

Reclaiming Female Subjectivity: An Irigarayan Reading of Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*

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Abstract:

This article aims to highlight the Irigarayan strategies that Pat Barker's women in her revisionist masterpiece, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), can utilize in order to resist being commodified in warstricken conditions and reclaim their subjectivity. The questions that this study tackles to answer are: Are the slave women able to resist commodification? How do certain strategies utilized by the slave women function in resisting commodification and reclaiming their sense of individuality? Will this resistance against commodification enable them to undermine patriarchy? To answer these questions, a feminist theoretical framework is incorporated, and Irigaray's theories are investigated in the selected feminist revisionist text. Barker depicts women's commodified status and their subjection to patriarchal roles as slaves and war spoils and, simultaneously, grants them voice and agency to undermine the patriarchal economy of the Same. This article elucidates that in spite of being subjugated to the patriarchal system, they can adopt Irigarayan strategies—appropriating a revisionist mythological narrative, establishing a female culture and utilizing mimicry—in order to resist commodification, defy patriarchy and reclaim their voice and individuality.

Keywords: Commodification, Enslavement, Feminist Revisionism, Patriarchy, Resistance

1. Introduction

The history of Western culture has been marked by the prioritization of male experience and the harsh exclusion, marginalization and silencing of those who were his opposites. Tracing back the roots of such problematic dichotomous thinking in Western culture, we can delineate that it has always preconditioned a 'difference' which exists in the 'corporeal' bodies of each sex. Therefore, the corporeal 'sexual differences' between men and women are what generate the different statuses

between the two sexes. As Françoise Héritier notes, it is not simply woman's lack of male sexual organ but her power of fecundity, her natural ability to give birth and produce children which makes her 'different' (69). According to Dani Cavallaro, with her sex devalued and her body reduced to a reified reproductive machine (100), woman is relegated to the status of a thing, no more different than an object or the nature surrounding her. Sometimes such kind of commodification even deteriorates into violence and sexual commodification in the forms of rape or slavery which have a long history in Western culture. History, science, philosophy, law, literature and 'myths', which, according to Shana Govers, "embody both historiographic and fictional elements" (8), are immersed with the negative 'otherized' portrayals of woman such as the evil seductress, passive mother or nurturer.

Luce Irigaray (1930), contemporary Belgian philosopher, psychoanalyst, linguist and feminist thinker, allocates a chapter in her groundbreaking work, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), to a Marxist reading of women's status in society, titled "Women on the Market." In this chapter, she draws an analogy between woman and commodity, arguing that the woman/commodity derives her value from a third masculine term which alienates her from her body through 'use' and 'exchange' values (175). She asserts that our societies are founded upon the consumption, circulation and exploitation of women's bodies while pushing them to the 'infrastructure' of sociocultural horizon (*This Sex* 170-171). However, she also suggests that there might be ways to elude commodification through methods such as appropriating a revisionist narrative, developing a female culture and employing mimicry.

Pat Barker (1943), contemporary highly-acclaimed British novelist, depicts a great portrayal of women's subordination, exploitation and relegation to the status of commodities in a mythological setting revolving around the Trojan War in her revisionist masterpiece, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018). The *Iliad*, a canonic work of mythology and literature, as Izabela Currylo-Klag indicates, through its ellipsis in language—the 'silence' of its women and the 'left out' aspects of the work (14), caters Barker with rich resources to explore her feminist insights. Providing a revisionist narrative regarding the Trojan War, Barker grants voice to the silenced women on the Greek camps who are reduced to the status of slaves, spoils of war and commodities.

This study aims to apply Luce Irigaray's theory to Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* in order to investigate women's possibilities for challenging the patriarchal system, resisting commodification and reclaiming their voice and agency. This study is academically significant for two reasons. First, Irigaray's feminist theories have been relatively less examined within literary studies compared to those of other feminist thinkers. Second, despite the growing scholarly attention to Pat Barker's novel, Irigaray's ideas have not been yet applied to its analysis. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to existing scholarship by exploring the intersection of Irigarayan theory and Barker's feminist revisionist narrative. The questions that this article tackles to answer are: Are the slave women able to resist commodification? How do certain strategies utilized by the slave women function in resisting commodification and reclaiming their sense of individuality? Will this resistance against

commodification enable them to undermine patriarchy? In order to answer these questions, Irigaray's critical notions regarding women's liberation, which include the appropriation of a revisionist mythological narrative, inauguration of a culture of the female and practicing mimicry, will be taken into consideration. The following pages constitute the "Literature Review" in which some academic research that has been conducted on Irigaray's oeuvre and Barker's novel respectively will be introduced. In "Theoretical Framework," Irigaray's strategies for resisting commodification and reclaiming female subjectivity are presented. "Analysis: Reclaiming Women's Subjectivity in *The Silence of the Girls*" provides an intensive enquiry of Irigarayan strategies in Barker's novel, including three subsections titled "Feminist Mythological Narrative," "Culture of the Female," and "Mimicry" in which each of the mentioned critical notions are explored. The final section, "Conclusion," provides a quick review of the findings of this study.

