PAT BARKER'S UNION STREET AS A RESPONSE TO GERMAINE GREER'S THE FEMALE EUNUCH AND THE CONCEPT OF SISTERHOOD

YIĞIT SÜMBÜL

Gazi University, Turkey
E-mail: yigitsumbul@gmail.com

Abstract - Revealing the patriarchal discursive elements that shape the core of all human languages has been the mutual concern of the feminist critics in general and with that objective in mind they, to some extent, achieve to establish certain awareness among contemporary women to the constructedness of language and all cultural enterprises in today's world. Although Greer's text seems to be arguing the same things as her predecessors do like displaying the male voice embedded in the very language and culture, she also traces the female voice in this male-oriented history and tradition with a closer textual and linguistic analysis. In her famous work The Female Eunuch, she finds the ideal way to overcome this male-orientedness in solidarity among women generated out of, first, an awareness of the false idea of natural female subordination and, then, cooperative revolt by women in all walks of life. However, Pat Barker, in her debut novel The Union Street, frustrates all hopes regarding female solidarity and improvement in the present time.

Index Terms - Pat Barker, second-wave feminism, solidarity, sisterhood, Germaine Greer

Greer bases her argument in The Female Eunuch on the assumption among men that there is a natural law that gives the female body an inferiority compared to males and on women's need to realize the normality of their existence to open up for development. Though there have been certain initiatives recently, women seem to have failed to tear down their walls and take wide-scale action. She states that women have had the chances to achieve themselves; yet, "the number of women in Parliament had settled at a low level, the number of professional women had stabilized as a tiny minority, the pattern of female employment had emerged as unpaid. The cage door had been opened but the canary refused to fly out" (2008:14). This is the result of the undeniable fact that women's rights and regulations concerning them still tend to view women as dependent, fragile and vulnerable. Greer argues that "women politicians still represent female interests, but they are most often the interests of women as […] to be protected from easy divorce and all sorts of Casanova's charters" (14). Nevertheless, late movements have taken a political and academic role; and women from all classes have begun to struggle to get their voices heard. She finds the solution in women's collaborative action, which is mainly political, against the social constructs: The plight of our society has become so desperate and so apparent that women can no longer be content to leave it to other people. The enemies of women have blamed such circumstances for female discontent. Women must prize this discontent as the first stirring of the demand for life; they have begun to speak out and to speak to each other. The sight of women talking together has always made men uneasy; nowadays it means rank subversion. 'Right on!' (15).
There are feminist groups who struggle to achieve equality on occupational, legal, social, economic and political levels. There are also other feminist groups that aim to achieve better life standards through political activism. Yet, every single woman must be a part of the world-wide revolution, be it by realizing her own place and potentialities. Women must first be aware of the fact that they are not abnormal creatures that are naturally inferior to men. They must realize that all the labels associated with womanhood like passivity, timidity, plumpness, languor, delicacy, artificiality and weakness are the products of male perspectives due to the assumed castration. Greer argues that a woman "could begin [this struggle] not by changing the world, but by reassessing herself" (16). With sadomasochistic urges, males root out females' life energy aggressively, suppressing them into the inferior leg of the polarities. Women must unite to defy all the conditioned and stereotypical definitions imposed on them by the patriarchal discourse. For Greer, men have a narcissistic tendency which necessitates the presence of a woman beside him to have an ontological certainty about themselves. Women must know their sisters with whom they can discover their true potentials to achieve their energy before spiritual castration: "The revolutionary woman must know her enemies, the doctors, health visitors, priests, marriage counselors, policeman, magistrates and genteel reformers, all the authoritarians and dogmatists who flock about her with warnings and advice" (23). Women must also attain political awareness to understand the oppression they have been going through. Greer calls all women for an armed fight against male oppression; by withdrawal of labour, women must teach a lesson to men with a Lysistrata-like reaction:

The first exercise of the free woman is to devise her own mode of revolt, a mode which will reflect her own independence and originality. The more clearly the forms of oppression emerge in her understanding,

the more clearly she can see the shape of future action. In the search for political awareness there is no substitute for confrontation. It would be too easy to present women with yet another form of self-abnegation, more opportunities for appetence and forlorn hope, but women have had enough bullying. They have been led by the nose and every other way until they have to acknowledge that, like everyone else, they are lost. A feminist elite might seek to lead uncomprehending women in another arbitrary direction, training them as a task force in a battle that might, that ought never to eventuate (23-24). Greer also tries to subvert the false generic conception that male domination is scientifically proven. For her, scientific data even shows that males are more prone to violence and committing crimes compared to females: "It is an essential part of our conceptual apparatus that the sexes are a polarity, and a dichotomy in nature. Actually, that is quite false. The animal and vegetable worlds are not universally divided into two sexes" (29). With these truths in mind, all women must develop an awareness to resist against what is imposed on them by patriarchy.

