

## Summoning the Voices of the Silenced: Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, a Feminist Retelling of Homer's *The Iliad*

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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. In the male-written and male-dominated accounts of the ancient world, we do not get access to women's feelings and desires, their struggles and anguishes, and their dreams and accomplishments. Likewise, while Homer's *The Iliad* recounts the incidents of the mythic Trojan War lionizing the valiant and valorous feats of larger than life heroes, women in this timeless epic are reduced to objects, primarily sex-objects, used by conquering men to appease their overriding sense of masculinity and heroism. In essence, women in *The Iliad* are denied the opportunity to articulate their voices on the harrowing pretext that "*Silence becomes a woman*" (Barker 2018, 294). The Booker Prize winning author Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* is a sincere attempt to break that 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 undermined women of Homer's *The Iliad* to speak out, to make choices, to act, and to assert their feelings and opinions about their own lives. Offering a textual analysis of *The Silence of the Girls*, 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 counteracts the misogynist depiction of women in literatures based on myths.

**Keywords:** myth, *The Iliad*, silence, feminist retelling, female perspective

Myths, being deeply embedded in human experience, are considered to be the oldest composed sagas of the human race. They, recounting past events in the form of tales, set out to explore diverse human experience in this universe. De-

spite containing inflated exaggeration along with fantastical and supernatural elements, historians and myth-experts have invariably acknowledged the significance of myth in unfolding the past to the present time. Karen Armstrong, emphasizing on the significance of myth in enabling human beings to live more intensely within this real world, remarks:

The myths gave explicit shape and form to a reality that people sensed intuitively. They told them how the gods behaved, not out of idle curiosity or because these tales were entertaining, but to enable men and women to imitate these powerful beings and experience divinity themselves. (Armstrong 2006, 5)

Transmission of these myths through both oral and written traditions from one generation to subsequent generations has added to the authenticity and acceptability of the embedded concepts contained in these myths. Thus, myths, in the course of time, start concocting human experience, shaping human beliefs, dictating human behavior, guiding human actions, and creating cultural history. Often these myths are constructed, consecrated and disseminated to both propagate and legitimize certain norms, practices, beliefs and rituals even though they endorse unequal power relations between the sexes. Therefore, patriarchal bias and gender prejudice can straightforwardly be discerned in almost all the mythological tales. Furthermore, as Simone de Beauvoir articulates, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (Beauvoir 1956, 162). Consequently, myths turn out to be powerful tools used by men to subordinate women and to tag women with a sexual identity immersed within the phallogocentric power structure. In this context, Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* astutely enunciates:

A myth always implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears towards a sky of transcendence. Women do not set themselves up as Subject and have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship. Men have shaped for their own exaltation great virile figures: Hercules, Prometheus,

Parsifal; woman has only a secondary part to play in the destiny of these heroes. (Beauvoir 1956, 162)

Patriarchal beliefs about women as reflected in myths are imposed on the human psyche in such a way as to be accepted as the transcendental reality. They likewise dictate the manners and norms of human society that guide the conduct of women and shape their roles and identities. On the whole, myths are always produced in a manner that ultimately allows certain perceptions of culture to be accepted as undeniable and factual. Accordingly, myths as a patriarchal instrument yield, preserve and prescribe a subordinate identity for women, which is perceived as natural. Approving Simone De Beauvoir's viewpoint, eminent American feminist critic Kate Millet in her path-breaking book *Sexual Politics* perceptively articulates:

As both the primitive and the civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture in regard to the female were also of male design. The image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the 'otherness' of woman. . . . Whatever its origin, the function of the male sexual antipathy is to provide a means of control over a subordinate group and a rationale which justifies the inferior station of those in a lower order, 'explaining' the oppression of their lives. (Millet 2000, 46-47)

