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## Subversion and Reconstruction: The Classic Retelling of Margaret Atwood's *Impatient Griselda*

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### Abstract:

Margaret Atwood frequently employs the technique of retelling classics, as exemplified by her innovative subversion of "Patient Griselda", the final story in Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, with her own version, "Impatient Griselda". Through the lens of postmodern feminism, "Impatient Griselda" deconstructs the human cultural center and the binary gender by narrating the story from the perspective of the Other of an alien. This narrative choice highlights the inherent biases and limitations of anthropocentrism and traditional gender roles. By contrasting the distinct differences and the evolution of female protagonists' subjectivity in both the original and Atwood's retelling, "Impatient Griselda" underscores the significance of challenging patriarchal structures and overturning conventional female values as essential steps toward women's liberation. Furthermore, Atwood digs into the roots of gender power imbalances, particularly as they manifest in domestic violence. Through her retelling, she advocates for increased awareness and attention to the contemporary living conditions of women. By reframing the narrative and giving voice to the traditionally silenced or marginalized, Atwood not only critiques the historical context of gender relations but calls for a reevaluation of modern societal norms as well. This expanded narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the necessity of continued feminist discourse.

**Keywords:** *Impatient Griselda*, Margaret Atwood, post-modern feminism, classic retelling

### 1. Introduction

"Impatient Griselda" is a short story by Margaret Atwood during the COVID-19 pandemic first published in *The New York Times* "The Decameron Project", which later was included in the latest short story collection, *The Old Babes in the Wood* released in March 2023. The project features a total of twenty-nine pandemic-themed creations, not only reflecting on the pandemic era but also paying tribute to Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* set against the backdrop of the Black Death. *The Decameron* is considered a profoundly influential classic, with its final story narrating a humble girl, Griselda, marrying a duke. The duke tested her fidelity and obedience in various ways, including physical humiliation, falsely claiming to have killed their children, even abandoning her for another woman, etc. While Griselda silently put up with various "torture" and adhered strictly to traditional "female virtues", ultimately gaining her husband's trust and reclaiming everything that was taken from her. Atwood's "Impatient Griselda" is adapted from "Patient Griselda", the last classic story of *The Decameron*. The creative technique of retelling classics flourished in the latter half of the 20th century, coinciding with the global wave of postmodernism. Both movements challenged traditional values and aimed to deconstruct established authorities. Feminism, an important branch of postmodern thought, aims to expose the patriarchal nature inherent in history and contemporary culture and to promote female values, making it inseparable from the retelling of classics. "Impatient Griselda" aligns with postmodern feminists' insights through its retelling of the classic story.

Atwood's fascination with retelling classics has deep roots. Since childhood, she has been interested in classic stories. As her literary concepts and creative philosophy matured, her attitude towards classic works shifted from reverence and praise to rebellion and reconstruction. This change occurred because she realized that classics symbolized order and hierarchy. Thus, she used classics as objects of subversion, challenging authoritative discourse and speaking for marginalized groups, especially females. She showed her attitude toward "classics" in an interview that although the classics are considered unshakable, they can also become obsolete over time. Classics are constantly being redefined rather than being fixed. So, she insists that what does not belong to the classics is more classic than the classics themselves (Yuan, 2010). As Atwood demonstrated, she has reinterpreted classics in many of her literary works, such as her short stories collections *The Tent*, novels *Penelopiad* and *The Witch's Daughter*, etc. Among these works, "Impatient Griselda" adheres to Atwood's signature style and writing traits, fostering a dialogue between cultural perspectives and a clash of diverse values from different eras. This approach encourages readers to explore a more contemporary meaning within classic stories. However, unlike her previous "compensatory" female perspective, "Impatient Griselda" shifts the narrative perspective away from the original story's roles and places it on an added alien, allowing it to retell this complex European folk tale from an outsider's perspective, no longer focusing solely on the opposition between the sexes but more things like humans

and others. This reflects Atwood's broader human perspective and avant-garde consciousness transcending human beings themselves, as well as the development of feminist thought.

