



SILENCING AND RECLAIMING FEMALE VOICES IN WAR NARRATIVES: FROM HOMERIC EPIC TO PAT BARKER'S *THE SILENCE OF THE GIRLS*

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Abstract

*In this research, it is necessary to analyse the silencing and subsequent reclamation of female voice in the narration of a war. The conversation will range from Homeric epic to Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), the latter of which is the latest entry in the genre. The paper is based on the primary research of the supplied PhD thesis, and traces Briseis' evolution from a peripheral character in *The Iliad* to the consciousness of a female storyteller in Barker's feminist reworking. The analysis finds that Barker does not give the woman more speech than the man, rather he redistributes the narrative power. Briseis seems to be a part of Homeric narrative of any of the quarrels, but part of the Homeric narrative of the Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon in particular. Male is an economy of her body which is war. Her body is a male economic object of war's valuation, honor and possession. The narrator, witness, survivor, interpreter, and in the end, claimant of her own story is the same woman who is Barker. The five aspects explored in this transformation are: the classicisation of the narrative, the female witness, the female body as a battlefield, the minimisation of agency and survival, and feminist reception of the classical tradition. She comes from a sort of authoritative power that is rooted in observation, in memory, in judgment, in community and in storytelling. The paper concludes that feminist rewriting can be understood as a process of reclaiming the narrative which does not change, delete or replace the classical text, but rather reads it, reads its silences and thus makes the voices of those who are silenced the voice of the classical text. This discovery serves as confirmation of the recent feminist receptionist scholarship which has given voice and agency to Briseis, and with which she challenges Homeric divisions of gender.*

Keywords: *The Iliad, The Silence of the Girls, Pat Barker, Briseis, feminist rewriting, female voice, war narratives, classical reception, narrative authority, agency*

Introduction

The form of war narratives has always been determined by who can tell a war story, and who's experience is remembered to the collective. Wars in classical epic are usually constructed around the male warrior and his activities, such as fighting, honor, leadership, competition, revenge and heroic fame. The provided research document demonstrates that this narrative structure does not only reinforce the prevailing social structure in which men make history and women mourn, ensure domestic continuity, act as captives, produce offspring, and suffer after effects, it can reproduce this.

Indeed, a woman's experience of violence in war is often more personal and more profound than that of some of the men who fight in the war, and often her experience is overlooked or minimized by the narrative of the hero. Pat Barker's *Silence of the Girls* (2018) is the kind of series this. The novel takes place during the Trojan War, and more particularly during the war between Achilles and Agamemnon and Briseis is so much a part of Homer's story that she can be separated from the war between Achilles and Agamemnon. The question "What does Achilles' anger mean?" is turned into "What does the war look like from the woman whose body and captivity is bound up in Achilles' anger?" The woman who names, interprets,

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judges and tells is this "re-centering" of the woman who was silenced, the prize, object of the classical story.

As a consequence, the paper explores the change from silencing to reclaiming narratives. It asks the question: How can the epic of Homer overlook the female experience? In what ways does Barker show the way in which that marginalisation takes place? What would be different if Briseis were made the first, person narrator of the story? How might the type(s) of agency (or agency, lessness) differ? In what ways is the novel Barker's work a feminist reception text, rather than just a re-telling of Homer? The central theme of the argument is that the success of Barker is that he doesn't put female suffering on a predominately male plot.

An analysis of the novel in the present era also points to the novel as a feminist re-writing, which speaks Briseis' voice to explain the Trojan War, as it were, while The Iliad remains silent.

Literature Review

This thesis explores The Silence of the Girls in a wider literary evolution, from classical epic, to Modernist challenges to heroic war, to contemporary feminist rewriting. It emphasises that, in a traditional war narrative, the women character was not central but the role of men and that feminist texts would more often set out to deliberately include perspectives that did not form part of the dominant war stories. The discussion on ancient literature in the thesis is pertinent in case of Briseis. In epic, women are prizes, dependants, wives, mothers, mourners, political/symbolic figures but in most cases not the last word on the meaning of war. Furthermore, captives such as Briseis are self, revealing, as the body is part of the economy that rewards military success of the males.

This is corroborated by the current scholarship that is reflected in this paper. Barker challenges the non, or male, dominated narrative of Homer's Iliad in Jansen's work on Briseis, where she finally gets a voice, agency and a sense of community. Borgohain also considers it to be a feminist revision, and Barker's novel tells the story of the Trojan War from the perspective of Briseis, an othered woman in epic literature.

