

# Articulating the Unspoken: A Critical Examination of Silence in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*

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## Abstract

This research delves into *The Silence of the Girls*, a novel by Pat Barker which brings to light traditionally muted and marginalized voices of women within mythological narratives. Barker redirects the narrative from the celebrated exploits of male heroes in the Trojan War to the personal ordeals of enslaved women, especially Briseis, thus highlighting their trauma and resilience. Through Briseis's perspective, Barker vividly portrays the trauma, resilience, and healing experienced by captive women. The study further elucidates Barker's use of intertextuality to bridge historical and contemporary contexts, thereby giving voice to the subjugated women of epic tales. The novel's feminist reinterpretation introduces a new form of female subjectivity that challenges and 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.

**Keywords:** *Intertextuality, Mythical Retelling, Trojan War, The Iliad, Homer, Briseis, Pat Barker.*

## INTRODUCTION

The reinterpretation of Homeric narratives is not a new undertaking. Modern literary works such as *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood demonstrate how traditional tales may be creatively reinterpreted. This reinterpretation revitalizes ancient legends, harmonizing them with contemporary concerns and values. Atwood frequently explores the impact of historical events on personal identities in her retellings, while also modifying conventional narratives to emphasize themes of gender, power, and resistance (Malik 1). Traditionally, male authors have had a significant influence on the genre of myth, with Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* playing crucial roles in both fiction and history. Female authors like Pat Barker and Margaret Atwood, who aim to transform the creation of myths, confront the obstacle of surpassing a historically entrenched male hegemony. To excel in this genre, it is essential to place these significant feminist writings within their appropriate context and subject them to rigorous academic analysis.

*The Iliad*, a work by Homer, glorifies the male heroes of the Trojan War, portraying women primarily as objects, particularly sexual objects, that amplify masculine masculinity and bravery. In this narrative, women are suppressed based on the notion that "Silence becomes a woman" (Barker 294). Barker's novel, *The Silence of the Girls*, challenges the conventional narrative of the Trojan War by presenting a new perspective. The story is told from the viewpoint of Briseis, who is both a captive of war and a victim of sexual exploitation. Barker's feminist revisionist method amplifies the voices of the underrepresented female characters in

Homer's story, enabling them to articulate their experiences, exercise agency, and assert their perspectives. Through focusing on Briseis, Barker redirects the focus from renowned male heroes to the harsh and difficult experiences endured by those who were slaves.

Briseis has become a crucial and influential character within the framework of the mythical Trojan War. Historically, accounts of the Trojan War have typically neglected the role of women, and Briseis, a Trojan queen who was taken captive by the Greeks, is frequently portrayed as little more than a prize or symbol of victory. She becomes a mere tool in the power conflict involving Achilles and Agamemnon, who both use her to assert their masculinity. Her representation in myths is commonly viewed from a consistent masculine perspective, which conceals her own individuality. Nevertheless, *The Silence of the Girls* challenges this viewpoint by positioning Briseis as the focal point of the Trojan War. The reader is encouraged to sympathize with the protagonist as she recounts her own experiences, exposing her weaknesses and uncovering her past trauma. Barker introduces an alluring feminine viewpoint in the often male-dominated field of myth creation with the character of Briseis. Briseis emerges as a true protagonist, shedding light on hitherto undisclosed facets of the Trojan War. By doing this, she enhances the 'original' myths as narrated by Homer, incorporating crucial new aspects into these age-old tales.

In her article *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir was acknowledged as one of the early thinkers who explored the concept of the 'myth of woman'. She contended that men's portrayal of women is based on a collection of myths, in fact, several myths. Beauvoir contends that women are not seen as unique individuals but are instead categorized according to these myths. These myths are inherently insufficient since no woman completely fits the stereotypes created by males (Beauvoir 1265). According to Beauvoir, the myth persists mainly because it is useful to males. Central to these beliefs is the notion that women are enigmatic (1271). Beauvoir notes that, due to their limited understanding of women, men have categorized them as essentially enigmatic, describing women as a mystery to men and considering them to be mysterious by nature (1268). Labelling anything as a mystery neatly avoids the necessity of providing a thorough explanation and exerting effort, a phenomenon that de Beauvoir described as a key aspect of the problematic portrayal of women by males. Although there exist traditional tales that include female characters, it is important to note that these myths may not necessarily be specific to women. According to Uçar-Özbirinci, to understand feminist reinterpretations of myths, it is important to acknowledge that myths have mostly been authored by men (3). It may be inferred from this insight that patriarchal literature has influenced women's identities and defined their positions in society (Uçar-Özbirinci 4).

In the opening of the book, Briseis challenges the idealized portrayal of Achilles by labeling him as 'the butcher,' which stands in stark contrast to the customary descriptions of him as 'great,' 'intelligent,' and 'godlike' (Barker 3). This viewpoint is reinforced by her traumatic encounter of being imprisoned alongside other females, while being able to hear the agonizing screams of her siblings, who were slain by Achilles and his soldiers during their assault (Barker 14). Briseis does not perceive Achilles as a hero, but rather as an enemy.

