

# The Otherization of Collective Identities of Both Sexes in *the Blind Assassin* Under the Camera Focalization

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## Abstract

*The Blind Assassin*, is the masterpiece by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, whose complex structure, various themes and identity concerns have always been the focus of controversy among literary critics. However, few of them explore the otherization of male and female characters' collective identities in the novel through narrative focalization. Thus, based on some theories relevant to identity concerns and feminist narratology, the paper tries to investigate how camera focalization simulating objective observation—constructs and others the collective identities of both sexes through embedded news clippings. The analysis reveals that female collective identity is othered through patriarchal mechanisms and the reduction of women to decorative objects under the gaze. Meanwhile, male collective identity undergoes otherization through intra-group power struggles. Thus, the paper exposes the co-domination and the co-shaping of both sexes by masculinity and patriarchal culture, and Atwood's advocacy of decentralized gender view and harmonious relationship between the two sexes, providing a reference for the relevant studies on identity politics and narrative forms.

**Keywords:** Identities, Narrative focalization, Patriarchal society, Power, Othering, Gender politics.

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## I The Brief Introduction

*The Blind Assassin*, as Atwood's tenth novel, won the Man Booker Prize in 2000, the most prestigious prize for fiction in the United Kingdom. As famous for its exquisite narrative structure, the novel concludes four narrative layers, with one layer combined with another in virtuality and reality, just as the multilevel nested "Russian doll". Apparently, it seems that there is no internal connection among these narrative layers, but in fact, they overlap with each other both in plots and characters. Therefore, numerous scholars have been attracted by its exquisite narrative strategies and complex themes. However, the covered problems of identities reflected by the shifting narrative focalizations, such as absence, distortion and so on, should be given more consideration under the exquisite narrative structure, since they are also the projection of discrimination and moral bankruptcy in our society. Therefore, from the perspective of feminist narratology, the current study employs one of its theories—the camera focalization, to explore the issues of collective identities of both sexes in the novel.

As for the literature review of *The Blind Assassin*, in China, researchers tended to explore the novel through the perspectives of narrative methods,

themes, gender issues, power operation mechanism, colonial issues, post-colonial symbolism, feminist studies, cultural metaphor, psychoanalysis and archetype criticism etc. While in other countries, many scholars analyzed the fiction at the view of themes (such as history, war, ethics, memory), identities, narrative techniques, feminism, postmodernism, allegory, eschatology and so on. It can be said that the novel owns profound and rich connotation, which can be analyzed through various point of views. However, few researchers explored the otherization of collective identities of both sexes under the camera focalization. Thus, this paper attempts to explore how camera focalization simulating objective observation—constructs and others the collective identities of male and female characters through embedded news clippings, providing a new point of view for the relevant researches.

## II Some Theories Relevant to Identity Concerns and Narrative Focalization

According to Homi Bhabha, identity is an intersubjective and performative action that rejects the boundaries between public and private, psychological and social. It is a 'self' that enters consciousness through the domain of the symbolic 'other' —language, social

system and the unconsciousness. The view that identity is built and dependent on the constructions of ‘other’, is the progress of the potential significance that questions the self-claimed superiority of identity of oppressors (or racists, colonialists, imperialists, dictators, paternalism, etc.), and marginal and oppressed groups can take it to challenge and renegotiate the identity of ‘other’, which is imposed on them to strive for the rights of subsistence, narrative and citizenship (Anfeng, 2004).

The collective identities of both sexes play an important role in the analyses of identities, which should be explored under the revelation of the patriarchal system and culture in the novel, reflecting the common rule and shaping of patriarchal society to both sexes. When it comes to collective identity, it means that a person belongs to a specific social group and shares emotional and value meanings with those in that group. Furthermore, the collective identity could reveal the power and freedom of the group who belongs to, especially the degree of being gazed. In the novel, the collective identities of men and women can be typically investigated from the groups of male and female characters, as well as their representatives.

As one of the modes of narrative focalizations in feminist narratology, the camera focalization used by the author is worthwhile to underline and discuss under the specific textual and historical background. The camera focalization refers to the third-person narrator outside the story as a camera, observing and recording the discourses and deeds of the characters objectively. Moreover, the relationship between the observer and the observed is considered as a relationship of power and ideology. The narrator’s sight and fixation point are both affected by the narrative focalization, which indicates that it determines who is observed and where the gaze happens. Especially, it can easily present the otherization of male and female characters under the camera focalization.

