

**INTERNATIONAL BACCALAURETE
EXTENDED ESSAY**

**REFRAMING TRADITIONAL GENDER NARRATIVES IN PAT
BARKER'S *THE SILENCE OF THE GIRLS***

Research Question: To what extent does the contemporary retelling of Homer's *The Iliad* by Pat Barker in her book *The Silence of the Girls* reframe the traditional perspectives on gender?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, storytelling has helped people share their experiences, and create generational narratives called myths. Myth is defined as "*A usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon*" (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Therefore, myths can be said to form a framework on which human beings comprehend their place in this world (Armstrong, 2006). Among the various mythologies, Greek myths are the most well-known and helped define Western culture through their impact on literature, art, philosophy, and language (Highet & Bloom, 2015).

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are two epic poems written around 8th century BC by Homer and are considered to be the most important poems of the European literature (Luce, 1997). The first of these poems, *The Iliad*, focuses on the great warrior, Achilles, and explores the themes of heroism, fate, friendship, loss, and the ravages of warfare (Young, 2014). Although the events of the poem belong to Ancient Greek mythology, it still provides valuable awareness on human experiences and behaviours. One of the insights it provides is into the role of women in the society. In *The Iliad*, the infamous Helen of Troy is the reason of the war and at the same time, women as a group are the victims of the Trojan war. They are considered commodities, they rarely speak or make decisions and their fate is irrelevant (Zielinski, 2019). Through the portrayal of women in *The Iliad*, we can see the limited roles of women in the ancient patriarchal systems.

Stories play an important role in how we perceive our identity through the immersion state we experience during our engagement with the story (Joubert et al., 2019). Since gender identity is a fundamental part of overall identity (Jastrzebska & Blazek, 2022), it can be said that literature plays an important role in constructing cultural notions of gender (Wallowitz, 2004). Feminist literary criticism interprets literary texts to determine how women are depicted, gender norms, and power relationships between men and women (Plain & Sellers, 2007). In the recent years, there has also been a proliferation of feminist retellings of classics which aim to call attention to patriarchal traditions that define and limit women (Rich, 1972). This revisionist strategy, which has been shaped by writers such as Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller, and Pat Barker, among many others, transforms ancient tales of heroism into reinterpretations of voice and agency.

One of the most critically acclaimed of these writers is Pat Barker who won numerous awards as well as national honors for her work (Nixon & Barker, 2004). Her early work focused on the poverty and violence experienced by wage-earning women in England. In recent years, Barker has turned to deconstructing the dominant narratives in ancient myths in her Women of Troy series. The first book in the series, *The Silence of the Girls* tells the events in *The Iliad* primarily from the viewpoint of Briseis, the queen of the Trojan city Lyrnessus, and later the war prize of Achilles; with the aim of giving the women whose lives were irrevocably damaged by warfare back their voices (CBC, 2018).

This extended essay will critically examine how *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker deconstructs the phallogentric framework shaped by patriarchal norms in *The Iliad* and the writer's eventual ability in making the women the subject of the story, reclaiming agency, and redistributing voice in the constrained lives of women in her text. Consequently, I aim to answer the following research question: "To what extent does the contemporary retelling of Homer's *The Iliad* by Pat Barker in her book *The Silence of the Girls* reframe the traditional perspectives on gender? ".

2. FEMINIST THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To answer the research question, my primary sources will be Emily Wilson's 2023 translation of *The Iliad* which is the first English translation by a woman and echoes the rhythmic structure and the clarity of the original poem while remaining faithful to the patriarchal world depicted in it (Robles, 2023) and *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker. My secondary sources will be books, essays, interviews and theses about my primary sources.

I will first do a subjectivity-focused reading of *The Silence of the Girls* building on Nussbaum's Objectification theory, which identifies seven qualities that represent typical attitudes regarding objects that comprises objectification when directed toward an individual (Nussbaum, 1995), to determine how Barker reframed Homer's characterization of women as objects or prizes to be won. I will then employ Butler's concept of performative agency to explore whether the female characters in Barker's novel exercise agency within the limits set by patriarchy (Butler, 2010). Finally, I will use Lanser's feminist narratology to determine whether Barker is able to transform

Briseis's silence and change her from an object of male-centered storytelling into the voice of a shared female narrative (Lanser, 1981).

