrayal of university life, plus a political and psychological model to the profession of being an academic. Each decade, according to Showalter, “has foregrounded the scandal and headlines of higher education-class, political infighting, feminism, sexual harassment, political correctness” (2005: 101). Hence, these novels reflected the academy generally from scholars’ point of view and students and other occupants of campuses were either minor characters or never mentioned at all.

In *The Idiot*, on the other hand, the narrator is a first-year, female student. *The Idiot* chronicles its protagonist, Selin Karadag’s freshman year at Harvard, where Batuman also went, in the mid-1990s (Kindley, 2017: 31-33). Selin is an ambitious young woman who is hungry for knowledge and experience. She wants to be a writer in the future. As an idealistic and hard-working student, Selin enters the university with a mood that is responsive to everything she encounters. In the first weeks of her college life, she meets a group of sarcastic, depressed and obsessive professors. Her new friend Svetlana, an urbane Serb, is someone who can casually discuss almost anything including her psychotherapist or her most private fantasies and relationships (Rosefield, 2017: 45). Her idealistic nature sometimes forces her to be too strict and Selin sets herself standards that are difficult to achieve. She silently evaluates most of what she and others say and do (Kindley, 2017: 32), and Svetlana warns her about the possibly paralyzing results that this aesthetic responsiveness might cause: “I get that you despise convention, but you shouldn’t let it get to the point that you’re incapable of saying, ‘Fine, thanks,’ just because it isn’t an original, brilliant utterance” (Batuman, 2017:

107). A near perfectionist, Selin needs to learn small talk and social dynamics of the campus and real life. Hence, with the help of these excerpts from student life, the reader starts to view academia from a different angle.

Unlike David Lodge's Morris Zapp in *Changing Places* (1975), Malcolm Bradbury's Howard Kirk in *The History Man* (1975) or J.M. Coetzee's David Lurie in *Disgrace* (1999), who are all professors and intellectuals, Batuman's Selin is a naïve student who mirrors a reverse view of academia. She does not know about the competition between the academics, she does not know about getting tenure or adjunct professors, or the ladders one has to climb to achieve such positions. All she sees, and therefore reflects, is what a first-year student goes through and achieves at the end of an academic year at the university. A long-neglected view of the academy, that of the students, is thus revealed.

In *The Idiot*, the university serves principally as a place for intellectual discovery and personal development. Selin begins her studies at Harvard University, where she encounters new viewpoints, unusual social environments, and complicated social relationships. The plot underlines her attempts to comprehend literature, language, and the nature of human communication. Batuman presents the campus, through Selin's eyes, less as an institution characterized by power structures, unlike many conventional campus novels, and more as an environment that promotes curiosity and reflection. Selin's experiences demonstrate how university life can shape a person's intellectual identity.

In contrast, *The History Man*, for instance, depicts the university as a politically involved environment governed by ideological controversy and institutional power struggles. The novel centers on Howard Kirk, a sociology professor who represents the radical academic culture of the 1970s. Kirk uses his academic authority to influence colleagues and students while showing himself as a radical leader. He is very active during the student protests, "In fact he was an inevitable focus, and was very active everywhere, radicalizing as many people as he could, leaving the sit-in to speak to workers' groups and trade union meetings" (Bradbury, 1975/2012: 53). Bradbury's illustration of the university mirrors larger political discussions arising in academia during the period. The novel reveals the conflicts and hypocrisies that can develop when academic institutions become fields for ideological opposition rather than intellectual study. David Lodge's *Changing Places* does a similar job but offers a more playful critique of academic conventions and professional ambition. Thus the portrayal of the university environment is one of the most important differences between *The Idiot* and previous, conventional examples of the genre.

Moreover, the tone and narrative style of these works also reflect different approaches to the campus novel genre. While novels like *The History Man* or *Changing Places* employ satire to critique the ideological climate of universities, Batuman's *The Idiot* differs significantly in tone and structure. Instead of focusing on satire or institutional critique, the novel adopts a reflective and introspective narrative style. Much of the story consists of Selin's observations and philosophical reflections about literature, language, and relationships. The novel repeatedly pauses to explore intellectual questions, hence transforming everyday experiences into opportunities for observation. Consequently, *The Idiot* often resembles a

hybrid of fiction, memoir, and essay rather than a traditional campus novel that is driven by plot. These examples and comparisons display some of the important features of the novel which make it a unique example of its genre.