Thus, by discussing the otherization of main characters’ collective identities under the camera focalization in the literary text, readers can deeply experience the complexity and uncertainty of the novel, experience the breakdown of power relations between the colonized and the colonizer, human beings and patriarchal society, and explore how the author’s ideologies are presented.

### III Analysis of Collective Identities of Both Sexes under Camera Focalization

The camera focalization is the third-person narrator’s perspective outside the story, which objectively observes and records the discourses and deeds of the characters in the novel. It’s primarily presented in the 18 news bulletins from 6 newspapers of the novel, such as “The Toronto Star, The Globe and

Mail, The Mail and Empire, Mayfair” and so on, appearing in chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 and 15.

The current study through the perspective of camera focalization, explore the issues of collective identities in the novel. Herein, the narrative focalization can provide an intuitive and true reflection of the distortion, alienation and anxiety of the male and female characters’ collective identities. Herein, the analyses of otherization of characters’ collective identities pave the way to revealing the patriarchal system and culture in the novel and Atwood’s views of gender politics and harmonious gender identities.

#### 3.1 The Otherization of Female Collective Identity under the Camera Focalization

From the novel, the camera focalization in the third-person narration is employed to reflect the otherization of female collective identity, that is, the process of being sacrificed of certain female characters.

For female characters, the camera focalization created a male-dominated environment and presented the survival mode of being shadowed in patriarchy society, effectively depicting the patriarchal oppression for women. In the novel, as a part of the camera focalization, “Mayfair” and “Toronto Star” mainly reported on the high-society parties, which deliberately made a focalization and otherization of women. In addition, because of the author’s special design and plot setting, the novel primarily focused on the upper class in the utmost narrative layer and seemed to ignore the roughscuff with intent. Therefore, it could be discussed from macro and micro perspectives that the former is the relationship between macroscopic political and economic environment and the ideologies of upper-class women, and the latter is their social status under the influence of marriage law.

On the macro level, the camera focalization revealed women’s attitude of the involved historical events and individuals, reflecting the control of their ideologies by the patriarchy society. Since Atwood combined the real historical background to create the novel, the otherization of female collective identity should take it into account. Seemingly just reporting the various entertainment news of the upper class, these presses were in fact closely related to the political and economic environment of the time, and epitomized the male-dominated society.

Under the camera focalization, the female subjects were gazed by the public as if they were the appendages of men, and the banquets or activities held by women were actually another battlefield of political competition for men. For instance, in the “Mayfair, 1937”, it was mentioned that “...Mrs. R. Westfield and her daughter Daphne have set out for a visit to France and to Italy as well, ‘Mussolini permitting’” (Atwood,

2001:403). In view of the historical records, France and Italy were led by the fascist parties and Mussolini was the fascist dictator of Italy at that time, and herein they were all used to symbolize the fascist parties in the novel. The lady's words suggested the Canadian upper class's acceptance and recognition of the fascist dictatorship at that time. But this is not an embodiment that women have already awakened a distinct political attitude. On the contrary, it is virtually a passive reflection of the political stance of men by women. In the last news clippings, "The Mail and Empire, 1936", Richard denounced the Reds and argued that "...many smaller countries might find themselves under threat...only Germany and France, and to some extent Italy, were strong enough to resist the tide" (Atwood, 2001:357). In light of historical facts, these countries all had close relationship with the fascist parties, and he openly showed his support and appreciation of them. As a most popular politician and fairly wealthy businessman, he stood for the political viewpoints and interests of most capitalists and the high society, which was dominated by men. Thus, the superficial political tendency embodied by the female characters was affiliated to the patriarchal society. It largely indicated that women just passively accepted the influence of men.

Besides, the otherization of female collective identity can also be discovered in the analogy between two women under the camera focalization. According to the "Mayfair, 1937", Miss Frances Homer was exposed to the camera focalization. On the one hand, she took up an occupational identity of monologist, increasing the degree of observation. And on the other hand, her career implicitly revealed the status of women as the "monologue performers". Since Homer was invited by the upper-class ladies, which indirectly reflected her social status and recognition among them. Moreover, she was compared to the famous American comedian Nell Gwyn and Queen Isabella of Spain, which indirectly put the American comedian and the Spanish queen on an equal footing. On the surface, it seemed to break the class division in the patriarchal society, eliminated the identity discrimination between aristocrats and commoners, and achieve equality among women. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of the political class already alluded to in the previous report, was once again more exposed here. The comparison between Gwyn, a commoner, and Isabella, a historically known monarchess was greatly attributed to the difference in national status behind them that Spain was far behind other capitalist powers, such as the United States. Therefore, behind the news reporting, it hid the political consciousness represented by men and the international struggle for national status. As a result, readers should notice the covert and omnipresent male influence envelop the female subjects and dominate their thoughts.

