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Unfurling Genocide and the Politics of Gender Stereotypes in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*

Sima Kalita

Contextualizing mass conflict or genocide, this paper endeavors to demonstrate how genocidal violence is gendered and how the politics of gender stereotypes has contributed to this genocidal violence from ancient times to modern as explored in Pat Barker's novel *The Silence of the Girls* (2018). Gender stereotypes in terms of mass conflict act through the mechanism of gender-based inequality operating in patriarchal society. So, to illustrate these dynamics, this paper attempts to demonstrate how Barker's novel projects genocide through the process of re-reading the classical Trojan War and the experiences of its forgotten victims to delve into the themes of genocidal violence, hegemonic masculinity and women's oppression. The primary objective of the paper is to show how Barker's novel effectively unblocks several gender-selective measures of violence used in genocide. Focusing on 'genocide', 'gendercide' and the politics of gender stereotypes, the paper intends to offer a nuanced insight towards the domain of study concerning genocide by explaining the complex interplay of several power structures.

Key words: Genocide, gendercide, gender stereotype, power, oppression

Although genocide is considered as a modern concept by various critics and intellectuals, recent study has been developed to meticulously examine its trajectory which lies in the mass annihilations or destructions of ancient times. The term "genocide" was first

introduced by Polish-Jewish legal scholar, Raphael Lemkin in 1933 and it was incorporated into international law in 1948. However, the explicit definition of the term “genocide” began to circulate with the appearance of genocide studies as a separate discipline in Europe and the United States in the late 1980s. Usually, the parameter of the definition of genocide has been framed by viewing it from legal perspective rather than concentrating on socio-cultural perspectives. Yet, some eminent scholars and writers like Raphael Lemkin, Leo Kuper, Vahakn Dadrian, Irving Louis Horowitz, Helen Fein, Israel W. Charny, Daniel Feierstein, Joshua Kaiser and John Hagan have defined genocide by focusing on the historical and sociological contexts. They venture out to associate several perspectives operating in terms of genocide ranging from psychological, cultural to the politics of the gendered structure of the society. According to Lemkin, the main purpose of genocidal practices is “to destroy the oppressed group’s identity” (Feierstein, 2014, p. 25). It is an intentional social destruction conducted by the perpetrators to demolish the identity of the target group. Emphasizing on the sociological aspect, another critic, Daniel Feierstein has also commented that genocide is a social practice because it aims to “destroy social relationships based on autonomy and cooperation by annihilating a significant part of the population (significant in terms of either numbers or practices), and to use the terror of annihilation to establish new models of identity and social relationships among the survivors” (Feierstein, 2014, p.14). Moreover, Charny has viewed that genocide means “mass killing of substantial numbers of human beings, when not in the course of military action against the military forces of an avowed enemy, under conditions of the essential defencelessness of the victim” (Feierstein, 2014, p.27). His views on genocide differentiate mass killing of the defenseless victims from the military war or action by locating it within the humanist lens and sociological perspective.

Usually, genocide involves the processes of immediate killings, extermination and subtle destruction leading to the elimination of an entire community, nation or a race. However, while critics like Raphael Lemkin, Israel W. Charny have viewed genocide from cultural and psychological perspectives, Joshua Kaiser and John Hagan’s argument

establishes a critical lens to look at the question of genocide which is usually perceived from the perspective of mass killing or the extermination of a nation or a race creating massive violence upon the target group. Their views on genocide mark a departure from the usually perceived notion of genocide, because they have remarkably acknowledged by focusing on the violence of modern genocides like Darfur genocide that genocide operates as “multiple forms of gender-selective violence that interact through victims’ collective experiences to produce social destruction” (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p.72). They particularly emphasize on the question of gender and the politics of gendered patterns of the society to show how multiple forms of gender-selective measures of violence have been targeted against the masses to break down the social fabric.

In terms of explaining the relationship between genocide and the politics of gender stereotypes, the idea of ‘gendercide’ is essential to understand how killing targets men selectively and sexual violence targets women particularly to a greater extent. Although the term “gendercide” was first used by Mary Anne Warren in her book *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection* (1985) as a sex-neutral term, ‘gendercide’ usually means “the massacre of select genders” and “one example consists of women being raped to produce children while simultaneously being kept in concentration camps: men are killed” (Fischer and Polacek, 2013, p.291). For Hagan and Kaiser, “attacks are highly gender-selective, creating gendered patterns that victims respond to and reify” (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p.101). Their views on gendered patterns existing in the society and the impact of these gender stereotypes on the execution of violence in genocide mark a stark contrast with that of Mary Anne Warren’s views on the neutrality of gendered structures, because what differentiates both ‘genocide’ and ‘gendercide’ is that “genocide is not just mass murder; dead, battle-aged men are not genocide’s only victims. Genocide by definition intends to destroy an entire social entity and it does so through multiple forms of systematic victimization” (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p.71) and ‘gendercide’ is a part of the larger framework of this destructive process.

