

Chapter III

Reflection of Working- class Women in Blow Your House Down

The present chapter deals with Pat Barker's second novel Blow Your House Down. In this novel she uses the same setting as Union Street, highlighting the lives of working-class women. These women turn to prostitution because there is no other job for them, prostitution is the matter of practical economics. Most of the women have children and no husband. So they either work in chicken factory or turn to the streets. The streets pay them better.

Blow Your House Down is set in the same part of England as Union Street perhaps even the same neighbourhood, with its boarded up streets slated for demolition. Its decrepit factories and poky working – class houses.

When we meet Brenda, the first section's main character, she seems like just another Union Street matron, hurrying through the evening chores in order to meet a friend for a drink and an ordinary Union Street matron is exactly what Brenda is, except like that Kath and Audrey and Jean and the other women who gather each night for lager and lime at the palmerston pub, she is a prostitute. She is also a woman who is risking her life- a homicidal maniac is on the loose and prostitutes are his prey.

Brenda and her friends stand in the darkness under the viaduct in front of the chicken factory, each wondering if this pick- up will be her last. One woman advises 'Stick to your regulars' and another replies, 'He is someone's regular'.

He is indeed, and Jean, who tells us her story in Part Three, suspects whose. Even before poor alcoholic Kath is murdered and before children find the body of Carol, who disappeared before the novel opens, Jean thinks the killer is Carol's nervous and peculiar regular, the one who chews lavender lozenges for his bad breath. Actually, Jean is the tougher and fiercer than the others – and Carol was her lover. And when Jean picks up a nervous, peculiar man who chews lavender sweets and is, may be, about to murder her, she kills him. Now we see the relevance of the Nietzsche quotation Pat Barker has chosen as epigraph :

**Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the
Process he does not become a monster.**

In her novel Pat Barker is concerned with two kinds of death – the transient one only death of the flesh and the living death of flesh and of long – term unemployment. Her setting is the North of England.

Pat Barker has been a classical example of a working – class realistic novelist. To go to the pubs is very usual thing for the prostitutes, working-class women. The description of the atmosphere in the pub drawn by the author is remarkable one – 'lager-and-lime'.

Other pubs were livelier, with music and skin shows and more comfortable too. The Palmerton's dingy lino and balding plush seats had been there as long as anybody remember. But to the women who used its back room the Palmerston was special. They drank in all the pubs,

moving in a nightly gavotte up and down Northgate, along Church Row, down Melbourne Terrace, under the viaduct and back into Northgate again. But the Palmerston was different and was because of its owner, Beattie Miller.

The book focuses upon rape, abduction, murder, torture and beating as major forms of cruelty and inhuman activities. In daily life women are routinely defined by sex and even if all men are potential kidnappers, rapists, batterers, murderers of women, all women are potential victims. The place in the economic life of a country is undergoing far – reaching changes everywhere. These changes in terms of their diversity appear to be more marked in developing economics which generally happened to be traditional bound.¹

Women's struggle to maintain a degree of autonomy from 'the threshold' can not be understood only as a strategy to acquire an income which they can control, but also to obtain access to a larger share of male earnings.²

Experiences had toughened a woman up like, Jean. There was a scar at the bottom of her neck, the worst Brenda had ever seen. She wrapped scarves round her neck to try and hide it, but she had a habit of sticking her chin out when she'd finished saying something.

Actually, they were discussing with fear about the murders and Audrey advised, 'stick to your regulars.' They all were prostitutes. Prostitution means offering of human body commonly for the purpose of intercourse or sexual gratification in return for payment or reward.

Prostitution may be heterosexual or homosexual. In Britain, acts of personal and private prostitution between mutually consenting adults of opposite sex are no longer a criminal offence and the Sexual Offences Act, 1967 legalised sexual acts between consenting males over 21 in private.

