

Revisiting History: A Critical Study of Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*

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Abstract

The Western literary tradition since its beginning has invariably foregrounded the experiences and perceptions of men suppressing the voices of women and, thus, relegated women's voices to the margins of history. Issues concerning 'identity' and 'representation' have preoccupied both feminist theorists and women writers from the beginning of the women's liberation movement to the present. As Patricia Waugh points out, exploring the contradictoriness of female identity, women writers have recognised that, the formulation of a unified "woman's voice is as risky a strategy as its dissolution into a fluid and free-floating semiosis" (204). Throughout 1970s and 1980s feminist theorists were particularly concerned with this contradiction: how might women affirm a feminine identity historically constructed through the very cultural and ideological formations which feminism as a movement was also seeking to challenge and deconstruct. Eva Figs in her feminist manifesto Patriarchal Attitudes argues, "women have been largely man-made" (14). In other words, woman's identity and representation in the literature is constructed as the projection of men's fears and desires, it is a 'distorted mirror' which shows a woman not what she is but rather what she should be.

DISCUSSION

The Booker Prize winning author Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) is an honest attempt to break the tradition of silence by retelling the story of the Trojan War from the perspective of the female voice of Briseis, a war prize and a sex slave. Barker's feminist revisionist mythological fiction allows the muted and oppressed women of Homer's *The Iliad* to speak out, to make choices, to act, and to assert their identity and opinions about their own lives. This paper aims at explaining how Barker, focusing on the depiction of feminine perspective and female experience, attempts to challenge the age-old patriarchal bias which suppresses the female voice and to provide a new representation of female subjectivity that counters the misogynist depiction of women in literatures based on myths. The novel's feminist reinterpretation introduces a new form of female subjectivity that deconstructs phallogocentric representations, critiquing the patriarchal foundations of traditional storytelling. Barker through her work presents an alternative narrative that exposes the passivity and suffering of women embedded within these long-standing traditions, myths and Literatures.

The Silence of the Girls starts with an epigraph from *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth. Novel is a dazzling re-imagining of *The Iliad*, as alleged by the dejected women of the Trojan War. Here, Barker relates for what reason she goes back to the mythology, who tells the stories and why it matters to her. In an interview, Pat Barker suggests many writers adapt the Greek epic and focus on the heroic spaces and leaving the unheroic and oppressed class behind. What Pat Barker does in her novel is that, she manages in looking at the unheroic spaces in the epic that other writers have previously ignored or taken for granted. For Pat Barker, it was the voicelessness of the girls, the limitation placed by the patriarchal society, and, the fact that Briseis -the female protagonist is being quarrelled over by these two great distinguished men and yet the girl is speechless. Briseis has no opinion; she has no power; and she has no voice. It was the urge to fill that vacuum that made her go back and start retelling the myth yet again from female perspective. *The Silence of the Girls* gives Barker sufficient justification to portray that, even though the women are victims or exiled or oppressed in the patriarchal society, they can shape their own identity. Pat Barker retells *The Iliad* in her novel from the perspective of a female slave, Briseis, who is fought over by two Greek heroes, Achilles and Agamemnon. Pat Barker gives voice not only to Briseis but also to the other women of the conflict and plight. *The Iliad* is an epic tale goes on nearly ten years led by Agamemnon and the Greek forces to siege the city of Troy. The war between the Greeks and the Troy starts with the elopement of Helen, wife of Menelaus of Sparta. Paris, son of king Priam of Troy, seduces Helen and steals her from her husband, who in return persuades Agamemnon, his brother to take revenge by taking siege of Troy. Many Greek heroes Odysseus, Achilles etc. join Agamemnon to lay

siege to Troy. The Greeks have also captured Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of the Greek god Apollo. The Greeks are arguing about whether or not to return the Trojan captive of King Agamemnon, Chryseis, to her father. Agamemnon refuses because she is his war prize, and intimidates to ransom the girl to her father. Apollo gets offended and plagues them with pestilence. However, in due course Agamemnon returns Chryseis but takes Briseis, Achilles' wartime prize. Achilles has destroyed Briseis home, and keeps her as his concubine.