This article, from the perspective of postmodern feminism, examines how Atwood deconstructs the human cultural center and disintegrates the binary segregation of sexes through an alien's voice of the *Other*. Based on this, it focuses on the reshaped images and contrasts the sharp differences and changes in the protagonist's consciousness between the original and new stories, emphasizing the significance of challenging patriarchal norms and overturning traditional female values for women's liberation. Finally, it extends the issue to real-life situations and unearths the root causes of the imbalance of power between the sexes behind domestic violence, calling for attention to the current status of female survival.

## 2. Deconstructing the Center: Dissociation of Human Culture and Dissolution of Gender Binary

In contrast to previous works of classic retelling, Atwood innovatively introduces an extraterrestrial narrator as the *Other* in "Impatient Griselda". This approach incorporates a sci-fi setting of "first contact", challenges the human-centric view, and deconstructs the ingrained gender binary notions. It aligns with the core tenets of postmodern feminism, providing readers with an opportunity to contemplate human diversity and openness.

The *Other* is a concept that exists in both Eastern and Western philosophical domains, representing an existence relative to "the Self". Under the premise of confirming the Self, everything external to the Self becomes the *Other*. From the perspective of humans with self-centered recognition, the storyteller from another planet is regarded as the *Other* existing in the human world. The *Other* is a carrier of "difference", "plurality" and "hybridity" (Zhao, 2022). The narrative of the extraterrestrial storyteller introduces various phenomena of estrangement to the human world depicted in "Impatient Griselda". Set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, this story follows a lower-ranked extraterrestrial being assigned to Earth as part of an "interstellar crisis aid" initiative and having to retell a human classic to soothe human emotions. Hailing from a distant galaxy, this storyteller is androgynous with an extended lifespan. It resembles a cephalopod without bones, moving by permeating. Moreover, there is no need to excrete, for it metabolizes ingested food as fuel. Furthermore, it has a kind of "translation device" (Atwood, 2023) to communicate with humans, yet ineffective for complex cultural issues. Most importantly, the species like this storyteller is immune to the novel coronavirus, which is the root reason for enabling their aid mission on Earth. As a living being leveraging its immune advantage in the context of the pandemic, the alien storyteller, assuming the role of an "authority figure" from the outset of the story, details the living arrangements for a group of humans, "Your snacks? I regret that we could not arrange to have them cooked, as you call it, but the nourishment is more complete without this cooking that you do" (Atwood, 2023). Subsequently, it tends to highlight the superiority of its species by comparing their lifespan, environment, and biological structure. In the eyes of the extraterrestrial narrator, human physiological features and cultural advancements appear peculiar and primitive — "Snacks" (referring to meals) need to be cooked before being placed in the "feeding device" (referring to the mouth); the rest part of resources needs to be excreted after they ingest the nutritional portion; humans need to ride horses to commute because of their insufficient number of legs... Even though its discourse, spanning a considerable length, seems to consider all aspects of human daily life, nearly every sentence begins with prohibitive terms like "should not", emphasizing the vast differences between its planetary culture and human culture. The storyteller's expressions of arrogance and indifference reveal its incomprehension and disdain toward human civilization. Compared to humans with constraints, they consider themselves to be relatively advanced beings. Whether for the story "Impatient Griselda" or for the story that is retold, the extraterrestrial storyteller serves as the sole narrator. Hence, human opinions or objections are almost ignored and muted. Readers can only indirectly glean information like human attitudes and responses from the narrator's interactions with humans. In essence, humans are scrutinized and judged by a more powerful extraterrestrial species, even deprived of their right of speech. For this reason, certain societal and cultural norms, physiological, evolutionary traits and gender relations familiar to us become strange and archaic in the eyes of the extraterrestrial storyteller, 'the *Other*'.