On the micro level, the otherization of female characters' identities could be analyzed from the laws

and social ideology at that time under the camera focalization. In the history, there was a legal concept called 'coverture' greatly affecting the survival mode of women in America, which restricted women's choices in life in almost every aspect until the beginning of the 20th century (Ying, 2012:106). Nevertheless, the prevalence of such legal cognition was not only in the United States but also in the western countries, including Canada.

Under the camera focalization in the first-person narration, the otherization of female collective identity can be examined from the 'coverture' status of women. Not matter in the aspects of concept, principle or system, 'coverture' referred to that the legal identity and status of a woman were merged with that of her husband, and she was charged and shadowed by her husband and became a "femme couverte" (Ying, 2012:106). For example, in the "Mayfair, 1937" and "Mayfair, 1939", women were presented as follows, including "Mr. And Mrs. Henry Riddle, Mr. And Mrs. Johnson Reeves, Mrs. R. Westfield and her daughter Daphne, Mrs. Richard Chase Griffin, Mrs. Winifred Griffin Prior, Aimee Adelia, Miss Frances Homer..." etc. Obviously, from the camera focalization, the identities of the married female characters were replaced by the labels of "Mrs. XX", which was an embodiment of the otherization of female characters. Iris was not an exception, which was displayed by the retrospective focalization in the first-person narration. After discovering that the only beneficiary of her father's high insurance after his death was her sister Laura, Iris narrated that "He must already have...concluded that leaving any of it to me would have done no good. I was still a minor, and I was Richard's wife. The law was different then. What was mine was his, to all intents and purposes" (Atwood, 2001:315). This inner monologue after many years proved the fact that once a woman got married, she would lose her independent legal identity and status and was shadowed by her husband at the legal level, becoming invisible in the society at that time.

What's more, almost every time, the camera focalization gives a very detailed description of their dressing and decoration, foreignizing the collective identity of female characters. For instance, in the "Mayfair, 1939", it depicted that "...the Governor General and Lady Tweedsmuir...Her Excellency poised and beautiful. Her all-white ensemble, enhanced by fox furs from Canada's Arctic, was set off by a splash of turquoise in her hat..." (Atwood, 2001:456). As Warhol pointed out, "seeing" and "being seen" in the text are symbols of power and identity, which can reflect a power struggle of gender binary opposition to some extent. And characters with special social titles easily become the objects of narrative gaze, especially female characters. Therefore, the external body decoration of these upper-class women, namely clothing, ornaments and even surrounding furnishings, naturally became the focus of observation. It certainly explained that no matter who

were under the titles, female subjects were just delicate and empty exhibitions of the high society.

Last but not least, the otherization of female collective identity can also be explored from the marriage law's protection of female happiness under the camera focalization. It should be noted some descriptions of Homer that "...her Josephine was a delightful vignette; and her Lady Emma Hamilton was a poignant bit of acting" (Atwood, 2001:404). The two women and two corresponding dramas mentioned here, were modified by the adjectives with opposite emotional tendency. It could be said that each drama stood for the heroine on the same name, but the news clipping displayed different attitudes towards these two women. It reflected that a woman like the French Queen Josephine who got married and accepted her new identity granted by her husband, was guaranteed by the marriage laws and customs of the patriarchal society. While a woman like Emma Hamilton, the mistress of General Wilson, resisted the tradition and didn't obey the rules set by men, easily got a tragic ending. The diction of modifying the two women indirectly portrayed the patriarchal culture's education and imprisonment of female thoughts.

### 3.2 The Otherization of Male Collective Identity under the Camera Focalization

The otherization of male collective identity can be mainly explored from the camera focalization. Although the camera focalization created a male-dominated environment, the news clippings portrayed lots of struggles and exploitation among male characters, suggesting that certain male characters were dismembered or banished by the dominated ones or even the patriarchy society.