3. REFRAMING TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES

3.1 Objectification and Establishment of Female Subjectivity

Objectification is "the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, *as an object*." (Papadaki, 2024), and it involves fragmentation of the identity of a person, generally one with less power, into parts with specific functions, and their use as a means to an end for those with power (Gruenfeld et al., 2008). In her Objectification Theory framework, Martha Nussbaum (1995) established seven aspects that constitutes objectification when directed toward a person: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity.

When interpreted using this framework, it can be seen that most women in *The Iliad* are depicted as prizes, bargaining tools or relatives who are used to further the heroic narrative. An example of this instrumentality is Andromache's scene with Hector (Homer, 2023, p.149):

"Your will to fight will kill you! Do you feel

No pity for your little baby son,

Or my unhappiness, my life of loss?

Soon I shall be your widow."

Here, Andromache pleads with Hector not to go to battle since her life and her child's life depend on Hector's survival. Her fear is used to deepen the emotional impact of Hector's heroism and her grief is the emotional consequence which reinforces his glory. Andromache denies all subjectivity and defines herself as mother, wife, and widow as these are the only positions she can relate to herself. Thus, Andromache's marriage and maternity is the narrative device which, while pointing to the human consequences of battle, ultimately reinforces the male-centered and militarized social structure (Suri, 2020).

Another example is the fate of Chryseis, a Trojan woman who is the daughter of Chryses, a priest of Apollo. When the Greeks destroy her city, Chryseis is taken as Agamemnon's war prize. She becomes central to the plot when her father comes to ransom her. However Agamemnon refuses by declaring (Homer, 2023, p.2):

"I will not let her go. She shall grow old

a very long way from her fatherland

.....,

and share my bed."

First, Agamemnon's assertion that she will *"share (his) bed"* is a claim of violability which normalizes sexual domination. Second, Chryseis is denied autonomy as she is denied any capacity to determine her own fate. Finally, she is entirely inert with no recorded words of her own, existing only as the object of male exchange and divine retribution.

Agamemnon is forced to return Chryseis when Apollo sends a plague on the Greek army and their prophet says that the plague will lift once the priest's daughter is returned to her father. Perceiving this as a loss of his status, Agamemnon tries to reassert his supremacy by targeting Achilles' war prize, Briseis, and declares (Homer, 2023, p.8):

"so I shall take your beautiful Briseis,

your trophy. I myself will come and get her

in person from your tent, so you will see

how far superior I am to you,..."

By these words, he reduces Briseis' identity to a status symbol. This underscores what Nussbaum calls the denial of subjectivity, wherein the emotions of Briseis are made irrelevant within the

decision of men; fungibility, as she is considered an object interchangeable with Chryseis; and ownership, through which she is positioned as a possession used to assert Agamemnon's authority.

In contrast, Barker challenges this dynamic in her novel. Briseis becomes the narrator describing others rather than being described by them:

"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, 2019, p.3)

This repetition of the epithets negates the epic tradition of deifying Achilles through praise by replacing it with the rhythmic tone of irony. Furthermore, by re-naming Achilles *"the butcher"*, she reclaims moral center of narration for the victim, converting Briseis's passivity in *The Iliad*, her inertness, into autonomy of perception.

Barker reverses instrumentality by giving Briseis the power to describe her exploitation. Her reflection that she is *"his prize of honor, his reward for killing sixty men in one day..."* (Barker, 2019, p.37) exposes the transactional logic of male glory. The conversion of body from trophy into testimony dismantles instrumentality by allowing women interpret, rather than just endure, their exploitation which allows for the recovery of self (Altin, 2021). Briseis is both the object and the witness of objectification. Being aware of objectification implies articulation, claiming that experience and imagination of alternatives. Once you are aware, you can never be un-aware again.