In her first months at the university, amidst the rain of information pouring down on her, Selin tries to form a context within which she can understand the new academic world she has entered. Yet she refrains from following any particular school, approach or even opinion, fearing that the truth might lie elsewhere and that she might be in the wrong direction. Entering different courses, evaluating different options, she is surprised by the determination of other students on the campus who seem to be sure of what they are doing and their purpose. For instance, during the taekwondo class she decided to take with Svetlana, when she witnesses other students taking a scuba lesson, she says, “How did all those people know that they wanted to know how to scuba dive?” (Batuman, 2017: 76). She feels that everyone, except her, knows something that is hidden from her.

On the other hand, while she is surprised by the determination of other students around her, she is also surprised by the indetermination of the professors, who, according to Selin, lack certainty about their course subjects and solid answers for the questions they put forward during the discussions in the classroom. She explains this as,

It was hard to decide on a literature class. Everything the professors said seemed to be somehow beside the point. You wanted to know why Anna had to die, and instead they told you that nineteenth-century Russian landowners felt conflicted about whether they were really a part of Europe...it was somehow naïve to talk about anything interesting, or to think that you would ever know anything important. (Batuman, 2017: 16)

She wants answers fast and she wants them to be coherent and stable because she believes she is there to learn certain, fixed truths and the professors are there to teach them, which sounds plausible enough for a freshman. As a result, her enthusiasm weakens, “The days took on a lurid, nightmarish quality, like they were all part of some long unbroken thing” (Batuman, 2017: 106). As time passes, she starts to give up and loses her faith in these courses, and starts to skip them,

One morning, on my way to a lecture on Balzac, it came to me with great clarity that there was no way that that guy, the professor, was going to tell me anything useful. No doubt he knew very useful things, but he wasn’t going to say them; rather, he was going to tell us again that Balzac’s Paris was extremely comprehensive. (Batuman, 2017: 77)

Similar examples can be found all through the novel and Selin feels alienated in these abstract and pointless discussions during the courses. These types of professors, who are problematic from the students’ points of views, are generally witnessed in campus novels. Academics are commonly and essentially thought as aggressive, as Hazard Adams observes in *The Academic Tribes*: “Faculties are, after all, composed largely of people who like problems, perhaps even more than solutions, and even to the point of actively seeking them where they have not been recognized. Indeed, some of these individuals positively dislike

solutions, preferring the deeper existential absurdity of the problem itself” (1976: 11). This problematic nature of the academy also reveals itself in *The Idiot*. As Pinsker writes “the academic novel might best be described as a fun-house mirror held up to the nature of our colleges and universities, one that, for all its grotesquerie, packs a good deal of truth within its pages” (2003: 183). Hence, one can say that Batuman shares her observations of that truth in *The Idiot* as well and that problematic truth of higher education does not seem to have changed much in today’s academy.

Despite the fact that she has a hard time understanding what the professors are trying to get at, Selin is not an idiot. She is, on the contrary, as Kindley observes, witty, inventive, widely read, and gifted with languages (2017: 32-33). Circled by mostly showy and the well-educated people, Selin feels like an “eternal pauper in the great marketplace of ideas and of the world” (Batuman, 2017: 131), persistently trying to enrich herself intellectually. She looks for answers in literature and novels to this end, but the literature courses she takes disappoint her too. In fact, she is more after understanding than knowledge, something meaningful rather than mere information. When she states, “I wasn’t interested in society, or in ancient people’s money troubles. I wanted to know what books really meant” (Batuman, 2017: 16), she means that rather than turning in circles around the main issue, she wants to touch the center, feel the core of the subject that is written in the concerned book or discussed in the classroom. This view of the students, their struggle to understand the subjects taught in the courses by heart was usually overlooked in the exemplary works of campus fiction genre, which mainly narrated the professors’ side. In *The Idiot* a student as hard-working and enthusiastic as Selin questions the purpose of her studies and the results in her life. This different point of view is unconventional in campus novel subgenre.