It is important to distinguish prostitution from other forms of sexual activity such as promiscuity, the distinguishing mark of prostitution is payment for sexual acts. From this prostitute– customer relationship arises another distinguishing characteristic namely that the prostitute is nearly always involved, because of his or her work, with a complex set of social relations with those supporting the work e.g. taxi – drivers and pimps.

In many countries legislation is directed against women prostitutes but not against their clients. In Britain under three acts passed in the early nineteenth century, prostitutes were forbidden to solicit to the annoyance of other people. But the provision has been repealed in regard to two of these acts whilst the relevant sections of the Vagrancy Act, 1924 is now held to apply solely to those prostitutes who not only solicit possible clients but behave indecently with them in a public place. Public solicitation by women prostitutes is now dealt with under the Street Offences Act, 1959, which makes it an offence 'for a common prostitute to loiter or solicit in a street or public place for the purpose of prostitution'.³

Brenda was nervous because her daughter Sharon was ill – Cystitis – inflammation of the bladder. She was eleven. Brenda asked Kath about her bairns. Her son David was going to work on the golf course and she used to go to meet Julie in the foster home and became upset while leaving. They were worried about Carol she puts a very good face on it, but underneath she's worried sick. The author has presented plights of these working-class women in chicken factory as it is.

Brenda was used to the smell because as a young woman she'd worked there for a time. In fact, she'd still been working there officially, anyway – when she met Kath. Brian had just buggered off and left with the two bairns. He didn't give her money to keep the house on. Pat Barker gives us details of family-background of Brenda. She was sixteen when she married Brian – a pregnant, all his family was against her and there was a lot of it, his mother, his granny, his three married sisters, their husbands, their kids. They all lived within a few streets of each other. Marriage is necessity of life. One needs life-partner. Unmarried girl is a burden to parents.⁴ The over whelming majority of both working and non – working women did not like the idea of young working girls remaining unmarried.⁵

Brenda tried very hard to fit in with them. She didn't have any family of own, just one foster mother she still kept in touch with, so she wanted them to be hers. Her mother-in-law even didn't give her consent to call her 'Mam'. The only one of the women in the family who was

kind to Brenda was Edith's Mam; she was nice because she'd do anything to rile Edith. Pat Barker's character sketches are very interesting, touching and lively as it. We are very friendly with them. Vices and virtues of the characters she has shown in details really, deserves praise.

It was no use going on living in the same street so Brenda moved further in, to Melbourne Terrace. She was safe enough there. At the first evening she got a shock, when she was going to a corner shop for a pint of milk, a driver of the car stopped and asked her, 'Do you suck?' Pat Barker has given details of sexual intercourse between Brenda and George and used many taboos and mentions the things essential for that. After it she closed her eyes and said; 'Oh, yes, mister, I suck. I suck till my jaws ache.'

Brenda went to Social security office to put in a claim after leaving Brian. The atmosphere in that office was very well narrated by Barker she needed the job so badly in chicken factory. They asked her about child-minding. First day they kitted her out with a uniform, had to wear overalls, a plastic apron over them, scrape all hair back under a plastic cap, wearing boots etc. At the end of the day Brenda crawled up Northgate. She wanted to run because she was going get her children, but she hadn't the energy. Her wrists hurt so much she couldn't cried from the pain. She needed a child-minder but Lindsey hated a child – minder. There was nobody in that street she should ask to sit with the children. She just have to go and ask Annie. There were Pakistani

families on the either sides of her. She called west – Indian family ‘Mucky sods’, on the first floor. Brenda thought that it was a fucking awful job, who’d want it.

Brenda and Kath were discussing about ‘rent’. They call them- sexual intercourse - bleeding honeymoon. Kath told her that she wanted to run the cunt a soap – kitchen, that is entirely up to her. Knock ten minutes off that and you might start making money maximum for the minimum. ‘It was still very hard. There were evenings when just the sheer smell of them, their weight on top of her, made her want to scream and their cocks! Long, short, thick, thin, spindly, straight sticking out of flat bellies, or sunk in rolls of fat the hairy, the hairless, the washed, the unwashed....’ One day a policeman punched her in the face, went back to his car and drove off. An administrative provision requires that a women supposedly seen soliciting must be cautioned twice for the offence before the first arrest; on her first conviction under the act she becomes legally ‘a common prostitute’. By thus relegating her to a class apart, she becomes also a ready pray to exploitation and is unlikely to resume a normal life.