Briseis is spared from the rape and murder that befalls many women when her city falls; instead, she becomes Achilles' property. Her position is about to change dramatically at this very moment. As Nestor leads her away from her city, she comes to the realization that he is likely the only one who will never perceive her as anything other than Queen Briseis, not a prisoner. Despite the overwhelming rage she feels, her first and unwavering response to this demotion is to conceal her feelings and keep up an emotionless front. She demonstrates her

inner struggle and determination by striving to keep her face expressionless. Briseis may be choosing to remain silent and unresponsive while she adjusts to her new world, but there are likely other factors at play.

In the narrative, Briseis takes center stage offering her unique perspective and contemplating significant moments in her story. However, she is portrayed as a slave captured by the Greeks, with her role being limited to serving Achilles at his discretion. Within this context, Briseis is diminished to the role of a mere prize. Achilles' comment upon her receipt, where he casually says "Cheers, lads," exemplifies the objectification that takes place. "She'll do," (Barker 22). Upon further reflection, Briseis realizes the significance of the situation, recognizing that she is being treated as a trophy by the army, a symbol of Achilles' self-proclaimed status as the most esteemed among the Greeks (Barker 120).

As the story progresses, Briseis finds herself in a more intricate situation, especially when she tries to flee from Achilles at a crucial moment. This action, where she intends to conceal herself on a cart departing the city, represents a significant milestone in her empowerment as she metaphorically frees herself from the bonds of enslavement (Barker 283). However, despite the potential for a new future, Briseis ultimately chooses to go back to the camp (Barker 290), which adds complexity to the idea of her having control over her own actions. Her presence in the camp seems to be a voluntary decision, but it doesn't mean she has complete freedom or control, as Achilles still holds power over her. Her presence highlights a contradictory position: although she manages to carve out some independence within the camp, she sacrifices a portion of her own perspective and personal story to become related with Achilles' narrative and the broader legend of the Trojan War. The complexity of the situation is emphasized by her reflection at the conclusion of the book: "I attempted to distance myself from Achilles' story – but was unsuccessful" (Barker 324), which brings attention to the conflict between individual control and the larger mythological narratives.

Briseis's position as Agamemnon's captive does not alter her basic position as a servant. She worries that Agamemnon will soon lose interest in her and pass her on to his men, a fate she dreads even more than that the treatment of Patroclus's dogs. Her specific role in Agamemnon's household is to pour wine to his guests each evening, a role that underscores Agamemnon's position as the supreme leader. During these events, Briseis contemplates on how men project their dominance through women's roles, using them to convey power to others. In Agamemnon's compound, her presence symbolizes his ability to assert control: by taking her from Achilles, he demonstrates his power to seize anything, including the possessions of others (Barker 120).

Briseis endures not only the hostility and blame from men for the Greek casualties following Achilles' withdrawal from the war, but also direct accusations from Achilles himself, who calls her the source of all the trouble (Barker 155). This parallels how Helen is held responsible for the Trojan War by both Greeks and Trojans, often citing her physical attributes as the source of the conflict (Barker 201). Despite these challenges, *The Silence of the Girls* provides insights into how these women subtly assert their agency within their constrained circumstances. Helen, for instance, uses the act of weaving tapestries as a form of resistance, asserting her individuality despite her isolation and powerlessness. Briseis perceives this as Helen's way of reclaiming her identity and declaring her personhood, not merely as an entity to be gazed upon and contended for (Barker 130). Similarly, Briseis finds a sense of self through her work in the hospital tents, helping her transcend her role as merely a concubine (Barker 140). Barker's feminist retelling thus endows Briseis and other women with a nuanced

form of agency, highlighting their capacity to assert their individuality and navigate their experiences in the Greek camp.

By relinquishing control over her own narrative, Briseis' future is determined by Achilles, who arranges her marriage to Alcimus without her or Alcimus having any say (Barker 307). With Achilles' death, her story, previously intertwined with his, reaches its conclusion. This ending highlights the complex nature of Briseis' agency. Although she lacks consistent control and faces significant limitations as a slave, she exhibits what could be termed 'slumbering agency.' This agency occasionally manifests, allowing her to make impactful decisions despite her restricted freedom. Her silence and subdued demeanor reflect a dual strategy: sometimes accepting her fate to avoid attention, and other times using her restraint to carve out a small, safe space and subtly resisting her enslavement.