In the Homeric narrative, however, the "novel" is a feminist retelling where hefty women can voice what their narrative lacks, which is their voice and feelings, choices and perspectives. There has been a recent trend to employ silence as another analytical category as well. Barker's argument on silence, in Singh's (2026) interpretation, is not only a lack but the process of narration and transformation as well, which can cause a reconsideration of the subjugation of women, trauma, memory, and survival. This reinforces the claim in the next paragraph that it isn't natural, but rather a social construct, that Barker's war story lacks women, which is not natural, because women have always been around in the war story, but not as the traditional epic form of story. Thus, there has been a great emphasis on the difference between representation and authority in the literature. Not all the female characters are necessarily female characters of the Iliad. But what Barker does innovatively is represent the story of the female consciousness that is inherited. It's not only the epistemology changing, it's the characterization changing as well.

Theoretical Framework

The central framework used in the studies is Feminist literary criticism, and there is an addition of the classical reception theory. Feminist criticism can not only be used to analyse the effects on women but also can be used to see how narration systems create knowledge of the experience of some people. The thesis put forward is that the dichotomy of the epistemic



in classical war literature validates the experience of men and deifies the experience of women as more emotional, domestic or anecdotal.

Another concept that is useful is narrative focalization. In this thesis, the emphasis will be on the tendency to marginalize the experience of women, which is linked to waiting and loss, survival and repetition, as a contrast to the emphasis that epic style puts on man's action and heroic movement. In an attempt to change this, Barker gives Briseis the first person point of view. She is not only a part of Achilles's story, but also the consciousness that translates Achilles and the war. Classical Reception Theory is the second large body of theory. The provided thesis, based on Martindale (2006) and Fantuzzi et al. (2021), sees reception as an active conversation between the texts of the past and those of the present. Barker is thus not a man who thinks of Homer as a brick wall. She enters the Homeric story and attempts to keep the characters and events in the story recognizable while varying the moral and the focus of the story. This seems to be consistent with the contemporary scholarship (not adaptation) that argues that *The Silence of the Girls* is a feminist reception. The overall framework allows for the study to be conducted as accurately as possible in terms of the term "reclamation".

Reclamation is not a guarantee that Briseis' social status becomes free and her military strength comes into being at once. It is a process which enables the slave woman to see, remember, understand and narrate. The agency is then constrained but true. The precariousness, contingency, and modalities of Briseis's agency in captivity, and of power relations, is made visible in the thesis, which explicitly foregrounds Barker's avoidance of simple binary oppositions (between victim and agent).

Methodology

Qualitative, interpretive and comparative literary methodology is used in this paper. The primary sources are thesis provided (especially in the feminist rewriting section), Briseis, the authority of the narrative, the female body, voice, agency, survival, and classical reception. The focused study literature consists of two major: *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker and *The Iliad* by Homer. The themes of the conversation are: (1) Homeric silencing and the marginality of the narrative; (2) Briseis as a narrator, a witness and survivor; (3) the female body as a battlefield; (4) voice, limited agency and resistance; and (5) Barker's feminist reception of Homer. The method is adapted from the general methodology explained in the thesis where it is evident that the proposed research method is qualitative, interpretive and comparative analysis.

Selected contemporary scholarship was also consulted to check and confirm the interpretation of Barker provided by the thesis. These are external sources that are offered for scholarly context but are not to replace the source uploaded.

Homeric Epic and the Structural Silencing of Women

To understand Barker's intervention we need to consider the role of women in the Homeric epics as narrators of the story. According to the thesis on the theme, epic is a structure constructed on the principle of male action, action, movement, fight, decision making, and female action is more concerned with kinship, domestic affairs, weeping and aftermath.

This means there is a literary hierarchy, the male experience is universal, the female experience seems particular. Especially, the Briseis is an especially significant one. Her absence from *The Iliad* would be a disgrace to Achilles' dignity, as she plays an integral part in the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon. However, this argument is conveyed more by her than by him. She's the object of the negotiation of male authority? The thesis provided is a more general one of a captive women become a sign of victory and masculine status in a greater



patriarchy economy. That is why there is silence as well as verbal silence. Briseis doesn't have to be silent to be on the fringes of the tale. She can be present in the story, have an emotional value, and even shape the story's action without having control of the story's "center of interpretation." The provided thesis also indicates that the women's speech within the classical war narratives is likely to be restricted to some expressions, such as laments, supplications, grieving or home advices. These are important forms, but do not usually affect military and/or political decisions. The women are therefore made aware of the impact of war without having any control over the course of it. It is this structural gap that Barker's novel starts with. Not only did Homer not include what he omitted, but his characters had the type of experiences the heroic form should have been secondary to. Scholarship also in contemporary time refers to Barker's novel as a way to fill in the "gendered gaps and silences" of the Homeric epic by providing a female point of view from which the ancient tale can be retold.