To Millet, "Primitive society practices its misogyny in terms of taboos and mana which evolve into explanatory myth" (Millet 2000, 51). She further opines, "Myth is, of course, a felicitous advance in the level of propaganda, since it so often bases its arguments on ethics or theories of origins" (Millet 2000, 51). She uses the Biblical myth of the Fall as an example to show the exploitation of myth at the hands of patriarchy, illustrating how the "earlier mana concepts of feminine evil have passed through a final literary phase to become highly influential ethical justifications of things as they are" (Millet 2000, 51). Overall, these myths have turned into exclusive tools in the hands of the patriarchy to represent women as subordinate individuals with no agency to control their own destinies. Therefore, women in Western literatures based on these myths have largely been portrayed as silent and passive creatures subject to control by the men in their families and tribes.

To counteract the recurrent practice of presenting the stereotyped images of women with restricted possibilities drawn from traditional myths in classical literature, women writers of late have started retelling these myths by replacing the male perspective by a female perspective hitherto ignored. These retellings of ancient myths offer a new representation of female subjectivity that defies the orthodox patriarchal beliefs which assert women as inferior, and underscore the issue of female autonomy. Feminist revisionism of myths is analogous to the re-arrogation of the male privilege with a view to achieving female intents and goals. Retelling a particular myth from a female point of view with an added feminist edge enables the women authors to recreate the images of women in a different way to how they are represented in traditional classical literature composed by male writers. This avant-garde practice of retelling myths from a feminist perspective also promotes and fosters gender consciousness in contemporary women. Reading myths from a female perspective essentially has the profound potential not only to reveal how much the traditional mythical literary texts written from a male perspective contribute to the suppression of women, but also challenge the androcentric premise of these cultural texts. Feminist theorists and writers in recent times revise myths to lend meaning and purpose until now denied to women. In this context, acclaimed feminist poet and critic Adrienne Rich in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" pronounces:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. (Rich 1972, 18)

For Rich, this self-knowledge is essential for women to untangle themselves from the vicious web of male domination reflected in and perpetuated by the mythical literary texts which time and again render women muzzled and voiceless creatures in the grand scheme of male affairs.

French feminist critic Hélène Cixous in her essay "Castration or Decapitation?" deplores the fact that the only choice available for women is forced decapitation. They can retain their heads only on condition that they remain completely silent. This imposed silence decapitates the feminine metaphorical-

ly, prohibiting her from speaking anything meaningful and substantial. Making a distinction between speaking and talking, she claims that women talk and chatter ceaselessly, "but they don't actually *speak*, they have nothing to say" (Cixous 1981, 49). Citing the story of Little Red Riding Hood, she goes on to explore the place of women in phallogentric history and observes:

. . . she is laid, ever caught in her chain of metaphors, metaphors that organize culture . . . ever her moon to the masculine sun, nature to culture, concavity to masculine convexity, matter to form, immobility/inertia to the march of progress, terrain trod by the masculine footstep, vessel. . . . While man is obviously the active, the upright, the productive . . . and besides, that's how it happens in History. (Cixous 1981, 44)

Towards the end of her essay she persuades women writers to write not as writers but as women, since femininity in writing has the potential of transforming the phallogentric history. It is by feminine writing and accepting the challenge of speaking that women can create their own space by rejecting the enforced space of silence. Cixous feels that writings by women on women can be a means of resistance and a mode of bringing about change in history. Thus, she perceptively articulates:

If women were to set themselves to transform History, it can safely be said that every aspect of History would be completely altered. Instead of being made by man, History's task would be to make woman, to produce her. And it's at this point that work by women themselves on women might be brought into play, which would benefit not only women but all humanity. (Cixous 1981, 50)

