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Domesticity, Autonomy, and the Postfeminist Shrew in *Vinegar Girl*

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Abstract

This paper examines Anne Tyler's Vinegar Girl (2016) as a postfeminist reimagining of Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew, exploring how the novel both critiques and perpetuates patriarchal structures within the framework of contemporary domestic realism. Drawing on postfeminist theory as articulated by Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, and Charlotte Brunsdon, the analysis demonstrates how Tyler's adaptation translates Shakespeare's overtly patriarchal "taming" into a subtler negotiation of autonomy, care, and emotional labor. Through the protagonist, Kate Battista, Tyler stages the contradictions of postfeminism—where feminism's political vocabulary is absorbed into neoliberal discourses of choice, tact, and personal fulfillment. The paper argues that Vinegar Girl embodies what Natalie K. Eschenbaum identifies as the "modernisation of misogyny," transforming patriarchal control into a system of emotional persuasion and familial obligation rather than overt coercion. Tyler's ironic realism situates Kate as a postfeminist subject whose resistance manifests through silence, irony, and reluctant compliance rather than rebellion. To sum up, the novel suggests that the postfeminist woman is not "tamed" through domination but through affective labor and self-regulation—a form of taming internalized within the logic of modern gender relations.

Introduction

Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (2016) constitutes a contemporary reimagining of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, produced under the auspices of the Hogarth Shakespeare project—an initiative that commissions established novelists to reinterpret Shakespearean drama within modern settings and sensibilities. Set in twenty-first-century Baltimore, Tyler's narrative transposes the contentious dynamics of Shakespeare's original into a domestic comedy that foregrounds questions of autonomy, gendered expectation, and the limitations of choice within socio-familial structures.

The novel centres on Kate Battista, a 29-year-old woman whose intellectual intransigence has marginalized her both professionally and personally. Having abandoned her university studies following a confrontational exchange with a professor, Kate finds herself employed as a preschool assistant while managing the household of her eccentric father, Dr. Louis Battista—a scientist at Johns Hopkins University—and her adolescent sister, Bunny. When Dr. Battista proposes an expedient marriage between Kate and his soon-to-be-deported research assistant, Pyotr, in order to secure the latter's immigration status, Kate's initial resistance gradually gives way to reluctant acquiescence. Her evolving response is catalyzed not only by Pyotr's disarming openness to her outspokenness but also by her own recognition of the constrained parameters of her current existence.

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Tyler's adaptation undertakes a deliberate reframing of Shakespeare's infamous "shrew-taming" narrative, softening the original's aggressively performative gender conflict into a more understated, character-driven exploration of mutual recognition and compromise. As Tyler herself observes in an interview, "The Katherina in Shakespeare's play is insane... She's shrieking at Petruchio from the moment she meets him. And he's not much better. So you know I had to tone them down" (Charles 2016). This recalibration not only renders the protagonists more legible to contemporary readers but also invites broader critical reflection on the ethics and politics of literary adaptation—particularly in relation to how classical texts are mediated through modern ideologies of agency, consent, and domesticity.

In the wake of evolving feminist discourse, postfeminism has emerged as a complex and often contested framework that negotiates the entanglements of femininity, autonomy, and domesticity within a culture presumed to have moved beyond the feminist project. Frequently misunderstood as either a successor to or rejection of feminism, postfeminism operates not as a clearly delineated epoch but as a discursive formation shaped by contradictions—foregrounding individualism, choice, and empowerment, while often reaffirming traditional gender norms (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004). It is within this paradoxical space that Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (2016), a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, situates its protagonist, Kate Battista, whose reluctant navigation of marriage, domestic responsibility, and personal agency presents fertile ground for postfeminist interpretation.

By reimagining the "shrew" archetype within a contemporary American context, Tyler's novel implicitly interrogates the ideological tensions at the heart of postfeminism—namely, the co-optation of feminist rhetoric in service of neoliberal values and the commodification of female autonomy (Lazar, 2014; Aronson, 2003). The domestic sphere, long a battleground for feminist critique, is reconfigured in *Vinegar Girl* not as a site of female subjugation alone, but as a contested space wherein autonomy is paradoxically performed through concession and adaptation. As such, Kate's transformation resists simple categorization: rather than embodying the regressive taming of Shakespeare's Katherina, she becomes emblematic of the postfeminist subject—simultaneously complicit in and resistant to the ideologies that shape her choices (Faludi, 1991; Jones, 1994).