Re-centering Briseis: From War Prize to Narrating Consciousness

The one most obvious change in focus in *The Silence of the Girls* is the change of the narrator's focalization. Instead of the standard elevation of Achilles as a heroic figure, Barker starts with Briseis's point of view on Achilles. The idea that the text puts Achilles in the place of horror, rather than in the position of praise, by the voice of praise, is the thesis that is being offered here.

It's obvious from the voice of the novel in the first person. Briseis isn't just a part of the plot anymore, the plot itself is a means by which Briseis becomes a part of the plot. She recalls the destruction of Lyrnessus, her family's deaths and the violence against the enslaved women, along with the enslavement of her own soul. This shift brings about what could be described as an epistemological flip. The Homeric epic teaches the reader about war through the understanding of strategy, honor, courage, wrath, and heroic reputation. Barker's invitation to readers is to view the same world through fear, fragility, loss, memory, and life. The meaning does not change, the event doesn't change when the person authorised to interpret it changes. This difference is captured by the name here given to the woman Briseis, the woman who was once a 'prize' and who now becomes the one who is a 'namesayer', 'interpreter' and 'judge'. Most recently, the same scholarship is given to Jansen who tells Barker her voice and agency to come out of the shadows of the heroes and tell a story from a female perspective. This is more than just inclusion. It is possible to include a female character in a heroic story without altering its ideology. Rather, Barker reorders the elements. Achilles is still significant but now he is a thing of Briseis's gaze. The hero is no longer the indisputable focus of interpretation.

Briseis as Narrator, Witness, and Survivor

Barker's Briseis is an authority since she is a witness. It's there that she hears the war in her ears and it's there that it's in her body; it's there that she feels the loss of the war; the thesis provided says that. Thus, her story makes a kind of knowledge based on experience. Her witnessing role is especially important as she not only witnesses individual acts of violence, but also the social organization of the Greek camp. She sees the disparities in the world, rich and poor, army officer and slave, holy and profane, beautiful and ugly. This is because she is not a typical victim, but a victim, narrator. She turns into an interpreter to the system which has captured her. This transformation is beautifully depicted from her friendship with Achilles. Achilles is a great hero and the model of the heroic qualities of Homer. At Barker, Briseis observes him as a dangerous, yet to be understood man, one who must be understood in terms of what he does, what he doesn't do, his strengths and weaknesses, and his feelings. The thesis



is that it's an off the walls survivor epistemology, or the study of the predator if you don't know it, it can have direct effects.

It's also a survival that is deliberately complicated. Barker tarnishes Briseis' purity by no more than it is. She is feeling injustice and those who are wronged. The thesis is that this complexity is too great to develop what the given text calls "binarism of good women and bad men" is impractical. Her survival isn't the normal heroic kind of epic win. This is the hardest method of maintaining consciousness in the consciousness preserving state that strives to eliminate the consciousness of the person. This is a vision of life which takes the feeling of agency further. When Briseis becomes a warrior and a ruler she is not given the power. Attention, memory, interpretation and narration empowers her. It's also recent scholarship to say it is a figure that recovers agency through the restricting, but one who is not wholly excluded from it.

The Female Body as Battlefield

Barker's most powerful inroads go in the direction of his insistence that war goes on even after the fighting has ceased. The body of woman is suggested as the second battlefield in the wake of the destruction of the city in this thesis. Women are taken and sexually violated by the army, examined, handed out and evaluated for their reproductive potential. This is important because the classical heroic narratives typically end with the ending of the military opposition that can be seen as the end of war.

Barker is questioning the time, based separation. The enslavement and sexual exploitation of women at Lyrnessus is a form of conquest which continues. The female body becomes a material monument to success, and a point of male power reproduction. Captivity inspection is important because it reveals the administrative aspect of objectification of women. Women are judged by their beauty, health and reproductive value as they are young. The visual aspect is illuminating of the link between War, Property, sexuality and the control of Patriarchy. The violence is not perceived by a few as an accident or 'too much', but as a part of the institutional machinery of sorting and distributing system of the conquerors. The treatment of Achilles is also of great importance for Barker. He doesn't have to be a continuing caricature of an evil man. The simple issue is, Briseis is already a possession in the social system. The point to be made in the thesis that will follow is that, even if there were no wickedness of individual men, ownership structure will still exist.