2. Literature Review

As one of the few feminists who has not disregarded Irigaray's contributions to feminism, Linda Daley in "Luce Irigaray's Sexuate Economy" (2012) discusses Irigaray's new model of exchange which does not preconditions "the reduction of difference to sameness" (62). Rather, she studies "the resources for a corporeal conception of exchange and value, a sexuate economy, based on sexual difference" (62). Irigaray's sexual difference is the principal basis for the establishment of an economy inclusive of both sexes' biological differences which can lead to women's liberation from patriarchal oppression (63). Tegan Zimmerman, in her article "Revisiting Irigaray's Essay 'Women on the Market'", reexamines Irigaray's commodification theory. Irigaray's view regarding the exchange of women only by 'male' exchangers exempts women from such position. However, Zimmerman suggests that "women need not be excluded per se from being exchangers if they likewise exchange women according to male desires/needs" (432) which may result in the exploitation of women by other women, pitting them against each other (433). Diana J. Fuss, in her article "Essentially Speaking: Luce Irigaray's Language of Essence" (1989), studies the essentialist charges against Irigaray's oeuvre. She emphasizes Irigaray's 'strategic' use of essentialism, claiming that her 'too much' emphasis on female corporeality is mimetic of the phallogocratic model and it is Lacan's morphology that she imitates (66). In a thought-provoking article titled "Thinking with Irigaray: On Asian Women as Objects of Conquest and Exchange" (2017), Elaine M. Lazaro advocates Irigaray's call to found a new culture of difference which does not treat women as commodities nor spoils of wars signifying the homeland whose rape functions as the subjugation of this homeland. She notes that the maternal body is possessed, utilized, labelled and exchanged by patriarchy (96), a notion that Irigaray significantly challenges in her works.

In her article "Breaking the Silence: Woman as Subject in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*" (2021), Merve Altin analyzes the novel in the light of Hélène Cixous's notion of 'écriture féminine'. According to Altin, Cixous urges women to write about their experiences which will eventually help them reclaim their long-silenced voices (852). Likewise, the protagonist of the novel narrates her

experiences on the Greek camps, working as a nurse and forming bonds of sisterhood with other women as a means of retaining her individuality (858). Izabela Curyllo-Klag in “Of Mice and Women: Pat Barker’s Retelling of the *Iliad*” (2020) observes Barker’s novel in an ecofeminist light, denouncing the patriarchal thoughts through portraying the horrible consequences of wars and associating women with nature. As she proclaims, decay, waste, misery, plague, destruction, terrors of murder and rape associated with wars are concealed within the Classic text (14-15), but not in Barker’s novels. Indeed, the protagonist closely observes what happens in her surrounding while identifying herself with mice (16) which inflict a deadly plague on Greek soldiers as a revengeful compensation. In a different perspective, Shana Govers’ *Feminist Voices in Modern Mythmaking: On the representation of women in Pat Barker’s The Silence of the Girls and Madeline Miller’s Circe* (2020) suggests the ‘mosaic mythmaking’ method to analyze feminist revisionist novels. Instead of reading these texts as “rewritings” of Homer (28), Govers argues that texts are a mosaic of quotations; therefore, these texts should be read as complementary myths to each other (32). Thus, Barker’s myth is not a “retelling” but a complementary version of Homer’s. Tuhin Shuvra Sen, in “Summoning the Voices of the Silenced: Pat Barker’s *The Silence of the Girls*, A Feminist Retelling of Homer’s *The Iliad*”, argues that retelling the patriarchal myths which have always marginalized the female experiences offers “a new representation of female subjectivity that defies the orthodox patriarchal autonomy” (46). Sen notes that Barker depicts the dreadful lives of slave women, observing how they sustain their individuality through making small choices and exerting power (54).

3. Theoretical Framework

Irigaray proposes three specific strategies in *This Sex Which Is Not One* to help women rediscover their sense of individuality and subjectivity. One of the most significant of these strategies is the creation of revisionist mythological narratives. According to Athena Athanasiou and Elena Tzelepis, “Irigaray’s encounter with “the Greeks” encompasses mimetic deconstructive readings of canonical texts but also appropriating Greek mythology especially in its aspect of female genealogies” (4). Elizabeth Grosz also inserts that “Greek mythology articulates our shared cultural narratives. Yet, given their rich ambiguity and openness to re-interpretation, they are always capable of being read *otherwise*” (163). Creating a revisionist mythological tale revolving around the same mythological event but through a different perspective perfectly resonates with Irigaray’s critical notion. Moreover, she proceeds to articulate her second strategy which is the establishment of a female culture. She highly emphasizes the reconciliation between mother and daughter hitherto distanced from each other by patriarchal speculation as well as acknowledging female genealogies. According to her, “there is no longer any woman God, any God the mother of the daughter; there is no longer any spirit of divinity circulating between mother and daughter, between woman and woman, etc.” (*Elemental Passion* 1-2). According to Gail M. Schwab, this disappearance of female genealogies induces women’s loss of the opportunity to establish a utopic, fruitful, loving