This article explores the relation between domesticity and autonomy in *Vinegar Girl*, arguing that Tyler's revision offers a subtle critique of postfeminist sensibilities that mask structural inequalities beneath the veneer of personal choice. By framing Kate not as a victim of patriarchal coercion, but as a postfeminist shrew negotiating agency within constraint, Tyler complicates the narrative of emancipation as simply oppositional to domestic roles. In doing so, the novel exemplifies how postfeminist fiction reframes feminist concerns, often under the guise of irony, ambivalence, or romantic resolution (Feasey, 2010; Whitney, 2017).

Towards Postfeminism

The term *postfeminism* has emerged as one of the most contested and multilayered concepts in contemporary gender discourse. It signifies, paradoxically, both a continuation of feminist ideals and a rejection of the feminist label. Scholars such as Pamela Aronson, Elaine J. Hall, Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, and Charlotte Brunsdon have explored the sociological, cultural, and representational facets of postfeminism, revealing its complexity as both ideology and lived experience. This essay examines postfeminism analytically through these three seminal works, focusing on (1) the sociological construction of "postfeminist" identity, (2) the myth of postfeminism as a media discourse, and (3) the cultural aesthetics of postfeminism as represented in media and lifestyle narratives.

Postfeminism as Ambivalent Identity

Pamela Aronson's *"Feminists or 'Postfeminists'? Young Women's Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations"* (2003) presents one of the most nuanced sociological analyses of postfeminist identity. Her qualitative research with young women demonstrates that the so-called "postfeminist generation" does not necessarily reject feminism but rather reinterprets it within a framework of individualism, ambivalence, and pragmatism. Aronson observes that while media discourse often proclaims the "death" of feminism, young women express awareness of persisting gender

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inequalities even as they distance themselves from the feminist label (905–06). Her participants recognize the achievements of earlier feminist movements—expanded access to education, employment, and reproductive rights—yet they also internalize neoliberal values of self-determination and personal choice that fragment collective feminist consciousness (910–11).

Aronson's findings disrupt the binary opposition between "feminist" and "postfeminist" by introducing a continuum of identification. She categorizes respondents as *feminists*, *feminist sympathizers*, *fence-sitters*, and *anti-feminists*, showing that many women hold feminist values while rejecting the term itself (908–09). This ambiguity reflects what she calls the "simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization" of feminism (906). Such depoliticization is linked to a neoliberal ideology that privatizes structural inequality and transforms feminist politics into individual lifestyle choices. Aronson's argument thus reveals that postfeminism, as lived identity, is less an ideological opposition to feminism than a symptom of changing social conditions in which collective struggle is replaced by individualized empowerment.

Moreover, Aronson highlights the intersectional variations in postfeminist identity. Class, race, and life experiences profoundly shape women's orientations toward feminism. Middle-class women, exposed to feminist discourses in academia, articulate more coherent feminist positions, while working-class women frame gender inequality through economic hardship rather than political ideology (907). Women of color often critique mainstream feminism for centering white, middle-class concerns, echoing longstanding critiques within intersectional feminist scholarship (907–08). Aronson's analysis demonstrates that postfeminism cannot be understood as a universal generational phenomenon but rather as a stratified response to feminism shaped by sociocultural positioning.

The Myth and Media Construction of Postfeminism

Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez's *"The Myth of Postfeminism"* (2003) complements Aronson's sociological perspective by exposing postfeminism as a discursive construct propagated by the mass media. Through a content analysis of ninety popular and scholarly sources, Hall and Rodriguez identify four central postfeminist claims: (1) declining support for the women's movement, (2) growing antifeminism among specific groups, (3) feminism's perceived irrelevance, and (4) the rise of "no, but…" feminism—women who endorse equality but reject feminist identification (879). These claims, the authors argue, lack empirical support. Public opinion data from 1980–1999 show little evidence of eroding support for gender equality, suggesting that postfeminism is less a social reality than a "media-created social category" (885).