As Simone de Beauvoir claims in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir, 1974). Similarly, postmodern feminists emphasize the intimate relationship among gender, power and language, arguing that gender is both a biological attribute and a social construct. Gender is not solely determined by biology but is co-constructed through social power structures, interweaving individual identities and linguistic and cultural practices. The extraterrestrial storyteller expresses confusion regarding humans' categorization into "male" and "female", hence collectively addressing anyone of human as "Sir-Madam" (Atwood, 2023), and explaining about this, "Frankly, I use both because frankly, I can't tell the difference. We do not have such limited arrangements on our planet" (Atwood, 2023). Through such linguistic construction, "Sir-Madam" becomes a linguistic phenomenon, prompting a reevaluation and redefinition of gender concepts among humans. Power dynamics influence the definition and distribution of gender roles, while languages like "Sir-Madam" also play a crucial role in disseminating and consolidating gender norms. In this sense, replacing "lady" and "gentlemen" with "Sir-Madam" challenges power structures and, at the same time, opens up more possibilities for gender identity. Based on this, gender becomes a dynamic and variable social product rather than an immutable biological trait. Moreover, from the perspective of the extraterrestrial storyteller, distinguishing between male and female for the sake of heterosexual reproduction is inefficient and contradicts the principle of "efficiency", which is evident as the primary criterion for the alien to determine the superiority of a species. Similarly, the storyteller is also puzzled by humans concealing their "organs of pleasure" (Atwood, 2023) (referring to genitals). Since these organs, on their planet, are prominently located on their heads, they allow them for quick determination of mutual attraction. Through the eyes of the *Other*, the division of genders and the differentiated physiological characteristics of the sexes appear as low-grade and inefficient evolutionary traits, which deliver a dual critique of human-centrism and male-

centrism.

As seen above, Atwood externalizes a detached perspective from a third party to question our human existence. Under the scrutiny of the *Other*, the Earth, the center of the universe we assume, is regarded as an object by someone from a larger space, and encased into a pandemic-induced glass dome, becoming a microcosm subject to be observed, judged and controlled. Through the alienation and deconstruction by 'the *Other*,' humans as the weaker party undergo a dimensional contrast and strike from an "overlooking" perspective, allowing us to pause and contemplate more on familiar topics such as the body, food and gender characteristics, which makes us aware of the severely rooted anthropocentrism inspired of new insights in such cultural conflicts, thereby further exploring a diverse existence of life.

### 3. Retelling Classics: Awakening of Subjectivity and Subversion of Values

Atwood, through the voice of an extraterrestrial storyteller, subversively reconstructs and reverses the original story while significantly adapting the image of the female protagonist. To be specific, she transforms the compliant and docile Griselda into resolute Pat, who bravely resists oppression with the help of her sister Imp, and correspondingly alters the related plot elements, distinctly embodying Atwood's consistent stance of feminism as well as her creative style of postmodernism.

In literary works, housewives are often portrayed as a perfect "angel in the house", characterized as "lovable, selfless, pure, and most importantly, thoughtless" (Zhu, 2001). Griselda in *The Decameron* is precisely such a traditional female figure, and so is Pat in "Impatient Griselda" before she decides to rebel. Born into a poor and lowly family, she caught the eye of the Duke and, unsurprisingly, became his prospective bride. The Duke married Pat just because he thought she was of low status and tended to have no ideas about anything. He confessed his true intentions, "I can boss you around and humiliate you as much as I want, and you will feel so lowly that you won't say boo, Or boo-hoo, Or anything" (Atwood, 2023). After hearing such almost threatening words, Pat did not resist or attempt to save herself. Moreover, she could not imagine that those words were just the "appetizer" for the subsequent "loyalty test". After their marriage, her husband went to great lengths to test whether she was obedient and faithful, including physical humiliating, mental bullying, threatening to kill her two "pseudopods" (Atwood, 2023) (referring to children), announcing his infidelity to divorce her and so on, all of which she endured without complaint, even remaining grateful. Ultimately, her "female virtues" won her husband's approval. As Judith Butler argues, the inner essence of gender, which we take to be an internal truth of gender, is produced through a sustained set of acts posited through the gendered stylization of the body (Butler, 1990). In the traditional cultural context of *The Decameron*, Griselda is thus "othered as a female" (Zeng & Ye, 2020), a compliant, pleasing, and self-sacrificing stereotypical female image within the patriarchal system, which reflects unilateral expectations of images of women by patriarchal desires. Such intent is also vividly embodied in the nuances of the narrative process. Despite being narrated in the third person, the plot development is still primarily driven by the Duke. His inherited subjectivity controls the narrative, severely neglecting Griselda's female consciousness. Even when the Duke went to the bride's home to pick her up, Griselda was fetching water in a state of knowing nothing about this, let alone realizing that the bride was very herself. At that time, the dual burdens of economic and patriarchal oppression not only stifled women's voices and life choices but also made women like Griselda overlook the existence of their subjectivity.

