

Reimagining Homeric Women : An Analysis of Pat Barker's the Silence of the Girls

Jon Bhat¹, Shafayat Hussain¹

¹ Department of English, C.T University, Ludhiana, India.

Article History:

Received: 12-12-2024

Revised: 25-01-2025

Accepted: 05-02-2025

Abstract:

Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) both offer feminist reimaginings of Homeric women, particularly Penelope and Briseis, who were originally marginalized in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, respectively. These novels draw on the original texts in a myriad of ways. The novels lend voice to the otherwise silent voices muzzled for years together in the maze of alternate discourses. These novels give voice to many prominent female characters that, in Homer's epics, are often defined by their relationships with men rather than by their own experiences, emotions, and perspectives. By giving certain grounding to the female characters, the authors empower to speak freely of their own observations with a fair authority. The paper makes an attempt to analyse the host of ways through which women try to reclaim their space, voice and a definite position or standing to narrate the plight of the women in Homeric times.

Keywords: Homer, silent, alternate discourses, grounding, plight, Homeric times.

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood disputes the very nature of male-centred stories. In her poem True Stories, she sets out to believe that the true stories lie in a labyrinth of stories. She is of the mind that the true story is hard to find and it is, so to say, useless to ask for a true story:

*The true story is vicious / and multiple and untrue /
Don't ever / ask for the true story....*

This poem, in certain different ways, might very well serve as a preface to Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad*. It is an attempt to depict one such "true story" lying "among the other stories," Atwood's novel reinterprets *The Odyssey* from Penelope's point of view, transforming her from a passive, loyal wife into a sharp-witted, self-aware woman who challenges traditional narratives. The novel is structured as a retrospective monologue, with Penelope narrating her story from the Underworld, offering an ironic and often humorous critique of her portrayal in Homer's epic. Atwood's Penelope is no longer just the patient wife waiting for Odysseus; she actively manages Ithaca in his absence and questions the heroic myth that surrounds her husband. She is aware of Odysseus' cunning and infidelities, and her voice is one of skepticism and intelligence. A crucial innovation in *The Penelopiad* is the collective voice of the twelve maids who were hanged by Odysseus upon his return. They serve as a Greek chorus, lamenting their unjust fate and exposing the brutality of the patriarchal system that condemned them. Atwood uses humour and irony to subvert

the idealized image of Penelope and Odysseus' marriage, portraying it as far more complex and less romantic than in *The Odyssey*.

2. Literature Review

Feminist reinterpretations of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* have gained traction recently, as scholars and authors seek to centre marginalized voices, particularly those of women, within these canonical texts. This shift highlights how classical epics often silence or minimize female experiences. Below, I outline the development of feminist interpretations, moving from recent perspectives to older approaches, and analyze the contributions of Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. Down the line, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) offers a satirical take on *The Odyssey*, narrated by Penelope in the afterlife. It explores Penelope's experiences while Odysseus is away, interweaving her story with the voices of the twelve maids Odysseus brutally executes upon his return.

Atwood critiques the male-centered heroism of Homer's *Odyssey*, exposing its inherent sexism and questioning the morality of Odysseus' actions. The voices of the maids highlight issues of class and gender inequality. *The Penelopiad* demonstrates how myth can be reimagined to challenge patriarchal narratives and question the glorification of traditional heroes. Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* is a retelling of *The Iliad*. It foregrounds the experience of Briseis, the enslaved Trojan queen who becomes Achilles' concubine. Barker reclaims Briseis' voice, shifting the narrative focus from the heroics of men to the suffering, resilience, and silenced voices of women. Barker critiques the patriarchal violence of the epic and emphasizes themes like agency, trauma, and the dehumanization of women in war. Her feminist approach subverts the glorification of war and exposes the complicity of epic traditions in silencing women. Barker's novel has sparked renewed discussions about how epic traditions erase or distort women's experiences. Her work aligns with contemporary feminist and postcolonial concerns about representation and power.

3.1 Homeric Women in their essence

Homer's twin classics *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* teem with women. The women in these epics are both mortal and immortal. These epics are largely the stories of and about a protracted war between the Greeks and Trojans. Amidst the rut-a-tat of war and frenzy, the women suffer silently. Penelope is often regarded as the idealized wife in Homer's *Odyssey*, embodying loyalty, patience, and domestic virtue. Her character reveals the expectations of women to maintain household order and faithfulness to their husbands, even in their long absence. Ann Haward maintains that the expected role of the women was in the home. Telemachus instructs Penelope "get on with your own work, weaving and spinning. Talking is men's concern". Ann Howard further says that there are few choices for women in the Homeric world and they would expect to be married off and only a small few would have a particular status. Penelope Murray says:

Throughout Odysseus' wanderings it is Penelope who remains firmly at the centre of the epic and it is she who symbolises the goal for which Odysseus constantly strives: his homecoming.