Hall and Rodriguez conceptualize postfeminism as a *myth*, not in the sense of falsehood but as a narrative that organizes public perception. Media representations construct postfeminism as a natural historical progression, implying that feminism's goals have been achieved and are therefore obsolete. This framing, they argue, functions ideologically to depoliticize gender inequality and to divide women along generational and cultural lines (883–84). The authors demonstrate how popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* alternately celebrated feminism's victories and declared its irrelevance, effectively "talking postfeminism into existence" (884–85). As a result, postfeminism operates as what they call a "cultural toolkit," offering rhetorical resources to discredit collective feminist politics while promoting individualist narratives of success (885).

The concept of "no, but…" feminism captures the ambivalent self-positioning of women who align with feminist principles but fear social stigmatization. Hall and Rodriguez cite research showing that young women often avoid the label because of negative media stereotypes of feminists as "unattractive, unfeminine, and man-hating" (884). This phenomenon mirrors Aronson's "fence-sitter" category, illustrating the internalization of anti-feminist imagery even among those who believe in gender equality. Hall and Rodriguez conclude that postfeminism is a media discourse that produces ideological effects: it undermines solidarity, depoliticizes feminist goals, and frames equality as an achieved fact rather than an ongoing struggle (885–86). Thus, the "myth of postfeminism" functions as a backlash narrative that conceals persistent gender hierarchies under the guise of progress.

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Postfeminism as Cultural Aesthetic and Media Genre

Where Aronson and Hall and Rodriguez focus on sociological and discursive dimensions, Charlotte Brunsdon's "*Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella*" (2005) investigates postfeminism's cultural manifestations in media and popular culture. Examining figures such as Martha Stewart and Nigella Lawson, Brunsdon explores how postfeminist aesthetics reconfigure domesticity as a site of pleasure, professionalism, and self-expression. For Brunsdon, the 1990s "resurgence of the domestic on television" represents a shift from the feminist critique of domestic labor to a celebration of the domestic as lifestyle performance (110–11). Postfeminist media figures such as Stewart embody a paradox: they reclaim traditionally feminine spaces while asserting entrepreneurial authority within them.

Brunsdon contrasts Stewart's glamorous domesticity with Martha Rosler's *The Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), a second-wave feminist video that transformed kitchen tools into weapons of resistance. Rosler's performance exposes the violence of domestic confinement, whereas Stewart's perfectionist domesticity transforms the same space into a site of aesthetic mastery (110–12). This juxtaposition dramatizes the ideological shift from feminism's critique of domestic roles to postfeminism's commodification of femininity. In postfeminist media culture, domestic labor becomes a form of self-expression aligned with consumer capitalism, a process Angela McRobbie calls the "undoing of feminism" through cultural incorporation (Brunsdon 112–13).

Furthermore, Brunsdon situates postfeminism within generational discourse. Her students' incredulity toward second-wave feminist films reveals what she terms "disidentification," a process by which younger women differentiate themselves from the perceived excesses of earlier feminism (112–13). This "not being like that" structure—refusing identification with the "angry, humorless" feminist stereotype—parallels Hall and Rodriguez's notion of "no, but…" feminism. Brunsdon also notes that postfeminist media texts often stage this generational tension through female protagonists who "negotiate the perilous path of living as a woman in a patriarchal world" (113). The recurring narrative of the "single girl" who balances independence with romantic fulfillment exemplifies the postfeminist genre that reconciles feminism with femininity through irony and self-awareness.

In this sense, Brunsdon reframes postfeminism not merely as ideology but as *genre*—a repetitive structure of representation that mediates feminist history through popular culture (112–13). This genre simultaneously memorializes and trivializes feminism, producing what she calls the "Ur feminist article," in which female protagonists are celebrated for their contradictions but never allowed full political coherence. Postfeminism thus becomes a cultural logic that converts feminist struggle into aesthetic play, replacing critique with consumption and collective politics with individualized style.

Taken together, the works of Aronson, Hall and Rodriguez, and Brunsdon reveal that postfeminism is not a coherent movement or ideology but a constellation of contradictory discourses. Aronson exposes its sociological roots in generational ambivalence and neoliberal individualism; Hall and Rodriguez unmask its ideological function as a media-constructed myth; and Brunsdon uncovers its aestheticization in popular culture as both genre and affect. Across these analyses, postfeminism emerges as a site of tension between feminist memory and neoliberal modernity—a discourse that proclaims equality while reproducing inequality through depoliticization and commodification.