In contrast to the traditional version, Atwood introduces a sci-fi element in "The Impatient Griselda", shifting the narrative authority to an extraterrestrial storyteller, which subverts the male-centeredness of the classic story. It replaces a single female protagonist, Griselda, with twin sisters, "impatient Griselda" Imp and "patient Griselda" Pat, which come from the word "impatient". From the reactions of the storyteller, it is evident that there are certain dissenting opinions in the crowd. However, as the sole narrator of the story, the storyteller does not yield or further explain but insists, "No, there was not one. There were two. Who is telling the story? I am! So there were two" (Atwood, 2023). This is Atwood's resounding voice against tradition and classicism and a helping hand extended to women confined within patriarchal values. In the retold story, the wife, "patient Griselda" Pat, is no different from the Griselda in the classic story, still a submissive and obedient traditional "angel in the house". In other words, Atwood does not directly transform the traditional wife Griselda into a "Modern Woman". Instead, she adds the role of Pat's sister, "impatient Griselda" Imp, providing an ally to back her up, which is crucial in Pat's self-saving. Her sister Imp sensed in advance that the Duke was not a good person, so she infiltrated the kitchen of the Duke's palace and waited for the opportunity to alert and rescue her sister. It was only after repeated persuasion from Imp that Pat agreed to conspire to kill her husband. However, her fear caused her to back out. Ultimately, Imp had to impersonate Pat to complete the plan, successfully killing the Duke. Strictly speaking, "patient Griselda" Pat did not awaken her self-awareness and resistance to patriarchy at the very beginning. However, she was prompted and urged by her sister, Imp, who inherently possessed female subjectivity and the will to fight. Anyhow, the ending of the story shows that both sisters decided to eat the Duke's relatives who came to inquire, which indicates that Pat, following her sister Imp's lead, embarked on the path of awakening to female consciousness and resisting patriarchy.

Women's self-awareness is derived from a series of deeply rooted gendered performances orchestrated by the patriarchal society. The juxtapositional process experienced by the twin sisters not only reflects the tight control of individuals by discourse power and traditional values but also reveals the tremendous resisting potential exhibited by certain subjects during the process of power reiteration. This is the key that Atwood provides to traditional female characters in classic stories to open the door to a new life and serves as a guiding beacon for countless women in today's society who face similar struggles.

### 4. Reflecting Reality: Gender Power Struggles and Domestic Violence

In a patriarchal society, a male-centric cultural system is maintained and reinforced through various forms,

including marginalizing women, solidifying gender stereotypes, institutionally discriminating and so on. As Huo Tiantian states, "In patriarchal culture, men are self-centered, excluding, despising, and denying female as 'the *Other*'. The relationship between men and women is an unequal one between the subject and the object" (2021). This idea reveals the power imbalances in gender relations. In "Impatient Griselda", from the moment Pat agrees to marry the Duke, she falls into the trap of the weaker party within the marriage, which is a result of multiple factors.

