‘The street is not neutral ground’: Pat Barker’s *Blow Your House Down* and the exploration of public spaces as battlegrounds shaped by male violence and state control.

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Abstract:

Pat Barker’s 1984 novel *Blow Your House Down* is a haunting exploration of the lives of several women working as prostitutes in a northern industrial city, set against the backdrop of a ripper-like serial killer who preys upon them. In the novel, public spaces become sites where class and gender hierarchies are enforced through both social judgment and physical threat. As women occupy public space most visibly, as factory or sex workers, they are therefore the most exposed to violence, stigma, and state regulation. This article will focus on Barker’s portrayal of the streets as places of patriarchal control hidden under the guise of order, and how the women in this novel fight to regain their space within a society that seeks to banish and manipulate them.

Keywords:

Patriarchy, Surveillance, Violence, Working-class, Resilience.

The novel *Blow Your House Down* centres itself around various public spaces within an industrial backdrop- the streets, a local pub, a factory- and explores these as both hypothetical and physical battlegrounds for women. Barker looks at both conflict (male violence) and control (state surveillance) through a feminist and classist lens, evaluating that public spaces are operated as places of oppression for women, where they must fight to renegotiate belonging. The purpose of this article is to convey how Barker's raw portrayal of the conflict and control imposed on these women reflects the dynamic in the real world- only through camaraderie and unity can the oppressive system be refuted and brought down.

Gendered Geographies of Fear and Control

One of the most prominent features of *Blow Your House Down* is Barker's construction of public spaces as profoundly gendered and inherently unsafe, suggesting that what is nominally "public" has become privatised by patriarchal control and deep-rooted misogyny. Violence functions as a means of disciplining women's bodies: they are monitored and constrained, rather than protected, ultimately presenting fear itself as a mechanism of territorial domination.

Barker depicts male violence as a form of territorial domination through the entry of The Ripper, who keeps public spaces eminently unsafe and therefore gender segregated. The streets become arenas of fear: "'Somebody's watching me.' Elaine had said this every night for weeks."[1], where the women are forced into negotiating their presence- they begin walking in groups, limiting movement and psychoanalysing every client, and Barker reinforces the idea that these once private spaces are forced to become public. The idea of space becoming socially

[1] Pat Barker, *Blow Your House Down,* (Virago, 2016), p. 88.

constructed connotes Doreen Massey, a feminist and Marxist geographer, who argued that "we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny." [2] Masseys' argument- that a space can feel safe or threatening based on *who* you share it with and *how* those relationships work- echoes the novel's portrayal of fear as a mechanism of territorial domination. Barker suggests that these women turn themselves into primarily sources of sexual gratification, as it is the only way to ensure they can make ends meet, highlighted in philosopher Patricia Ann Wheeler's argument:

> 'Barker's female protagonists in *Blow Your House Down* inhabit a phallogocentric world where their survival is predicated on the consumption of women as sexual objects.' [3]

This is particularly evident in the character of Brenda, a single mother driven into sex work to escape the degrading conditions of the chicken factory, the only legitimate job available, which ripped her from her innocence and forced her into adulthood.

> 'My life ended when I was nineteen.'
>
> 'You're bloody lucky,' she used to say. 'I was only sixteen when mine ended.' [4]

Brenda's premature adulthood becomes evident by the time the killings begin. She is emotionally repressed, forcing herself into the role of protector, yet her fear causes her to overthink every situation she finds herself in:

> *'-Stick to your regulars. That's your best bet.*

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[2] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (SAGE Publications, Limited, 2005), p. 31.

[3] Patricia Ann Wheeler, 'Pat Barker: The Reclamation of Anger' in *'The Red Light of Emotion': Reading Anger in Contemporary British Women's Working-Class Fiction* (2004), pp. 102-133 (p. 106).

[4] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 22.

-That's what I told her. She said, He is somebody's regular.

The skin at the nape of her neck crawled. Suddenly it was too much, she fought to get her head free […]and it was only George, blinking down at her.' [5]

The novel thus portrays fear itself as a mechanism of territorial domination, turning the streets into a contested battleground between women's survival and patriarchal violence. Barker uses imagery of invasion, 'She has been stared at, poked, prodded, measured, photographed, the contents of her stomach analysed, the secrets of every orifice laid bare' [6], to represent how quickly the ordinary space of the city can transform into a warzone, highlighted further by feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz: 'The ways in which space has been historically conceived have always functioned to either contain women or to obliterate them' [7], further proving the idea that public spaces are male-dominated, and women's bodies are subjected to male higher power, limiting their freedom of movement.

