

Reclaiming the Silenced: A Comparative Study of Briseis and Ragini across Literature and Cinema

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Abstract: *This study offers a comparative exploration of female agency, trauma, and resistance in Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and Mani Ratnam's *Raavan* (2010), examining how literature and cinema reinterpret myth and history through distinct narrative mediums. Both texts reframe canonical stories—the Trojan War and the Ramayana—from the perspective of women who have been marginalized within patriarchal and heroic discourses. Briseis, a captive queen in Barker's novel, and Ragini, a kidnapped woman in Ratnam's film, exist within worlds shaped by violent male conflicts, yet each navigates her captivity and trauma differently. Through Briseis's interior narration, Barker transforms silence into testimony, allowing her to reclaim authorship over her experience and to expose the moral cost of masculine glory. Conversely, Ragini's resistance unfolds through performance and moral confrontation, as Ratnam uses visual and emotional language to challenge binaries of heroism and villainy. By juxtaposing these works, the paper underscores how cross-medium storytelling interrogates the enduring structures of patriarchy and redefines what it means for silenced women to speak, endure, and transform myth into lived human truth.*

Keywords: Reinterpretation, Patriarchy, Marginalized, Juxtaposing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature, with its narrative depth, internal monologues, and textual richness, often provides the foundation for cinema, which in turn reimagines these stories through visual, auditory, and performative dimensions. When placed side by side, these two mediums reveal not only the versatility of storytelling but also the unique ways in which human experiences of power, memory, trauma, and resistance are represented. Literary works are often situated in specific historical traditions, yet cinema adapts them to contemporary sensibilities. Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* retells the Trojan War through the voices of the silenced women, while Mani Ratnam's *Raavan* reinterprets the Ramayana in a modern Indian setting, reframing the hero-villain dichotomy. Here, literature interrogates canonical history, while cinema contemporizes myth, bringing both closer to the lived realities of modern audiences.

Briseis in *The Silence of the Girls* by Pat Barker and Ragini in the film *Raavan* by Mani Ratnam are women caught in the storm of violent male conflict, their fates shaped by war and power, yet their responses to trauma, captivity, and agency differ in ways that reflect their respective cultural and narrative contexts. Briseis is a Trojan queen taken as a war prize by Achilles during the Trojan War, and the novel is told largely through her eyes, giving voice to a character traditionally silenced in myth. Ragini, on the other hand, is a modern woman kidnapped by Veeraiya (based on Ravana) in the Indian forest, and her story unfolds in a contemporary setting but is heavily influenced by the *Ramayana*. Both women are used as pawns in the ideological and emotional battles between powerful men, but their inner lives and evolution are central to how the audience experiences the broader conflict.

Briseis's experience is one of being literally and symbolically silenced. She is taken from her city after it is destroyed, her husband killed, and then handed over to Achilles as property. The novel meticulously explores her inner thoughts, her humiliation, her trauma, and her observations of the men around her who pretend she does not have a voice. Her existence is bound to the whims of warriors who talk about honour and glory while treating her and other women as objects. Yet, Briseis survives by observing, understanding, and quietly resisting—through endurance, through small



choices, and eventually through reclaiming her narrative. In contrast, Ragini is not a passive observer but an active participant in the moral questioning of her captor and the government forces chasing him. Her strength is externalized through confrontation, moral judgment, and the emotional entanglement that challenges black-and-white notions of good and evil.

Ragini begins her journey in *Raavanan* as a symbol of purity and righteousness, married to Dev, a police officer who is in pursuit of Veeraiya. Her kidnapping is not only a political act but a personal vendetta for Veeraiya, who has suffered loss and injustice at the hands of the state. As Ragini spends time in captivity, her perception of right and wrong begins to blur. She witnesses Veeraiya's vulnerability, his moral complexity, and the pain that drives him. While initially defiant and combative, she evolves into someone capable of empathy for her captor, not because she is weak, but because she recognizes the humanity in someone she was taught to see as a monster. This emotional evolution is vastly different from Briseis's journey, which remains largely interior and shaped by historical silencing, but both women confront the myth of male heroism by exposing its brutal cost.

