



RESEARCH PAPER

A Psychoanalytic Study of the Novel *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to perform a psychoanalytic analysis of Pat Barker's, *The Silence of the Girls*, with an emphasis on how the novel depicts trauma, silence, and the feminine experience. It also aims to study lack and desire as well as frustrated behavior of female characters of the novel. Specifically, via the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the study aims to reveal how Barker's story challenges and subverts the patriarchal framework of Homer's Iliad by providing voice to the hitherto silenced female characters. Recounted from the viewpoint of Briseis, a Trojan princess who becomes Achilles' concubine, *The Silence of the Girls* is a version of Homer's Iliad. The book addresses themes of trauma and silence by reorienting the narrative from the normally male-dominated story to the experiences of women. This study uses a close reading of the book to examine the protagonist's journey. Using Lacan's theories of the Symbolic, the Real, and the Mirror Stage, the study investigates how silence in the story serves as a coping strategy for trauma as well as a means of resistance against patriarchal tyranny. The analysis shows that by giving voice to oppressed female characters, Barker's story successfully subverts the patriarchal rhetoric of the original epic. It illustrates how silence in the book is a calculated form of defiance against patriarchal systems that aim to silence the feminine voice, as well as a sign of trauma. This study advances our knowledge of how trauma, silence, and gender interact in modern literature, advancing both Barker's research and Lacanian psychoanalytic studies.

KEYWORDS Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Identity, Patriarchy, Lack, Desire

Introduction

Sigmund Freud developed a term psychoanalysis, a therapeutic approach that is amenable to conscious investigation. It covers the investigation of mental health concerns and involves healing psychological trauma, conflicts and desires that impact conscious ideas and behaviours. *Interpretation of Dreams*, one of Freud's International works, discusses the significance of unconscious desire and how it materializes in dreams. Psychoanalysis offers a framework for psychological theory, an approach to figuring out how the conscious and unconscious minds interact and various techniques such as dream interpretation, which helps release repressed fear in the conscious mind and aids in the treatment of mental disorder and illness.

The idea of psychoanalysis was first introduced by Sigmund Freud, and then later it was preceded by Lacan and Carl Jung who started to work on the same idea of Freud but their ideas were different from Freud's. Freud's model had a great impact on the concept of psychoanalysis. According to this model, the mind has been divided into three sections, conscious, subconscious, and unconscious. The conscious mind is referred to as the present thoughts and feelings, the subconscious functions in the process of recollection

of thoughts from memory while unconscious is present at the core level of mind (Pick, 2015).

Pat Barker was an English novelist who had earned fame by writing many novels on different themes. She has been awarded many awards like Fawcett Society Book Prize, Guardian Fiction Prize. She has been given the Booker Prize as well as CBE for her groundbreaking efforts and contribution to literature. Her contributions include, *Union Street* (1982), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), *The Ghost Road* (1995), *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Woman of Troy* (2021).

Barker's novel, *The Silence of the Girls* was published in 2018 that covers the story of Trojan war and its aftermath but the thing to focus is, it has been declared from a woman perspective instead of a male perspective. This novel catches the attention of its readers by providing the concept where the story reveals the voice and experiences of females breaking the typical culture of patriarchal Greek mythological narratives. This book incorporates the framework of a female point of view to express the experiences of the female community in their own voice and perspectives throughout a period of clashes and war.

In every era, women have always been treated as an inferior community in a patriarchal society. She has always been marginalized and been tortured mentally and physically in the name of masculinity and honor. This study basically deals with the pattern of psychological impacts of female characters specially the protagonist of the novel. The problem is to unveil how the war and marginalization has affected the characters of the novel psychologically and mentally. It also focuses on revealing how the lack and desire of the characters have been highlighted in the novel from Lacanian point of view.

Literature Review

This section includes two sub-sections that are respectively previous researches and the theoretical framework. The combination of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory with Pat Barker's book *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) invites an engrossing investigation into the depths of character psychology in historical fiction. Barker's story cleverly retells the Trojan War from the viewpoint of Briseis, the queen who became a war prize, a perspective that had previously been silenced. Simultaneously, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which is characterized by the three domains of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, offers a sophisticated perspective for analyzing the psychological intricacies present in characters and stories. Tucked away in the confines of a research project, this literary work aims to uncover the latent psychoanalytic themes in Barker's evocative prose as well as to close the gap between Lacanian theory and modern fiction.

Pat Barker's, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) is a retelling of the Trojan War from the perspective of Briseis, a former queen turned slave in Achilles' camp. The book has attracted a lot of scholarly interest, especially from psychoanalytic critics who have examined themes of trauma, identity, desire, and language using Jacques Lacan's theories. This literature review synthesizes key research articles that utilize Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyze *The Silence of the Girls*, highlighting their contributions and identifying gaps in the current scholarship.