Postfeminism, therefore, must be understood not as "after" feminism but as a contested rearticulation of it. It thrives on feminism's cultural success, translating political achievements into personal lifestyles and media narratives. As Hall and Rodriguez argue, it is "talked into existence" by the very media that benefit from its depoliticizing effects (885). Aronson's and Brunsdon's findings remind us that beneath this discourse lies a persistent feminist consciousness—fragmented, ambivalent, but still alive. The analytical challenge is to read postfeminism not as feminism's endpoint but as evidence of its ongoing negotiation with the cultural and economic structures of late modernity.

Postfeminist Negotiations and the Reconfiguration of "Taming"

In Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl*, misogynistic values are simultaneously idealized and critiqued, mirroring the

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contradictions that Natalie K. Eschenbaum identifies in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* as a text that "modernises misogyny rather than abolishes it" (Eschenbaum 31). Tyler's narrative exposes this ambivalence through subtle linguistic and situational choices, particularly in her depiction of Kate Battista's domestic entrapment. The novel's opening scene, in which Kate reluctantly complies with her father's request to deliver lunch to his laboratory, encapsulates this tension. When her father pleads, "Ah, Kate, don't be like that. Just hop in the car and zip over; there's a good girl," Kate's frustrated response—"Sheesh"—followed by her reluctant obedience, dramatizes the persistence of patriarchal control under the guise of affection and civility (Tyler).

Tyler's deliberate use of the phrase "good girl" functions as an ironic echo of the infantilizing rhetoric that sustains patriarchal authority. The father's casual condescension reduces Kate to a compliant child, exposing how the language of care often conceals structures of domination. By modernizing Shakespeare's "taming" plot, Tyler reframes misogyny as a subtle, internalized process rather than an overt act of subjugation. As Eschenbaum observes, Tyler's adaptation "forces readers to confront the endurance of sexist scripts in modern relationships," particularly through the dissonance between Pyotr's coercive charm and the novel's romantic closure (34).

Through this lens, *Vinegar Girl* invites a more analytical engagement with the gender politics of *The Taming of the Shrew*, compelling readers to negotiate the uneasy coexistence of affection and control. Tyler's nuanced portrayal of Kate's resistance and compliance transforms the taming narrative into a site of critical tension, where irony exposes rather than resolves misogyny. In doing so, she continues the conversation Eschenbaum identifies—where "modernisation does not erase patriarchal logic but repackages it within the language of romance and individual choice" (Eschenbaum 35).

In the opening chapters of *Vinegar Girl*, Anne Tyler establishes the foundation for her modern reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* by immersing readers in the gendered and domestic dynamics of the Battista household. Through Kate Battista's interactions with her father, Dr. Louis Battista, and his assistant, Pyotr Cherbakov, Tyler constructs an atmosphere of restrained tension in which patriarchal authority persists beneath the veneer of familial affection. Kate's reluctant compliance with her father's request to deliver his forgotten lunch—a task rooted in caretaking and domestic servitude—signals the novel's engagement with the enduring expectation that women must accommodate men's irresponsibility. Her father's patronizing tone and exaggerated praise of her "good-girl" dependability subtly infantilize her, exposing how benevolent sexism operates as a contemporary form of "taming." Even as Kate expresses frustration, her eventual acquiescence underscores how internalized obligation continues to regulate women's labor and emotional availability. (Tyler 6-13)

Tyler complicates this dynamic by humanizing Dr. Battista, depicting him as vulnerable and overburdened, a man struggling to sustain his research and keep assistants like Pyotr. This dual characterization—both neglectful patriarch and anxious father—creates moral ambivalence that mirrors the contradictions of postfeminist narratives, in which male authority is softened through vulnerability while female subordination is reframed as empathy. When Kate reassures her father, her gesture blends irritation with reluctant tenderness, signaling how care becomes both a means of resistance and entrapment. As she exits into the sunlit world outside the lab, Tyler juxtaposes her isolation with the carefree laughter of other women nearby, a moment that visually captures Kate's alienation from the feminine norms of sociability and lightness that the world around her seems to valorize.