Under the camera focalization, the contradiction between Norval and Richard vividly reflected the otherization of male collective identity. In the patriarchy society, it was naturally that the old-fashioned industrialists were swallowed by the emerging bourgeoisie. Therefore, under the survival law of the jungle, Norval's identity was gradually turned from the king of the Chase family business into a loser of being encroached. In the beginning, in "The Port Ticonderoga Herald and Banner, 1933", as the biggest industrialist in Port Ticonderoga, Norval's donation for those areas most hard-hit by the Depression was highly praised that "we can only applaud Captain Chase's efforts, a man who holds to his word, unlike the strikebreaking and lockout tactics in centers such as Winnipeg and Montreal" (Atwood, 2001:108). Nobly, Richard's objection of Norval's behavior wasn't accepted by the media, which symbolized the mouthpiece of the upper class. The attitude of the reporting mediately embodied the high social status of the Chase family. And from the retrospective focalization in the first-person narration, "prime ministers came to port Ticonderoga...and Avilion

was where they stayed. There were photographs of Grandfather Benjamin with three prime ministers in turn...They must have preferred the food there to anything else on offer" (Atwood, 2001:60). It not only embodied the close relationship between the Chase family and the dominated class but also depicted the latter's principle of interest primacy with the childlike tone of irony. As Panitch mentioned, the corporate elite is the most powerful fraction of the capitalist class that "it is the group of people who own, control, and manage the largest corporations in Canada". Their close relationship was out of the needs and interests of the bourgeoisie, as indicated in that "by that time the town had several prominent manufacturers, whose support for political parties was valued" (Atwood, 2001:60).

Nevertheless, if the Chase family business could no longer satisfy the needs of the political parties, Norval would be abandoned and encroached by them, suggesting the otherization of the inferior in the male groups, as well as the otherization of male collective identity to a degree. From the novel, it could be seen that Norval over-hired veterans when there were shutdowns and layoffs all over the country and didn't cut down the staff until his factories were nearly bankrupt. He said the county was lack of gratitude for them and the businessmen should now pay back something of what was owed. Thus began his reputation for being a renegade and a bit of a fool. As indicated in "The Mail and Empire, 1934", "flesh violence broke out in Port Ticonderoga, a continuation of the week's turmoil in connection with the closure, strike and lockout at Chase and Sons Industries Ltd....Mr. Norval Chase, president of Chase and Sons Industries, was unavailable for comment" (Atwood, 2001:122). Evidently, Norval was condemned by the newspaper reporters, who he termed as vermin and corpse flies. And it seemed that the new violence was attributed to his mismanagement. Herein, Norval was equivalent to the illegal strikers and outside agitators who disrupted public order and damaged the interests of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, their status was changed, which resulted from the interest orientation of the bourgeois represented by the media.

Finally, the cornered Norval was mad and otherized into an abandoned pawn under the law of the jungle. Under the retrospective focalization in the first-person narration, when constructing the Weary Soldier statue for the War Memorial, Norval "...favored 'Lest We Forget', which put the onus where it should be: on our own forgetfulness. He said a damn sight too many people had been a damn sight too forgetful. He rarely swore in public, so it made an impression" (Atwood, 2001:148). Herein, the "forgetfulness" tended to accuse that the glory and sacrifice of the Chase family, as well as the terrible price he and his brother paid in the war, had long been forgotten by the public and the upper class. Furthermore, the approaching collapse of Chase's business changed his identity so dramatically that not



only the upper class to which Chase was loyal, but also the people or organizations that had previously attached themselves to him were eager to get away from him. Banks, insurance companies, and perhaps even the workers in his factory, all made Norval's situation more difficult. And he finally turned to his competitor Richard, who seemed generous and kind, but stealthily swallowed up the Chase family's business. When learning that Richard did not fulfil their private agreement but gobbled up his business after marrying Iris, Norval chose to drink and lock himself in the attic to end his life. He lost his business kingdom, which eventually led to his otherization of being an abandoned pawn under the law of the jungle. Besides, it could be seen that he was labeled as a stupid, cowardly and lunatic man, who did not conform to the so-called traditional patriarchal image of father, thus his was doom to an accelerated death.

Under the camera focalization, Richard was otherized into a dehumanizing mouthpiece of the bourgeoisie, symbolizing the otherization of the superior in the male groups, which was frequently reflected in the antagonism between the bourgeoisie represented by Richard and the proletariat represented by Alex. Likewise, in "The Mail and Empire, 1934", Richard strictly opposed release of the Communist leader Tim Buck in the Kingston's Portsmouth Penitentiary, who was once jailed for seditious conspiracy, spoke highly of Mr. Bennett's policy of "the iron heel of ruthlessness", and stated that "force should be used promptly and effectively against illegal strikers and outside agitators" (Atwood, 2001:114). What's more, in "The Mail and Empire, 1936", he detailed the crimes committed by the Communists to incite public ire that "the Republicans...was taking their orders from the Reds, as had been shown by their seizure of property, the slaughter of peaceful civilians, and the atrocities committed against religion..." (Atwood, 2001:357). And he also said that "there was already an underground stream of diehard Communists heading for Spain from our continent...the country should be thankful that an opportunity had arisen whereby it might purge itself of disruptive elements at no cost to the taxpayer". From the novel, as a member of the diehard Communists in Canada, Alex was reduced to a heresy and fugitive that threatened social stability and people's property and safety, having to frequently dwell in different low-rent houses. Thus, Alex was a representative of being banished and a sacrifice to the class struggle. From the camera focalization, Richard acting as a mouthpiece of the bourgeoisie, gradually stirred up class ideological contradictions and the public anger, and openly boycotted the Communists, emphatically calling them illegal strikers and outside agitators who destroyed social order and harmed the interests of all people, not just of the bourgeoisie.