The denial of autonomy is absolute in *The Iliad*, the men decide on the fate of the women. However, Barker overturns this through interiority. When Briseis declares, *"A slave isn't a person who's being treated as a thing. A slave is a thing, as much in her own estimation as in anybody else's."* (Barker, 2019, p.38), she describes the internalization of subjugation with extraordinary insight. Self-objectification is, ironically, an act of cognitive autonomy (Bauer, 2011). By recognizing her dehumanization, she rises above it.

In Homer's world, women are interchangeable prizes exchanged between men. Barker resists this fungibility by differentiating each woman, removing their fungibility by inscribing individuality to collective trauma (Judge, 2022). In a meeting, the women share their sexual experiences and convert their private trauma into collective knowledge (Barker, 2019, pp. 47-48):

"Uza was Odysseus's prize. No problems there, apparently. All very straightforward. When it was over, he'd lie looking up at the ceiling and indulge in long, rambling reminiscences about his wife,

Ritsa turned to me. "What about Achilles? What's he like?"

"Fast," I said, and left it at that. "

Lesser (2025) argues that Barker's Briseis acquires a moral awareness absent in Homer through this relationship with other women. Thus, by creating a bond among the female characters, the author creates a space women can imagine an alternative definition for themselves and take strength from each other.

In such a quest for re-definition of female identity, the female body requires attention. Barker's novel describes the violation of the female body with brutal honesty (Barker, 2019, p. 28):

"He fucked as quickly as he killed, and for me it was the same thing. "

Barker's refusal to eroticize rape reframes violation as testimony. The violated body, thus, becomes an epistemic site, where pain creates perception and ethical understanding (Scarry, 1985).

The reduction of a person to property, ownership, is confronted in the novel through Barker's irony. When Briseis observes (Barker, 2019, p. 37), *"Nobody wins a trophy and hides it at the back of a cupboard"*, she replaces Achilles's physical ownership of her with ownership of the story. The enslaved woman's body remains claimed, but her story is her own. Through self-narration, Briseis repossesses her identity, undermining the economy of possession that defines the epic tradition.

Finally, Barker's novel functions as a reclamation of interiority which overturns the denial of subjectivity, the refusal to recognize women's perspectives. Even after living with his violence and ownership, Briseis recognizes the captivity and loss experienced by Achilles. After Patroclus dies, she notes (Barker, 2019, p. 259):

"Then he covers his face and weeps for his father and for Patroclus, for the living and the dead."

The fact that Briseis can perceive his pain despite her own marks a moral superiority. Sen (2020) observes that Barker relocates ethical authority from the hero to the victim. When Briseis feels empathy for Achilles, she becomes the one who interprets the hero, thereby reversing *The Iliad's* hierarchy, where women are consistently interpreted through the perspectives of men.

However, Barker's attempt at reframing remains incomplete in several ways. First, Barker grants Achilles chapters that explore his psychology and grief. This recenters the epic hero, relegating Briseis once again to the role of witness to masculine suffering. Secondly, a pregnant Briseis walks toward an unknown future at the end of the novel, her body becoming a vessel of continuation of patriarchal lineage. This can be interpreted as showing that Barker cannot entirely escape the patriarchal narrative it seeks to overturn. On the other hand, Barker's success lies in portraying that subjectivity is not the opposite of oppression but the means by which this oppression becomes visible. Her women cannot escape war and violence, but they can narrate it. That act of narration becomes the assertion of the self.

Her final words, where she says (Barker, 2019, p. 324);

"His story. His, not mine. It ends at his grave.....Now, my own story can begin."

gives her the last word, and thus the last moral perspective.

3.2 Reconstructing Female Agency in a Patriarchal War Context

Theory of performative agency proposes that identity and action are produced through repeated social norms (Butler, 2010). However, that repetition carries the potential for subversion. Each re-enactment allows the alteration of meaning. *The Silence of the Girls* covers various actions (service, care, etc.) which are dictated by patriarchy while re-signifying them as endurance, witness, and moral authority.

The novel opens with sacking of Lyrnessus by Achilles and his soldiers. Briseis, the queen who is hiding with other women and children, narrates their horrifying approach. She then refuses to follow her cousin to her death by jumping over the parapet and becomes Achilles' war prize instead. This refusal to commit suicide is not heroic but a re-signification of survival itself. Briseis

accepts capture, repeating the expected pattern of female passivity, yet gives it new meaning by asserting her will to live and to witness. Survival is her first performance of agency.