The contrast between the two characters also lies in how their respective narratives grant them voice. In *The Silence of the Girls*, Briseis's voice is literal—she narrates her own story, even though within the world of the narrative, she is voiceless. This creates a powerful tension between what she is allowed to say aloud and what we, the readers, are permitted to hear. Ragini, however, is a more outwardly expressive character in a cinematic narrative, where her resistance, disgust, fear, and empathy are conveyed through physical performance, dialogue, and visual symbolism. The mediums also play a role: literature allows Briseis's internal monologue to dominate, while film captures Ragini's journey through interactions and silence, through looks and gestures as much as words. The core of their suffering is the same—both are forcibly removed from their lives and subjected to the consequences of men's violence—but how they process and respond to that trauma is shaped by medium, culture, and the mythological versus historical settings.

Both Briseis and Ragini embody the idea that women are often the battleground upon which men fight their wars, yet both subvert this role by becoming more than just victims or prizes. Briseis, in claiming her voice and reflecting on her experience, undermines the narrative of Achilles as a simple hero. She bears witness to the cost of his glory and records the pain left in its wake. Ragini, on the other hand, disrupts the binary of hero and villain entirely by emotionally connecting with her supposed enemy, suggesting that moral clarity is a luxury not afforded in real conflicts. Through their nuanced portrayals, both characters challenge the audience to rethink familiar stories—whether ancient epic or religious myth—and ask whose voices have been left out or distorted in the telling.

While both Briseis and Ragini emerge from vastly different cultural and temporal contexts, their experiences resonate with each other in their shared confrontation with patriarchal violence and ideological warfare. One of the most striking aspects of their respective narratives is the way both women are initially defined by their relationships to powerful men—Briseis as the war prize of Achilles, and Ragini as the wife of Dev and the captive of Veeraiya. However, their arcs reveal a gradual but decisive shift from being defined by others to asserting an identity that complicates and even contradicts the roles assigned to them. These transformations are not triumphalist in a conventional sense; rather, they reflect the nuanced and often painful process of carving space for personal agency within systems designed to suppress it.

Briseis's story unfolds in a mythologized past but is grounded in the emotional realism of trauma. The emotional depth afforded by Pat Barker's literary lens allows readers to inhabit her inner world—a place of fear, calculation, memory, and defiance. Though Briseis is denied speech within her environment, the narrative structure subverts this silence by privileging her voice as the dominant consciousness of the novel. Her silencing becomes, paradoxically, a vehicle for profound expression. She is not merely a symbol or an allegory of suffering; she is a fully realized individual whose thoughts and perceptions cast the actions of the so-called heroes in an unflinching light. In many ways, she performs the role of the historian—remembering what others would rather forget, documenting the cost of war on the bodies and minds of women. Her resistance is not dramatic or externalized; it lies in survival, in memory, in bearing witness.

In contrast, Ragini exists in a more visual and immediate medium. Her story relies on presence—her face, her gaze, her movement within the frame carry as much meaning as her dialogue. Her character is not allowed the same kind of narrative introspection as Briseis, but she commands the audience's attention through her defiance and emotional volatility. Where Briseis's response to violence is mediated through endurance and reflection, Ragini meets violence



with confrontation. Her captivity does not strip her of her moral compass; instead, it sharpens her awareness of the contradictions around her. She sees, more clearly than the men around her, the fragility of the ideological binaries they cling to. As the narrative unfolds, Ragini becomes not a victim, but a lens through which the audience must reevaluate the definitions of justice, heroism, and villainy. Her evolution challenges the viewer to empathize across constructed moral lines, making her not just a character within the story but a force that reshapes its meaning.