‘It was terrible, really humiliating and changed you completely. You felt as if you’d had the words ‘common prostitute’ stamped right through you, like ‘Blackpool’ through a stick of rocks. It was the ‘common’ that hurt ‘prostitute’, well you couldn’t very well deny it; but she was not common. They had no right to say that. In prostitution there were a lot of things you could enjoy. Oh, not the sex, not that side

of it, but there was the company, the excitement, the chance of a drink whenever you fancied it, going out and looking in the shops and not having to think all the time, ee can I afford it? And she had the best-dressed kids in the street. This is the life of a prostitute! A readers of the novel get surprised to know how can Pat Barker collect the information, ins and outs of these prostitutes, their way of working , their language and particular words, their behaviour and their plight and so on.

The viaduct had become a second home for the prostitutes. Kath went there with her customer. It was nice: you could shelter from the rain and the wind and then if he didn't have a car you could always take him under one of the arches. There were lots of places you could go, if you didn't mind the thunder and rattle of the trains and the steady drip – drip of water from the walls. There was even a mattress.

When Kath was with him in the car she was thinking of her kids. The two boys- she had to look up to them and the baby her little Julie and what that bloody women was doing with her. There was not a single day went by she didn't ache for Julie. The man asked her if there anywhere else they could go. There was a house they could get into. His breath smelled bad and because all his life he afraid of dentists, and he always carried with him, little purple, violet scented sweets to slip into his mouth and sucked it, if he was going to be close to anyone. He sometimes liked to imagine that he was on another planet, a dead planet: miles colder, and the sun a feeble, twinkling speck in the sky.

He followed her into the house Kitchen, boiler, sink, living room. The window was boarded up. Three or four thin lines of moon-light lay across the floor. There was a smell of candle grease or dried urine? He handed the fiver over because she told him: My motto is business before pleasure' some men were like that. It wasn't so much they objected to paying you, it was wanting to make the moment of paying last. She lay down on the mattress and spread her legs apart. The business with the money had left a bad taste. After while she got his cock out and it nestled against her thighs, as moist as confiding as a puppy's nose and about as much bloody use.

At first he could make no progress, forcing himself against the tight ring of flesh. He stopped shaking with excitement and tried again. This time a crack opened , a way into darkness. She groaned and tried to get away from him and he hit her with his clenched fist. Sexual conquest may be the sole reason for rape, with aggression only incidental or sexual conquest may be used for gaining status while sexual satisfaction is but a minor element.⁷

He was ready for the other now. He pulled himself out of her and tried to plunge in again, but missed. The failure maddened him. He hit her again and again until he found his way back inside. She was moaning and crying all the time now but he didn't care. Kath, terrified and in pain, risked one look round. There was a heavy smell of violets and decay, coming from his open mouth. *'Give him what he wants'*. Ridiculous! It was not good. After a while, he opened his eyes and

looked around him. There were feathers everywhere. His cock felt small and worm-like inside her stretched arse. She cried out in pains and told him that he could have his money back. In fact now it has become a kind of rape. Rape is a part of war, but it may be more accurate to say that the capacity for dehumanising another which so corrodes male sexuality is carried over from sex into war.

He hit her again, then dragged her back onto the mattress then reached into the pocket for a knife. It was almost soundless. There were only slight grunts of efforts. Kath was no more. It was not enough that she was dead, he needed more. He gathered handfuls of feathers together and started shoving them into her cunt. How disgusting! It was not easy: as fast as he pushed them inside, they turned red. He started searching the floor for anything he might have left behind. Her eyes were not closed. The sleeping and dead. Any resemblance between them is a contrivance of undertakers, they do not look alike. What a merciless person he is!