In like manner, Cixous makes a rallying cry for women to break out of the snare of silence in her seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa". Deconstructing the prevailing myth of Medusa as a monstrous woman decapitated for her powers to snare, transfix and petrify the onlookers, Cixous offers her feminist critique through the figure of the laughing Medusa, who flaunts her femininity and sexuality by denouncing her representation in popular mythology as a symbol of feminine terror and incomprehensible feminine sexuality. To Cixous, the

beheading of Medusa is a masculine ploy to throttle woman's power of expression and to render her incapacitated. Denouncing male writing that "has been run by a libidinal and cultural- hence political, typically masculine- economy" (Cixous 1976, 879), she ruefully says:

We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces, the bebies- we are black and we are beautiful. (Cixous 1976, 878)

Hence, the repression of women has incessantly, consciously and frighteningly been perpetuated in this locus adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction "where woman has never *her* turn to speak" (Cixous 1976, 879). Accentuating the extraordinary potential of women as writers, Cixous propounds the concept of *l'écriture féminine*, which has the power to subvert the phallogocentric discourse of masculine writing. For Cixous, women's writing, a *new insurgent* writing, can serve as a foundation for women's dissident thought, which has the exceptional power of transforming the phallogocentric social and cultural structures. She sees woman's writing her "self" as "an act that will also be marked by woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her *suppression*" (Cixous 1976, 880). On the whole, a feminine text, in Cixous's opinion, possesses the tremendous subversive power of bringing about "an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments" (Cixous 1976, 888) as well as breaking apart the Western cultural representations of female identity along with the myths associated with womanhood.

Retelling of myths from a feminist perspective has dominated the recent arena of Western literary fiction, bringing prestigious literary awards and accolades to the writers undertaking this subject. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia*, Natalie Haynes's *The Children of Jocasta* and *A Thousand Ships*, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, Madeline Miller's *Circe*, and Daisy Johnson's *Everything Under* are some of the novels that give female characters of classical myths the voice they have conventionally been deprived of by male classical writers. In Madeline Miller's acclaimed novel *Circe*, an ingeniously subversive retelling of Homer's *The Odyssey*, the eponymous spokeswoman Circe, the vilified witch of Homer's tale, both fumes over her unfair portrayal in the epic and mocks the Western classical literary tradition of demeaning the status of women:

I was not surprised by the portrait of myself: the proud witch undone before the hero's sword, kneeling and begging for mercy. Humbling women seems to me a chief pastime of poets. As if there can be no story unless we crawl and weep. (Miller 2019, 181)

Following the contemporary feat of literary revisionism, Pat Barker in her Women's Prize for Fiction 2019 shortlisted novel *The Silence of the Girls* concentrates on representing the feelings and experiences of the women characters who are, for the most part, portrayed as the silent victims of colossal masculine rage and fierceness in Homer's *The Iliad*. Barker in her revisionist mythological fiction has given a feminist tinge to the hitherto overlooked and unheard voice of Briseis, the queen of Lyrnessus, who has been turned into Achilles's "bed-girl" after the fall of her city. Shifting the focus from the mighty, agile and valiant heroes of the Trojan War to a widowed and enslaved woman, Barker, through Briseis's eyes, has given us a glimpse into the dreadful lives of the captured and caged women who are given over as spoils of war to the victorious men. Briseis is just one among those thousands of women – the sex-slaves, the nurses, the cooks, the cleaners, the weavers, the concubines, the subhuman – who are erased from the pages of Homer's grand narrative. As a matter of fact, in *The Silence of the Girls*, Briseis's journey through her life in Greek rape-camps candidly represents a subjugated woman's quest for an individual identity and personal freedom in the face of innumerable hazards and uncertain odds.

Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, written in three parts, begins with Achilles's raid of Lyrnessus, one of Troy's neighboring kingdoms and Briseis's home, which Achilles and his invading men have sacked and destroyed. Killing her four brothers and her husband King Mynes, Achilles not much later chooses Briseis to be his concubine as a trophy of victory. Nevertheless, Barker reveals her intention of telling us a woman-centered account of the Trojan War from the very beginning of her revisionist novel. In an effort to end the silence of women depicted in Homer's *The Iliad*, which depicts mortal women merely as either wailing chorus grieving for the dead or enticing bodies to be sought-after, cherished, abused, assaulted, raped, sacrificed, owned or fought over, Barker, unlike Homer, introduces us to her protagonist Briseis even before Achilles and Agamemnon start falling out over her. Though Homer has used women as the pretexts for the war and squabble, it is, as Barker's retelling deftly demonstrates, men's ego which initiates the battles between Hellenic and Trojan forces as well as the

angry quarrels between mighty heroes. Barker's main intention, rather than glorifying the heroic exploits of mighty men, is to reveal Trojan War's violent brutalities and grim atrocities on women who mostly remain disembodied names in Homer's *The Iliad*. In the first twenty odd pages of Barker's novel, we see that the fall of Lyrnessus is the end of a typical day for the men: the Greek warriors leave triumphant killing, destroying, pillaging, raping and drinking, while all the Lyrnessusian men lie dead. But, it is the beginning of new horrors and afflictions for the women. The matter-of-fact narration goes, "Another successful raid, another city destroyed, men and boys killed, women and girls enslaved, – all in all, a good day. And there was still the night to come" (Barker 2018, 26–27). The novel then chronicles the haggard and agonizing lives of Briseis and other enslaved Trojan women in the Greek encampments. Surprisingly enough, the heroic feats and conducts of triumphant warriors do not look at all commendable when viewed from the perspective of the captive Trojan women whom they abuse in every possible way. All these celebrated classical heroes and warriors look outrageously vainglorious and ruthless wrongdoers in Barker's tale, as Briseis sternly utters, "Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles . . . How the epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called him 'the butcher'" (Barker 2018, 3). Instantaneously, the readers pick up a different interpretation of the glorified deeds of the classical heroes than what is presented in Homer's heroic poem.

The events in Barker's novel are carried forward mostly through Briseis's voice in a first-person narration. Occasionally, Barker switches into third-person narration, in part two and part three, focusing on Achilles's thoughts and actions. The third-person narration, apart from contributing to the construction of the story line, helps in the thorough portrayal of Achilles, who, rather than being an outright boorish and bloodthirsty villainous male for Barker's feminist tale, is also an accomplished musician, a genuine friend, a sincere host, a frightened abandoned child, an adroit leader and a worried father. Nonetheless, Briseis's eyes and voice are the prime focus all through Barker's novel. Being "a thing" completely in Achilles's power, Briseis is no more than a collection of body parts to him in his bed. In her objectified existence conditioned only to obey, Barker has not imposed any superhuman ability and dubious gift on Briseis enabling her either to defend defiantly or to escape deviously. Later, when Agamemnon as the commander-in-chief of the Greek army wants Briseis as a replacement for his concubine Chryseis, Achilles's decision to pull out from fighting for the



Greek army has nothing to do with his feeling for Briseis whom he refers in the vilest terms as “scrape”, “trifle”, “pile of steaming dog shit”, and “it”. On the contrary, he is overridingly concerned about his offended pride and slighted status. But it is also noteworthy that despite all that she must bear as a slave woman, Briseis also knows how to retain her sense of worth and agency. When she is told by Nestor to forget her past life, she immediately knows that forgetting is exactly what she must not do. Straightaway, she, standing at the centre of that baying mob, starts remembering and visualizing herself going back to her vibrant past life in Lyrnessus. She ruminates, “I pushed them back, out of the arena, down the beach and up on to the ships. I did it. *Me, Alone*. I sent the murdering fleets home” (Barker 2018, 21). Her inherent desire to reclaim her personhood is also evident when she feels that she will even agree to marry Achilles, the person who kills her brothers and husband, at Patroclus’s hint that he can make Achilles marry her. Briseis reflects, “Yes, I was a slave, and a slave will do anything, anything at all, so stop being a thing and become a person again” (Barker 2018, 93). Briseis’s sense of worth manifests itself as well when she decides on leaving for Agamemnon’s compound thinking “I wasn’t going to be dragged away, I’d keep my head up and not look back. I wouldn’t give Agamemnon the satisfaction of seeing my fear” (Barker 2018, 107).