The inequality within marriage stems not only from personal choices and compromises but also from the combined effects of power mechanisms, cultural norms, and economic oppression. Atwood vividly depicts such a scenario in "Impatient Griselda". When the Duke first met Pat, he said, "Come with me, Pat. People tell me I must get married so I can copulate legitimately and produce a little Duke" (Atwood, 2023). It is obvious that one of Pat's primary functions in this marriage is reproduction. At this point, Pat became an objectified entity. Actually, Pat initially relinquished her subjectivity and promised to be a submissive wife, thereby deepening her objectification. Additionally, Pat's repeated obedience and compromise further fueled her husband's expanding desire for conquest and intensified his sadistic tendencies, exacerbating the power imbalance in their relationship, except that the significant economic and status disparity between Pat and the Duke placed her in a subordinate position, which the Duke exploited to make unreasonable demands. Consequently, the "subordinate object" became the Duke's perception of Pat.

However, whether this "subordinate object" could permanently remain by his side without betrayal became a hidden concern in the Duke's mind. Hence, driven by a desire for absolute control over his wife, he inflicted both physical and psychological domestic violence on her. In terms of physical discipline, the Duke, on the one hand, used violence, causing direct harm to her body. On the other hand, he made Pat wear ill-fitting clothes to further diminish her presence and voice, even preparing to expel her from the palace naked. Besides the crude physical humiliation, the Duke's psychological oppression was even more severe. He made Pat believe that all misfortunes were due to her fault, hurled the vilest insults at her, and even told her his plan to abandon her for another woman. In short, these measures not only physically humiliated but also psychologically harmed Pat. Michel Foucault points out that power is maintained through the discipline and surveillance of the body (Foucault, 1975). Both forms of violence over Pat exemplify this dynamic of power.

The imbalance of power between genders induces domestic violence. While the scenario mentioned above might seem inconceivable in contemporary society, domestic violence exists in diverse and covert forms. Beyond physical harm and psychological oppression, there can also be emotional control and silent violence. Unfortunately, the patriarchal society not only oppresses women within the family but shapes their submissive image in the context of culture and education as well, continually reinforcing gender inequality through traditional narratives. Classic stories have their historical limitations, while Atwood's retelling subverts traditional narratives, revealing these oppressive mechanisms and highlighting the importance of female subjectivity and resistance. It particularly reminds us to be vigilant against the indoctrination of women under the male gaze in a patriarchal society.

Regarding the issue of gender inequality, postmodern feminism advocates for the establishment of a "dual subject" relationship between male and female, promoting more equal and inclusive gender interactions. As Luce Irigaray states, two subjects need to assist each other in living, discovering, cultivating happiness and attending to our differences, not only because of the role of their differences in reproduction but also to achieve and flourish happiness (Irigaray, 2013). The imbalance of gender power undermines the foundation of happiness based on "dual subjectivity". Consequently, in Atwood's writing, women like Imp and Pat under patriarchy no longer submit to men's will but transform into aggressive avengers who rise against oppression. This also points the way for women entangled in domestic violence and the broader female community in contemporary society — Only by breaking patriarchal authority, constructing their subjectivity, as well as maintaining independent thinking and personal development can women achieve victory through repeated resistance.

Atwood's vivid portrayal illustrates how a male-centered social structure objectifies women and restricts their autonomy through both physical and psychological oppression. It reveals the deep mechanisms of domestic violence and gender oppression, calls for profound attention to issues of gender inequality and domestic violence, and, through the resistance actions of Imp and Pat, further underscores the significance of awakening female subjectivity and resistance.

## 5. Conclusion

Even though the modern world advocates for gender equality, which some countries even enshrine in their legal frameworks, eurocentrism still pervasively exists in various overt or covert forms. Compared to other disadvantaged groups challenging oppressive classes, almost uniquely, feminism directly confronts the patriarchal system itself. Only by challenging authority can feminism truly realize its vision of gender equality. Recognizing this, Atwood challenges the patriarchal essence of classic stories through the voice of 'the *Other*,' the extraterrestrial storyteller. Through this third-person perspective, she successfully subverts anthropocentrism while also deconstructing gender traits and differences. As a spokesperson for women, with numerous postmodern feminist works to her name, Atwood infuses feminist thought with new insights and vitality through her unique literary techniques. Her work "Impatient Griselda" calls for deep societal reflection on gender equality, reminding us that we must continually challenge traditional gender norms and power structures in the pursuit of social justice to achieve a more equal and inclusive future.

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