In fact, this search for practical value and use of humanities has been in discussion for a long time. According to Zhang Longxi, in modern times, it is the superiority of science with its practical application in technology that places pressure on the humanities for evidence of worth and legitimacy (Zhang, 2012: 65). He argues that government policies to steer higher education towards applied research and skill training rather than pure scholarship consequently resulted in the practical mentality in students. Hence, humanities and social sciences are not as popular as they used to be. When efficacy and function are calculated in economic terms, he asserts, then the humanities can only be seen as inefficient and irrelevant, blamed for elitism, impracticality, and anachronism. In the hard times of financial crises and economic downturn, the humanities are under tremendous pressure to justify their existence to students and parents (Zhang, 2012:69). He argues that,

Those defending the humanities have failed to make their case, not only because the humanities cannot produce commodities that are readily saleable or weapons that are useful for national defence, but also because, more significantly, many scholars working in the humanities in the latter half of the 20th century have themselves abandoned the idea that arts and literature, or the humanities in general, can teach the core values of a worthy life of moral goodness. (Zhang, 2012:69)

Though not directly related to financial reasons, Selin's complaints also resemble these practical concerns. Theoretical knowledge that is useless and ineffective in her life is underlined in the novel many times.

As for her life out of the classroom, Selin, unlike Svetlana, believes in romantic love and rather than thinking about the right time to have sex, like most of her schoolmates, she wants to have a sincere and serious relationship. She falls in love with Ivan, a mysterious Hungarian. Because of Ivan, she decides to travel to Hungary for teaching schoolchildren English. In the end, neither Harvard nor Hungary, neither Russian nor Ivan teach Selin exactly what she wants to know (Rosefield, 2017: 45). What she realizes is that she will never find coherence in life. This lack of coherence is, in fact, one of the central themes of *The Idiot*. According to Rosefield, the pleasure of seeing Selin try to work out her notion of the relation between experience, art and education compensates for the sometimes boring, long and seemingly irrelevant plot structure (2017: 45). We, the readers, like Selin, learn to endure and enjoy the quest, not the final destination.

This is not the first time that Batuman's novel has been called a campus novel. Elina Alter states, "A 400-plus-page campus novel, *The Idiot* is indeed full of observations, but Batuman's prose is effervescent and conversational" (2017: 53). However, Selin's view of the campus, students, professors and the general flow of a representative system of higher education reveals much more about the problems of university, and those of the humanities in particular. One of the most important of these is the problem of communication and conveyance of the information between the faculty and the students.

In the first half of the novel, Batuman depicts the university setting of 1995 with significant accuracy. The essential Albert Einstein posters on the dorm-room walls; quarrels among the roommates, Walkmans and Discmans etc. are among the noticeable details of the time. Moreover, taking place in the mid-nineties, the novel is also a good reflection of the early digital age and its effects on academic and student life. Selin enters Harvard in 1995, and she is one of the members of the first generation of students that used e-mail. Selin's first reaction to this new medium of communication is noteworthy: "Always there, unchanged, in a configuration nobody else could see, was a glowing list of messages from all the people you knew, and from people you didn't know, all in the same letters, like the universal handwriting of thought or of the world" (Batuman, 2017: 4). It is also through this "universal handwriting of thought" that her platonic love toward Ivan is revealed.