At the end of the story, Briseis contemplates Achilles overwhelming presence, noting that his voice is always dominant and drowns out all other voices (Barker 323). This comment not only criticizes Achilles actual vocal expression but also illustrates the more extensive problem of masculine voices eclipsing feminine viewpoints in the creation of myths and historical accounts. Following Achilles demise, Briseis ponders the way next generations would interpret their narrative. She predicts that they will prefer a sanitized rendition of events, maybe emphasizing a romanticized love story rather than the harsh realities of domination and servitude: "They will not desire to be informed about the mass killings of males and young boys, the enslavement of females and young girls... No, they will choose for something very gentler. Could it be a tale of romance?" (Barker 324). This perspective highlights the need of critically analysing the way myths and history tend to idealize war, portraying it as heroic and valuable, while disregarding its harsh and violent nature. Briseis emphasizes the inclination of mythmaking to downplay the actual horrors of war by ending with the concept of a love tale. The Silence of the Girls subverts this prevailing pattern by depicting the conflict through the lens of Briseis, providing a tragic alternative narrative that underscores the individual cost of war and the frequently overlooked female perspective.

In Silence of the Girls, Barker offers a feminist reinterpretation of The Iliad, focusing on suffering and resilience of Trojan female characters like Hecuba, Andromache, and Briseis. Barker highlights their personal choices and acts of resistance, often overlooked in the original epic. Despite their hardships, characters such as Briseis find ways to assert their agency. As Briseis feels Achilles's unborn child within her, she embraces life and reflects that the story she had been part of belonged to him, not to her, and that it would end at his grave. She realizes that now her own story can begin (Barker 324). Barker's recounting ends on a hopeful note, emphasizing renewed agency and self-determination for the female protagonist.

Barker's story further draws attention to the gender gap in classical mythology and history. Under the cover of darkness, Priam, who is defenseless and unarmed, sneaks into the enemy camp to implore Achilles to return Hector's remains saying that he is doing what no man before him has ever done: kissing the hands of the man who killed his son (Barker 267). Despite Priam's pleading, Briseis is unconvinced. When asked about the conflict, Barker's Briseis powerfully retorts, explaining that she is doing what countless women before her have been forced to do, bringing attention to far worse and sometimes overlooked suffering of women. For the guy responsible for the deaths of my husband and siblings, I am spreading my legs (Barker 267). This answer highlights the immense and sometimes unrecognized hardships that women face during times of conflict.

Achilles stands in sharp contrast to the camp's female residents in terms of social status. While the ladies are cast into a lesser social class, Achilles, being a man, lives a life of affluence, freedom, and luxury. Men enjoy a life of luxury and independence at the pinnacle of society. Women, on the other hand, are subjected to inhumane conditions, such as sleeping in close quarters with fellow slaves and warriors, because of their inferior status. The grandeur of Achilles everyday life is seen in his use of gold for dinnerware, an ivory footstool for resting his feet, and bedcovers covered in lavish embroidery for a good night's sleep. He takes as much care in getting ready for war as a bride gets ready for her wedding, and his morning ritual mirrors that (Barker 34).

After being escorted to the basement, the slave ladies were swiftly removed. From above, Briseis beheld a group of men celebrating their victory by taking turns raping a lady as they drank from a jug of wine (Barker 14). This scenario shows how the rape of women by males is portrayed in the Greek narrative as a victory party over the vanquished city. Several guys rape the women till they die, subjecting them to terrible torment.

A different scenario emphasizes the terrible brutality and sadism done by men, showing a mother frantically reaching out to her two injured kids as they die nearby (Barker 14). These brutal and torturous acts of sexual abuse highlight the patriarchal patriarchy's persistence in seeing women as nothing more than sexual objects. Two men in the Achaean camp conduct a degrading physical examination on the ladies of Lyrnessus to distribute them based on their looks (Barker 19).

Here Briseis undergoes a dramatic change, losing her prior dignity and becoming a concubine for Achilles the man who killed her family because of the Trojan War. A veteran of the Achaean army named Nestor tells the ladies to forget their old lives, so they won't be unhappy, but Briseis isn't having any of it. But she decides to recall her history, nevertheless, seeing it as a rebellion against her predetermined destiny (Barker 20).

Briseis aspires to express her individuality and question the narrative placed upon her by remembering and reporting her experiences. She aligns herself with the more positive traits normally associated with males, such as activity and intellect.

Barker's story is aptly described by Sophie Gilbert, who explains that *The Silence of the Girls* represents the new narrative Briseis envisions, one that considers the impact of war on women (Gilbert 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, a compelling feminist reinterpretation of Homer's epic, *The Iliad*, successfully brings attention to the voices of women usually neglected in classical mythology. Barker skilfully integrates the experiences of her female protagonists into the broader patriarchal framework, offering a subtle analysis of the traditional methods of constructing myths. Barker's novel sheds light on the devastating effects of war on women, emphasizing themes of grief, despair, and historical subjugation. The novel honors the memory of those who suffered by retelling their stories, with Briseis standing as a powerful symbol of collective memory and resilience. Barker bridges the gap between the past and the present via fusing the storytelling traditions with modern fiction, giving voice to the historically marginalized women of Homeric epics.

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