Tyler extends this tension by placing Kate in the classroom—a microcosm of societal hierarchy where she is again positioned ambiguously between authority and subordination. Her work as a teacher's assistant at the Charles Village Little People's School symbolizes both her intellectual stagnation and her constrained agency. Despite her natural rapport with children, Kate's sense of being an "impostor" reveals a deeper crisis of identity. She occupies a liminal space—older than the children yet denied full professional legitimacy—reflecting the broader gendered dynamics of undervalued "women's work." Tyler uses this environment to critique the postfeminist illusion of workplace equality: although Kate participates in a nurturing, feminized profession,

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her autonomy remains circumscribed by institutional expectations of tact, restraint, and "pleasantness," as emphasized by Mrs. Darling's admonitions. (Tyler 14-34)

Mrs. Darling's polite but patronizing critique of Kate's "performance" exemplifies how patriarchal discipline operates through managerial discourse rather than overt coercion. By suggesting that parents "don't share the children's fondness for her," Mrs. Darling subtly frames Kate's assertiveness as unprofessional, reaffirming the gendered code of emotional labor that requires women to suppress irritation in favor of diplomacy. This moment marks a symbolic continuation of the "taming" motif—one mediated by institutional civility rather than marital hierarchy. Kate's difficulty in embodying this expected femininity foregrounds her resistance to the social script that conflates professionalism with docility.

Tyler also situates Kate's domestic and professional frustrations within a broader narrative of familial dysfunction and emotional inheritance. Her father's intellectual detachment and Bunny's youthful impulsiveness reproduce gender archetypes that position women along a binary of rational discipline and naïve charm. Bunny, described as ethereal and reminiscent of their late mother, functions as a foil to Kate's pragmatic, self-contained demeanor. This contrast echoes Shakespeare's opposition between Bianca and Katherina, but Tyler reimagines it within a postfeminist frame—one in which both daughters negotiate the residual expectations of femininity in different registers. Bunny's passive sweetness grants her social ease, while Kate's assertiveness isolates her, exposing how contemporary gender roles continue to privilege performative softness over autonomy.

The intrusion of Pyotr Cherbakov into this domestic sphere further intensifies the novel's exploration of gender and power. His foreignness positions him as both outsider and catalyst, allowing Tyler to test how patriarchal dynamics adapt across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Pyotr's initial interactions with Kate—awkward but attentive—foreshadow the novel's ironic play with romantic convention. Rather than an overtly domineering suitor, Pyotr embodies a subtler kind of control, one rooted in social exchange and institutional dependency, as his visa status ties his future to Dr. Battista's intervention. Kate's early encounters with him are thus charged with both curiosity and apprehension, as she becomes unwittingly entangled in her father's plan to secure Pyotr's stay through marriage.

Tyler's prose oscillates between irony and empathy, constructing a realist critique of gendered expectation without overt polemic. The domestic and professional spaces Kate inhabits—home, school, and laboratory—are unified by a common theme: women's emotional and logistical labor sustains the functioning of patriarchal systems that simultaneously marginalize them. Yet Tyler refrains from depicting Kate as a victim; instead, she portrays her as a reluctant participant in a social script she intellectually rejects but emotionally reproduces. This ambivalence situates *Vinegar Girl* firmly within the terrain of postfeminist fiction, where feminist awareness coexists uneasily with the endurance of patriarchal order.

At the Little People's School, Kate's confrontation with Mrs. Darling over a minor comment about a child's drawing ability encapsulates how feminine labor is policed under the guise of emotional professionalism. Mrs. Darling's criticism—that Kate must learn to be more "tactful"—reflects the postfeminist demand that women temper honesty with empathy, discipline their speech, and prioritize others' feelings over their own integrity. Tyler's portrayal of this exchange reveals how neoliberal workplaces, especially feminized ones like teaching or caregiving, impose gendered expectations of politeness and affective management. Kate's insistence that "Emma didn't mind" exposes the arbitrariness of this reprimand; what is being corrected is not rudeness but nonconformity. In the postfeminist workplace, women are not told to be submissive but to be "likeable"—a modern euphemism for self-erasure. Through Kate, Tyler critiques how professionalism disguises patriarchal control as interpersonal diplomacy.