Throughout the novel, without any physical connection, much of Selin and Ivan's affair is performed via e-mail, a medium that serves as a structuring motif (Kindley, 2017: 33). *The Idiot* begins with Selin having her first e-mail account through the university registration:

Insofar as I'd had any idea about it at all, I had imagined that email would resemble faxing, and would involve a printer. But there was no printer. There was another world. You could access it from certain computers, which were scattered throughout the ordinary landscape, and looked no different from regular computers...It was like the story of your relations with others, the story of the intersection of your life with other lives, was constantly being recorded and updated, and you could check it at any time. (Batuman, 2017: 4)

Batuman inserts long pieces of Selin's e-mail communication with Ivan into the narrative. The subjects of the emails range from the Ottoman invasion of Hungary and the post-Soviet fate of statues of Lenin to the possibility of free will, and the poetry of Pablo Neruda. For the readers, Kindley argues, much of this is hard to grasp, as they are private conversations. Nonetheless, these e-mails of Ivan provide Selin with a text to unravel, enabling her to use the critical skills she is developing in her literature and philosophy classes (2017: 33). In this sense, Selin is trying to build a bridge between theory and practice, between education and life. She tells that, "I read Ivan's messages over and over, thinking about what they meant," (Batuman, 2017: 117) and that she, "felt ashamed, but why? Why was it more honorable to reread and interpret a novel like *Lost Illusions* than to reread and interpret some email from Ivan?" (Batuman, 2017: 117). Selin's lack of experience in relationships prevents her from realizing that she is reading too much into Ivan's e-mails. As in almost anything else, she is trying to unlock a supposedly hidden meaning behind Ivan's words when there is not much to unlock. Thus, that is one reason why she finds her academic struggles useless in daily life.

Selin's conversations with her psychologist, on the other hand, mark very important perplexities of digital and face-to-face communication. Her counselor tells Selin that people have a speaking voice and a writing voice, two different voices enabling two different ways of communication. About Selin and Ivan's conversation via e-mails, the counselor says,

He is just a voice from behind a computer. Who knows who or what is behind there- behind the computer? He obviously enjoys hiding. And you, too, are behind the computer. This is perfectly understandable. Human beings, all of us, hate to take risks. We *all* want to hide... You risk nothing. Behind your computer screen, you're completely safe. (Batuman, 2017: 140)

According to Phil Christman, the medium of e-mail causes the emotion of love in Selin, and the couple communicate with each other easily through e-mail, while their face-to-face conversations are full of misinterpretations and silence (2017: 37). The role of digital communication in the novel is also addressed by Chris Townsend, who also argues that Selin and Ivan's supposed love is not real love and only confined to their e-mails (2022: 589). This traffic of e-mails steals Selin's time and creates a false image of the man she feels attracted to. Townsend states, partly at least, that the novel is "a kind of experiment in the epistolary form (the *e-pistolary*, perhaps)" (2022: 589). At the beginning of the novel, when Selin sees an Ethernet cable for the first time, she asks, "What do we do with this, hang ourselves?" (Batuman, 2017: 3). This humorous introduction to the digital world, later in the novel, turns sour as their digital, half relationship with Ivan, through extensive and complex e-mails, upsets Selin (Alter, 2017: 53). While Ivan travels around, exploring graduate schools, Selin tries to catch up with him via their e-mail communication, which, according to Leiding "consists primarily of a plaintive yet intellectual" (2016: 81) conversation. These conversations, eventually, cause Selin to commit to teaching English in Hungary over the summer.

For the purpose of being close to Ivan, Selin decides to spend the summer teaching English in a Hungarian village. This decision triggers the incidents of the novel's casual second half and "a sense of futility starts to take over the novel, which gradually becomes

a kind of depressive picaresque” (Kindley, 2017: 33). Finally, Selin starts to feel that this business of travelling to Hungary was a fault and a waste of time. She thinks of a girl from Harvard, Meredith Wittman, one of her classmates who is doing an internship for the *New York* magazine for the summer,

and for a moment now I reflected on the fact that, although Meredith Wittman and I both wanted to be writers, she was going about it by interning at a magazine, whereas I was sitting at this table in a Hungarian village trying to formulate the phrase ‘musically talented’ in Russian, so I could say something encouraging by proxy to an off-putting child whose father had just punched him in the stomach. I couldn’t help thinking that Meredith Wittman’s approach seemed more direct. (Batuman, 2017: 341)

Selin’s frustration of not succeeding in both of her attempts, of love and preparation for a future career, makes her only stronger, “I thought about all the ungrounded longing I had felt around Ivan, and it seemed to me that I couldn’t live another moment without feeling him inside me, filling that terrible emptiness. And yet apparently, I could live, and had to live, and did live” (Batuman, 2017: 349). As seen many times in the novel, she will return to her only console, that of writing. The novel’s final sentence is “I hadn’t learned anything at all” (Batuman, 2017: 423). Indeed, she learned a lot, just not from the professors at the university.