Women are assigned care work (tending wounds, preparing corpses for burial) in the camp. On the surface, these are performances of docility, enactments of "a women's place". However, when Barker describes Briseis washing Hector's dead body, this coercion becomes witnessing.

" This was the man who would have been king of Troy after Priam died, and yet here he was, his flesh as white and dense as dead cod." (Barker, 2019, pp. 72-73)

Through humanizing the dead, she unmask the war's glorified violence. The act reiterates a patriarchal assignment and reinscribes it as moral perception. She cannot refuse the work, but she can decide what the work signifies.

Staying silent, despite often being interpreted as passivity, can be considered refusal to perform. Briseis's silences with Achilles are actions, she chooses to withhold her inner life from her captor. Furthermore, the silence in the camp is contrasted with speech to the reader. While performing obedience externally, she inwardly addresses an audience Achilles cannot control. This defines her agency; she may be under his command but she is in command of telling her story.

Constrained agency can also be seen in other women in the novel. Tecmessa, the Trojan woman who is the war prize of Ajax and is not a speaking character in the Iliad, negotiates safety for other captives; Polyxena, the Trojan princess who is chosen for ritual sacrifice to ensure a safe passage home for the Greeks, refuses to beg before her execution and stays calm. These are the small acts of resistance which preserve dignity and lives. Furthermore, by naming these other women, Briseis rescues their lives from anonymity and includes them in the communal record. Once again, a female community serves as the site of connection and power.

It can be argued that there are some limits to Barker's re-signification. Performativity can reframe meaning, but it cannot change the material conditions of sexual slavery, captivity, and exchange of women. This realist structure of the novel severely limits the female agency and denies retributive solutions. Nevertheless, where *The Iliad* makes them objects of exchange, Barker makes them authors of meaning of their actions. In doing so, Barker manages to separate

vulnerability from agency. She shows that one can be both enslaved and self-possessed, both silent and authoritative. These women may never win the war, but they win back their story as their own.

3.3 Narrative Authority and the Reclamation of Silenced Female Voices

According to Lanser's narratology theory, narrative voice is not neutral and reflects patterns of power and social hierarchy. Who is authorized to speak, to whom and on what social terms reveal the gender structures (Lanser, 1981).

The Iliad tells the story of wrath of Achilles and it is sung by a male poet about the male warriors. In Barker's version, however, it is the captive who sings as a witness. The novel's first-person narration ("*I heard him before I saw him: ...*") (Barker, 2019, p. 3) asserts testimony which Homer denies in *The Iliad*. Briseis chooses where to begin the story (with the destruction of Lyrnessus), what to remember about the events (women's terror, rape, hunger, daily work), and what to omit (the battle scenes which celebrate male power and heroism). This shift of voice gives the authority to the captive. Furthermore, Briseis may be the narrator of the book but her first-person singular voice alternates with first-person plural throughout the text. This repeated use of "we", naming of other women and telling about their fates creates a communal memory of shared experience which counters *The Iliad*'s solitary heroism, increasing the narrative authority of women.

Lanser also emphasizes address because audiences give power to the narrator. The implied audience is not the Greek men anymore but the "moral jury" of the future generations. One of the most emotionally powerful scenes in *The Iliad* is Priam talking about kissing Achilles's hands in a bid to get Hector's body back (Homer, 2023, p.599):

" I have endured what no man yet on earth has done,

I pressed my mouth into the hand of him

who killed my son."

This scene appears in *The Silence of the Girls* through Briseis's eyes (Barker, 2019, p. 267):

"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."

Through this change, she shifts the direction of the address from Achilles to outward to expose and morally judge a system which enslaves and objectifies women and to tell the stories that the epic erased.

Voice is not only who speaks but also how they speak. Lanser argues that male and female voices reflect socially constructed speech patterns. Women's language is more hesitant, emotional, and uncertain while men speak in a more rational, efficient, and authoritative way in literature. When the soldiers are taking Polyxena for sacrifice, Briseis objects to their rough-handling her (Barker, 2019, p. 316):

"Polyxena tried to turn back, and one of the men caught her roughly by the arm. Stepping in front of him, I said, 'There's no need for that.'"

