



Wailing Wounds: War-Torn Women in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Women of Troy*

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Abstract

The article hopes to explore the multifaceted repercussions experienced by women as wartime rape is weaponized as a tool for silencing and subjugation. By unpacking the wartime realities of the Trojan women outlined by Pat Barker in her novel The Silence of the Girls and its sequel, The Women of Troy. Engaging with the authors' intricate and multi-layered narrative of war serves as a critical scaffold to discuss issues of gendered violence and coercion. The novels have drawn from mythological accounts to shed light on the indelible mark left on women during the war, psychologically and physically scarring them for life. Barker has anchored the narrative in mythology, and the novel, with its interpretive potential, engages with multiple ideological issues and paradigms related to women in war. The research at hand critically examines the lives of the women who were displaced and subjected to sexual and physical violence during the war. Through a comprehensive review of these mythological narratives, the study substantiates how women's sufferings were subsumed and predominantly silenced by heteronormative war narratives. This paper is oriented to elucidate and understand the pattern that emerges when probing the treatment of women during war.

Keywords: gendered violence, ideological issues, interpretive potential, multilayered narrative, subjugation, wartime rape.

Wartime Rape: The Past that bleeds Into The Present

Since classical times, wartime rape has been used as a weapon to subdue and silence; it has been systematically used in armed conflicts to assert dominance. The violence inflicted on women in recent decades has been understood in a reconceptualised way. The mainstream attention on the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, where historical accounts record the rape of Chinese women by the Japanese Imperial Forces, and in 1994 in Rwanda during the Bosnian War, where records suggest

an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 women endured systematic rape. The severity of wartime rape and its devastation were fully comprehended after these incidents. Mythological narratives have oftentimes legitimised wartime rape and, in some cases, have normalised and ritualised it. Mythology, in a way, has codified the framework for hegemonic forces to trivialise wartime rape. This historical gendered and cultural erasure has contributed to establishing a canon where women are blamed for collective disasters.



Pat Barker: The Chronicler of Womanhood and Trauma

Pat Barker is an acclaimed British writer who has delved into the domain of feminist revisionist mythology. Baker reconstructs the voice of the woman of the Trojan War in the novel *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Women of Troy*, which is the story of women who displayed exceptional resilience even when they endured involuntary concubinage and rape. Barker sets out not to write praises about war heroes, but rather unveils the struggles of the women whose suffering is glossed over and shrouded in mystery. Often relegated to the background of the victory songs sung in praise of heroes, these Trojan women, in the hands of Barker, are reprised, and their small yet significant acts of courage find a mention. This gender aware stance of Barker establishes a connection between the war and women.

The Silence of the Girls and Women of Troy: A re-inscription of war and women

The Trojan War is a quintessential aspect of classical mythology, often famed for its heroic narratives, intricate depictions of war and bristling with commentaries of warriors. But upon closer inspection, the gender undercurrents and determinants underlying the war are often overlooked. *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Women of Troy* capture the tribulations of women who ended up being hostages in the power struggle. The thematic exposition of the novels focuses on the Trojan War as it unfolds through the eyes of Briseis, who is at the heart of the story, but is also very much about her companions, who are central to the narrative. Mythological sources occasionally do give significance to women's tribulations and attainments, but it is often papered over by rendering women's actions seem irrational and illogical. Further characterising their actions as inefficient and incongruous, reinforcing the stereotype of associating women with being inept. Barker has structured the narrative in a way that the story is reduced to just suffering, but it is also a chronicle of survival.

The War for Women and The Women in War

In war, women are often the first victims of war crimes to create a sense of humiliation in the

defeated enemy and their experiences become forgotten tales, that die with them, this is often the case because, their tales are not stories of valour, and bloodshed, but rather tales of suffering in silence, but Barker's narrative supports the argument that their lives weren't comprised of suffering alone as they fought back authority in quiet ways they could. They are not helplessly suffering, but rather their acts of defiance and courage are drowned out by the clamorous celebration of war heroes.