This separation also helps to strengthen the feminist point of view as it carries over the feminist point of view on the exceptional behaviour to the institutional power. So the female body is the site of oppression and of memory. The violence isn't abstract; Briseis' physical reminders and her embodied consciousness. Body is property: story tells meaning of conquest. The connection between Barker's story and bigger feminist strategies which view the testimony of the marginalised body as a counter, narrative to the dominant story of war. The thesis which is given very clearly is that the novel presents such a situation/scape of male heroism that makes violence towards women invisible in the context of such conventions in an epic literature.

Voice, Agency, and Resistance

It's not just about letting Briseis speak, as with Barker's, the idea of voice is more complicated. The thesis is that voice is produced in the situations of captivity, fear, body control and social helplessness. Briseis has no official law, military or commanding rights. She has an agency that is based on observation, interpretation, memory and storytelling. This is especially the case for the "traditional" definition of agency that may be interpreted as heroic. If agency is only when they are able to act in public without anyone's assistance, enslaved women will



be effectively always powerless. There's another model of Barker. Briseis's sight, taste, judgment, memory and narration is a resistance to a system that wants Briseis to be an object. An element of self-consciousness of narration is required. The following is a selection of the thesis she was given, a foray to portray the camp as a space to reclaim interpretive space. Now she's no longer just a whimsical object for people to view. It's she that's going to see the world. She's also got a sense of indecision about saying no. She doesn't turn into a 'perfected' personality that ignores others or is totally devoid of anger. She has harbored resentment and grief as well as the desire for revenge for a long time, the thesis says.

It is an expression of the rejection of purity sentimentality that has a lot of meaning. Women's speech is most readily accepted in a patriarchal story line when it is nurturing, forgiving or passive. Barker endows Briseis with a critical and angry voice. The issue then is one of maintaining interpretation autonomy, that is, agency. Briseis does not control Achilles, Agamemnon, or the military system, she can refuse to let them be who make the meaning of her life at the end of the day. The very fact that her story is a survival story is due to the fact that it does not completely accede to the imposed identity.

Barker as Feminist Reception of Homer

The last significance of the book is as a feminist reception. Barker is not against the grain, she's working with it in keeping with the homeric tradition. Achilles, Patroclus, Agamemnon, Briseis, the Trojan War, the main conflict are still recognizable. What is the difference in the relationship of their stories? The thesis provided here argues that this is a change in emphasis, the same world, but a new moral center, the experience of women.

The Silence of the Girls is not only a contemporary novel about the Trojan War; it's a novel about silence. This is a very significant attempt to intervene in the story of the Trojan War. Briseis wakes up not just to her own history, but to how the subsequent generations can romanticize war and seem to be able to brush aside living in captivity. This is a reflexive dimension, which is an important part in Barker's Homer, as supplied in the thesis. The novel thus puts into question the demarcation between history and myth. Later generations may want to hear a different account of the Trojan War, one that is more romantic in nature, one that is some kind of heroic story or one where famous men were the only ones involved, than one of massacre, slavery and sexual violence, Briseis believes. This self-consciousness extends the novel to become a commentary on cultural memory, in general. The most important act of reclamation is when Briseis cuts away from Achilles's identity to become her own self. The thesis given is yours, as long as it concludes like this: Briseis's story can start, Achilles's story can end. Achilles doesn't go away; that's the key. Rather, it's a less than authoritative story. This reading is now well attested by present research. The project's mission, Jansen says, is to "voice, agency, and community to Briseis," and Sen characterizes the novel as a feminist retelling to voice the women who have been overlooked by Homeric tradition. Likewise, Petre argues that Barker's account does not exclude the framework of classical history, but pushes Briseis from the margins to the middle of the Trojan War. So, Barker's reception is not destructive but transformative. Homer is still alive, but must not be allowed to be alone. The novel is about someone being handed the classics and yet being challenged by their silences; it's about what experiences haven't been a part of their culture, and what they might be missing.