More importantly, what Richard had stated was conform to the laws at the time, which further suggested

his identity of the dehumanizing mouthpiece of the bourgeoisie. In "The Globe and Mail, 1938", Richard strongly lauded the unfair Munich Accord, which was mainly created by the Fascist regimes. Based on historical facts, the Accord was signed by Britain, France, Nazi Germany and Italy, which sacrificed the interests of Czechoslovakia and forced the country to accept humiliating terms. Whereas Richard glorified it and argued that "this accord...would usher in a new 'golden era' of peace and prosperity. It also went to show the value of statesmanship and diplomacy as well as positive thinking..." (Atwood, 2001:455). Meanwhile, he also claimed that the citizens of Czechoslovakia had been guaranteed sufficient safeguards under the Accord, and "a strong, healthy Germany...was in the interest of the West, and of business in particular, and would serve to 'keep Bolshevism at bay, and away from our Bay Street'." Obviously, Richard's statements always catered to the ideologies and interests of the bourgeoisie, which was against to the Bolshevism of the proletariat and emphasized the private property and interests of business. Notably, since 1934, each time when he made a speech, the new clippings would end with a sentence that "his speech was roundly applauded" to reflect his political correctness and appreciation from the upper bourgeoisie.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study employs feminist narratology and identity theory to analyze Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*, focusing specifically on how the novel's embedded news clippings utilize the camera focalization to construct and other the collective identities of both male and female characters. It demonstrates that this ostensibly neutral narrative technique functions as an ideological apparatus of patriarchal society.

For female characters, the camera focalization enacts othering by systematically reducing women to decorative objects under a gendered gaze. News sources like Mayfair meticulously document female attire and social appearances while erasing their legal autonomy through the compulsory use of "Mrs. + Husband's Surname" —a practice reflecting the historical "coverture" doctrine that subsumed a wife's legal identity under her husband's. Furthermore, women's apparent expressions of political views (e.g., implicit acceptance of fascism in society columns) are revealed as mere echoes of dominant male perspectives, exposing the pervasive control of patriarchal ideology over female subjectivity and public representation.

The analysis also reveals that male collective identity is similarly subjected to othering, albeit through mechanisms of intra-group power struggles inherent to patriarchal capitalism. The camera focalization captures the brutal enforcement of a capitalist "law of the jungle" within the male hierarchy. Norval Chase, an old-guard industrialist initially portrayed as a community pillar, is

progressively othered and vilified by the media (e.g., *The Mail and Empire*) when his ethical stance (refusing mass layoffs) conflicts with bourgeois profit interests. His trajectory—from respected captain of industry to a media-branded “renegade fool” and ultimately a suicidal outcast—exemplifies the patriarchal system’s disposal of men who fail its competitive norms. Conversely, Richard Griffin, the emerging capitalist, is othered through his transformation into a dehumanized mouthpiece of the bourgeoisie. His speeches, consistently lauded in news reports (“roundly applauded”), rigidly parrot reactionary ideologies (denouncing ‘Reds’ supporting the Munich Agreement, advocating ‘iron heel’ tactics against labor). This reduces him to an instrument of class power, devoid of individual consciousness, symbolizing the othering of men who ascend by embodying the system’s most ruthless dictates.

Ultimately, this investigation transcends analyses focusing solely on female victimization or surface narrative structures. By dissecting the camera focalization within the news clippings, the paper exposes the co-domination of both sexes under patriarchal and capitalist systems. The othering of women occurs through external subjugation, erasure, and objectification under the male gaze, while the othering of men manifests through internal power dynamics, enforced conformity, and the sacrifice of individuals within the competitive hierarchy. Atwood’s narrative strategy thus performs a dual critique: it unmasks the mechanisms sustaining patriarchal power while implicitly advocating for a decentralized understanding of gender that both men and women may become “the others” under the power mechanism, and points towards the possibility of more equitable, harmonious relationships. This provides an important reference for the cross-disciplinary study of identity politics and narrative forms.

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