A murderer in most cases is a normal individual who acts in an extreme way due to anxiety, fear, anger or confusion caused by a specific situation.⁸

Even it was Monday, it was quiet. The bar was empty. There was Kath Robson's photograph in the paper, there was only one reason for Kath to be in the paper. She (Brenda) did not need to read the headline or the story underneath. A mile away in the police mortuary Kath Robson lies on a marble slab. She has been stared at, poked, prodded,

measured, photographed, the contents of stomach analysed, the secret of every orifice laid bare, Guted, filleted and parcelled up again, she is left alone. Her eyes were open. In life Kath Robson hated being stared at. Not in death. In death she looks ready to outstare anybody.

Kath went to see Julie every Thursday. She didn't always loom forward to her mother's visits sometimes she dreaded them, because her mother talked funny and cried a lot and clunged on when it was time to go. Now she will never come again.

The murders which were talked about endlessly in every pub were never mentioned at home. Brenda's mother – in – law always used to say, "Boys everytime!" she was only saying it to get at her because she had the two girls. She used to say, "A boy" shit on somebody else's doorstep. A girl brings her trouble home.

Elaine and Jean decided some essential things precautions and so on. Jean was bending down and taking to the driver of a car. Too late. Elaine came out onto the road to take the number. The car had already driven away. Jean would be furious when she came back. She was always so careful to take the number of any car Elaine got into, Elaine withdrew into the chicken factory gateway and settled down to wait.

Majority of women do take car numbers: now. But there is very few women actually sit down and work out why they're taking them. There are two reasons. One, you scare the bloke, because he knows your mate's got his number so he's less likely to try his little tricks.

Two, if he does, the number means you can trace the car. The first way he's got to see the number being taken, the second way it is better if he doesn't, because in fact you are not trying to stop him doing anything, you are just making bloody sure you can trace him afterwards. In other words you are using the girls as a bait.

Part III is told by Jean. Pat Barker has used this different technique that is used in psychological novels of Joseph Conrad. Jean tells us that sometimes she thought that the only thing that keeps her alive was hating him. It was better out there, under the viaduct than it was in the flat. She was going to take revenge, she thinks:

I like the place, I've got to know it I can see why Brenda was so fond of it; though I used to think she was mad working right down here. Her and Audrey are at the top of Northgate now. Along with everybody else.

She liked to have a little rest there but there was chicken factory behind her, which at was not exactly the most sweet – smelling spot in God's universe but never mind. Elaine used to stand in there, but well back, so she didn't have to look at Kath. She hated that poster.

She thought that, he must have picked Kath up somewhere near there. He would come back and he would come back there. Jean was confident about him due to experience she was the toughest. It was impossible to police too many corners, factory yards, alleys leading of each – other, streets with the windows boarded up, bricked up houses, and then under the arches, the timber yard the place where the old iron foundry used to be and waste land behind that.

Jean was very brilliant, she confidently guessed, not actually guessed but she studied the circumstances, psychology of the murderer. That was a good place from his point of view especially in comparison with Northgate and one or two other areas where it was packed deep with girls. If killing was his hobby, he must need to kill, then the viaduct area becomes very attractive. Jean said, 'meanwhile life goes on' but when people say, 'Life goes on' as if it is this great marvellous discovery they've just made and you are supposed to be

pleased. She didn't accept that it was life. 'Life' was what she had with Carol and it didn't go on – it stopped.

The scar was big factor in Jean's life at that time. She looked awful, feeling weak and on the defensive. Carol had a kind of confidence that Jean had lost and she lost later. She'd walk into anywhere and sit down as if she owned the place. There was Carol sat at a table near the window, looking all round her.

Carol wore a lot a bangles, not the kind that cost a lot, but not cheap either, she had bunching them all up together round her wrist. Her arm was brown and so thin, you could see the division between two bones. She was of course, very beautiful, there was always something more than that. she had a way of closing her eyes when she was talking to you with a little fluttering of the lids as though the eyes were trying to roll up and this was incredibly sexual- not sexy.