This theme extends into the domestic sphere, where the family dinner scene becomes a microcosm of the postfeminist negotiation between autonomy and patriarchal expectation. The introduction of Pyotr Cherbakov to the household intensifies the tension between intellect and intimacy, reason and emotional labor. Dr. Battista's obliviousness to social dynamics, Bunny's flirtatious immaturity, and Pyotr's cultural awkwardness all converge around Kate, who once

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again assumes the role of mediator and moral center. The chaos of the tofu dinner—Bunny's experimentation, her phone call to a boy, and Dr. Battista's detached rambling—renders the domestic space absurdly unstable. Yet within this instability, Tyler stages the reassertion of patriarchal logic through Dr. Battista's shocking proposal that Kate should marry Pyotr to secure his visa.

This proposition literalizes the commodification of women that postfeminism often conceals under narratives of "choice." Dr. Battista presents the marriage as a pragmatic solution, not a romantic one, reducing Kate to a transactional figure in his professional ambitions. His reasoning—that Pyotr is "integral to his work"—converts Kate's body and legal status into an instrument of male continuity and intellectual capital. The absurdity of this request underscores the persistence of patriarchal entitlement beneath liberal rationality. Tyler exposes how the rhetoric of progress does not dismantle but reconfigures patriarchal control into forms of emotional persuasion and familial duty.

Kate's reaction—an eruption of anger culminating in her throwing a pen at Bunny and storming off—functions as a rare moment of feminist assertion within the text's postfeminist frame. Her anger, however, is framed not as political consciousness but as emotional excess, echoing how postfeminist discourse often pathologizes female rage as immaturity rather than resistance. Tyler's nuanced irony lies in how she allows Kate to express genuine indignation while situating her outburst in a context where it is destined to be misunderstood or dismissed. The scene thus dramatizes the exhaustion of feminist affect within a postfeminist world that prizes accommodation over rebellion.

Kate's introspection—her reflections on failed relationships, isolation, and her father's instrumental treatment of her—illustrates the psychic toll of living under the "illusion of equality." Postfeminism, as theorized by scholars like Angela McRobbie, often presents women as having transcended patriarchy, yet Tyler's portrayal of Kate exposes the emptiness of this narrative. Kate enjoys nominal independence—she works, earns a wage, and manages her household—but her autonomy is circumscribed by invisible emotional and familial obligations. Her father's reliance on her for domestic and bureaucratic maintenance (from cooking to taxes) exemplifies the feminized labor that sustains patriarchal productivity while remaining unacknowledged. (Tyler 35-50)

Kate's exhaustion is not simply personal but structural: it reflects the dissonance between feminist consciousness and postfeminist conditions. Her late-night retreat into solitude—reading about the Cambrian Era—functions symbolically as an escape from the suffocating domesticity and emotional servitude of her present. The imagery of prehistoric life evokes a world unmarked by gendered hierarchy, a temporal and psychological refuge from human social structures. Tyler's choice to end the chapter in this moment of imaginative withdrawal underscores postfeminism's paradox: the desire for liberation coexists with resignation, and autonomy is achieved only through isolation.

Tyler's depiction of Bunny's adolescent rebellion adds another layer to this critique. Bunny's flirtations, vegetarian experiments, and whimsical idealism contrast sharply with Kate's pragmatism, positioning her as a postfeminist caricature of youthful empowerment—free, expressive, but directionless. Yet even Bunny's seeming freedom is shaped by male influence, as her dietary choices stem from her infatuation with Edward Mintz. In this sense, both sisters embody divergent responses to patriarchy: Bunny internalizes it through romantic imitation, while Kate resists it through reluctant endurance. Neither mode achieves genuine emancipation, revealing the structural persistence of male mediation in women's self-definition.

Tyler's narrative reframes *The Taming of the Shrew* through the lens of postfeminism's contradictions. Whereas Shakespeare's Katherina is tamed through overt domination, Kate Battista is subdued by the subtler forces of care, obligation, and institutional politeness. Her father's "proposal" for a pragmatic marriage and Mrs. Darling's admonition to be "tactful" both exemplify the modern technologies of taming—couched not in violence but in emotional and rhetorical containment. Tyler's realism transforms Shakespearean farce into a study of the everyday mechanisms that sustain gender hierarchy under contemporary liberalism.

