

The Stoic Mothers, Violence and Human Condition in *Union Street*

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Pat Barker with her first novel, *Union Street*, provides a realistic social panorama of her time and offers a significant vantage point to class and gender issues by focusing on overall characteristics of working class environment with the emphasis on women in such an environment. She draws attention to the problems that exist in working class houses and sees corruption and violence as outcomes of economic inequalities. In women's case this situation is doubled as they both have to carry the role of the woman as a housewife and as a worker. "Among the working class family there has always been a tight-knit institution, a place where the gender roles have their fixed place, but in the post-war period when women started to work, the role of the woman as housewife seemed to exist alongside her role as a worker. Yet still the socially expected gender performances were to be fulfilled at home."¹

In *Union Street*, Barker presents a picture of working class women, whose lives are hardened with procreation, child care, violence at home and sexual abuse. She gives voices to silenced women neglected during economic upheaval. Their suffocating situation is projected through the consciousness of seven different women, [who are] "trapped in a relentless cycle of poverty, casual underage sex, backstreet abortions, abusive relationships, and early signs of illness."² *Union Street* can be read from and within realist and feminist perspectives. "To Barker, gender is a cultural construct, and she defines class through sexual difference, identifying working-class women as the working class within the working class."³

The aim of this paper is to analyze first, women (by focusing especially on mothers) in *Union Street* from a socialist feminist point of view; second, indicate that the

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1. Aytül Özüm, *The Representation of Working Class and Masculinity and Alan Sillitoe's Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Ankara: Hacettepe University Press, 1995), retrieved from: HTTP: < <http://warlight.tripod.com/AYTUL.html> > on 13th May, 2012.
 2. John Brannigan, *The Small World of Kelly Brown: Home and Dereliction in Union Street in Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), p.8.
 3. Sharon Carson, "Pat Barker," in George Stade, Carol Howard (eds.), *British Writers: Supplement IV* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan Press, 1997), p.75.

on-going violence in *Union Street* is an outcome of economic depression; and, lastly, draw attention to how Barker avoids simple solutions such as blaming the oppressor (man) by showing that rudeness and negligence of the men of Union Street are also determined by socio-economic factors. Socio-economic factors constitute the core of the novel as people's manners are shaped according to their social standing. "The hopelessness, the frustration and the irresponsibility which became apparent after the second world war, affected the way [Working class people] lived and the relationships they built."⁴

Pat Barker gives the reader insights about the conditions of working-class people by particularly shedding light on the stories of seven different women and showing that how they share a common consciousness. All the women living in Union Street suffer from common problems and their life intersect in Union Street. They have similar pasts, presents and will probably have similar futures as a result of their social standing. Almost all of them suffer from violence, procreation, sexual abuse and have become, in part, inured to violence and abuses. They are wearied by economic conditions, these conditions affect the overall course of their lifestyle and as readers, we, witness that lives are getting even worse than worse under those difficult conditions. Pat Barker especially draws attention to working class women whose role in the development of economy as a bread-winner is neglected. She provides a different vantage point to the gender roles by depicting the men as idle creatures (on the surface) wearied by vain attempts to find a job, while depicting women as wage-earners:

What is really striking is the fact that, although more women went out to work during and after the Second World War, this did not bring about a change in working class values which has always been represented as much closer to masculinity and brought to mind the position of man as wage earner or bread-winner, earning a living to feed his family or contribute to the salary of his parents.⁵

With the first story, which is titled as "Kelly Brown," Barker shows that she displays a different working-class atmosphere from the ones depicted in George Orwell's, Hoggard's or Raymond Williams' works. "Barker reorients [their] contexts, in her construction of the experiences and identities of working-class women, against an emergent condition of postindustrial economic blight."⁶ Contrary to earlier depictions of

4. Aytül Özüm, *The Representation of Working Class and Masculinity and Alan Sillitoe's Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

5. Aytül Özüm, *The Representation of Working Class and Masculinity and Alan Sillitoe's Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

6. John Brannigan, *The Small World of Kelly Brown: home and dereliction in Union Street, in Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*, p.6.

cozy, domestic and familial working class environment, we, as readers are subjected to suffocating, frustrated and corrupted relationships. Brown family is the first example of the families depicted in *Union Street*, 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. That's why Kelly lacks an attentive mother figure as well as a father figure that she can lean on and this indifference leads her to search for anything that she can fill the void in her life. For that reason she wanders in the streets alone as her house is not the source of safety and comfort. Her efforts to fill the void take a tragic turn when she is raped by "The Man". Instead of staying away from a stranger, Kelly does not care talking with "The Man" or walk with him. Not having a father model to lean on or proper relationships with people around her, she needs a kind of attachment. After the rape, Kelly neither cries nor escapes from "The Man. "He [The Man] looked at her so intently. Other people-her mother, Linda, The teachers at school-merely glanced at her and then with indifference or haste, passed on."⁷