In the light of the ideas discussed above, most feminist novels written during the last decades of the 20th century can be analyzed with regard to the women's position in the patriarchal society and their ability/inability to achieve themselves through solidarity with their sisters. For instance, written and published in a period when women started to gain power throughout the world, especially in business life, politics and legal issues, Pat Barker's first novel touches upon daily life struggles of a few working class women suffocating in the patriarchal society. Brannigan argues that Barker's Union Street deals with the struggles of working class women "trapped in a relentless cycle of poverty, casual underage sex, backstreet abortions, abusive relationships, and early signs of illness" (2005:8). He also adds that "in the derelict society symbolised in Union Street, women are frequently reduced to commodities for use and exchange, their value determined in the impoverished system of social and cultural relationships and their ruined community" (8). It is no surprise that the novel comes out exactly during the Thatcher period in England and that it is associated with the Second-wave Feminism with its emphasis on the possibility of 'sisterhood' among all women against the impositions of patriarchy. Barker here draws a parallelism between the women's situation in the union street and the general condition of women first in England under Thatcher's rule and later in the world. Like most of the second wave feminist thinkers, who emphasize 'sisterhood' as the only way to overthrow patriarchy, Barker makes a criticism of the women in the novel in their lack of communication and indifference towards the problems of their 'sisters'. According to Ross, Barker's feminism as reflected in the novel is "characterized by her refusal to one-sided ascriptions of blame or easy fictional solutions" (2005:132). She blames women themselves, as well as men, of not raising their voices up and resigning to male oppression in society. The seven women depicted in the novel, though ranging in age, appear as heroines in a modern tragedy, all struggling against poverty and male oppression, all experiencing catastrophes in their own ways and none receiving help from their 'sisters'. Eleven-year-old protagonist of the first chapter, Kelly Brown is obligated to bear consequences of her rape on her own at such an early stage of her life in a society where she always grows a "sense of oppression" (17) inside upon seeing men's faces. However, Kelly is raped for a second time in the novel, metaphorically of course, by her 'sisters' in the society, including her mother, sister and the other women in the neighbourhood. Their negligence and lack of sympathy towards her lead to Kelly's transformation into a monster, who finds ways of self-expression in violence, vandalism, rebellion and wrath (53). Çağlar agrees upon such an interpretation and lays bare women's, especially her mother's, abandonment of Kelly as follows:

Mrs. Brown, Kelly's mother, sinks into her own miserable life, neglects her children, she never controls what they are doing, where they are going or what time they are coming home. In most cases she is outside of home herself. In general motherhood is seen as the happiest stage that a woman can reach in her lifetime but it becomes a burdensome, exhausting experience for the woman in Union Street, so Mrs. Brown doesn't show any affection to her children and her relationship with her daughters does not carry any respect or attentiveness (2012:357). Similarly, Joanne Wilson suffers from the consequences of an early pregnancy at the age of seventeen along with her problems with her mother at home and the other women at work. First, she takes objection to telling her mother about the pregnancy, as she knows that her mother will show no understanding, just "moaning and groaning all over the house … [asking] questions 'Who is he? I'll kill him when I get my hands on him'" (75). Apart from the pregnancy issue, Barker also elaborates on the relationship between women at the bakery shop and clearly shows that there are other things which matter, for these women, more than sisterhood. The rivalry and antagonism between women suck their energies out so much that they cannot even think of trying to raise the standards of living and working. The supervisor's attitude towards the other working women reveals that, once women achieve certain power or position, they begin mimicking the male attitude towards women instead of trying to elevate their sisters, too (85). Actually, the bakery shop in the novel functions as the microcosmic representation of Thatcher's period in England, in which women cannot see things out like the women in the bakery shop who cannot work and