Perhaps the most evident display of gendered space in the novel is Barker's use of fragmented narrative voices, which echoes the fragmented safety of the women in public spaces. The novel is formatted to shift between different women telling their stories; we start with Brenda's, an emotional and reflective perspective, which shows her desperation to support her children, yet her fear of the danger of her situation. The narrative then majorly shifts, the tone becoming increasingly violent and realistic as we're passed to Jean, who is armoured and cynical, a sharp contrast to Brenda. These traits get the better of her; through her desperation to regain space

[5] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 27.

[6] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 71.

[7] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Space, Time, and Bodies: Women, *Chora*, Dwelling' in *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995), pp. 119-134 (p. 120).

and safety for the women, she ends up killing an innocent man she believed could be the killer, mirroring the brutality she was trying to escape. Barker's selected epigraph is now poignant: 'Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.' [8] Sarah Ross, specialist in women's writings, highlights the relevance of this, arguing that:

> 'Women in this novel pluck and are plucked, they fuck and are fucked: through Barker's imagery, the two alternatives become one and the same, equally violent, equally destructive.' [9]

Jean escapes punishment, but is left with the haunting knowledge that, in defending herself, she has crossed the same moral line as the killer she was so desperate to stop. Thus, public space becomes a terrain of constant threat, not just endangering women's lives, but reshaping who they are- pushing them into roles they never chose, at the cost of their own sense of self.

Class, Visibility, and the Politics of Space

In the novel, working-class women occupy public space most visibly- as factory workers, cleaners, or prostitutes- leaving them exposed to violence and prejudicial state regulation. Barker highlights how gender and class intersect to create urban precarity, casting public space as a site where social hierarchies are reinforced through judgment and physical threat; the criminalisation of sex work and the unjust policing of the working-class women's behaviour reveal how the state's surveillance reproduces patriarchal control under the guise of order.

The novel highlights working-class women as particularly visible and vulnerable in public spaces; their physical labour ties them to the streets and the workplace more than the middle-

[8] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, Epigraph.

[9] Sarah C. E. Ross, 'Regeneration, Redemption, Resurrection: Pat Barker and the Problem of Evil' in *The Contemporary British Novel* (2005), pp. 131-141 (p.133).

class women. In 1975, roughly the year our novel is set, around 1,096,902 people were registered as unemployed, sending the number of women in employment to over 57%.[10] Both in the novel and real life, women became increasingly exposed to violence, through factory work, 'a man hit them with something to stun them and another man chopped off their heads'[11], as well as sex work, 'Kath, terrified and in pain, risked one look round and saw the whites of his eyes turned up.'[12] Barker uses this intersection to critique how both forms of work situate the women in precarious urban environments, yet the increasing unemployment and poverty levels ensured they were unable to escape. British working-class research specialist Roberto Alcalá develops this idea:

> 'The link between the two seems to be, ironically, an overarching presence of bloodshed and death. Thus, the taylorist butchering of the birds in the abattoir is seemingly replicated on the streets where the prostitutes work.'[13]

By linking economic necessity to exposure and vulnerability, Barker critiques a society that marginalises women for the very labour it depends upon. She focuses on the struggles of working-class women, not just in public spaces. Take Brenda, for example- the very first sentence of the novel focuses on her circumscribed life, 'There were two beds and a wardrobe in the room. To get between them you had to stand sideways and shuffle your way along.'[14] It

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[10] Amina Syed, 'Changes in the economy since the 1970s,' O*ffice for National Statistics* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/output/articles/changesintheeconomysincethe1970s/2019-09-02> [Accessed 15 November 2025].

[11] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 33.

[12] Barker, *Blow Your House Down,* p. 64.

[13] Roberto del Valle Alcalá, 'Reproductive Work and Proletarian Resistance in Transition' in *British Working-Class Fiction: Narratives of Refusal and the Struggle Against Work* (2017) pp. 57-94 (p. 84).

[14] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 1.

is this forced proximity that, as American Literature Professor Sharon Monteith suggests, causes everyone's 'most intimate of functions'[15] to intertwine and lead to tension and arguments. This, therefore, generates the idea that these 'private spaces' are not at all private, but public- and, as the nursery rhyme play-on-words title suggests, the metaphorical big bad wolf (the systems of governance), irrevocably blows down the safety of these private spaces.