relationship among each other (79). Therefore, Irigaray argues that the mother-daughter relationship is “one of the areas where it is important to work for the establishment of mediations, of relations between the in-itself and for-itself for women” (*I Love to You* 47). The third Irigarayan strategy that can be utilized by women in order to reclaim their voice and individuality is the only “path historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*.... as an attempt to thwart the workings of patriarchal order” (*This Sex* 76). However, as Alyson Lieberman maintains, this strategic mimicry is a double-sided gesture since it reductively restricts women and the true expression of their desires; yet, it is the only tool that women consciously have access to, and accordingly, must utilize in order to liberate themselves (12). Ping Xu advocates Irigaray’s strategic mimicry, asserting that “To assume the feminine role deliberately is to exercise a resistance from within the phallogocentric discourse, so as to disrupt it by forcing it to admit the consequences of its own logic which it cannot or does not want to admit according to the same logic” (80). Although this double-edged sword might not function in the favor of women, it is one of the only weapons they have access to and therefore have to make use of in order to exert as little agency as they can in perilous situations. Utilizing this strategy, significantly through laughter and hysteria, women are enabled to rediscover their voice and subjectivity and unveil the workings of the patriarchal system.

4. Analysis: Reclaiming Women’s Subjectivity in *The Silence of the Girls*

In this section, a comprehensive analysis of Irigaray’s critical notions in Pat Barker’s novel is provided. This survey explores the ways female characters in Barker’s revisionist tale can utilize each of these strategies to resist commodification and rediscover their sense of selfhood and subjectivity. The first subsection, “Revisionist Mythological Narrative,” investigates the narrative tools that Barker’s women use to rediscover their voice and agency. In the second subsection, “Culture of the Female,” the possibility of resorting to female bonding and friendship among the characters is explored. The third sub-section, “Mimicry,” investigates how these women can resubmit themselves to patriarchal images regarding themselves and undermine the workings of this system simultaneously.

4.1. Revisionist Mythological Narrative

Myths significantly contribute to the shaping of cultures and the division of gender roles. Greek myths, which have been the touchstone of Western tradition, are marked by the valorization of virility and privileging men in contrast to the subordination of women and inferiorization of femininity. Myths, through their oral transmission and reiteration, develop into dynamic tools in the grasp of patriarchy for the perpetuation of certain images and beliefs in societies. Therefore, as Bruce Lincoln points out, “myth is ideology in narrative form” (12). Likewise, Irigaray stresses the significance of Greek mythologies and their influence on our contemporary culture: “We are all imbued with the many Greek...traditions, at least, particularly through art, philosophy, and myths we live by, exchange, and perpetuate, often without our realizing” (*Je, Tu, Nous* 23). Thus, these ideological instruments at the hands of patriarchy are utilized for the imposition of certain roles and

images on the individuals and the perpetuation of hegemonic patriarchal values. As Nora Julia Levicka asserts, myths serve as the basis for the construction of a society; therefore, they create and substantiate the roles to which people are expected to conform to as natural (18). Women's statuses in Greek myths have been always defined in terms of their relationships with their male counterparts and predominantly depicted as either passive, peripheral, 'footnote-like' characters, or silent, even non-existent beings altogether. Besides, the mythological women are nothing but mere 'images of femininity' enforced on them by patriarchy. Dessa Meehan contemplates on the negative patriarchal portrayals of women in myths, used as excuses for the justification of women's exclusion from authority:

Women in mythology were commonly portrayed as devious, manipulative, hazardous to men, and deceitful. Their actions in the stories culminated in realization of ancient Greek male fears: namely that women would become promiscuous, disloyal, and uncontrollable. In order to keep this from happening, ancient Greek men exercised the practice of seclusion, forcibly separating women from men and barring them from authoritative positions outside of the household, for this was thought to be a solution to combat women's innate trickery and keep men firmly in control. (18)

Secluded and voiceless, women were merely restricted within their patriarchal entrapment. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese indicates, "while men were ... busying themselves with those activities we are wont to call history, women were invariably doing something - if only bearing more men to make more history and more women to permit them to do so" (6). While men were leaving their mark on history, women were solely regarded as reproductive instruments for the sustenance of society. Thus, they have never had access to the male scope of myth-making so as to voice their own experiences or defend themselves against the prejudiced patriarchal myths regarding themselves. According to Carolyn Larrington, "Historically, women have been disbarred from the means to fix their myths in literary form, to give them a distinctively female perspective" (13). Similarly, Sue Blundell adds that no Greek woman "is allowed to speak for herself. None is able to tell us what she thinks about her life and the place which she occupies in the Greek society" (11). Silence is the prominent characteristic shared by all of these women, particularly during wartime conflicts. Likewise, Irigaray reflects on women's silence and non-access to story-telling:

Their history, their stories, constitute the locus of our displacement. It's not that we have a territory of our own; but their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves. Their properties are our exile. Their enclosures, the death of our love. Their words, the gag upon our lips. Don't cry. One day we'll manage to say ourselves. And what we say will be even lovelier than our tears. (*This Sex* 216)