Long before *The Idiot* was published, Morris Zapp, the protagonist of David Lodge’s *Small World: An Academic Romance* told that,

There are three things, which have revolutionized academic life in the last twenty years—jet travel, direct-dialing telephones and the Xerox machine. Scholars don’t have to work in the same institution to interact, nowadays: they call each other up, or they meet at international conferences ... I work mostly at home or on planes these days. I seldom go into the university except to teach my courses. (Lodge, 1984: 43-44)

Today, the technology reached a higher level from that of Zapp’s time and as witnesses of the digital age, we all experienced a new medium of teaching, called “online teaching” with the help of various software programs used throughout the world during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. If jet travel, direct-dialing telephones and the Xerox machine revolutionized academic life, as Zapp states, then today’s digital technologies like online education opportunities and artificial intelligence re-revolutionized it, for better or worse. However, in Selin’s case, the developments in technology, like e-mail and internet, in her first year at the university do not seem to help.

In this digital age, students also need to have, if not exact, at least solid answers for the questions they raise in classroom discussions for these discussions to be meaningful and to enable them to form, at least, a general picture of the subject in question. An example from the novel summarizes this problematic situation,

‘This,’ said the professor, ‘is the problem with Bunuel. Why exactly does he show us a moon, and then an eye? Two unrelated images. Why does he juxtapose them?’
He looked around the table. Nobody said anything. ‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘There is no

answer, because this is surrealism. We can suggest many interpretations, but we can prove nothing, and we will never have an answer.... for example, Freud interprets a dream. I read his interpretation. I think, Yes, this is possible...But how can he prove it? He cannot prove it. For this reason, discussion is endless, and it's useless. (Batuman, 2017: 103)

Following this, Selin looks around the classroom and thinks, “Nobody else seemed to find it appalling or shameful that a literature professor should stand up in front of a classroom and say that interpretation was infinitely useless” (Batuman, 2017: 103). Students who have less questioning natures, and who are more oriented towards passing the exams, take their notes and do not react like Selin expects. This is a serious criticism of teaching in humanities, and these examples are numerous in the novel. In this respect, when Selin claimed that university education taught her nothing, we can deduce that she feels that all her efforts in the first year of the university proved futile. Thus, the futility of higher education is one of the most important and underlined themes explored in the novel. Still, is this a fault of the university or the professors? Not entirely. Selin's unrealistic expectations to find fixed meanings and truth from the courses are also responsible for her disappointment. If literature is read for its own sake and pleasure we can witness its power of enlightening us. Umberto Eco, for instance, perceives literature's power upon us as;

the power of that network of texts which humanity has produced and still produces, not for practical ends (such as records, commentaries on laws and scientific formulae, minutes of meetings or train schedules), but rather, for its own sake, for humanity's own enjoyment – and which are read for pleasure, spiritual edification, broadening of knowledge, or maybe just to pass the time, without anyone forcing us to read them. (Eco, 2002: 1)

Hence, if Selin could just leave aside her worries about practical value of the books she reads, she could enjoy literature's power mentioned in Eco's words. Moreover, *The Idiot* is a rebelliously imperfect novel, as Kindley points out, in that “as a maker of sentences and scenes, Batuman is masterful—but she is committed to retaining a certain randomness that evokes the mess of real life” (2017: 33). Thus, we can say that there is a method in Batuman's imperfectness, in terms of plot structure, which is also reflecting the young protagonist's confusions. Even though the novel ends in disappointment, for the readers, it feels like the beginning of a better future for Selin, who won the hearts of readers due to these narrative skills of Batuman. Hope is still intact and alive for the sincere and developing character, Selin, the alter ego of Elif Batuman. Thus, as a novel which depicts the early years of internet communication and campus life of students, *The Idiot* reveals a subversive view of the university education which falls short of answering students' needs and providing meaningful answers to their questions.