The practice of pillaging women of defeated countries was a normal practice of the conquerors, states Ikuhiko Hata, the author of the book *Comfort Women and Sex in the Battle Zone*. This denotes how hurting women was instrumentalised to affront male authority indirectly. Furthermore, Barker focuses on how wartime rape often results in the deprivation of bodily autonomy in women, who have no say in what happens to them, as they are shuffled around as broodmares and given out as prizes, becoming trophies indicating victories. In *Women and Genocide Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators*, Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warren say, "One explanation for gender-specific violence is that in all cultures there has existed—and continues to exist" (Bemporad 6).

The Blame Game: Woman and War in Mythology

Mythology often serves as a scaffold which narratively positions women as instigators of wars and disasters. Gendered assumptions are further operationalised for scrutinising the behaviour of women. According to the *Washington Post*, the French have a phrase for it: "cherchez la femme -- look for the woman" denotes the cultural tendency to attribute the mistakes to women. This cultivates discourses that reinforce ideas such as 'there's always danger lurking behind beauty', which eventually results in harmful archetypal figures such as the *Femme Fatale*. A *Femme Fatale* can be described as a seductive woman who supposedly uses her beauty to lure men and entrap them. Many such historical and fictional women who were spuriously incriminated and branded are Medusa, Cleopatra, Aphrodite, Pandora and Helen of Troy. Medusa famously known for her ghastly appearance was a victim of sexual assault at the hands of Poseidon but he was



left unpunished whereas Medusa was punished by transforming her hair into snakes; Cleopatra is often referred to as a woman who almost singlehandedly wrecked two empires but never as a queen that held her ground amidst so many challenges; Aphrodite a goddess who is often slut shamed for her sex appeal and sensualness is often pointed as the partial reason why the Trojan War started. These acrimonious depictions install a flawed framework about women.

But perhaps the most well-known sacrificial lamb during the war was Helen of Sparta. In *The Silence of the Girls* and *The Women of Troy*, everybody assumes that Helen could have stopped the war at any instant had she returned to Menelaus, as she becomes the subject of derision. Barker's rendering of Helen is multi-dimensional and, in some cases, even confounding. Despite the contrary accounts about Helen provided by other women about her, according to Helen herself, she was stripped of agency, didn't have a choice or free will. Helen was merely a sacrificial lamb who was pointed at as the reason for the war. Ruby Blondell, in her work *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation*, notes that "Helen as an object to be resecured regardless of both her failings and her own desires" (Blondell 107). Briseis notes about Helen that "When I looked at her, I didn't see the destructive harpy of the stories and the gossip; I saw a woman fighting for her life" (Barker, *Troy* 48).

Bodily Autonomy: Women's Bodies as the Symbolic Trophy

Barker paints a picture where the female body becomes a site of conquest in war, and the sketches of demoralisation are haunting and graphic. Wartime sexual violence is defined by Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against Our Will* as "rape was a deliberate act of power, dominance, and humiliation committed by men with no moral compass—and that most victims feared their attackers were going to kill them" (Brownmiller 5).

Barker portrays violation of the body as an act of violence. Briseis, towards the end, is carrying the child of Achilles, her fate uncertain, and in the novel's sequel, *Women of Troy*, everyone starts cherishing her, the reason being that she is carrying Achilles's child. But Briseis considers the pregnancy

an erosion of her identity. Briseis thinks, "I hadn't chosen this pregnancy; I didn't want it. And yet I knew it was my salvation. Without it, I'd have been given away—offered as a first prize in Achilles's funeral games" (Barker, *Troy* 55).

A woman's body being viewed as a gestational apparatus is not a distant dystopian dream, but rather a lived reality in the recent ruling of *Roe v. Wade*, which again views women as wombs. Laura Kaplan, in her work *The Story of Jane*, a book on a secret underground group that helped women with abortions, states that the organisation "viewed reproductive control as fundamental to women's freedom" (Kaplan 7). Kaplan, with critical lucidity, agrees that symbolic reduction of women as wombs still reverberates in the present: "Women are being reduced, once again, to the incubators of future generations with total responsibility but no power" (Kaplan 15).

Briseis expresses emotional detachment from the pregnancy, "At times, it seemed more like a parasitic infestation than a pregnancy, taking me over, using me for its own purposes—which were their purposes" (Barker, *Troy* 54). Barker establishes that what the Greeks did to the Trojan Women was borderline and falls into the category of 'Revenge Rape'.