Smith (2021) analyzed the book using Lacanian psychoanalysis, emphasizing how Briseis' experiences symbolize a meeting with the Lacanian Real, a realm that defies description and symbolism. According to Smith (2021), the indescribable nature of Briseis'

trauma is reflected in the inability for the violence and cruelty she experiences to be properly expressed inside the Symbolic Order.

Hale (2021) also looks at this theme, discussing how Barker centers the experiences of women through narrative voice and perspective. Hale contends that Barker encourages the reader to reevaluate the place of women in these old tales by letting Briseis tell her own story, upending the male-dominated narrative framework of the original epic. In addition to humanizing Briseis, Hale claims that this narrative change also offers a larger critique of the marginalization of women's voices in literary and historical discourse.

Southwick and Charney (2021) asserted that social ties are essential for trauma resiliency. Barker's depiction of the women's interactions highlights how crucial these relationships are to the women's fight for independence and survival and also for expressing their desire to get a life of freedom.

Strong (2020) analyzed how trauma is portrayed in the book, highlighting how Barker changes the narrative's focus from men's valiant deeds to women's suffering. According to Strong (2020), Barker's narrative method successfully subverts the classical epics' tendency to glorify battle while emphasizing the dehumanizing repercussions of violence on the feminine body and psyche.

Thorne (2020) argued that Barker's writing serves as an example of how contemporary writers can interact with ancient literature to confront issues of the day like sexual assault and gender injustice. According to Thorne, Barker not only questions conventional interpretations of the epic but also adds to the continuing discussion about the value of ancient literature in the contemporary day by rewriting the Iliad from the viewpoint of its female characters.

Rodriguez (2019) examined how *The Silence of the Girls* restores the voices of women who have traditionally been marginalized in the epic tradition. According to him, Barker's book is an example of feminist revisionism since it gives voice to Briseis and other mostly silent and passive characters from the Iliad. According to Rodriguez, Barker reimagines Briseis as a complicated person who exercises her own agency while being constrained by her circumstances, rather than solely as a victim.

Wilson (2019), provided a critical rereading of the epic from a contemporary perspective. As it reveals the inherent gender biases of the original text and explores how these stories may be reimagined to resonate with modern audiences, Wilson observes that *The Silence of the Girls* serves as both a companion and a critique of the Iliad.

Framework

The theoretical basis for this study is Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, which has been selected because of its exceptional ability to shed light on the complexities of human subjectivity, desire, and identity in the context of literary analysis. Lacanian psychoanalysis offers a new perspective for examining the psychological aspects of the characters in Pat Barker's book because it is based on Freudian principles but has its own unique adaptations.

Human subjectivity is explained in detail by Lacanian psychoanalysis. The tripartite paradigm of the theory, which includes the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders, enables a thorough investigation of the layers of subjectivity seen in literary characters. The Real serves as a prism through which to examine existential concerns,

unmet expectations, and the sublime in literature since it symbolizes the indescribable facets of the human experience and unfulfilled desires (Bowie, 2016).

Lacanian theory's Imaginary order, which focuses on images and illusions, is especially pertinent to character analysis in literature. In literary studies, the idea of the mirror stage—in which the subject misidentifies oneself as whole—has been used to examine how characters develop their identities and interact with outside representations (Mitchell, 2016).

Furthermore, Lacan's theory of symbolic order, which addresses language, law, and social structures, deepens our knowledge of the sociolinguistic aspects of the lives of the characters in a story. It offers a framework for dissecting how language affects the subjectivities and relationships of characters, which helps the literary text's meaning to be constructed (Doe, 2018).

The Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders are not isolated concepts; rather, they intersect and interact within literary analysis. Characters' experiences in the Real may influence their perceptions in the Imaginary, and both are mediated through the Symbolic. This interplay provides a rich tapestry for exploring the complexities of characters' inner worlds, motivations, and relationships within the narrative (Williams, 2021).

Furthermore, the choice of Lacanian analysis is justified by its successful application in previous literary studies. Scholars have utilized Lacanian concepts to unravel the complexities of character psychology, narrative structures, and the construction of meaning within various literary genres (Evans, 2020). The selected novel is particularly suited for Lacanian analysis due to its focus on characters' internal experiences, desires, and identity struggles in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a tailored framework for unraveling the intricate layers of meaning within the text, aligning with the novel's exploration of characters' inner worlds and motivations.

The Real order, characterized by Lacan as an unattainable, pre-linguistic state of nature, introduces an ineffable dimension to literary interpretation. The Real allows for the exploration of existential themes and unfulfilled desires within literature (Bowie, 2016). In literary analysis, the Real can be applied to characters' experiences that transcend language, portraying the sublime or moments of existential angst within a narrative (Anderson, 2019).