Briseis's imperative here is assertive, and since the soldiers listen to her and do as she says, effective. She commands obedience by speaking in a way that Lanser identifies with male narrative power. Still, Briseis can only claim a male narrative voice at this time, as she does not possess a voice of her own yet.

In significant contrast with this feminist reallocation, Barker gives Achilles his own voice in third-person chapters. These sections risk re-centering male subjectivity in the novel. We are invited to witness Achilles's grief after Patroclus' death and emphasise, a luxury that the enslaved women rarely receive. In Lanser's terms, the communal female voice cannot displace the master narrative; it co-exists with it creating what Genette called "double focalization" where the same events are filtered through two perspectives (Genette, 1980). Yet, it can be argued that the tension created by this dichotomy helps with reframing the narrative. Since we also hear the male perspective, Briseis's narrative authority becomes relational. Rather than substituting Achilles, she frames him, letting him to remain human but not heroic.

In the beginning of the novel, Briseis says "*Nobody was ever allowed the last word; not even a god.*" (Barker, 2019, p. 3). However, at the end of the story, hers are indeed the last words we hear (Barker, 2019, p. 324):

"Now my own story can begin."

4. CONCLUSION

In answering the research question, "**To what extent does the contemporary retelling of Homer's *The Iliad* by Pat Barker in her book *The Silence of the Girls* reframe the traditional perspectives on gender?**", this essay has aimed to show that Barker is able to reframe the traditional narratives and reclaim the epic from a female perspective through her reconstruction of female subjectivity, agency, and voice.

Barker keeps the structures defined by Nussbaum's Objectification Theory without softening the violence through a redemptive new story but introduces an awareness. The first-person narration positions the female as a moral witness rather than a "prize", exposing the price of honor and glory in the language of human experience.

Barker's women also aim to have agency, even under total domination. This change happens not through rebellion, but through creating a new meaning. The rituals that signify their submission in *The Iliad* stay the same but are resignified. In other words, even if they can't escape the system they are in, they are nevertheless able to transform how its symbols or rules function. Even if it can be argued that women also have agency in *The Iliad* in the form of Helen's introspection or Athena's manipulations, Barker's success lies in amplifying these tiny disruptions in the patriarchal narrative into a counternarrative, without discounting the knowledge that the enslaved women still live inside systems of war and patriarchy.

Barker relocates narrative authority by giving the enslaved women ownership over their own stories. Where Homer grants women consequential speech only in lament or supplication, Barker gives them their voice by allowing them to decide who is named and what is told. When Briseis

seizes the narrative at the end of the novel by saying "Now, my own story can begin", this is an assertion of selfhood where the original epic permits only absence.

However this essay also has certain limitations. The theoretical framework used in this essay narrows the analysis to Western feminist thought which emphasizes ethics, voice, and resistance. However, these notions carry distinct meanings across historical periods and cultures which raises the risk of interpreting ancient hierarchies by imposing time and culture-specific ideals upon them. For instance, another feminist framework could analyze how race and imperial power intersect with gender in Barker's portrayal of captivity (Crenshaw, 2017). Similarly, a trauma-theory approach might offer an alternative perspective and argue how both silence and voice can be performative responses to violence (Griffiths, 2018). The analysis' emphasis on conceptual argument over linguistic detail also poses a limitation since stylistic and structural devices such as syntax, rhythm, and focalization can also be used to generate emotional resonance or detachment (Phelan, 2005). Future research could combine these methodological approaches to expand the interpretation through discussions of culture, historical reception, and linguistic devices.

The patriarchal ideology persists in modern institutions and gendered power relations still exist. By reframing the epic's gendered power, Barker not only reinterprets ancient social systems but also invites the modern readers to question how gender is depicted in narrative traditions today. Recognizing morally questionable objectification patterns is the first step toward exposing and undoing the conventions that perpetuate women's oppression (Nussbaum, 1995). Therefore Barker's retelling reminds us that ultimately we make sense of our world through stories and every story can be retold to challenge the status quo.

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