Briseis is a captive and belongs to Achilles. By taking Briseis, Barker portrays Agamemnon, a powerful man grappling for supremacy. Feeling dishonoured and enraged, Achilles pulls himself and his warriors back from the Trojan War. Hence both Helen and Briseis become the cause of dispute between two men that lead to brutal battle. However, women as a cause of all trouble is a common theme for this epic drama.

The Silence of the Girls is told by first-person narrator, and only the final part, of the narrative is by the third-person point of view. In The Iliad, terrible destruction is caused by male behaviour that not only harm themselves but also the society as a whole, for example, Hector says in The Iliad, "War is men's business" women lack action; they are either enslaved or sacrificed and are given as war prizes because it was a patriarchal society where men rule women. Thus, we have seen that men in The Iliad struggle with each other for status drawn primarily from women's bodies and pretty faces. Women are shown voiceless, but they are not entirely silent. Homer's women lament for their dead sons, fathers and husbands; grieve for the city of Troy and for their own freedom. Hence mourning after war and destruction is the only goal of women.

Briseis, who was taken as a hostage by Achilles to revenge his brother's murder but later he himself falls in love with her. However, later Agamemnon takes Briseis from Achilles. Achilles is enraged and refuses to fight for Agamemnon even after Agamemnon returns Briseis- untouched.

Pat Barker starts her story a few months earlier unlike The Iliad which starts in the tenth year of the Trojan War. The Greeks are encircling and blockading the settlement of Lyrnessus, home of Briseis. Briseis watches the falls to the Greeks. She could not do anything but watch silently the wrath of the Greeks. She falls into the hands of the Greeks and is given to Achilles as his war prize. Captive women are slaves and are given to the warriors but Briseis is taken as Achilles' concubine. From queen to captive, she is transmuted from a free woman to a concubine and is offered to the warrior Achilles. She discovers that the Greeks blame her as the cause of the quarrel between the two. On the same day, in the course of the Trojan War, innumerable women have been arrested and taken captives, and given to the warriors. In The Iliad, many other female characters fall into similar category such as Chryseis, Hecuba and Andromache. They are like pawns that has been exchanged among powerful men as their war prize. The fights are caused by women, men possess them because men are in control. The male domination is seen in both public and private spheres. They control and dominate both homes and country too.

Barker gives Briseis, standing nearby, a bitter rejoinder: "And I do what countless women before me have been forced to do. I spread my legs for the man who killed my husband and my brothers" (42). In a world of men obsessed with their own supremacy, how much more powerful is Briseis's claim that she is just one of many. A fight over Briseis between rivals Achilles and Agamemnon kicks off the action of the novel, though she otherwise appears only a handful of times. But she, too, appears on a list - a list of objects: "They brought out the seven tripods which Agamemnon had promised and the twelve horses; they also brought the women skilled in useful arts, seven in number, with Briseis, which made eight" (57). Women are replaceable. Agamemnon makes her utility explicit. He tells Achilles: "I shall come to your tent and take your own prize Briseis, that you may learn how much stronger I am than you are, and that another may fear to set himself up as equal or comparable with me" (61). It has nothing to do with Briseis. "Men carve meaning into women's faces," Barker's Briseis observes, "messages addressed to other men" (65).

The Silence of the Girls is cleanly, even beautifully written, but it also feels familiar. "Reclaiming" women of classics is now a genre, one that no longer feel inherently rebellious. In the past few years, Madeline Miller's novel Circe and Emily Wilson's new translation of the Odyssey have given fresh voice to Homer's women, alongside novels centering Antigone and Jocasta.