In this light, Kate's defiance—her blunt speech, impatience, and refusal to perform charm—becomes a

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form of postfeminist resistance, albeit one stripped of collective politics. She does not seek revolution but autonomy within constraint. Tyler's portrayal neither wholly condemns nor celebrates her; rather, it situates her within a world where feminist impulses persist but have been absorbed into the quiet frustrations of modern womanhood. By the end of chapter four, Kate stands as a distinctly postfeminist figure: conscious of inequality, weary of its persistence, and suspended between rebellion and compliance—an inheritor of feminism's ideals trapped within the structures it sought to dismantle. (Tyler 50-60)

In the middle and later chapters of *Vinegar Girl*, Anne Tyler advances her postfeminist reinterpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew* by translating Shakespeare's overt patriarchal power dynamics into the subtle, ambivalent negotiations of gender and autonomy characteristic of the twenty-first century. As Kate Battista becomes increasingly ensnared in her father's manipulative marriage plot, Tyler constructs a domestic and social landscape where traditional hierarchies persist under the guise of affection, professionalism, and "choice." This dynamic exemplifies what Rosalind Gill identifies as the postfeminist sensibility—a discourse in which "feminism is simultaneously taken into account and repudiated" (Gill 149).

Kate's vanished crocus bulbs, consumed by unseen creatures, foreshadow the erosion of her own agency by the subterranean forces of familial obligation and patriarchal dependence. Her father's repeated calls for her to deliver his forgotten lunch serve as an emblem of the unpaid emotional and logistical labor expected of women, even in ostensibly modern contexts. Tyler uses the repetition of this domestic errand—mundane yet intrusive—to illustrate how female responsibility is naturalized within the family unit. As Kate reflects on her fractured relationships, her resentment toward Bunny's "social" charm and their father's indulgence of "dumb blondes" exposes her frustration with the ways feminine docility is rewarded while her own assertiveness is pathologized (Tyler 61-71). This emotional economy mirrors what Angela McRobbie describes as the postfeminist "undoing of feminism"—a process through which the gains of women's liberation are reabsorbed into the private sphere, repackaged as voluntary emotional labor (McRobbie 12).

Pyotr Cherbakov's arrival at the Battista home in this chapter further dramatizes the collision between personal autonomy and patriarchal negotiation. His mixture of awkwardness and admiration introduces a form of gendered tension that is both comic and revealing. When Pyotr remarks on accents and foreignness, Tyler uses linguistic difference to parallel gender difference—both become sites of translation and miscommunication. Kate's tentative softening toward Pyotr, despite her resistance, exemplifies postfeminist ambivalence: the coexistence of skepticism toward male authority and the internalized desire to find validation within it. As Natalie Eschenbaum notes, Tyler's adaptation "modernizes misogyny rather than abolishes it," inviting readers to confront how patriarchal logics persist in softened, culturally palatable forms (Eschenbaum 31).

Her father's orchestration of a marriage to Pyotr for professional gain exemplifies the commodification of women's agency within neoliberal family structures. Dr. Battista's insistence that the marriage is merely a "formality" cloaks exploitation in the rhetoric of rational choice, aligning with what postfeminist discourse often frames as empowerment through compliance. Tyler's irony is deliberate: Kate's "agreement" to the marriage, motivated by guilt and obligation rather than desire, reveals how consent can be manufactured within emotional dependency. The wedding dinner, dominated by Aunt Thelma's controlling enthusiasm, stages postfeminism's paradoxical fantasy of feminine autonomy constrained by the relentless management of women by other women. (Tyler 71-79) Thelma's hyperactive social planning, presented as supportive, mirrors the disciplinary logic of neoliberal femininity—where women enforce standards of taste, decorum, and domestic success upon one another (Gill 151).