3. Language as deceitful and undependable

The problem of language is one of the main issues of *The Idiot*. We read most of Batuman's own opinions on language through Selin in the novel. Selin spends several weeks early in

the book, considering which literature class to take. The course reading for her introductory Russian class, that she finally chose, is a story called “Nina in Siberia”, which initially uses only very limited, beginner grammar. It nevertheless makes her feel “totally inside its world, a world where reality mirrored the grammar constraints, and what Slavic 101 couldn’t name didn’t exist” (Batuman, 2017: 28). She likes to feel that there is an attainable knowledge in what she is taught and wants to immerse herself in the kind of books and courses that seem to contain that knowledge. Hence, when language allows her to pursue knowledge, in this case Russian, in not an abstract but a concrete way, she is happy and fulfilled.

Furthermore, as Selin is interested in language and literature, she enrolls in some courses on linguistics. She spends several weeks developing a theory of language that would help a Martian to apprehend what the word language means. She explains this as,

Something basic about language had started to escape me. I thought I could fix it by taking classes. I signed up for a seminar on the philosophy of language. The point of the seminar turned out to be to come up with a theory such that, if a Martian read it, the Martian would understand what it is that we know when we know a language. To cover all the bases, I also signed up for a class on psycholinguistics, which had a prerequisite in neural networking. In addition to not having taken it, I also didn’t know what neural networking was. (Batuman, 2017: 108)

As the passage shows Selin tries to cover all bases in the area of language so that she hopes she will be able to make sense of everything going on around her. She is also obsessed with the associations of thinking in a language with devices like the Turkish suffix -mis, which corresponds to an “inferential tense” (Batuman, 2017: 53) used to express indefinite or recycled news (Max, 2017: 14). These kinds of linguistic eccentricities easily attract Selin’s attention as disturbing puzzles that need to be solved at once and she feels the need to dwell on them out of the linguistic curiosity she always had, like the author Batuman.

This view of language, Max argues, as deceitful or undependable is an important part of the overtone of *The Idiot*, “which lingers on the feeling of being on one’s own for the first time— of finding yourself in an ambiguously bounded world populated by a shifting cast of unfamiliar people speaking in idioms you don’t know” (2017: 14). In this respect, what Selin reveals about her summer abroad, “Hungary increasingly like *War and Peace*: new characters came up every five minutes, with their unusual names and distinctive locutions, and you had to pay attention to them for a time, even though you might never see them again” (Batuman, 2017: 329-330) can be seen as an indicator of such feelings of being alone, surrounded by unknown idioms. A similar example can be given from the part where Selin tries to avoid a discussion with her roommates. As Kindley observes, Batuman is especially talented at catching how relationships of youth can swerve rapidly from strong affection to indifference (2017:33). After freeing herself from a dispute with her roommates Selin thinks, “That was the best thing about college: it was so easy to leave... You could be in the place where you lived, having an argument that you had basically started, and then you could just say, ‘See you later,’ and go somewhere else” (Batuman, 2017: 31). The same is also relevant, as Max points out, about university, or about young adulthood. *The Idiot* is about the effort

of adjusting to the foreign, he goes on, “of re-drawing the boundaries of one’s life until they’re wide enough to accommodate a flood of unfamiliar people, places, and experiences” (2017: 13). Thus, the problematic nature of language, that is deceitful and changing, *The Idiot* shows, is also valid in social relationships, communication and life. Again, Selin can attain no coherence, stability or absolute truth in this sloppy area.