Through creating their own myths, filling in the ellipses in grand narratives such as Homer's *the Iliad* and centralizing the marginalized insignificant female characters, Barker is able to voice her

female protagonists' feelings, experiences and perspectives. Myth-making is a highly agentic gesture hitherto associated only with patriarchy. As Alicia Ostriker inspects,

At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. There we find the conquering gods and heroes, the deities of pure thought and spirituality so superior to Mother Nature; there we find the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtuously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, Cinderella. It is thanks to mythmaking that we believe that woman must be either "angel" or "monster". (71)

Pertaining to the role of passivity, mythological societies are marked by "an interest in maintaining women's silence" (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference* 105). Hence, female writers incorporate narrative tools in order to focalize women's experiences. Notably influenced by Nietzsche, Irigaray similarly insists on the significance of deconstructing/demythifying myths and reconstructing/remythifying them in order to provide a contingent chain of ever new takeovers, adaptations and reinterpretations (Athanasίου and Tzelepis 5). This corresponds to feminist mythmaking which reveals the dark aspects of wars hitherto condoned by male myth-makers and functions as an active gesture in reclaiming the long-deprived female subjectivity. As Shana Govers indicates, it allows women to "tell their own stories, their own myths, their own history" (32). By turning a peripheral Homeric female character into the protagonist of her novels, Barker accommodates Briseis with the essential narrative tools to voice her inner feelings, thoughts, and experiences as Achilles' prize of honor on the Greek camps during the Trojan War. As Catherine Lanone puts it, "Through transfocalization, she gives her voice back to Briseis, and allows her to piece together the story of her life (and potentially of all Trojan women), to expose her story rather than History or his/story" (10). Watchfully aware of her surrounding, she actively commits herself to "bear witness" to everything that is occurring during the course of war, probably as a defiant response to Nestor's advice before her enslavement: "Don't think about your previous life... That's all over now—you'll only make yourself miserable if you start brooding about it. *Forget!* This is your life now" (*The Silence of the Girls* 38). Briseis' immediate mental reaction to his advice is to exactly do the otherwise: "*Forget*. So there was my duty laid out in front of me, as simple and clear as a bowl of water: *Remember*" (38). She instantly realizes that she has to cling to her past memories so as not to let her identity be assimilated by her enslavement. Her narration of the events are meshed with reminiscences of her past life—her childhood in her father's household, her mother's songs and lullabies, her four young brothers, her young King husband, her difficult mother-in-law who resented her due to her apparent infertility, her older sister to whose house she had random visits, or her meeting with the infamous Helen of Troy. She deliberately incorporates her memories in her narration, giving the readers a clear picture of her true identity as well as reminding herself of her sense of individuality as a person. As Altin remarks, "Remembering is an act of defiance, a revolt against her "forced" destiny. Remembering, and consequently telling her own experiences would be a way of breaking out of the boundaries of his/story" (855). Govers also observes that "at least in

her own mind, she is able to hold on to her own voice, her own story” (12). Therefore, Briseis is simultaneously reclaiming both her voice and subjectivity. Additionally, the events of the Trojan War are perceived through the perspective of a slave woman whose recounting does not include epic elements or glorious warriors but kinesthetically realistic depictions of the goriest aspects of the war, the perpetration of atrocities and their devastating aftermaths. Through her narrative, the reader can take a glimpse at the ruins and desolations caused by the masculine violence, the extreme commodification and exploitation of women in the form of rape and enslavement, and the vulnerability of male warriors who suffer from the oppressive forms of toxic masculinity.

Briseis’ act of narrating her story corresponds with Helen’s act of weaving, both signifying agency and subjectivity. According to Buket Akgün, Homeric female characters turn to weaving whenever they want to spin a story, control the destiny or fabricate a lie (208). Irigaray too notes the significance of weaving and plaiting as women’s contribution to the history of civilization (*The Speculum* 112). Consequently, Helen turns to stitching a tapestry of the Trojan War—in which she herself is absent—in order to tell her story and feel in control once again. Briseis reflects on Helen’s tapestry:

What I came away with was a sense of Helen seizing control of her own story...that those tapestries were a way of saying: I’m here. *Me*. A person, not just an object to be looked at and fought over...I know she wasn’t in them, I know she deliberately made herself invisible, but in another way, perhaps the only way that matters, she was present in every stitch. (*The Silence of the Girls* 181-182)

Just like Briseis who sings her story in ‘words’ like bards, Helen spins her story through stitching tapestries. Both Helen and Briseis utilize narrating and stitching as strategical means to reclaim their agency and subjectivity. According to Sen, despite losing everything, Briseis and the other slave women nonetheless rally, survive and voice their griefs and losses: they strive to regain their sense of identity even in the harshest conditions forced upon them by the masculine affair of the war (55).