Nonetheless, the offspring of the representation of these experiences of genocidal violence in literature is immensely portrayed through the works of various prominent writers during the late 20th and 21st century across the globe. The exposition of the representation of these experiences is mostly examined through the process of re-reading the events of the past and the mass annihilations of historical past through a fresh perspective. Works like Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2007), Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991), Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), Pat Barker's renowned *Regeneration* (1991-1995) trilogy and many others from diverse geographical locations has exposed their experiences and views on war and mass conflict and its impact on both physical and psychological domains. However, among these popular writers, Pat Barker (1943-) stands out predominantly who remarkably draws on the exposition of the feminist sensibility within the framework of her fictional works by associating the themes of war, violence, trauma, working-class women's lives etc. Her recent novel *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), which has been chosen for this study, is an attempt to re-examine the past events like the Trojan War as described in Homer's *Iliad* to unfasten the continued presence of multiple mechanisms in terms of the execution of violence during the time of chaos. Instead of glorifying the heroic Trojan War, Barker re-imagines the popular narrative to explicitly show the harsh realities of mass annihilation by reinforcing different perspectives ranging from power, patriarchy to the revelation of the scarred body and mind of the victims.

As re-reading the grand narratives of the past through the process of revisiting those events is one of the characteristic features of Postmodern literature, Pat Barker being a versatile Postmodern writer retells the classical Trojan War in her novel to suggest the connection between ancient and modern genocides by implying the relevance of those events in contemporary context. The classical event of the historical past i.e. the Trojan War has been rejuvenated with profundity and brilliance to unfold the sensibilities of contemporary time. Even though contemporary critics configure the complex nature of the dehumanizing effects of genocide focusing primarily on modern day genocides, the amount of loss, persecution of violence and the

perpetrators' ways to create violence remain same with that of the earlier mass annihilations. The only visible difference is that of the use of technology and modern weaponry in terms of creating havoc in the lives of the commoners. The basic motto of all genocides is to kill the men, rape the women and to slay the male children in terms of cleansing the area. So, there is an inevitable link between the modern day genocides and genocides of ancient time which directly or indirectly influences the ways of execution of violence upon the people. Moreover, retelling the past through feminist lens offers an innovative platform to scrutinize the representation of women in those narratives by delving deeper into their physical, psychological as well as social discourses. Although her novel is a retelling of Homer's *Iliad*, the novel resonates with the terrible circumstances of modern day genocides like Holocaust, Rwandan genocide, Darfur genocide, Bosnian genocide and many others.

Published in 2018, the novel *The Silence of the Girls* executes the terrible conditions of mass conflicts like the Trojan War between the Greeks and the Trojans of which common men, women and children were the worst victims. The narrative portrays the dynamics of power and the ineluctable presence of pain suffered by the vulnerable ones. The outline of the story is set on the backdrop of the Trojan War and its violence which thwarted the life of each individual and the society as a whole. Each character of the novel peels out the layers of the extremity of genocidal violence and the politics of gender stereotypes manipulated by patriarchal society. Moreover, Barker's use of Briseis as a narrator of the novel offers the scope to articulate the conditions of women and their oppression in the process of genocidal violence from ancient to modern period. Briseis being the narrator gives a detailed observation of the time of turmoil of which she herself was the victim. Narrated from the first person point of view, she has applied acute observation to depict the experiences of each individual during the fall of Troy. However, the narrative of the novel begins with the fall of the city of Lyrnessus (i.e. the beginning of the Trojan War) while massive killing and looting invaluable goods like carved furniture, bales of rich cloth, tapestries, armors, tripods, cooking cauldrons, barrels of wine and grain (Barker, 2019, p.15) etc. from the houses were

conducted by the Greek soldiers. After killing and looting the goods, they turned their attention towards those women who were hiding behind the citadel to save themselves from the wrath of the Greek soldiers:

Gradually, the looting stopped- there was nothing left to take- and the drinking began in earnest. Several huge vats were wheeled into the square and jugs passed from man to man... And then they turned their attention to us. (Barker, 2019, p.16)