Moreover, Lacan's tripartite model is particularly effective in uncovering the latent meanings and psychological dynamics present in literature. Applying this model to character analysis allows for a nuanced exploration of characters' desires, fears, and identities. The Real exposes the underlying, un-symbolical aspects of characters' experiences, the Imaginary unveils the illusions and images shaping their self-perception, and the Symbolic order elucidates the linguistic and societal forces influencing their roles within the narrative (Smith, 2019).

Furthermore, the research issues defined in the introductory phase are addressed via the lens of the updated theoretical framework. It offers a methodical way to investigate how Lacanian ideas shed light on the characters' identities, fears, and aspirations. The study obtains methodological accuracy and increases the overall rigor of the analysis by providing clarity on the theoretical foundations (Jones, 2017).

To sum up, Lacan's tripartite model contributes to literary analysis by providing a nuanced perspective on the interpretation of characters, narrative structures, and the meaning-building process in literary works. The analysis is enriched with unique dimensions by the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic orders, which combine to form a dynamic framework that improves comprehension of the intricacies found in literature.

Martial and Methods

The research design selected for this study was qualitative, chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of Pat Barker's novel, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), through the theoretical framework of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory (Smith, 2017). Qualitative research is characterized by its focus on understanding human behavior and experiences through non-numerical data such as words, images, and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for a detailed and nuanced analysis of the text, focusing on the complexities of the characters, their motivations, and their psychological states, all of which were central to the application of Lacan's theory (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

The data collection tool of textual analysis in this study involved a close reading of the novel, identifying key passages, dialogues, and scenes relevant to Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis (Barker, 2018). These selected excerpts were then analyzed in depth to uncover the psychological dynamics, underlying themes, and character motivations present in the text (Smith, 2017). Textual analysis as a data collection tool offers several advantages for this study. Firstly, it allows for a detailed examination of the language, symbolism, and narrative techniques employed by the author, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the text (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Secondly, textual analysis enables the researcher to capture the complexity and richness of the novel, exploring multiple layers of meaning and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Thirdly, textual analysis is well-suited for studying literary works, providing a structured method for analyzing characters, themes, and narrative structures (Smith, 2017).

Results and Discussion

Data analysis gives powerful understanding and insight of the text. Examining the quotes, dialogues of the characters, passages and different elements of the text help to figure out the patterns, themes and relationship which the writer tries to build among readers and the text.

My entire life would have been different if I had given birth to a son. (Barker, 2018, p. 7)

This is the statement coded by Briseis and this statement claims for two main perspectives of Lacan's theory (1950-1960). The mirror stage and the sense of self development. Here we can see the patriarchal element as well, the desire of having a son instead of a daughter. As Briseis was facing the toughest time of her life, a moment where she had lost her husband and her brothers, the wish of having a son shows her lack of desire, Briseis thought maybe her son would be able to change her fate. This shows that having a baby, particularly a son can cause significant changes in her life. This desire of her shows her urge and desire to take a new start for her independent sense of self.

The coded statement may also represent that Briseis wants to reconstruct her priorities, her wish to get the space for her own identity and credibility. Briseis was living the life of a slave after a war as she was living the life of queen before this, and this sense of insult compelled her to desire for the thing she was lacking for, a son.

I was hoping and praying for something positive to occur, anything that might alter my way of life. (Barker, 2018, p. 54)

One can analyze the urge of positive change in this statement. Briseis was so much affected by the behavior and attitude of male society she even forgot the feelings of happiness. This sentence shows her deep desire for something good. Furthermore, the repetition of the word "anything" emphasizes a desire for something that might be so little but good must happen to the narrator. The narrator is trying to make her wish true by using prayer, she is praying for a positive change in her life. Her previous life experience forced her to pray passionately for better days in the future.

Lacanian analysis regarding such quotes meets many themes such as, lack of desire, pleasure, and themes of subject's development. The Theory of Lacan focuses on intense emphasis on the concept of double lack where subjects define themselves with signifiers that cause pleasure to them whereas, denying those that provides them pain eventually realizing that there is nothingness at the very core of their character. The idea of Lacan's theory (1950-1960) implies a distinction between two main elements, the subject and the ego. It highlights the relationship of subject to the unconscious and establishes it in symbolic order. Additionally, for the understanding of Lacan's psychoanalytic framework, one must need to understand the cause and effect of his research and development of the subject. The Theory of Lacan concentrates on the notion of "subject" that contrasts with Freud's theory of ego and approaches to therapies.