Songs, also associated with voice, play a significant role in the novels as means of narrating stories, notably myths. As Levicka mentions, “Songs represent a medium through which the myths can be transmitted from generation to generation. These songs, however, are centred around a less gory and horrendous topic than the outcome of war suffered by the survivors” (54). This is why Briseis insists on composing a ‘new’ song:

Yes, the death of young men in battle is a tragedy – I’d lost four brothers, I didn’t need anybody to tell me that. A tragedy worthy of any number of laments – but theirs was not the worst fate. I looked at Andromache, who’d have to live the rest of her amputated life as a slave, and I thought: *We need a new song*. (*The Silence of the Girls* 417)

Listening to Tecmessa singing her half-Greek baby a Trojan lullaby to put him to sleep, Briseis realizes that the slave women and their stories are going to survive:

I looked around the group. There they were: battle-hardened fighters everyone, listening to a slave sing a Trojan lullaby to her Greek baby. And suddenly I understood something...I thought: *We're going to survive – our songs, our stories. They'll never be able to forget us. Decades after the last man fought at Troy is dead, their sons will remember the songs their Trojan mothers sang to them. We'll be in their dreams – and in their worst nightmares.* (*The Silence* 394)

She realizes that through their songs and lullabies, not only the slave women will eventually survive the ferocious ordeal of war, but they will also possess a significant domineering power over men. This underpins their agency and subjectivity and helps them to undermine the patriarchy.

4.2. Culture of the Female

The phallocratic order is established based on the exploitation of female matter and survives through alienating mother from daughter. Through distancing mother and daughter from each other, patriarchy prevents the foundation of any genuine relationships among women. The daughter's submission first to her father's and then to her husband's genealogies obliterates any genealogical relationship to her mother and female ancestors. Looking down on herself and her resented castrated mother, the daughter realizes that no other woman possesses the phallus, the signifier of power, either; hence, she extends her hatred to other women as well. According to Margaret Whitford, this is why Irigaray deems it rather impossible to negotiate the problems caused by the horizontal relationship between women totally separated from the vertical relationship between mother and daughter (78). Mother-daughter relationship is unquestionably linked to between-women relationships as it is "one of the areas where it is important to work for the establishment of mediations, of relations between the in-itself and for-itself for women. We must, in short, define a culture of the female" (*I Love to You* 47). Furthermore, women are doubly alienated from each other in the process of commodification. According to Millett, functioning based on binary logic, patriarchy pits the estranged alienated women against each other as rivals to create a lively antagonism between them (38). In response, Irigaray invites women to speak to each other as 'women': "Speak to me...Don't tear yourself apart like that with choices imposed on you (*This Sex* 211)". With a convincing tone, she persuades women "to discover the love of other women while sheltered from men's imperious choices that put them in the position of rival commodities (*This Sex* 33). Founding relationships with other women based on love, respect and bonding helps them overcome this long-internalized rivalry and hostility, consequently enabling them to establish a culture of the female. As Gea Sophia Oh regards, "In order to call for a new god who represents women, women need to gain their own subjectivity in the masculine society. What Irigaray suggests is that in order to create female subjectivity, women must have a sociality among themselves" (5). Founding a culture of the female based on sisterhood, bonding and maintaining female genealogies undermines patriarchy and helps regain the female subjectivity.

Barker's slave women strive to establish a culture of the female through overcoming their conflicts. Compromised and commodified, they all suffer from the devastations brought upon them

by the savagery of war. As they all have undergone and endured the same loss, violence and oppression, they exert themselves to relieve and help each other survive the war (Altin 858). Briseis possesses a significantly kind, caring, and empathetic personality which enables her to overcome the alienating patriarchal beliefs internalized in her. She feels deeply concerned and responsible for the other women from the beginning. Unlike other Trojan women who despised Helen, young Briseis' opinion about her is neither low nor biased. She also believes Helen's account of being raped at the age of ten which others derogatively dismissed: "Oh, yes, I got that story too. Poor Helen, raped on a riverbank when she was only ten. Of course I believed her. It was quite a shock to me, later, to discover nobody else did" (175). She openly appreciates Helen's unmatched weaving skills and her attempt to spin her own story through stitching her tapestry of war. As Levicka maintains, "Briseis respects Helen's version of the story, giving her license to create her own narrative" (87). After her enslavement on the Greek camps, Briseis also meets and befriends several other slave women such as Iphis, Hecamede, Uza, Tecmessa and Chryseis. Besides, she still keeps in touch with her maid and friend, Ritsa. Iphis is the first of the slave women who receives her with kindness and looks after her when she is lost and struggling:

I stood there, wet, bedraggled and terrified, with no idea of what to do or where to go. But then a girl came to the door of one of the huts and beckoned me inside. Her name, she said, was Iphis. She took care of me that morning, even filling a bath with hot water to wash the salt out of my hair. (*The Silence of the Girls* 55)

Briseis constantly reflects on the kindness she received from other women in her early days of enslavement and is urged to reach out to other slave women as well. She is genuinely concerned for the young Chryseis who is sexually abused by Agamemnon and feels relieved and happy for Chryseis when she is ultimately sent back to her father. She also appreciates Tecmessa's beautiful voice and love for her son and gradually builds a bond of friendship with her. In this regard, Levicka elucidates:

Her attitude towards other women is rooted in compassion, caused by their shared fate. She does not even reproach Helen, the one person who was seen by most of the Trojan women as the cause of all their perils. She acknowledges the importance of voices of other women, believing Helen's story and recognizing the power of Tecmessa's lullaby. The comradery between women who unite in their shared fight for survival represents another shade on the wide pallet of complex relationships between female characters. (88)

Through overcoming their alienation, Barker's slave women are enabled to inaugurate a culture of the female, and consequently, strive for survival, thwart workings of the patriarchal system and rediscover their own sense of identity and subjectivity. What is more, instead of being solely based on Briseis' inner voice only addressing or questioning herself, the narrative seems to have another particular company or addressee. Barker herself reveals that this particular company could be Briseis' grand-daughter:

The novel builds an unstable situation of enunciation, as it is unclear whether Briseis is addressing someone or herself...Yet the questioning voice that reappears may not be an instance of psychomachia, but an address to a listener—perhaps, as Barker suggests in interviews, Briseis’s grand-daughter. (Lanone 9-10)

Taking Briseis’ grand-daughter as the listener, the novel can also be perceived as a feminist myth orally narrated and addressed to a female progeny as a means of establishing a female genealogy. Through leaving behind a dynamic female legacy and genealogy for her grand-daughter and future female descendants, Briseis consolidates her reclamation of agency and subjectivity.

4.3. Mimicry

Irigaray proposes mimicry as a key strategy for undermining patriarchy, emphasizing the significance of imitating the roles that patriarchy has imposed on women. She argues that woman “adopts the disguise that she is told to put on. She acts out the role that is imposed on her. The only thing really required of her is that *she keep intact the circulation of pretense by enveloping herself in femininity*” (*This Sex* 194). Ironically playing out the feminine roles that patriarchy has enforced on her, woman demonstrates her own exploitation at the hands of the patriarchal system. Through resubmitting themselves to patriarchal images regarding themselves, also including laughter and hysteria, women can resist being commodified, defy the patriarchal system and reclaim their subjectivity. Even in their subjugated situations, Barker’s women frequently attempt to perform whatever they can to exert even as little agency as they are able to. Thus, they imitate patriarchal roles and expectations imposed upon them while exercising agency and reclaiming their sense of worth simultaneously. As slaves, they know that they must keep silent if they want to survive the ruthless war. Silence, passivity, modesty and obedience are patriarchal roles to which they resubmit themselves: yet, they cleverly convey the atrocities of patriarchal values and their own exploited position within such oppressive system, even utilizing laughter and hysteria which are both historically associated with mimicry and women.

Briseis intelligently and deliberately resubmits herself to the patriarchal ideals regarding women, significantly slave women, in her narratives: she chooses to be silent, obedient, passive, modest, and caring (nurturing). Filled with agony, resentment, and grudge, she still manages to get herself together and show no emotion. Even though she is highly empathetic, sympathetic and compassionate, she does not fall to her knees mourning nor madly attacking the enemy warriors. As Govers writes, “the fact that she combines her silence and lack of expression with an intense hate, implies that she will not accept her fate willingly – but at the same time she does not harm the opposite...she does have her own subtle ways to resist them – a strategy of silent resistance” (11-12). In this way, she also problematizes the rational/emotional dichotomy which predicates emotionality to women as she is able to stay collected even when she loses her husband and four brothers in one day. Silence and passivity are two central roles she deliberately chooses to play out since she is well aware that their survival depends on their silence. As Curyllo-Klag explains, “conscious of the Greek

proverb ‘*Silence becomes a woman*,’ she “understands that voicelessness is a prerequisite for staying alive. Quiet like a mouse, she does not risk interacting with her captors beyond necessary responses to questions” (18). While keeping a low profile, she is also meticulously concentrated and vigilant, acquiring a mouse-like personality, in order to observe and learn the ways of her enemy:

Yes, I watched him. Every waking minute – and there weren’t many minutes I allowed myself to sleep in his presence. It’s strange, but just then, when I said “I watched him” I very nearly added “like a hawk,” because that’s what people say, isn’t it? That’s how you describe an intent, unblinking stare. But it was nothing like that. Achilles was the hawk. I was his slave to do what he liked with; I was completely in his power. If he’d woken up one day and decided to beat me to death, nobody would have intervened. Oh, I watch him all right, I watched him *like a mouse*. (*The Silence of the Girls* 61)

Briseis intentionally ‘watching’ her captor like a ‘mouse’ suggests her passivity and agency at the same time since she is Achilles’ slave, simply at his disposal, yet able to gain some degree of agency through watching and knowing him. Even her identification with rats signifies her subjectivity: the increase in rat numbers which causes the deadly plague, killing hundreds of Greeks, might be related to her constant praying to gods for vengeance. Even her immunity to the plague reinforces this subjectivity.