Kelly's stoic calmness after the rape shocks the reader. Her mother is always out either for working or passing time with somebody else. In such an environment Kelly feels alone and she has an urge to attach herself to her rapist as she has no one else. Rape is a traumatic experience especially for such a young girl but she shows stoic reactions to the even the most tragic event which is rape. Instead of screaming, yelling crying or trying to escape; she takes situation calmly. This stoic calmness is also the result of the shock that rape creates in her, but stoicism comes from her being alone indeed. As readers, we might blame her mother like her neighbors do. If Mrs. Brown had really cared for her children this incident couldn't have happened but Barker by revealing few moments of Mrs. Brown and giving the reader insights about her inner life, has accomplished to establish a kind of empathy for the situation of Mrs. Brown. After the rape three weeks have passed and Kelly finally can't help and bursts out. Although Mrs. Brown is unable to show any affection to her daughter or doesn't know what to do, she still cares for her little child, but life has been so hard on her and her children that they

7. Pat Barker, *Union Street* (London: Virago, 1982), p.15.

don't know how to react or how to show affection to each other. Via Barker's narration we, as readers, witness the consciousness of Mrs. Brown:

The sight of her daughter's misery would bring her own gushing to the surface again, it had taken most of the night for her get it under control... she heard herself start to whimper. The whimpering frightened her; it sounded so lost, so out of control, so unlike her normal self. For she thought of herself as a hard, though, realistic woman, able to cope with most things. She had to be bringing up two children on her own.⁸

Although Mrs. Brown's behavior seems immoral in terms of letting her children alone at home or hangs out with men outside, her situation is desperate indeed. She is left alone with two children and she needs to use every opportunity to supply basic needs both for herself and for her children.

Mrs. Brown sees Arthur or any subsequent male as a kind of roborant medicine on the path of this miserable life. She doesn't have a strong male model to submit to. She is alone in raising two children. She needs a man to be a family, and to take care of children. Maybe in each man that she is together with, she searches for the pieces of a happy merry family. Underneath of her stoic indifferent appearance, she carries concerns, dreams and wishes that any other women would carry. That is why she is devastated by the departure of Arthur and cries. Kelly, when she sees her mother crying, feels disturbed as it is not something that she is used to. What she is used to is, her mother's endurance, and seeing her in such a devastated situation makes her uncomfortable. Kelly herself has become stoic after the rape that's why she can't stand seeing her mother's weakness. "She felt no sympathy: She felt, rather, distaste for this woman whose hard exterior had cracked to reveal an inner corruption."⁹

Women of Union Street share the present and the future. Each story in *Union Street* shares the similar characteristics with each other. "The characters are really versions of one character's progress through life. Barker indicates this in the recurrent scenes in which characters see their younger or older selves reflected in the other characters."¹⁰ When Joanne Wilson sees Lisa Goddard, who is the mother of two children and the one in her belly, she imagines her own future and she knows that her future will probably be no different from Lisa Goddard's. Already stuck between bakery and home Joanna Wilson's life has become mechanical. Conditions have made her expect least from life.

8. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.34.

9. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.59.

10. John Brannigan, *The Small World of Kelly Brown*, p.10.

She marries a man without knowing and without questioning whether she really likes him or not. She submits to what she has. Kelly's situation is similar. She doesn't have great expectations. She doesn't even know how to envy others as lives of the wealthy families are too far for her to imagine. "She might have pitied or despised the girl who lived in this room, but she would not have known how to envy her."¹¹ Under such circumstances, Kelly has developed a kind of defense mechanism and she is proud of herself after realizing that she can manage alone. Like her mother, she probably won't show any affection to her own children or she won't have any loving tender family life as this is what she is used to. She can manage alone. She'll try to manage alone in the future so the present situation of women in Union Street will show itself in the future of their own daughters like a vicious but unified circle.

Weariness of people is skillfully reflected via short and abrupt sentences or sometimes one-word-expressions throughout the novel. This style creates a straightforward effect on the reader in terms of understanding the situation and sensing the atmosphere directly. This style shows itself especially when characters think about their pasts or upcoming futures or when there is a kind of traumatic impact. Lisa Goddard thinks about her future. "There'd be a house. Somewhere. Housework and eventually, a baby. Well, that was what she wanted. Wasn't it?"¹² Although this is not what Lisa actually wanted, she has no better choice. Joanne Wilson will probably have a similar future like Lisa Goddard.