Penelope is a woman of many parts. She wears many a shoe with a fair degree of justice to them. She is a fine mother and a patient wife. She quite calmly withstands the domestic pressures and wards off all the odds with a fair degree of sangfroid:

But the heart in her is firm and enduring, / that woman of the house, Penelope. She is always weeping / for her husband, who is away, and the thought of him with her is never / done; she is waiting in patience for the day when he will come back. (The Odyssey, Book 1, lines 331–334)

Penelope's role in the epic is to preserve the household while Odysseus is away, and her loyalty is constantly tested by the suitors. Penelope constantly finds herself in a quandary and yet she knows how to get out it. She is hemmed in by a cabal of suitors who, every now and then, pester her with taunts and jeers. She takes on the role of a loving guardian and typical Homeric women:

So by day she would weave at her great and growing web— / by night, by the light of torches set beside her, / she would unravel all she'd done. Three whole years / she deceived us blind, seduced us with this scheme. (The Odyssey, Book 2, lines 107–110)

The most discussed women among the Homeric women is the Helen of Troy. Helen, the cause of the Trojan War, is portrayed as a complex figure, both revered for her beauty and blamed for the devastation of war. Her character illustrates the limited control women had over their fate, as they were often objects of exchange and power between men. Despite the fact that she is women of great beauty, she rues all her ways that issue out of her beauty and the attendant lack of reason and foresight:

Would that evil death had been pleasing to me / when I followed your son here, forsaking / my bridal chamber, my kinsmen, my grown child, / and the lovely companions of my youth. (The Iliad, Book 3, lines 172–175)

Helen expresses regret for leaving her family and causing the war, showing her awareness of her role in the conflict. Yet, her fate was largely determined by men's actions (Paris abducting her, Menelaus trying to reclaim her), reinforcing the idea that women had little control over their lives. Helen is reduced to an woman of great beauty only and thus a bone of contention between the best of Homeric men:

But now, seeing Helen, the old men murmured softly, / 'No wonder the Trojan and Achaean men have suffered / years of agony all for her, for such a woman. / Terribly like a goddess, immortal, awe inspires. (The Iliad, Book 3, lines 156–159)

Talking of the other prominent women like Briseis, a concubine taken by Achilles as a war prize. She is a typical example of the enslaved women who were treated as objects or rewards for male warriors. Her experience underscores the vulnerability of women, especially during war. Briseis mourns Patroclus not only for his kindness but also for the lost promise of security and marriage. Her sorrow reflects the lack of autonomy women had—her fate was determined entirely by men's decisions, and even her future marriage was seen as a form of possession by Achilles. Andromache, Hector's wife, exemplifies the vulnerability of women left behind during war. Her character highlights the emotional toll of war on women, who face the potential loss of their husbands, sons, and their homes.

Andromache's plea to Hector shows her dependence on him for protection and support. In this patriarchal society, women's lives were tied to the fate of their male relatives, leaving them vulnerable and powerless in the face of war.

Apart from treating women as creatures shorn of reason and foresight, they were objectified as war prizes that could be tossed between men and men. The first example of women being treated as property is found at the very beginning of the poem, when Agamemnon agrees to give Chryseis back to Calchas:

But fetch me another prize, and straight off too, / else I alone of the Argives go without honour. / That would be a disgrace. You are all witness, / look--my prize is snatched away. (1.38-41)

3.2 Homeric Women reimagined

Pat Barker, in her seminal work *The Silence of the Girls* expressly points out those men talk women as if they were their rightful subject and as if they were divinely destined to that. She elaborates:

Men carve meaning into women's faces, messages addressed to other men. In Achilles compound, the message had been: Look at her. My prize awarded by the army, proof that i am what I have always claimed to be the greatest of the Greeks. Here, in Agamemnon's compound it was: Look at, Achilles' prize. I took her away from her just as i can take your prize away from you. I can take everything from you. (Barker 16)

Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* begins with a vindictive observation and confrontational jibe. She, at once, wants to negate the history of peerless bravery, unfathomable wisdom attributed to Achilles. She finds these accolades hollow and thus mere figments of imagination. Barker reassesses these attribute and settle for a different one. She calls Achilles a butcher:

Great Achilles, Brilliant Achilles, Shining Achilles, Godlike Achilles ...How these epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things, we called him the butcher.