Furthermore, she is modest, shy, respectable and obedient, conforming to the patriarchal roles and images of femininity: “Barker’s Briseis is also initially modest and appears to conform to her society’s expectations of how a woman should act” (Pather 49). This definition fits Briseis in the beginning of her narrative. However, she gradually gains experience and learns that she only needs to ‘imitate’ such roles. She gives herself the freedom to go outside unveiled, walk around the camp and take swims in the ocean ‘alone’: all activities that she was not allowed to do on her own before. In other words, within her life in the camp, she finds herself a small free space where “she can do as she likes – and being able to live like this would give her more agency, more freedom, than leaving would ever give her” (Govers 13). In this free space that Briseis carves for herself, she strives to do things that will help her cope with the traumas of war and retain her subjectivity.

One major activity in regaining Briseis’ subjectivity is working as a healer in the Greek hospital huts alongside Ritsa and Machaon, the Greek healer. In choosing to work as a female nurse, she resubmits herself to the image of carer/nurturer; yet, she finds real joy and happiness in tending the sick and saving lives. This activity clearly insinuates Briseis’ power over the wounded Greek soldiers too: “The conflicted women nurse the wounded, yet secretly rejoice that the Trojan earth should poison the enemy’s wounds” (Lanone 6). Even years later, Briseis contently reflects on her memories of working as a nurse:

In spite of all this, I remember the days I spent in that hospital working alongside Ritsa as a happy time. Happy? Yes, it surprised me too. But the fact is, I loved the work, I loved everything about it. I lost myself in that work—and I found myself too...I really started to think: I can do this. And that

relief took me a step further away from being just Achilles' bed-girl—or Agamemnon's spittoon. (*The Silence of the Girls* 192-193)

This new job Briseis finds herself helps her regain her identity, marking her subjectivity and power to do something 'herself' instead of being merely defined through her relations with male counterparts. Saving many lives as a gifted nurse, she significantly enables herself to feel in control once again. In addition, she is not a flat character perfectly fitting the patriarchal images; rather, she is a round character, possessing personality traits which challenge the patriarchal notions of woman. As Indrani Borgohain states, "Barker paints women as contemplative, diverse, versatile human beings" (14). Her portrayal of women deconstructs the dichotomous depictions of women in terms of man's fantasies which testify their complicated nature. Likewise, the image of woman as the weaver is also resubmitted by Helen in a subversive way. She resubmits herself to the feminine image of weaver imposed by the patriarchy; simultaneously, she practices her agency in telling the story of the Trojan War from her own perspective to regain control. Moreover, she reassumes the image of "prostitute" as she deliberately calls herself a "whore" and blames herself for the war in public while she is aware that this war, in fact, has nothing to do with her: "In public, Helen was forever beating her breast, blaming herself for the part she'd played in starting this ruinous war. Perhaps she thought if *she* used the word "whore" frequently enough, others would be less likely to use it...In private, it was a quite different story. She ridiculed the Trojan women" (*The Silence of the Girls* 177-178). Despite knowing that the war was not actually her fault and how everyone execrated her for the war, she is intelligent enough to acknowledge that she must strategically get the blame in order to survive the denunciatory social judgements. In an even more significant gesture, the slave women intentionally resubmit themselves to the role of mother as an attempt to guarantee their survival and, concurrently, retain their sense of individuality and subjectivity. Levicka reveals that "The motherhood becomes a weapon in the arms of Trojan women: their survival will be assured thanks to their children of mixed origins. Their story, built also on the sense of belonging and their shared trauma, will continue to live on" (88). In giving birth to their enemies' children which seems a passive act, they secure their survival; yet, through the songs and lullabies they sing to their children, they will be always an active part of their children's and future generations' dreams and nightmares. For example, Tecmessa exerts agency through her power of motherhood and caring for her son. Besides, Briseis' attempt to escape from the Greek camp denotes her agency; however, when she sensibly decides to come back to Achilles, it even redoubles her agency since from that point on, her presence on the camp is seen as her choice. Her relationship with Achilles changes after her attempted escape, becoming more dialectic and rather intimate, ultimately altering the course of her life since she gets pregnant quickly afterwards and her pregnancy is what ensures her own safety, making Achilles marry her off to Alcimus.

Another key word related to mimicry in Irigaray's writings is 'laughter' or 'hysteria' which is also utilized by Barker in her revisionist myths: "Women among themselves begin by laughing"

(*This Sex* 163). Likewise, Xu asserts, “for Irigaray, laughter can serve as an effective way of recovering the place of women’s exploitation by phallogocentric discourse and disrupting the phallogocentric order” (84). Correspondingly, laughter has the same function as mimicry, being a form of mimicry itself. Irigaray suggests laughter as a liberating gesture: “Isn’t laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? *Isn’t the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning?* Perhaps women, and the sexual relation, transcend it “first” in laughter?” (*This Sex* 162-3). Therefore, laughing is the first reaction to the seriousness of phallocratic order. What is laughed at, indeed, is the very phallogocentrism itself, with all of its inadequacy, untruth and pretended “seriousness” (Xu 84). Furthermore, the body expresses a kind of extreme and uncontrollable emotion while laughing, underpinning laughter alongside cries of pains as pre-linguistic expression of the body (Lieberman 17). These pre-linguistic expressions transcend the Symbolic order and the patriarchal system, returning to the previous stages of being with mother once again. Thus, it is a potent means of undermining the whole phallocratic system. As Irigaray regards women’s silence and laughter, “it is somewhat in spite of them that they are compelled to pitch their voices lower, to adopt a hushed voice, often accompanied by loud laughter” (*In the Beginning, She Was* 39). The hushed women, therefore, might burst out laughing loudly and hysterically: an incident occurring in the novel with particular significations.