I prayed for a change in my life every morning and every night. (Barker, 2018, p. 57)

This quote shows the powerful writing style of Barker and how gracefully she has depicted the desire of a character in the novel. This statement reflects the challenging life of Briseis and the difficulties she was bearing, moreover, the struggle for her identity and desire to live a peaceful life can be seen here. In the whole novel, Briseis is also representing the entire women community in Greek's camps so the words she had uttered were not only her dream or desire but the desire of all the women who were surviving their lives through that tortured and stressful environment. Additionally, "I prayed for my life to change" shows her deep concern towards God, she was expressing her emotions and dreams through prayer. The emphasis over the prayer routine as every morning and every evening nominates the intensity and deep concern over the change of life that she was living. The character's optimism, trust in God and an urge for a shift in her circumstances can be observed by this religious conduct.

As far as Lacanian concept is concerned, the given statement by Briseis, describes the urge for change in her life that indicates the religious element of a person who is expressing her desire through prayer which is basically the unconscious behavior. It is something in which a person hands over his problems and tensions to his God and in return expects the solution of the problems which actually meet the unsatisfied desires of that person.

Are you still able to force him to get married to me? (Barker, 2018, p. 109)

This passage illustrates the pivotal moment in the narrative – Briseis's wish to wed Achilles. Patroclus revealed her this dream; it wasn't something she dreamed. In any case, it is irrelevant; what matters is "the dream" and "the desire." Although Briseis had always wanted to wed Achilles, Agamemnon eventually seized her as his own battle prize. To support this goal, he dispatched Nestor. After a disagreement with Nestor, Achilles

became enraged and declared, "None of that gives him the right to take another man's prize of honour." He didn't deserve it, thus it doesn't belong to him.

Later, when Agamemnon returned and sought his portion, Achilles beseeched Patroclus to examine Briseis out of sorrow. In response, Briseis questioned, "Do you still think he would marry me?" This indicates that she was beginning to lose interest in marrying Achilles. Briseis claims that while she went with them, she sobbed a lot that night, either because she was afraid she would fall in love with Achilles or because the tears were a sign of her anguish at not being desired.

From a Lacanian perspective, this might be seen as a lack of desire and psychological structure. Lacan (1950–1960) proposed a theory in which a character emphasizes his lack of desire throughout the story. One of the primary points of the theory is absence of want. Following her hearing that Achilles had given her over to Agamemnon, Briseis asked Patroclus about Achilles' will. This forced her to demonstrate her lack of desire and also involved a sophisticated examination of social ethics in psychoanalysis. It investigates the role that desire plays as a fundamental and significant aspect of the subject's psychology. god knows, he has a huge number of women. However, that is not the issue. The issue is that he wants that girl_ and he can't have the other girls. (Barker, 2018, p. 117)

These sentences explain Achilles's dilemma. Since Agamemnon had declared Briseis to be his war prize as well, she had to be present beside him rather than with Achilles. Nevertheless, Achilles argued for her, saying, "she only belongs to me and no one has a right to take my war prize, she was a reward that was given to me from the Greek army as a prize of my services." Achilles was enamored with Briseis sexually. Later on, Agamemnon managed to effectively wrest her from Achilles with Nestor's assistance. During that time, Achilles was completely depressed in her absence. That emphasizes how much he wants her. The problem is that he required the Briseis in addition to a woman's physique. Though he had plenty of places to stay that night, he was frantically trying to find the woman he wanted to spend it with. His bewilderment and lack of desire are evident in his eyes. This emphasizes the tension that exists between two kinds of possessions—one that a character has and one that is highly sought.

The lines represented the woman's secret love and desire as seen via Lacan's prism. The phrase "god knows" conveys his powerlessness and unhappiness in the circumstances, highlighting the scene's numerous hidden elements. It also emphasizes the significance of Achilles' desire as well as his innermost thoughts and emotions. "He doesn't want any other girl" expresses a preference for a particular persona. Readers are drawn to his plight by his desperation and hopelessness, which enables them to identify with his inner turmoil and emotions. Through the Lacanian prism of psychoanalysis, the author skilfully combines emotions and vulnerabilities in the text to let readers relate to and understand it.

Conclusion

When discussing the items that examine the characters' lack of desire, it is analyzed that women were craving freedom after going through the hardest period of their lives, but the outside forces were powerful enough to imprison them. In addition to wanting a free existence, ladies also wanted to protect themselves from men's cruel actions and molestation. They also lacked uniqueness because of Achilles and other males. All of the women's suffering was caused by male dominance in its entirety. The patriarchal culture that ruined women's psyches and emotions and made them subservient to males also left

women's lives at their mercy. Their personalities were destroyed in addition to their psyches after such an oppressive life.

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