Barker is simply writing against Homer, whereas Miller and Wilson locate a radical current in the original poems and exploit it. It would be easy to believe there is something eternally sexist about Homer- his men abuse and trade women. But there's a kind of larger awareness in Homer, too: when Briseis is

handed over to Agamemnon's men, Homer gives her an unexpected adjective: "unwilling". Briseis goes unwilling. Achilles and Agamemnon don't care, but with one small word, Homer signals that she has her own story to tell.

The novel has a distinct feminist message. The endeavour to deliver Briseis with a happy ending is narrow, nevertheless, by retelling the story of Briseis. Barker gives her a voice that was left unheard. The female characters' outrage seems a bit predictable, as when Helen says,

I am here, Me, a person, not just an object to be looked at and fought over. Barker paints women as contemplative, diverse, versatile human beings and portrays the emotions of the wounded women, their loneliness, even when they are crying together (78).

Through Briseis, the readers get to listen for voices that are silenced by history and male dominated power. The Silence of the Girls is a novel that portrays the silenced, oppressed and voiceless women, who were trapped in a historical war. Pat Barker introduces the listening skills that allow us to hear another's story, the story of Briseis, a secondary female character who neither got a chance to speak, heard, nor to bear witness. One interesting choice here (which sets it somewhat apart from many of the other retellings that surround it) is Barker's decision to use colloquial and modern Britishisms in the dialogue of the Greek soldiers. About which she comments, "there's no reason the characters should be speaking the Queen's English in an ancient historical fiction, whatever the narrative conventions for historical fiction and fantasy might have become. Ancient Bronze Age warriors from the Greek peninsula certainly wouldn't have spoken modern English, let alone posh modern English, and the choice to make it colloquial in places effectively conjures the modern laddishness" (102). Anna Carey in her review of the book remarks:

This is primarily a book about what war does to women, but Barker examines what it does to men too. Angry, thoughtful, sad, deeply humane and compulsively readable, The Silence of the Girls shows that 36 years after her first novel was published, Barker is a writer at the peak of her powers (9).

The Silence of the Girls provides us insight into the chasms of voicelessness carved out by The Iliad, offering a space for this community of women to assert their own collective and individual narratives over the male voices that traditionally dominate the story and left female voices unheard. In an Interview, Barker comments about the choice of the subject matter of this novel and she suggests that, "her interest lay in looking at the unheroic spaces in the story that other writers have previously ignored".

Catherine Lanone in her article "The Silence of the Girls and the State of Exception" elaborates that, The Silence of the Girls written in 2018 comes as a surprise, at the apex of World-War I commemorations. She argues that rather than turning to The Iliad, Pat Barker has returned to the war archive. She adds that, Barker has adapted Homer's epic, and at the same time she has explored another aspect, that of the female captive as she says: 'I was astonished by that silence. The eloquence of the men, the absolute silence of the women they are quarrelling about' (Barker 17).

Kat Solomon in her essay "Fighting Muteness in Pat Barker's The Silence of the Girls," writes that, throughout the novel, the girls and women find support in one another, sharing news and ministering to the wounds inflicted during the course of their nightly duties. In the novel's concluding chapters, the captured women try to comfort the newly enslaved women of Troy, although they are again hapless to alter their fates.

Many critics like R.Strong have analysed how trauma is portrayed in the book, highlighting how Barker changes the narrative's focus from men's heroic deeds to women's suffering. According to Strong, Barker's narrative method successfully subverts the classical Epics' tendency to glorify battle while emphasizing the dehumanizing repercussions of violence on the female body and psyche.

Barker not only questions conventional interpretations of the epic but also adds to the continuing discussion about the value of ancient literature in the contemporary day by rewriting The Iliad from the viewpoint of its female characters.