In Barker’s novel, women are rendered based on their traditional roles, and consequently, assigned to low labors such as laying-out the dead. When Myron’s dead body—a Greek soldier who has died out of plague—is brought to the laundry room to be cleansed and ready for burial, women pass coarse comments on the dead male. After Achilles’s sudden intrusion into the room to check out the laying-out process and leaving, one of the women publicly ridicules the dead male’s sexual organ which causes a chronic outbreak of unstoppable, hysteric laughter:

Then one of the women picked up Myron’s poor limp penis between her thumb and forefinger and waggled it at the rest of us. The women hooted with laughter—and immediately clapped their hands over their mouths to silence themselves. But nothing could contain that laughter which rose in pitch and volume till it turned to whoops of hysteria that must have been clearly audible outside the hut. (*The Silence of the Girls* 124-125)

These slave women laugh at the dead man’s sexual organ which is now useless, not being applied to sexually harass them any longer. They laugh at what used to dominate them before, freeing themselves from all the pains and fears they had to withstand through their hysteric laughter. This is also why hysteria is closely tied to laughter and mimicry. As Xu explains, “It is by no means accidental that hysteria always emerges in the form of mimicry, for mimicry can serve as a disguise under which the “sufferer” is able to avoid the censorship of the existing order and release her long-repressed instincts, although in a distorted form” (80). Elsewhere in the novel, when Briseis and Tecmessa are talking about Ajax’s nightmares, insomnia and unwillingness to tell her what is wrong with him, Tecmessa brings up the old Greek proverb that Ajax uses to hush her: “I’m supposed to

just put up with it and say nothing, and if I do try to talk about it, it's: '*Silence becomes a woman*'" (391). After this moment, the two women suddenly burst out laughing which soon turns into an intense hysteric laughter once more:

Every woman I've ever known was brought up on that saying. We sat on the shady veranda and contemplated it for a moment and then suddenly burst out laughing, both of us together—not just laughing either, whooping, screeching, gasping for breath, until, finally, the men turned to stare at us and Tecmessa stuffed the hem of her tunic into her mouth to gag herself. The laughter ended as abruptly as it had begun. (391-392)

These two women clearly laugh at a patriarchal proverb constructed merely to impose silence and passivity on women, ridiculing its untruth and inadequacy and pretended "seriousness." According to Lanone, Barker "turns laughter at the expense of the Greeks into a small but central act of disobedience and resilience" (9). This laughter though the "crude jokes" causes them to release their suppressed pains, fears and tensions, and consequently, makes them closer to each other as friends. It is intelligently utilized by the oppressed slave women as a potent tool to resist commodification and challenge patriarchy at the same time. Although commodified, they can eventually reclaim their long-deprived subjectivity and sense of identity and mark their empowerment even under the harshest conditions.

5. Conclusion

In this critical survey, Pat Barker's revisionist myth, *The Silence of the Girls*, was analyzed with regard to Luce Irigaray's proposed strategies for resisting commodification and reclaiming women's subjectivity. Irigaray's emphasis on the significance of rereading Greek mythologies, and consequently, creating a feminist myth that give voice to the hitherto silenced Homeric women corresponds to Briseis' attempt to narrate her experiences during the Trojan conflict. The second Irigarayan notion requires women to overcome their conflicted relationships, which have historically alienated them from one another, in order to establish a culture of the female. Bonding together in the face of suffering and adversity, Briseis and the other women gradually learn to trust, love and support each other during the war, coping with its devastating afflictions and regaining their sense of subjectivity while simultaneously defying the patriarchal system. The last strategy proposed by Irigaray, strategic mimicry, which also manifests itself in forms such as laughter and hysteria, is frequently utilized by the slave women as they deliberately imitate the "feminine" roles imposed on them by the patriarchal system in order to undermine it without reducing themselves to those roles. They intentionally resubmit themselves to the expectations of passivity, silence, modesty, motherhood, nurturing and prostitution; yet, they exercise their agency at the same time and expose the flaws and inadequacies of the patriarchal system. Therefore, this research demonstrates that Irigaray's critical notions can be effectively applied to literary texts while also illustrating how women, through using subtle strategies of resistance, can challenge systems that

attempt to commodify them, reclaim their subjectivity and negotiate their identities within oppressive structures. Moreover, the analysis of *The Silence of the Girls* reveals the continuing relevance of feminist reinterpretations of classical narratives, as they provide marginalized voices with opportunities rewrite their histories and challenge the traditional representations that have shaped their identities for centuries.

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