Briseis’s position as Agamemnon’s concubine at his compound does not necessarily bring any change in her essential status as a slave. She is rather apprehensive that Agamemnon will soon grow tired of her and will hand her over to his men for common use, a fate which she considers worse than that of Patroclus’s dogs. Her particular duty in Agamemnon’s compound is to pour wine for his guests every evening and, by doing so, she serves the purpose of enabling Agamemnon to show others his supreme authority as the commander-in-chief. On such occasion, Briseis reflects:

Men crave meaning into women’s faces; messages addressed to other men. . . Here in Agamemnon’s compound, it was: *Look at her, Achilles’ prize. I took her away from him just as I can take your prize away from you. I can take everything you have.* (Barker 2018, 120)

In addition, Briseis has to face the accusatory stares and slurs of men for the countless deaths of the Greeks in the battlefield since Achilles withdraws himself from the war. Even Achilles later blames her for Patroclus’s death: “. . . the girl,

the bloody girl, the cause of all the trouble” (Barker 2018, 155), just as Helen has been blamed by both the Greeks and the Trojans for the Trojan War: “The eyes, the hair, the tits, the lips That launched a thousand battleships . . .” (Barker 2018, 201). However, throughout *The Silence of the Girls*, we are provided with an insight into the ways these women respond to the innumerable adversities they encounter in their subjugated existence. Their subtle responses enable them to hold on to whatever agency they can exercise within their confined existence. Helen, for instance, deliberately makes herself invisible throughout the period of war by busying herself with stitching the tapestries, which is for her a way of fighting back to establish her individuality. In this context, Briseis narrates:

What I came away with was a sense of Helen seizing control of her own story. She was so isolated in the city, so powerless – even at my age, I could see that – and those tapestries were a way of saying: I’m here. *Me*. A person, not just an object to be looked at and fought over. (Barker 2018, 130)

Likewise, Briseis also makes a statement of her own individual existence by immersing herself in her newfound work in the hospital tents. She says:

I lost myself in that work – and I found myself too. . . I really started to think: *I can do this*. And that belief took me a step further away from being just Achilles’ bed-girl – or Agamemnon’s spittoon. (Barker 2018, 140)

Thus, in Barker’s feminist retelling, Briseis, together with other women, has been bestowed with the subtle yet genuine agency of displaying her aptitude in the way she deals with her experience at the Greek camp and her relationships with other women around her.

Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls* further illustrates how classical myths and history treat men and women differently by offering an absorbing version of one of the most moving moments of *The Iliad*. When Priam, alone and unarmed, comes in the dark to the enemy camp to plead with Achilles to return the dead-body of his son Hector, the old Trojan king says: “*I do what no man before me has ever done, I kiss the hands of the man who killed my son*” (Barker 2018, 267). However, these heartbreaking words of supplication keep Briseis unmoved, for Barker makes her

protagonist speak out a potent and fitting rejoinder to Priam's words, which immediately draws our attention to the similar and even worse untold horrors suffered by women in the war: "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" (Barker 2018, 267). In fact, all the Trojan women – Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra, Polyxena, Iphis, Hecamede, Uza, Ritsa, Tecmessa, Chryseis and innumerable others – have suffered even worse ignominies at the hands of the conquering Greek heroes and Barker's rendition of their collective anguish through Briseis in *The Silence of the Girls* offers us a unique opportunity to review the events of *The Iliad* from the perspective of these countless enslaved women. Also, in Barker's revisionist tale, we see these women still making small choices and doing acts which are marks of their empowerment even in their restricted life. Arianna chooses death over slavery, Tecmessa enjoys eating dainty and establishes a loving familial existence with her captor Ajax, Ritsa relishes her work as a nurse in the hospital, Briseis out of compassion spreads a sheet of pure white linen over the face of Hector's mutilated corpse, Briseis also attempts first to escape to Troy hiding in Priam's cart and then comes back from the middle of the road, Polyxena bravely prefers to die on Achilles's burial mound than to live and be a slave, Cassandra unflinchingly follows Agamemnon's aides to be his mistress – all these instances of willful deeds and choices, though not too significant to be penned in detail in *The Iliad*, find a vivid expression in *The Silence of the Girls*, and, thus, Barker's novel convincingly breaks the silenced women free of the conventions of the masculine epic.