Barker focuses closely on the criminalisation of women in *Blow Your House Down*, highlighting the idea that the police and media focus on policing their bodies rather than ensuring their safety. The women face constant harassment and regulation- not through protection, but through surveillance and neglect:

> 'The police'll watch and wait and take down his number and watch him drive away, but whatever happens they don't interfere […] Just think: a whole row of juicy maggots, waiting for one fish to bite.' [16]

Barker uses this metaphor to show the state's dehumanisation of the women and their sex work, presenting them as expendable bait in a patriarchal structure, valuing their bodies as instruments for mechanisms of control. In 1970s England, whilst there were no kept statistics on the number of sex workers, we know that the number of vice squads emerging to rid the streets of the prostitutes rapidly grew- just like real life, the women in the novel are constantly treated like animals by the state, 'They were being herded into Northgate, like into a pen.[17], representing how the state's authority extends into women's lives by dictating their vulnerability: their bodies become strenuously policed, yet majorly abandoned, 'That's why

[15] Sharon Monteith, *Pat Barker* (Tavistock: Devon, 2002) p. 15.

[16] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 98.

[17] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 123.

they're leaving us alone. They're waiting for one of us to be killed.'[18] Judith Walkowitz, professor of women's studies, highlights this dynamic, arguing that the institution created a 'double standard of sexual morality'[19], where women were policed in the name of public health, while men, the consumers of prostitution, remained unregulated and unaffected. Echoing the 1970s attitude that prostitution was a working-class problem rather than a universal symptom of patriarchal inequalities, the novel focuses greatly on the stigmas created towards sex workers. The women are seen as dirty and disposable, to the extent that they are treated as a bigger problem than the serial killer:

> 'I wish to God they'd catch the bugger.'
>
> 'Too busy catching us.'[20]

Blow Your House Down magnifies state surveillance and the reinforcement of social hierarchies in public space, offering an unheard-of opportunity to give voice to those who have been given scant recognition in literary history. The novel exposes how, through the relentless control of the state, class prejudice works hand in hand with misogyny to maintain a social order in which the working-class women's suffering is not just normalised but ignored.

Resistance and Reclaiming of the Streets

Despite the continuous threat of danger that overpowers the public spaces in the novel, the women in Barker's story refuse to be passive victims. Through various acts of alliance,

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[18] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 88.

[19] Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Introduction: The revolt of the women' in *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (2011), pp. 1-9 (p. 3).

[20] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 32.

camaraderie, and carefully thought-out survival strategies, they construct counter-spaces of resistance within the hostile system, asserting their autonomy in a world intent on their silence and submission.

Author Dinitia Smith makes an interesting point, highlighting the companionship among the women, despite all the odds attempting to rip them apart:

> 'Despite the sex workers' grim lives, they have a camaraderie, meeting at night in the local pub for beers and exchanging ribald remarks about their customers before going out into the desolate streets.' [21]

Throughout the novel, The Palmerston serves as an anchor for the women as they survive the nightmare awaiting them in the streets. Despite its dingy interior and inferiority to other pubs, 'to the women who used its back room the Palmerston was special.' [22] This space creates solidity within the novel, allowing the women to resist the control held over them. They fight to reclaim their space through both shared knowledge and survival tactics, and their communal strength and unity: 'It might be a good idea if you and me started working together.' [23] In showing this, Barker reclaims both narrative and physical space for the women, suggesting that even within a hierarchical cityscape, they are able to continually renegotiate visibility and belonging. Barker formats the novel through different women's point of views- this embodiment and connectivity between the women subverts dominant narratives about the Ripper, allowing them to reclaim the space, as explained by Monteith: 'Barker elucidates the

[21] Dinita Smith, 'WHAT TO READ NOW: British Working-Class Lit', *World Literature Today* 96.3 (2022) p.6.

[22] Barker, *Blow Your House Down,* p. 9.

[23] Barker, *Blow Your House Down*, p. 79.

ways in which sisterhood forms part of 'an unrealistic vision for transformative politics in mass urban society'.' [24]

Through this idea, Barker has the women reframe the notion of public space being a battleground; the women become not merely passive victims of various forms of violence and control, but active agents who fight and reconfigure the hostile spaces they inhabit into sites of sisterhood and community.

Conclusion: Conflict, Control, and The Fight to Survive

Ultimately, the novel's incorporation of public spaces operates as a mirror of social control, reflecting the wider inequalities of patriarchy and misogyny within society that shape the women's lives. Yet, *Blow Your House Down* is incredibly effective in portraying Barker's intent- that, despite the unrelenting control on the women, there is always a possibility of community- a reminder that resistance can arise from the everyday courage of refusing to disappear. The novel is therefore strikingly relevant to the modern world, critiquing the violence and inequality that still shape so many women's lives, acting as a symbol of hope that we can one day break free from the system of control.

[24] Monteith, *Pat Barker*, p. 14.

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