As the novel progresses, Kate's sense of self erodes amid competing demands from her family, her workplace, and Pyotr's expectations. The domestic sphere—once the battleground of second-wave feminism—is now reconfigured as a site of ironic containment. Tyler's depiction of the family dinner, the engagement announcement, and the wedding preparations underscores the quiet violence of emotional manipulation masked as progress. The repeated assumption that marriage will "settle" Kate,

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rendering her less difficult, evokes the taming logic of Shakespeare's play, yet Tyler's version is stripped of farce and filled with subdued realism. Her protagonist is not a caricature of resistance but a postfeminist subject caught in a web of relational obligation and reluctant adaptation. (Tyler 80-95)

Kate's move into Pyotr's home in Chapter Nine introduces a new spatial metaphor for containment. The house, large yet sterile, signifies the ambivalence of postfeminist domesticity: it promises privacy and stability while embodying the residue of patriarchal ownership. Kate's act of unpacking—arranging her belongings, inspecting the kitchen, observing the garden—suggests a tentative reclamation of space, an assertion of identity within constraint. Yet her labor is once again aestheticized rather than politicized, aligning with Charlotte Brunsdon's observation that postfeminist culture "transforms domesticity from drudgery into display, from necessity into performance" (Brunsdon 112). Tyler's portrayal of Kate preparing food, managing conversations, and mediating social awkwardness recasts the feminist critique of domestic labor into a meditation on emotional resilience. (Tyler 96-112)

The chaotic wedding day—disrupted by the theft of Dr. Battista's lab mice—serves as a comic allegory for the instability of patriarchal systems that attempt to control women's lives. The ceremony's awkwardness, marked by Bunny's outburst and Pyotr's disheveled appearance, resists the romantic closure typical of both Shakespearean comedy and conventional marriage plots. Kate's calm acceptance of the absurd situation, culminating in her understated kiss to Pyotr, signals not submission but pragmatic adaptation—a hallmark of postfeminist sensibility. Her "quiet resolve" functions as a muted form of agency: she neither revolts nor surrenders but learns to navigate constraint with ironic self-awareness. (Tyler 119-135)

The epilogue reimagines this transformation through the figure of Louie Shcherbakov, the couple's son, whose independence and curiosity symbolize a generational reconfiguration of gender and domesticity. His parents' partnership, marked by mutual affection and professional recognition, suggests a reconciliation between intellectual and emotional labor that eluded earlier generations. Yet Tyler's tone remains ambivalent: the equilibrium achieved by Kate and Pyotr feels contingent, sustained by humor and habit rather than ideological transformation. (Tyler 163-165)

Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* thus exemplifies postfeminism's paradoxical structure—an oscillation between feminist critique and the normalization of patriarchal forms through irony, pragmatism, and emotional realism. As Eschenbaum argues, Tyler's adaptation "forces readers to negotiate affection and critique simultaneously," revealing that misogyny has not disappeared but been modernized (Eschenbaum 34). In Tyler's world, the "taming" is neither violent nor complete; it is negotiated through affective labor, domestic compromise, and the quiet endurance that defines contemporary femininity.

CONCLUSION

Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* occupies a complex position in the cultural dialogue between feminism, postfeminism, and literary adaptation. By transposing *The Taming of the Shrew* into a twenty-first-century American domestic setting, Tyler exposes how patriarchal ideologies persist beneath the rhetoric of modernity, politeness, and progress. Her protagonist, Kate Battista, embodies the postfeminist paradox: she is educated, self-aware, and articulate, yet her agency is continually redirected into service—whether emotional, domestic, or professional. Tyler's narrative refuses both the comedic closure of Shakespeare's original and the triumphalism of liberal feminist emancipation, offering instead a muted realism that acknowledges feminism's endurance within constraint.

Through her portrayal of Kate's reluctant marriage, familial obligation, and pragmatic endurance, Tyler demonstrates that postfeminism is less a historical aftermath of feminism than its ongoing domestication. The "taming" of women in the modern world occurs not through external force but through internalized responsibility, affective management, and the neoliberal valorization of choice. As Brunsdon observes, postfeminist narratives often "turn domesticity into display," transforming resistance into aestheticized accommodation (112). Tyler's adaptation captures this transformation with subtle irony: her heroine achieves stability not by renouncing patriarchy, but by learning to live knowingly within it. The image of Louie Shcherbakov—independent,

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imaginative, and nurtured by both parents—suggests the possibility of a generational recalibration of gender and care. Yet even this resolution remains ambivalent, reflecting postfeminism's refusal to settle the question of whether equality has been achieved or simply rebranded. By merging humor, affection, and critique, Tyler reimagines *The Taming of the Shrew* not as a tale of submission or empowerment, but as an exploration of how feminist consciousness survives—quietly, persistently—within the everyday negotiations of a world that insists it no longer needs feminism.

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