As it happens, in *The Silence of the Girls*, despite being dispossessed of everything that used to define them, these women rally and survive. Their voices are heard as they grieve over their loss and strive to retain their sense of individuality in whatever circumstances this masculine affair of Trojan War has forced upon them. Briseis also realizes eventually that these enslaved women will leave behind a legacy which these conquering men will never be able to forget: "We're going to survive – our songs, our stories" (Barker 2018, 296). In addition, seeing Hector's widow, Andromache, with her only child killed in the most outrageous manner, being allocated to Achilles's pimply adolescent son Pyrrhus and to be expected tonight to spread her legs for the son of the man who has killed her husband, Briseis states:

Yes, the death of young men in battle is a tragedy – I'd lost four brothers, I didn't need anybody to tell me that. A tragedy worthy

of any number of laments – but theirs is not the worst fate. I looked at Andromache, who'd have to live the rest of her amputated life as a slave, and I thought: *We need a new song.* (Barker 2018, 313–14)

Sophie Gilbert in her review of Barker's novel has precisely written that "*The Silence of the Girls* is the new song Briseis dreams of: a narrative that weighs what war means to women" (Gilbert 2018). Towards the end, Briseis, feeling Achilles's baby kicking inside her womb, is glad that she, unlike Arianna or Polyxena, has chosen life and, thus, will be able to sing the songs of women to posterity. As Briseis turns her back on Achilles's burial mound, her optimistic yet firm conviction closes Barker's feminist revisionist novel: "His story. *His*, not mine. It ends at his grave. . . Now, my own story can begin" (Barker 2018, 324). Thus, Barker's feminist retelling of Homer's *The Iliad* ends in a note of sanguinity for her female protagonist Briseis, who cherishes a desire to start life anew as an individual having the powers of agency and assertion. Barker's laudable attempt to highlight a facet of female existence in a patriarchal world has successfully inspired many of her readers to interrogate the presupposed gender hierarchies and orthodox socio-moral conventions of their respective culture. What is more, attempting to liberate the women characters from the confines of subjugated and marginalized existence as depicted in Homer's classical epic based on ancient Greek mythology, Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* has, in essence, efficaciously challenged the age-old patriarchal norms and notions that suppress and subjugate the so-called weaker sex.

On the whole, Pat Barker in *The Silence of the Girls* handpicks a "trophy" woman character from Homer's *The Iliad* mentioned a mere ten odd times in the course of the entire epic poem only to refer to her exquisite physical beauty and charm, and reclaims Briseis as the heroine by placing her at the center of her revisionist novel. The feminist light that Barker sheds on the events of the Trojan War serves to illuminate specifics we have not discerned or thought over earlier. Lucy Scholes in her review has also focused on exactly the same premise of Barker's novel: "In seeing a legend differently, Barker also makes us rethink history" (Scholes 2018). Barker's novel is, indeed, a summoning of those hushed female voices which have been forcefully silenced by the phallogocentric structure of human culture and history. To conclude, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* is specifically pertinent for our present time when women across the globe are raising their voices against gender repression and, hence, retelling Homer's *The Iliad*, the archetypal tale of larger-than-life men, from a woman's perspective is incontrovertibly apposite.

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