Stereotypes and Archetypes that Tame: The Chain of Gender Policing

Helen is treated as a symbolic burden, which serves as a constant reminder of the ancient prejudicial archetypes held against women. Jack Holland in his work *A Brief History of Misogyny The World's Oldest Prejudice* introduces a Greek term 'Kalon Kakon', meaning a "beautiful evil". Concepts like Kalon Kakon further construct prejudicial archetypes about women. Barker sketches a Helen who is living with a fame she doesn't want, as her beauty becomes the reason why she is imprisoned and stripped of her freedom. Behind closed doors, she is abused by the same man who is waging wars for her. Bettany Hughes in *Helen of Troy: The Story Behind the Most Beautiful Woman in the World* states, "Museum storerooms around the world have shelves crammed with vases showing Helen at various points in her life-story and in her evolution as an idol – Helen as a girl, Helen as queen, Helen as a demi-goddess, Helen



as a whole – but these images, without exception, are all made up; they reveal not who Helen was, but who men have wanted her to be” (Hughes 55).

Trauma Inscribed: Assault of the Mind

When assessing the impact of war on women’s bodies, the implications are insurmountable, but the impact goes beyond the physical violence. This lack of autonomy is not just limited to the body; it’s also psychological warfare. Briseis herself starts living her life with a constant sense of uncertainty as she observes, “I seemed to be living in a bubble, no past, no future, only an endless repetition of now and now and now” (Barker, *Silence* 41). As their entire life is shaped and consumed by violence, these harrowing effects of sexual slavery have lasting implications on these Trojan Women, as everyone seems to have become a shell of their past selves; their time in war has permanently warped the women. They also get acclimatised to the violence to the point where they are almost desensitised to the pain.

Sisterhood: The Silent Resistance against Control

Barker unflinchingly foregrounds the trauma the women undergo, but she also layers the narrative with their quiet but consequential actions that showcase their courage and their resolve to hold on to their moral integrity. Their sisterhood becomes the weapon of defiance when all seems lost. Many such standpoints of defiance that are noteworthy include Briseis becoming inclined towards Amina, an unassuming maiden who accompanies her. Briseis wants to keep the exuberant spirit in Amina alive and also protect and shelter her from the brutality of the war, which she failed to do for herself, as life caught up to her in the form of suffering. Briseis channels all her anguish towards healing the soldiers wounded in war; she loves working in the camp alongside Ritsa in helping heal the wounded soldiers. This also corroborates how women are at the forefront of reinstating normalcy in post-bellum societies. The main thing that makes these women resolute is that they turn to sisterhood as their source of strength. As they go through the same struggles, they look out for each other and try to ease their pain in ways they can.

Conclusion

Mythology, in a way, sort of fodders the cultural obsession to own women’s bodies, as it’s not love for Helen that fuels the war, but the need to possess the most beautiful women in the world. Mythology has often denoted women as the instigators of chaos and destruction, which indicates the deeply ingrained sociocultural tendency to blame women. The gynocentric reimaginings give an option to call into question the factualness and morality behind the claim. It also facilitates an opening to address and question the systematic patterns that are used to cultivate stereotypes against women. It is discernible to a limited degree that mythology is looked on as a repository of culture that has aided and spearheaded in establishing gendered power dynamics against women, especially in times of war. Barker, through her novel, has decoded the systematic violence and casts light on the convergence of patriarchy, mythology and how it permeates cultural essence. It further elucidates the idea that mythology has refashioned violence against women as customary, accepted and even as worthy of veneration. In a way, the war on women’s bodies continues, but in the form of legal docility, exclusion from history and cultural stigmas that still pervade everyday life. In an era marked by fragmentation, Barker connects the past and the present by touching upon issues like war, violence and prescribes compassion and empathy as the antidote to collective trauma experienced by humanity. This also acts as a kind of narrative therapy to contemporary readers. Barker’s writings highlights displacement, trauma, and exile, but also articulates survival. This helps mankind envision hope after turbulent times. Barker turns mythology into a tool of empowerment, as she presents stories of survivors who are not consumed by grief but rather who find a way to make sense of the chaos.

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