The slave women were dragged out first and were repeatedly raped by those Greek soldiers who killed their husbands and sons. The destructive processes of “gender-selective killing, sexual violence and forced migration” (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p. 70) of genocide are aptly visible in the sufferings and atrocities confronted by several Trojan women. Women like Briseis, Andromache, Hecuba and a large number of women witnessed the death of their husbands and brothers, while sexual violence and forced enslavement were used as violent measures against them to show the intensity of the power of hegemonic masculinity during the time of war. Distribution of Trojan women among the Greek soldiers, impregnating them, torturing them both physically and mentally demonstrate the complex interplay of several power structures which wipe out those women’s subjectivities in the wake of violence during the Trojan War.

Genocide is not just mass murder or mass conflict; the main objective is to diminish their identities by transforming “the victims into “nothing” and the survivors into “nobodies”” (Feierstein, 2014, p.38). In this context, the politics of gender stereotypes appears as one of the basic interacting systems to demonstrate a picture of shared yet different experiences of the victimized group. In a society driven by the politics of gender stereotypes, all crimes and intents are gendered (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p.101) and genocide is also not an exception in this regard. As gender strongly predicts and determines criminality, the politics of gender stereotypes strenuously ignites that gendered violence or gendercide. In the context of gendercide, the politics of gender stereotypes is operating through the discursive formation that “rape targets women; killing typically targets men” (Kaiser and Hagan,

2015, p.81). The politics of gender stereotypes emphasizes on the discourse of gendered identities of men and women in a patriarchal society. In terms of genocide also, this politics imposes the discourse of gender stereotypes in terms of executing violence by making women as the worst sufferers of sexual and other forms of violence and killing as the sole measure to be used against men. The resonance of this discursive formation has expansive glimpses on this novel too. After killing a huge number of Trojan men, the Greek soldiers used rape, abductions, sexual brutalization, beating and killing, forceful pregnancy against the Trojan women.

Sexual violence during genocide is not only accompanied with rape, torture, beatings, mutilations, but other forms of severe violent measures like enslavement and mass displacement of the target group appear as causes or consequences of such devastation. As genocide is intentional social destruction conducted by the perpetrators, the Trojan women were enslaved and displaced by the Greek soldiers to their camps during the Trojan War too. The Greek soldiers displaced those Trojan women to the camps by tying them with ropes so that they could not escape. Their inability to escape from the enslavement of the Greek soldiers places them as defenseless victims in the hands of the perpetrators. It is quite clear in the novel that Trojan men are also suffering from death, starvation and physical torture, but the ways of executing violence on the basis of stereotypical gendered identities denote similar circumstances confronted by women in any genocidal violence. Moreover, assessing those captive Trojan women by the Greek soldiers to be distributed among themselves according to their performance in the battle reveals the objectification of female body. For instance, women like Briseis, Iphis, Hecamede, Uza, Chryseis, Ritsa were offered to Achilles, Patroclus, Nestor, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Machaon respectively. While these women are being distributed just like commodities among the Greek soldiers, several other women like Arianna, Ianthe have killed themselves by jumping from the roof to escape violence. The scarred bodies of Briseis, Iphis and many other Trojan women have broken the images of the grandeur of heroic past and dignified femininity. Instead of being surrounded by

the glory of the past, those women's vulnerability has projected the similar nature of treatment women receive during any mass conflicts of ancient or contemporary time. Their experiences of the collective physical and psychological wounds of genocidal violence appear as a means of connecting bridge of antiquity and modernity by offering a fresh perspective to evoke historically suppressed or marginalized domains.

However, displacement, sexual violence and sex-selective killing are not the only mechanisms of genocide; anti-livelihood crimes like "slow killing" or "slow death" also appears as a process or consequence of violence exercised upon the target group during genocide. In the novel, "slow killing" is permeated by the Greek soldiers upon the captive Trojan women through enslavement, sexual violence, forced pregnancy and psychological torture which have made them the victims of "slow death". The scarred minds of these captive Trojan women like Briseis, Hecuba, Andromache, Ritsa and several others due to enduring excessive violence appear as the reasons of their slow death. Undoubtedly, they survived sexual violence but they were denied all the basic means of existence in the perpetrators' camps. The excruciating disorientation felt by those women's scarred bodies and minds has pointed out the presence of unbearable and miserable effects of violence exercised by the Greek soldiers. They were on the verge of forgetting their identities and emptied of feelings. Briseis said that:

When Iphis brought me clean, dry clothes and I put them on- or rather she did, I was standing there with no more feeling than a block of wood- I slipped the stone inside my girdle where it would press against my skin every time I moved. It wasn't comfortable, but it was reassuring, reminding me of the sea and the beach- and the girl I'd once been and could never be again. (Barker, 2019, p.35)

Moreover, when plague broke out in the Greek camps as a result of the curse given by Chryseis' father for Agamemnon's refusal to return Chryseis, these captive women were assigned to look after the sick Greek soldiers. The contrasting picture of those women's

‘working body’ and ‘passive mind’ indicates them as the victims of ‘slow death’ and displays the extremity of genocidal violence on the level of both physical and psychological domains. They were compelled to serve those soldiers who killed their husbands, brothers and sons. Moreover, as Chryseis was Agamemnon’s prize for his role in the battle against Troy, he wanted a ‘replacement’ (Barker, 2019, p.93) after Chryseis’ return to her father. He chose Achilles’ prize of honor i.e. Briseis as a replacement of Chryseis. Consequently, Briseis was forcefully brought to Agamemnon’s hut by his guards. She was used as a sexual object and treated as a medium to execute aggressive male power. So, treating Briseis as a substitute of Chryseis to gratify the sexual desire of Agamemnon is a vivid illustration of how the politics of gendered identities operate in a gendered social set up. Moreover, while she was forcefully led by Agamemnon’s guards to his hut, Achilles spat on her mouth which epitomizes Achilles’ hatred towards her and at the same time suggests the captive women’s endurance of misbehavior.

Despite the maltreatment those Trojan women received in the Greek camps, they were lacking of an agency to articulate their voices. They were just the passive and defenseless victims of the Greek soldiers. This passive and defenseless victimization is the result of overwhelming scale of excessive violence exercised upon them on daily basis causing serious physical and mental harm. Moreover, when Achilles and Patroclus refused to involve in any warfare against Troy out of severe humiliations and dissatisfaction with Agamemnon’s behavior, Briseis was again used as a medium to involve Achilles in the war to defeat the Trojan soldiers. Ajax and Odysseus came to give Briseis back to Achilles so that they could compel him to fight against Troy. But, Achilles refused to accept her at first. His initial refusal frightened Briseis because she thought that she would be sent to Agamemnon’s soldiers for “common use” (Barker, 2019, p.120). His refusal to accept Briseis offered Agamemnon’s soldiers an opportunity to gratify their sexual desire by placing her body for common use. These kinds of gendered experiences reflect the reasons of ‘slow death’ of the victims and at the same time, entail the power inherent within hegemonic masculinity in the context of genocide.

Even though ‘slow death’ is applied to signify the denial of elementary means of existence and basic amenities like food and water according to the definition provided by U.N. (1947) in terms of genocidal violence (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p.77), the hostile circumstances suffered by those captive Trojan women and their trauma remarkably indicate their ‘slow death’ from psychological level too. The Greek soldiers compelled them to bear the torture by forcefully imposing those burdens which appeared as the reasons of their ‘slow death’. It is intentionally exercised by the Greek soldiers which has affected those women on both physical and psychological level. Their scarred bodies and scarred minds simultaneously project the reality of their lives. So, Briseis said that: “it is hard on the women when a city falls” (Barker, 2019, p.269). Moreover, the Greek soldiers asked the captive Trojan women to cheer up for the Greek army who had set off for the battlefield to fight against Troy. Those captive women were compelled to do so even if it was quite difficult for them to cheer up against their own people and land. So, such act serves as a crucial testament of how slow killing is initiated by abusing the displaced individuals to affect particularly on psychological or emotional levels. It exposes the hidden dynamics of genocidal killing and the execution of power inherent within it, while at the same time it appears as a potential medium of suffering ‘slow death’ for those defenseless victims.

It is apparently clear in the novel that in genocides like the Trojan War, sexual violence is different from other types of rape like urban gang rape, familial rape and other non- genocidal rapes in that the label of ‘culture’ is attached to those women’s identities who are the victims of such genocidal violence. As the discourse of culture is intensely manipulated by the politics of gender stereotypes in a patriarchal society, their bodies are used as an agency to eliminate the whole nation i.e. Troy. The Trojan women bear the testimonies of traumatic experiences of turbulent times and their bodies demonstrate the lasting imprints of those experiences. Critics like Joshua Kaiser and John Hagan have also commented that “gender-selective killing comes from gendered motives” (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p.82), because the politics of gender stereotypes determines the nature of

treatment or violence by depending upon the gendered motives operating in a society. Critics like Ruth Seifert have also suggested by concentrating on the victimization of women during genocidal violence that “women are targets of strategies intending to destroy a nation because they are responsible for children and therefore considered as the epitome of culture” (Kaiser and Hagan, 2015, p.80). Similar scenario is depicted by Barker in the novel through the portrayal of such strategies used by the perpetrators to create violence against the Trojan women. Those women serve as powerless yet effective tools to forge the sites of revenge by the Greek soldiers upon the Trojans:

We-ell, in a manner of speaking I'd survived. There were women in the camp, women who'd seen their sons killed, who still couldn't speak, who stumbled about dead-eyed with shock” (Barker, 2019, p.45).

Like in all modern day genocides (such as Rwandan genocide, Bosnian genocide, Darfur genocide and many others), women's bodies are used as a medium to bear perpetrators' children in the Trojan War too. Their bodies are not only the emblems of reproductive agency, but also the embodiments of their history, reality and identity on which the violent memories have been sculpted by the perpetrators. The pregnancy of a lot of abducted Trojan women reveals the picture of contrasting emotions and identities within their womb as they are impregnated by the perpetrators. For instance, Briseis bearing Achilles' child proves that her body is used just as a reproductive vessel to carry on his legacy and as a means of deriving sexual pleasure by imposing power upon her. She was not happy to be the mother of Achilles' child. Although she was not happy, Achilles did not care whether Briseis was willing to carry his child or not. Her existence seemed to possess no significance at all except of being a 'captive' Trojan woman. Rather than willing to know her intention, Achilles found solace in impregnating Briseis which epitomizes the victory of perpetrators' power and the subjugation of women like Briseis:

I was invisible except in bed. In fact, I'm not sure how visible I was there, except as a collection of body parts. Body parts, he was familiar with: they were his stock-in-trade...He didn't speak to me, he didn't see me- but he sent for me every night. (Barker, 2019, p.40)

Apart from epitomizing woman as the bearer of 'culture', her identity of being a woman is one of the basic reasons to encounter various destructive forms of violence. However, in the novel, Barker has also projected the beatings, torture and starvation of some captive Trojan soldiers like Iphition, Demoleon, Hippodamus, Polydorus in the hands of the Greek soldiers. But it is evident that although Barker has presented a contrasting picture in terms of defying stereotypical dynamics of gender through the depiction of the beatings, torture, starvation and sufferings of those captive Trojan soldiers, she underscores the pain of those "nameless names" (Barker, 2019, p.217) i.e. the Trojan soldiers to compare their sufferings with that of the Trojan women. This strategy of comparison is used by Barker to demonstrate the amount of pain those captive women have gone through. The intensity of pain and suffering as a consequence of severe forms of violence suffered by the Trojan women ranging from instant death to 'slow death', sexual violence and self-harm is shown as more painful than that of men which is, in a way, suggestive of how gendered violence operates within the parameter of genocide.

However, as genocide targets the collective social entity having multiple identities, Barker's novel *The Silence of the Girls* subtly unpacks the violence by examining each gender's victimization and experiences of turbulent times through emphatically demonstrating the prototypes of the politics of gender stereotypes. As women are usually considered as weak and unfit to participate in war, their bodies are used as a storehouse to endure perpetrators' violence and scars. Although Barker's characters try to subvert those discourses of unequal distribution of power on the basis of gender, their stories of suffering put forward a different yet painful picture. The novel vividly contextualizes the atrocities and traumatic experiences of those forgotten victims who were targeted for destruction and genocide like the Trojan War. As re-reading the past events by reinterpreting

them possesses the capability to infuse the ancient tales with contemporary flavor which illuminates its relevance in terms of providing a platform to disclose marginalized or hidden viewpoints, Barker's novel potentially highlights "the massacres of men and boys, the enslavement of women and girls" (Barker, 2019, p.324) by primarily focusing on the exposition of the lives of those living in a rape camp rather than eulogizing the popular narrative of Homer's *Iliad* which cherishes the heroic war and the love between Helen and Paris. Furthermore, through the subversion of stereotypical stigmas regarding gender, Barker recounts the violence and death confronted by the Trojan soldiers to present women as stronger than men in terms of enduring and surviving the mass violence. Her novel comprehensively encloses genocides from classical Greece to present day mass killings to draw the inevitable nature of atrocities and violence exercised upon common people on the basis of national, political, religious, racial and gendered identities by highlighting the complex interplay of these power structures.

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