Economic and social distresses create violence in the lives of Union Street people. They are wearied by harsh conditions and this situation creates violence which shows itself in different circumstances. Lisa Goddard is another stoic woman figure. Although she has a husband, she manages everything alone. Having two children and the one on its way, she moves like as if "tiredness and desperation were written all over her face."¹³ Lisa although loves her children, hits them hard. "She hit him again and again, stinging hard slaps, her face distorted by hatred as she looked at him."¹⁴ This situation may create bitterness in the reader but the narrator focuses on Lisa's consciousness, revealing that Lisa would have been a loving, tender mother if she hadn't carried the burden of life on her shoulders. "God forgive me, she thought. She held him close and rocked him. It wasn't that she didn't love him. It was only that she got so desperate. She loved him all

11. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.52.

12. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.106.

13. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.107.

14. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.108.

right: this rocking gave her as much peace as it gave him.”¹⁵ She questions her own bad temper towards her own children: “Why am I so bad-tempered with them? It isn’t their fault.”¹⁶ With Lisa’s questioning, the reader is encouraged to question the bad temper of women throughout the novel. Instead of looking at superficial reasons, the reader may start to understand how these miserable conditions make people both stoic and bad tempered. They need to relax and get rid of their rage that life created on them, so they divert this rage against their own children. Lisa’s husband’s (Brian) condition is no different. Lisa gets so desperate that she can’t control her temper and hits her children. Her husband is the same. He beats Lisa hardly as if he doesn’t have any other choice. “He had to silence her somehow. So he stood up and hit her, not very hard, on the side of the head. But the blow liberated something in him, an enormous anger that had been chained up waiting for this moment. He hit her again. And again. It was easier now. She was driven back against the wall.”¹⁷ Lisa’s response to her husband is significant. She just looks at him and says: “Would you pass me the flannel please?”¹⁸ Miserable conditions of people have created a kind of stoic endurance, they get used to it gradually. This desperate situation is fully described with short and abrupt words by the narrator. “There were morning silences. The evening drinking. Rows. Occasionally, violence. Nothing else.”¹⁹ Life has become stagnant for the people of Union Street. The women of Union Street have nothing to do but submit to their husbands. This submission is not a kind of oppression, but a kind of bond between people who have similar miserable situations.

Barker, by way of Lisa’s thoughts, leads the reader to see how males are crushed by life circumstances as well. “Life had no vertical acceleration for working class families. Hence, social stratification was quite fixed for the working class man. Life was slow moving and based on physical pleasures like drinking, eating, sex.”²⁰ Brian, after seeking for a job for a long time, has already given up and Lisa knows it and understands him. She knows that he is like a child underneath of his violent behavior. “She, [Lisa] was sorry for him. She felt how like a child he had become. Underneath the drinking and blustering and violence he was like this all the time.”²¹ The reader not only witnesses

15. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.110.

16. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.110.

17. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.117.

18. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.117.

19. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.121.

20. Aytül Özüm, *The Representation of Working Class and Masculinity and Alan Sillitoe’s Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

21. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.120.

how women of Union Street have become stoic under the abusive attitudes of social relations, their husbands or mothers, but also, recognizes that men of Union Street are also trapped by poverty and crushed under the burden of responsibilities that they cannot meet. Therefore, the story of Union Street is not just a story of oppressed women but a story of oppressed people.

The characters who apply violence against each other release their suppressed rage in moments of sudden bursts of anger and find relief in violence. Their sudden rage is the result of heavy burden that life puts on their shoulders. They oppress it continuously but not always. Iris King, who is very cautious about her reputation in Union Street, is happy to be known as the mother of whole street. When it comes to her own daughter, in order to prevent any harm to her decency, she beats up her young, wounded and pregnant daughter. Iris's concern for decency and her obsession with cleanness come from growing up in even a worse street than Union Street which is called Wharfe Street. In Wharfe Street murder, rape, suicide is part of a normal life. Iris was beaten up badly by her father in her young age. So, Iris's picture of "good life" rests in escaping from Wharfe Street as soon as possible. She finds the salvation in marriage. Getting married seems to be the only way for her to get rid of Wharfe Street: "When she came back [from her Auntie] she got on with Ted, and married him. 'Course she had to, but by that time she'd've married anybody, just to get out."²²

Barker's characters might be examined through their background. Their psychological background is constructed by their traumatic experiences, therefore; their abusive attitudes need to be related to those of their earlier or present experiences. Iris's childhood experiences lead her to detest sexual intercourse and associate it with dirt and violence as she was beaten up by her father after menstruation. Iris's preoccupation with cleanness and stability in the household stems from her concerns about possibility of going back to Wharfe Street (to her traumatic experiences) one day. Iris strived hard to create a life different from Wharfe Street so she becomes obsessed with decency and reputation but her memories follow her all the time. She does everything that she can do not to return there again, so her inner fears come to surface when she hears about her sixteen-year old daughter's pregnancy. She sees it as a barrier in front of her reputation that she has been striving hard to keep for years. Although she draws a portrayal of ideal mother, she becomes cold-hearted, when her reputation is threatened. Just after she learns about pregnancy she beats her daughter up badly. "Iris's fist came up and hit the girl on

22. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.189.

the mouth. It was such a relief that she did it again... Iris was dragging Brenda around the ward by her hair. The girl was white lipped and moaning with fear. She had both hands pressed together over the wound in her belly.”²³ Like the other violence scenes, burst of anger brings the subsequent violent attitudes with it. It is like a moment of anger bringing all the oppressed excessive distress to the surface and characters find the relief through hitting again and again.