In the light of these remarks on language and the language of digital communication in *The Idiot*, it can be argued that the deceitful and unreliable aspects of language shape both the narrative and the protagonist’s intellectual development. Selin is fascinated by the relationship between words and meaning, and she frequently reflects on how language structures human interaction. A significant portion of her relationship with Ivan develops through email correspondence, which introduces ambiguity and misunderstanding into their communication. By focusing on written communication, Batuman emphasizes the difficulties of interpreting meaning in a digital age. However, in most of the campus novels like *The History Man*, the protagonist uses intellectual rhetoric to justify his actions and maintain his authority within the academic community. According to Howard, the protagonist, you can solve any problem by knowing a little Freud, a little Marx and a little social history, “ ‘So that really to understand Henry,’ says Flora, ‘we’ll need, naturally, a little Marx, a little Freud, and little social history,’ ‘How right you are,’ says Howard” (Bradbury, 1975/2012: 127). Thus, according to Howard, if you just use these names in your books or courses, as well as in your daily conversations, you can be successful and prove your authority. For him, name dropping or shallow knowledge is enough to justify and maintain your authority in the academy.

So, in the conventional campus novels like those of Bradbury and Lodge, language often serves as a mechanism of ideological persuasion, and reflect the concerns of an era when universities were increasingly influenced by political movements and cultural change. Their satirical portrayals of academia reveal anxieties about the role of ideology, professionalism, and cultural identity within academic institutions. By contrast, *The Idiot* reflects a contemporary perspective on university life. Rather than focusing on institutional satire, Batuman explores the personal and intellectual experiences of a student by concentrating on questions of identity, communication, and meaning.

Conclusion

This study focused on *The Idiot* as a contemporary campus novel and pointed out its different aspects from the previous, conventional examples of the genre. These different aspects, demonstrated throughout the study, make *The Idiot* a distinctive example of its genre as they provide a criticism of higher education from a student’s viewpoint and reveal the complexities of digital language and communication. Academic institutions and professors were always criticized in conventional campus novels but not in the way *The Idiot* criticizes them. Inspired by real events in its author’s life, the novel shows that there is a lack of mutual understanding and communication between the faculty and the students, even in an institution as prestigious as Harvard. Students, like Selin, experience difficulties in making sense of the subjects studied in the courses. Especially in the departments of humanities, where abstract

notions occupy large parts in curriculums, the professors seem to have lost touch with the reality. The freshman year students, on the other hand, need detailed introductions and bridges to connect abstract concepts with their factual reflections on life. Therefore, some pedagogical problems are addressed in the novel which were generally neglected in most campus novels.

The Idiot, with the help of the observations of Selin, makes us question the future of higher education and humanities indirectly but effectively, and triggers discussions about the situation of higher education and students. This study does not approve all the observations of Selin, but argue that these observations and their effects in both her academic life and private life unveil a previously neglected view of academy. The novel, hence, paves the way for new campus novels that can include various different angles and opinions about the state of contemporary higher education. Moreover, the advance of the digital age and technology, and their effects on university education and social life are noteworthy in the novel. This focus on the new mediums and language is another feature of the novel, apart from the students' perspective, which makes it distinctive. In this respect, what Selin's counselor told her about the sincerity of communication from behind the computer screens is an important message to all members of academia, including the administrators. Batuman's *The Idiot* is a contemporary campus novel which provides new perspectives and subject matters for contemporary readers and academia to consider.

Research and publication ethics statement: Research has not been previously published or submitted to any other outlet for publication. The author followed ethical principles and rules during the research process.

Contribution rates of authors to the article: First author %100.

Ethics committee approval: Ethics committee approval is not required for the study.

Support statement (optional): No financial support was received for the study.

Conflict of interest: There is no conflict of interest between the authors of this article.

Araştırma ve yayın etiği beyanı: Bu makale, orijinal veriler temelinde hazırlanmış özgün bir araştırma makalesidir. Daha önce hiçbir yerde yayımlanmamış olup başka bir yere yayımlanmak üzere gönderilmemiştir. Yazar, araştırma sürecinde etik ilkelere ve kurallara uymuştur.

Yazarların katkı düzeyleri: Birinci yazar %100.

Etik komite onayı: Bu çalışma için etik kurul onayı gerekmemektedir.

Finansal destek: Bu araştırma için herhangi bir finansal destek alınmamıştır.

Çıkar çatışması: Bu çalışma ile ilgili herhangi bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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