London was Carol's Mecca. She had this vision of herself smoking a cigarette in a posh hotel, looking all blokes up and down. Jean and Carol saw each other everyday, they even worked together she didn't even have to say anything. Carol had been very badly hurt. She had very sweet, happy memories of that time. It took them a long time to become lovers, even longer to decide to live together, because of course two girls living together is a brothel. Which is hilarious, when you think there was never a man in the place. Right from the very beginning they decided that. The flat was their place, they didn't want any of them in it.

Jean earned twenty quid she was happy but Carol was just opposite, she liked money. She was always wanting more. She wanted her little bit of glamour. Why Jean chose Carol? She on trusting nobody until she met Carol. She used to be walking along sometimes and she had think about her. She looked back on all the faces, she couldn't put a name to and she knew exactly what she had lost more than a friend, more than a lover she was the one fixed point. She couldn't make a lot of money; she always thought she could, if only she was somewhere else.

When Carol didn't come back at two 'O'clock in the morning, Jean started thinking. Jean thought that she might be fancied a change. But alas! She was murdered.

Then the time came near. Jean found a customer, with a car. They decided to go under a viaduct. There was a smell of violets on his breath 'Irene Waddell' was strangled, she said, 'Oh, Jean, you bloody fool ! She slipped her hand down into the bag she always keeps open beside her and clenched her fingers round the bilt of the knife she thought about Carol. She saw her lying on the slab, she thought how he'd fucked her and stabbed her and left her on a rubbish tip, and just as he got his tie off, she brought the knife up and stabbed him in the neck. He just stared at her and uttered a single word: 'why' ?

She said, ' I met a stranger. I had sex with him and killed him. I did what he did or does.'

Pat Barker wants us to make the strong of Maggie, told in Part Four. A middle-aged married woman who worked in the chicken-factory, Maggie was attacked perhaps by the killer, while walking through the prostitutes' turf on her way to meet a friend for a drink. Only Brenda stopped to help her – passers by assume Maggie's just another prostitute getting hers a view the police at first share.

The authors' feminist argument is clear enough – sexual violence puts all women at risk, there are no 'good' women and no 'bad' women and, the victim of sex crime is herself treated as a criminal. Beyond these points, though, Maggie's story seems to undermine Brenda's and Jean's. At one point the police suspect Maggie's husband of the attack, a suspicion Maggie, to her horror, shares. Given the men who populate the novel, this fear seemed reasonable enough. After all, the prostitutes' customers, many of whom are kinky and some of whom are violent, are respectable married men. But Maggie's husband is genuinely good and loving – the only such man in the novel – and he waits patiently for her to emerge from near – catatonic, despair. Male protection, which the first three sections carefully show to be an illusion, is suddenly a women's best hope. Maggie's decision to quit her job and stay home is similarly equivocal. It seems to symbolize her return to sanity and trustfulness, but isn't it really retreat into dependence?

Really, it is a swift spare and utterly absorbing but a puzzling novel. Its plot is needed rethinking. Actually, literature is full of

prostitutes, but most of them are fantasies of one sort of another – hearts of gold, sex goddesses, calculating bitches, masochists. Brenda and her friends fit none of these stereotypes. None, for example, feels anything remotely approaching a sexual feeling for her customers – “If they were nasty you hated them, if they were nice, you hated yourself,” thinks Brenda – and indeed, sex has rarely seemed as unappealing as it does in Pat Barker’s bleakly matter – of – fact description. Prostitution, is here a matter of practical economics.

What distinguishes Pat Barker’s novels is their regional qualities – an unusual setting, salty dialect, ways of life unfamiliar to middle class reader. We see her characters from within, as they are themselves, reveals the full individuality and humanity of women who have got short shrift both in literature and in life. That makes Pat Barker a feminist, a realist writer.

Notes and Referances

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4. Aileen Ross, The Hindu Family, Toranto Press, 1961, pp. 201 – 202
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