Iris’s concern about her social situation is not the only reason behind her violent attitude. Her protective feeling towards her daughter is another reason. She wants her children to have a better life than she has had and Brenda’s pregnancy threatens these hopes for a better life. She thinks that it is more difficult for women to walk out of the door not only because of the circumstances in which they are born but also because of poor economic conditions that they have. They are more vulnerable to harsh conditions or abusive attitudes of their husbands and it is more difficult to give up and walk out of the door if you have a child. That’s why she says “five minute pleasure and a lifetime of misery.”²⁴

Iris becomes cruel to her daughter and she wittily persuades her to illegal abortion in their conversation. She leaves no other option but this dangerous abortion and already wounded, young, five-months pregnant Brenda risks her life. The fact that abortion takes place in Wharfe Street is ironic as Iris always tries to get rid of the memories of Wharfe Street. She doesn’t want to remember anything or see anybody related to her life in there. Though Iris’s motherhood is described in negative terms, Barker invites the reader to question the ambivalence of this love-hatred relationship between mothers and daughters. Women of *Union Street* were daughters before who were abused, were exposed to violence and who have to cope with the burden of poverty on their own. Life has forced them to make difficult, painful choices and they, gradually, have started to take life with a kind of stoic coldness, however; the reader is invited to see they actually carry fragile, caring sentiments to their daughters: “Brenda might die. Iris wanted to run back, to stop it happening: the child would grow up as thousands before it had done. But she didn’t. Instead she went on clinging to the spikes, pulling on them as if she was in pain.”²⁵

The reader is exposed to the dualistic nature of the motherhood in *Union Street*. On the one hand we have Iris King who wraps the still living baby of her daughter in a

23. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.184.

24. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.198.

25. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.211.

newspaper without hesitation; but on the other hand, there is a suffering Iris trembling with remorse. The family life of Union Street people and their social behaviors are shaped according to their financial needs: That's why it is wrong to judge mothers or teenage girls of *Union Street* according to traditional sets of values such as "ideal mother" or "decent young girl". Life is not is not easy neither for Brenda nor for Iris. Although Iris buries newborn fetus immediately without hesitation, the image of her own flesh never leaves her. "Iris held on to her [Brenda's] hand. It is funny –yesterday I could have killed her. Now if I could bear the pain for her I would."²⁶ She feels the pain of her daughter and her own murder but she has to take it with stoic endurance in order to keep up with the conditions she has.

As readers, we witness that although capitalist system leaves most of the men unemployed and miserable, the pressure on women is doubled. They need to cope with several things at the same time. Barker in *Union Street* gives voices to silenced, ignored and abused women by not distinguishing them from others but drawing attention to their hardships and she shows that they are the important part of a whole. *Union Street*, despite taking place in a limited area, symbolizes the problems of masses. Low economic status brings violence and corruption and this corruption determines the life of future generations. Barker's feminist point of view is political and she aims to reveal injustices of gender and imbalances of power. Her realistic depictions and details of miserable life meet the criteria of social realism and socialist feminism. Women are trapped in the web of violence, procreation, motherhood, violence, poverty but they share similar problems and construct a kind of common consciousness so, they make the name of the book even more meaningful.

Barker's feminist ideology goes hand in hand with her social realism. Her Socialist Feminism is "characterized by her refusal to one-sided ascriptions of blame or easy fictional solutions."²⁷ Male characters are also trapped like female characters in life cycle. Her women are the victims of social corruption and exposed to violence but Barker shows that they are not the only victims. Barker tries to construct a kind of empathy for male victims as well. She reveals that nobody is isolated. *Union Street* is the story of invisible unions transferred through generations. The characters that live in Union Street are bound to each other with invisible links. Everything occurs in a cause and effect

26. Pat Barker, *Union Street*, p.110.

27. C.E. Sarah Ross, "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 2005), p.132.

relationship so; this book is not just about the life of working class women but about how human condition is shaped under specific circumstances. Although Barker takes side with the women, she also leads us to question the main causes of oppression. She puts the blame on economic conditions and corrupted system that leaves people in desperation.

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