make cakes coordinately. The antagonism between the women in the shop is only self-depreciating and they seem to deserve it when the manager accuses them of doing "nothing but gossip and giggle and rubbish" (93)". Lisa Goddard's case is no different than the other working class women living around the Union Street, as she suffers from her abusive husband who thinks that getting the supper ready is her "job" (116) and whom she calls as "dirty, filthy, drunken bastard" (117). Very much like Joanne Wilson, Lisa is expecting an 'unwanted' baby and she gets no support from her husband and other women around her including her mother. Besides, the attitude of the nurse towards Lisa after her delivery of a baby girl points to the general picture of the relations between women in the modern society: "She was disgruntled because her 'dinner hour' had been interrupted. […] It wasn't her job to look for the patient's towels" (131). As a result of the oppression and lack of means Lisa has been experiencing so far, she feels sorry for her new-born baby girl which foreshadows the future of women in today's world as dark, bleak and hopeless: "It seemed to Lisa that somewhere in their depths was the beginning of pain, a bewilderment that mirrored her own" (135). From Muriel Scaife's perspective, the narrator of the novel describes the Union Street as "full of women hurrying home from the shops to get the tea ready before the men came home" (142). The irony here lies in that the women living in the 'Union' Street seem to have devoted themselves to their husbands so much that they are not even aware of the possibility of a 'union' against patriarchy and the oppression they have been facing. Despite all the efforts her mother makes to open Muriel's eyes to the sickness, uselessness and indifference of her husband John, Muriel seems to be defending her husband and remain contented with her lot. She endures all the "work on the endless sums of feeding and clothing four people on [her husband's] sick pay" (146).

Even the indomitable Iris King, mother to half the street (196) cannot show tolerance to her own daughter after learning that she is pregnant. Instead of backing her up and showing some understanding, she gets too harsh on the girl and messes things up more and more. She also thinks of not accepting her daughter back in the house thinking that "she should've thought of all that before she got on her back" (197). Iris seems comfortable with risking her daughter's life instead of supporting her with the baby she is heavy with and with the stress she has been going through lately. In cold blood, she takes the aborted baby out of her daughter's womb and buries her, by which she submits herself and her daughter's future to the pre-established social rules. Barker intentionally gives the set of stories a circular order and brings Kelly, the protagonist of the first chapter, and Alice, the protagonist of the last chapter, together on the union street, implying that a coming together or a union is necessary for women. However, under these circumstances, women are far from having such political concerns, as they have other priorities than uniting against male domination. Barker implicitly argues that solidarity between all women from all classes and ages is a dream which is optimal but not realistic at the present time. For working class women, the current situation is even worse, as these women are members of a generation who have been "robbed of their childhood or youth, whether through rape, premature motherhood or [financial troubles]" (Nixon, 2004:12).

The author's obsession with the image of 'mirrors' is the shaping motive in the whole novel. Tens of times, she brings her characters face to face with themselves; yet, none of the women manages to see the depth in their eyes, their potentialities as 'individuals' and their latent power as a unity against the impositions of the patriarchal society. In this respect, Barker takes sides with the idea that women must achieve a certain unity or 'sisterhood' against the poor conditions imposed on them by the society; yet, she acknowledges that it is too early in modern times to achieve such awareness and unity against patriarchy. The novel, in the end, turns into a lamentation on the impossibility of a 'sisterhood' among women for the time being.

REFERENCES

[1] Barker, Pat. (1982). Union Street. London: Virago Press.
[2] Brannigan, John. (2005). The Small World of Kelly
[3] Brown: Home and Dereliction in Union Street in Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
[4] Çağlar, Bircan. (2012). "The Stoic Mothers, Violence and Human Condition in Union Street". Çankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. 9/2 (Nov.). pp.355– 364.
[5] Greer, Germaine. (2008). The Female Eunuch. New
[6] York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
[7] Kirk, John. (1999). "Recovered Perspectives: Gender, Class and Memory in Pat Barker's Writing". Comparative Literature. 40.4. pp.603-626.
[8] Nixon, Rob. (2004). "An Interview with Pat Barker". Contemporary Literature. 45.1. pp.1-21.
[9] Ross, C.E. Sarah. (2005). "Regeneration Redemption, Resurrection: Pat Barker and the Problem of the Evil". in James Acheson and Sarah C.E Ross (ed.). The Contemporary British Novel. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.

★★★