Importantly, the different historical and cultural backdrops of their stories inflect the possibilities available to these women. Briseis lives in a world where women's bodies are the currency of male honor. She is fully aware of her value as a symbol—first as a queen, then as a spoil of war—and how that symbolic weight traps her. Her reflections on Helen, for instance, show an acute understanding of how women become metaphors in male-dominated narratives, often to their own detriment. Briseis's struggle is not to escape the role she's been forced into, but to retain some thread of herself within it. There is no escape from the Greek encampment, no real freedom available. Yet, by claiming authorship over her experience, she lays bare the hollow foundations of the heroic narrative.

Ragini's context, rooted in the modern reinterpretation of the Ramayana, presents her with a different set of constraints and opportunities. The mythological foundation of the story looms large, but the film subverts expectations by reimagining the Sita-Ravana dynamic through a morally complex lens. Ragini does not fit neatly into the archetype of the loyal, chaste wife waiting to be rescued. Instead, her proximity to Veeraiya forces her to grapple with his humanity, and in doing so, she begins to question the righteousness of her husband's mission. This blurring of moral lines is not depicted as a fall from grace but as an ascent into greater understanding. Her empathy becomes a kind of power, unsettling to those who see her only as a symbol of virtue. By the film's end, Ragini is no longer simply a victim or a figure to be protected; she is someone who has seen the cost of ideological violence and carries that knowledge with a painful dignity.

Another point of divergence lies in how each narrative engages with the idea of the "rescuer." In *The Silence of the Girls*, Achilles, despite moments of vulnerability and even affection, never becomes a saviour in any meaningful sense. His relationship with Briseis is always shadowed by violence and power imbalance. Even when he shows restraint or grants her certain privileges, the fundamental truth remains: she is his possession, and her fate lies in his hands. This dynamic strips away the romanticism often attached to Achilles and exposes the brutality that underlies his glory. Briseis's survival does not depend on Achilles's redemption but on her own inner resilience and the solidarity she finds with other women.

In *Raavanan*, Dev's role as the supposed hero is similarly interrogated. Though positioned as the legitimate authority and Ragini's husband, his righteousness is increasingly called into question. His lack of empathy, his political ambition, and his readiness to use Ragini as a pawn in his larger mission contrast starkly with the vulnerability shown by Veeraiya. Ragini's shifting loyalty is not born of Stockholm Syndrome, as some interpretations might hastily suggest, but of a deeper moral reckoning. She sees in Veeraiya not just a rebel but a man broken by loss, and in Dev, the cold face of institutional violence. Her emotional journey destabilizes the narrative's moral center, placing the audience in a position of discomfort but also deeper reflection.

The importance of medium also cannot be overstated. In literature, the interior life can be richly mapped, and Pat Barker utilizes this to great effect, rendering Briseis's psyche in textured detail. In film, emotion and agency are conveyed through visual cues—gestures, silence, juxtaposition. A glance, a pause, a piece of dialogue carries layered meaning. Mani Ratnam uses these cinematic tools to craft Ragini's psychological arc, allowing her body language and expressions to fill in what the script may not overtly state. This difference in narrative mode means that Briseis's resistance feels cerebral and retrospective, while Ragini's is kinetic and unfolding in real time.

Comparative reflections between cinema and literature reveal that neither medium is subordinate to the other. Instead, they complement and challenge one another. Literature provides depth, voice, and reflection; cinema provides immediacy, embodiment, and spectacle. Together, they remind us that storytelling is a living practice constantly reshaping itself across form and context, while continuing to interrogate timeless human struggles. Ultimately, both Briseis and Ragini are women who expose the fractures within grand narratives of heroism, nationalism, and morality. Their stories ask us to look beyond the surface of epic tales and consider the human cost borne by those rendered voiceless or expendable. Neither woman is reduced to martyrdom, nor are they rescued in any traditional sense. Instead,



their survival and their significance—lies in their refusal to conform to the scripts written for them. Through pain, silence, confrontation, and reflection, they emerge not as mere characters within myth or conflict, but as voices that demand to be heard and remembered