Pat Barker, in *The Silence of the Girls*, bestows a particular honour to Briseis-the honour of narrating the events as they unfold to her. As Briseis takes the onus of the narrator, she is at a vantage point. She weans us away from the normal discourse of the war. She doesn't sing of the valour and wantonness of the war but pries open the inner recesses of the countries torn apart by war. She is free to tell her story and hence able to narrate the spoils of a protracted war with a certain degree of accuracy and journalistic precision. As she is one among the captured slaves who breathes within a group of ruthless men, she is able to report the attendant trauma and precisely the sense of fear the war caused among the women:

Down all the narrow lanes of the city, small groups of women carrying babes or holding children by the hand were converging on the main square. Fierce sunlight, a scouring wind and the citadel's black shadow reaching out to take us in...(Barker 5)

3.3 Her Story

Briseis voluntarily wants to walk out of Achilles' story as she found it one of the men and for the men only. She distances herself from the string of encomiums men weave around themselves. She is at loggerheads with the myriad of epithets which the war heroes came to be noticed by:

Once, not so long ago, I tried to walk out of Achilles' story—and failed. Now my own story can begin. (Barker 25)

Spoken by Briseis, a Trojan woman taken as a concubine by Achilles, this line reflects her struggle to assert her identity in a world where women are mere footnotes in the stories of men. Briseis' attempt to "walk out" of Achilles' story symbolizes her desire to escape the male-dominated epic of The Iliad, where her fate is dictated by the whims of warriors. The phrase "not so long ago" blurs the boundary between ancient history and the present, suggesting that the erasure of women's voices remains a persistent issue.

This line also highlights the novel's feminist perspective, as it reimagines Homer's epic from the viewpoint of a woman who was previously voiceless. It questions the glorification of war and heroism by exposing the suffering of the captives. Ultimately, the statement embodies Briseis' defiance and longing for autonomy, even as she remains trapped in a narrative that reduces her to a mere possession.

By handing the story to the women, Barker humanizes Achilles and his fellow warriors. They are ruthless and spoiled with no qualms about taking anything they like whether that's cities, finery or women. The Briseis is witness to the gruesome and unending rape of the women and she is privy to the arson loot all around. The horror and the ghastly scenes of the war may not figure in the general report of the war but Briseis as an objective narrator minces no words and hence reports the visceral realities of war without any fear.

Conclusion

By giving Briseis narrative power in *The Silence of the Girls*, Pat Barker achieves a powerful revision of The Iliad, shifting the focus from male heroism to the often-overlooked suffering of women in war. In Homer's epic, Briseis is little more than a prize, passed between warriors, but Barker transforms her into a fully realized character with agency, emotions, and a voice of her own.

Through Briseis' perspective, Barker challenges the glorification of Achilles and other Greek warriors, exposing the brutal reality of their actions. Briseis' narrative dismantles the romanticized notions of war, showing it as a cycle of violence where women are dehumanized and silenced. Her voice also brings attention to the psychological and emotional trauma of captivity, offering a more intimate and unsettling portrayal of war's consequences.

Additionally, by allowing Briseis to tell her own story, Barker reclaims space for female voices in historical and literary traditions that have long marginalized them. This narrative shift highlights themes of resistance, survival, and the resilience of women. Ultimately, Barker's choice to center Briseis reshapes our understanding of classical myths, making them more relevant to contemporary discussions on gender, power, and oppression.

References

- [1] Barker, Pat. *The Silence of the Girls*. Doubleday, 2018.
- [2] Atwood, Margaret. "The Women's War." *The New York Times*, September 21, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/books/review/pat-barker-silence-of-the-girls.html>.
- [3] Mendelsohn, Daniel. "Pat Barker's New Novel Gives Women a Voice in *The Iliad*." *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/08/pat-barkers-new-novel-gives-women-a-voice-in-the-iliad>.
- [4] Troches, Giulia. "Women's Voices in Contemporary Rewritings of *The Iliad*: Briseis' Perspective in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*." *Gender Studies* 18, no. 1 (2019): 45–58.
- [5] Kitzinger, Jenny. *Rewriting the Classics: Feminist Reinterpretations of Greek Mythology*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- [6] Wilson, Emily. "Classics and the Voices Left Out." *The Guardian*, October 1, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/01/silence-of-the-girls-pat-barker-review>.
- [7] Haynes, Natalie. *A Thousand Ships*. HarperCollins, 2019.
- [8] Hardwick, Lorna. *Reception Studies and the Classical Tradition*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- [9] Schein, Seth L. *The Mortal Hero: an Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. University of California Press, 1984.