Comparative Discussion

The change from Homer to Barker is an apparent move from the idea of representation to the idea of narrative authority. The epic does not play the main role in rendering a picture of the social and emotional life of the Trojan War, but Homer does. Barker's character is the same



but she moves her from object to subject. There are a number of implications of this change. First, war is a different meaning. In the Homeric epic, the battle over Briseis is one about honor and heroism. Here in Barker, it's proof of a system that considers female bodies as property and her afflictions as a lessor to male competition. The thesis offered is an overt declaration of Barker's evolution in the moral economy of the Trojan War from the male values of honour and glory, to captivity, trauma, memory, and survival. Secondly, the meaning of silence is constantly changing. Briseis' omission of a sustained narrative voice is part of an epic structure that is more focused on male action in Homer. Barker uses the term silence to refer to a state of silence that is enforced by convention and authority. In the novel, the quality of silence is therefore an "acquired" one, not a natural one.

In Homeric epic, heroism is related to the agency of action and fighting and the achievement of reputation.

Barker presents the agency in the shape of a captured woman: of observation, of endurance, of memory, interpretation, solidarity, of narration. Briseis isn't a typical strong character. It extends the political realm. Expands jurisdiction. Fourth, a change from body to story. Briseis's body is a part of the economy of war prizes in the epic system. Barker: Body is the Evidence. It is composed of slavery, rape, fear, work and living. The female body thus becomes a source of knowledge of war and not an object of war. Last but not least, the use of reception evolves. Barker's novel is much more than a modern, day Homeric recitation. It transgresses that tradition with contemporary issues of gender, violence, slavery, and narration. This is precisely what recent scholarship has been concerned with, and where feminist retellings are focused as purposeful interventions to uncover the exclusions of genders from the canonical stories.

Discussion

The analysis shows how several processes of silencing take place. It can be represented by the lack of words, but it can also be represented by the conventions of narration, the definition of heroism, the control of historical memory, as well as the objectification of female bodies. The significance of the literary patriarchy in the architecture of the narrative is especially the author's thesis in the proof. The thesis of the author is important in proving a work of literature written under the influence of the patriarchy which can be observed in the structure of the story. Barker's response is also a structural response. She won't let Briseis talk at times as she is. She is a telling, minded person, like Briseis. In this way, more than a picture of the classical woman of whom he is fond, the novel is significant. It moves the authority of interpretation. The study also implies that reclaiming the female voice is reclaiming an alternative absolute view is reclaiming the female voice itself. Barker retains ambiguity. Briseis can be filled with hate and love, it can be filled with knowing and surviving, seeing and misunderstanding, judging and being unsure. The agency is limited, and she concentrates on it, in a context that is the thesis provided.

This is significant because of the complexity to such an extent that we are not permitted to make feminist rewriting a simple "flipping of patriarchy. Another interesting note is to be made on collective memory. Later cultures will be telling the story of the Trojan War through the heroic romance and ignore the women who were subjected to slavery. Barker so weaves the politics of remembrance into the novel. Not only what happened to the women, but if future stories will remember it. So, now with the reclaiming of the voice is a cultural memory work. It is Barker's decision to have Briseis tell the story that brings a new understanding to the idea



of epic heroism. It is not the end of Achilles nor of Homer, but the end of the only war, stories to be.

Conclusion

In this study, the change of female voice from Homeric epic to Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* has been discussed. The analysis shows that Briseis's marginality in *The Iliad* is not solely dependent upon her number of speeches. Her deeper marginalization is that she is not in control of the framing of the narrative for interpreting her captivity, her body and her suffering. She's the centre of the man's conflict, but a large part of the periphery of the story. Briseis is a narrator, witness, survivor, interpreter, and finally the interpreter of the authority of the narrative. It turns into a tale of captivity, body, sexual violence, trauma, memory, endurance, and survival. In addition, the study shows that, contrary to popular opinion, Barker has no agency in the traditional heroic power. Briseis continues to be enslaved, and suffers the brutishness of men, still. She believes that her agency is created by paying attention, keeping memory, interpreting, judging, being in community, and being a storyteller. Reclamation is even more important since her transformation into a warrior and her reproduction of male patterns of authority are not necessary for her reclamation. The best thing about *The Silence of the Girls*, as with all the other books, is that it's a demonstration of the power of classical reception. Barker reconstructs the Homeric world, but lets out the feminine. In her new novel she invites readers to see the lives of the women lost in the adventure of the male hero. It is supported by the current scholarship on the novel, which sees it as a feminist bid to voice the opinion of Briseis, to challenge the Homeric silence concerning gender. This transformation from being, narrated to narrating then, can therefore be considered as a transition from Homer to Barker. This lady who was once thought to be property is a witness, this witness is an interpreter, this interpreter is a narrator and this narrator is the proprietor of his/her story. Feminism doesn't destroy the classical heritage. It is restored, hears its silences and gives its silence a historical and literary voice.

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