Marion Young while commenting about the different types of oppression, divides oppression into five faces: exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence.**done**

1. Exploitation

The novel The Silence of the Girls by Pat Barker depicts the exploitation by rulers/capitalists against women. The women in this novel are subjected to slavery and forced labour. The Greek warriors took personal advantages of the women, oppressed them brutally whose cities had been conquered, resulting in an unequal shift in social status, where there was dominant status for men and slave status for women.

According to Iris Marion Young (1990), exploitation is a form of oppression that often occurs due to authority to obtain other people's benefits. Young also stated that exploitation occurs because a dominant force can carry out any action using individual or group energy to get maximum profit. The novel presents the problem of oppression where women receive prejudicial and harsh treatment by men. Also, there was sexual exploitation of women by Greek

soldiers, where women were to be distributed as enslaved people with indecent treatment. Women are compared and examined, treated as objects to be evaluated, distributed and used for men's pleasure. This is stated in the quote below:

We were lined up outside the huts and inspected. Two men, who never spoke except to each other, walked along the line of women, pulling down a lip here, a lower eyelid there, prodding bellies, squeezing breasts, thrusting their hands between our legs. I realized we were being assessed for distribution. A few of us were singled out and pushed into a particular hut while the others were led away (24).

This proves that there is exploitation of women. Women are taken advantage of, and their rights are violated and dignity trampled. Women were not given freedom in their lives, such as not being able to leave the palace, serving men as enslaved people in all forms, being concubines, and so on. Women are sexual objects who are often raped, and the situation becomes worse because of the war. This highlights the bitter and sad reality of women's situation when they are treated as sex objects and subjected to invasive scrutiny by those in power.

2. Powerlessness

Young states that "helplessness is the inability to participate in decision making that affects one's life conditions" (56). The novel *The Silence of the Girls* depicts the powerlessness of women in a society where they are treated as commodities and subject only to the will of men in power so that women cannot fight and make their own decisions. They are reduced to mere puppets in the hands of men in power. Briseis, as the main character in the novel, feels a deep sense of helplessness when she is tortured and physically examined by an unknown man and is not given the right choice for herself. Her fate is determined only by those who have power and possess her. Another expression of powerlessness is that women in this novel are prohibited from speaking and expressing their feelings. This is all aimed at dominating and controlling them. Just as Andromache, who previously held great power in her realm, was forcibly taken from her home and family. They were held captive and stripped of their autonomy. Their lives are no longer under their control, rather they are now under the control of those in power. They became the property of the victorious Greek warriors. These women were treated as objects placed among the Greek leaders. Their status and role changed from free individuals to enslaved sex objects.

3. Marginalization

The women in this novel are marginalized in various ways. In the Greek camp environment, there was inequality among the women who were enslaved. There is a hierarchy among them, and some are treated worse than others, creating internal disparities among marginalized women. According to Young, "Marginalization is a person or group whose work system cannot or will not be used, so they have the potential to experience severe material deprivation and even extermination" (53). This is stated in the quote below:

I was aware of the common women all around me, tending fires and carrying cooking pots, getting ready for the warriors' return. Of all the women in the camp these were the most wretched. Many of them carried the curious circular bruises that came from contact with the butt end of a spear. They lived around the fires, slept under the huts at night; the youngest of them were no more than nine or ten years old. I'd thought their lives were altogether separate from mine, but now I understood that Agamemnon at least would sometimes donate one of his concubines to his men for common use" (49).

But nothing's ever simple, is it? Incredibly, there were some women whose lives had changed for the better. One girl, who'd been a slave in Lyrnessus and a kitchen slave at that, the lowest of the low—was now the concubine of a great lord, while her mistress, a plain, slack-bellied woman near the end of her childbearing years, had to scratch and scrape for food around the fires. Nothing mattered now except youth, beauty and fertility.(44)

The quote above proves the marginalization of women; those who do not meet society's expectations, especially regarding young age and fertility as factors determining women's value, will experience marginalization and adversity.

4. Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism refers to the domination of one culture over another culture, which often results in the oppression or complete elimination of subordinate cultures. When the Greeks occupied Troy, Trojan culture began to erode. The Greeks plundered the city, taking treasures, works of art, and sacred objects, thereby completely diminishing the Trojan cultural heritage. This is stated in the quote below: Gangs of men were dragging heavy loads out of the buildings—carved furniture, bales of rich cloth, tapestries, armour, tripods, cooking cauldrons, barrels of wine and grain. Now and then, the men would sit down and rest, some on the ground, some on the chairs and beds they'd been carrying. For hours, I watched them strip houses and temples of wealth that generations of my people had worked hard to create, and they were so good at it, so practised. It was exactly like seeing a swarm of locusts settle onto a harvest field; you know they're not going to leave even one ear of corn behind. I watched helplessly as the palace-my home-was stripped bare (20-21).

From the quote above, the elimination of Trojan culture can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism, where one powerful culture tries hard to dominate other cultures by deleting or subduing the original culture. The cultural imperialism occurs in the context of women too. Cultural imperialism can manifest as the application of patriarchal norms and values that limit women's rights and freedom. This can include the reinforcement of gender roles, the objectification of women, and the continuation of oppressive practices such as sexual slavery. Briseis and the other women had never left the house and had been unaccompanied for years. Stepping out without a veil and a companion made her visible to others, making her feel uncomfortable. In the Greek camp, she was introduced to the outside.

In the novel, women are depicted as struggling against their oppression within the social structure of Greek society. They are treated as sexual objects and enslaved people by men, and their voices are silenced. Despite their difficult situations, the women in the novel demonstrate resilience and strength as they navigate their roles as oppressed individuals.

They resist patriarchal oppression by expressing their grief and fear, clustering together for support, and silently enduring the raiding and violence inflicted upon them. The women support and protect each other, especially the younger girls. They huddle together, offer comfort, and try to console one another amid the chaos, brutality and violence. They find strength in their shared experiences and unity. They come together physically and emotionally to face the challenges and atrocities inflicted upon them by powerful men. Despite their captivity, the women seek moments of freedom and solace. They venture outside the huts, bask in the sunlight, and connect with other women who have experienced similar traumas. Their shared traumas unite them together. The women in the novel face immense oppression and struggle to resist it in various ways. Despite their limited power, they find ways to assert themselves and

fight back against their oppressors. The women show defiance and resilience in the face of their oppressors. They refuse to be shattered and continue to resist, even in the most challenging circumstances. Some woman resists being objectified and dehumanized by their abductors. They refuse to be reduced to mere sexual objects and strive to maintain their dignity, even if it means sacrificing their life. The women in the novel demonstrate remarkable resilience and resistance in the face of oppression. They find ways to assert their identity, support each other, and maintain their individuality despite the traumatic circumstances they find themselves in. Women still make small choices and do act, that are marks of their empowerment, even in their constrained lives.

CONCLUSION

Briseis becomes the voice of collective memory, bringing back the tales of silenced women, both celebrated and forgotten ones. By adapting Homer, Barker has appropriated today's crisis with the past. Through trans-focalization, Pat Barker successfully integrates a Renaissance literary tradition of storytelling with a rewriting of a Contemporary fiction. While using the act of telling stories, Barker also gives a voice to a silenced historical person and allows the Homeric women to piece together the story of their lives. The Silence of the Girls challenges and debunks the age-old patriarchal systems of

representation that subdue the female body, voice, perspective, and experience by proposing a new kind of female subjectivity that frustrates the phallocentric representations of female characters in the works of literature drawing their sources from myths, age-old cultural assumptions, and practices. The Silence of the Girls is both an exception in her work and a way for Barker to pursue her relentless investigation of history, with her own specific brand of feminism, her wry irony and her realism. Through trans-focalization, she gives her voice back to Briseis, and allows her to piece together the story of her life (and potentially of all Trojan women), to expose her story rather than History.

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