**Çankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
**2026, pp. 43-53**
**https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss.1786071**

Literary Studies | research article

# Place and Community in Pat Barker's *Union Street*

Pat Barker'ın *Union Street* Romanında Mekân ve Topluluk

**Dilek Öztürk Yağcı** 0000-0001-9573-1444
Trinity College Dublin/Istanbul Technical University

**ABSTRACT**
Contemporary British writer Pat Barker's first novel *Union Street* (1982) opens with the "Kelly Brown" episode, the story of a schoolgirl assaulted by an old man whom she mistakenly takes as her father trying to reconnect with her lost home. Following Kelly's steps through the derelict streets and houses of the post-industrial northeast England, the narration ends with the set of words: "She was going home" (Barker, 1982, p. 69). Through this final remark, what unfolds is a question relating to whether there is ever "a place called home" or this is simply "a longing for a place … a yearning for a different time" (Boym, 2011, p. xv). *Union Street* is often categorised as a social realist narrative, as in the post-war British fiction, due to its representation and celebration of the working-class home, its values and its struggles. However, Barker's depiction of people and place in *Union Street* goes beyond conventional portrayals of the working-class communities as romanticized and mythicized. Rather than succumbing to nostalgia or drawing any sentimental conclusions, Barker concentrates on transcribing the actual experience of women in Union Street and their relation to place. This nuanced realism, as this study argues, is significant in its engagement with space and place and its treatment of the spatial trope of "home" which, both as a place and idea, is shattered, and un-homely evoking rather an impossible *nostos* or an absence of nostalgia. For all these reasons, this study examines how Pat Barker defies nostalgic imagination of community and place in *Union Street,* mainly in the first episode Kelly Brown*,* through various ways but specifically challenging fixed notions of home and community as sites of belonging and unity.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 17 Sept 2025
Accepted 15 Feb 2026

**KEYWORDS**
Pat Barker, place, nostalgia, home, community, *Union Street*

## Introduction

In an interview with Rob Nixon, Pat Barker describes the beginning of her writing career rather in unfavourable terms. She explains that her experience with the publishing houses was based more on getting "favourable rejections" than "favourable responses" (2004, p. 4) because in the UK "regional, working-class voices are very, very marginalized, and there is a tendency either not to review the work or to review it in slightly different terms" (Nixon & Barker, 2004, p. 5). With this unpropitious condition in mind, Barker writes her debut novel *Union Street* which, to publishers, was "too bleak and depressing" (quoted in Rob Nixon Int., 2004, p. 4) to secure a place in Britain. However, the book finds its way in the United States through Virago, a printing house which publishes exclusively for women and about their experiences. Accordingly, with *Union Street* (1982), Barker assumes a typical mode of writing mostly aiming to articulate the experiences of the unvoiced working-class women of the post-industrial England. Barker believes in the significance of acknowledging the silenced and ignored women, as she thinks only when

© 2026 The Author(s). CUJHSS (e-ISSN 3062-0112) Published by Çankaya University.
Dilek Öztürk Yağcı, Postdoc. Res. Fellow, School of English, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland | Dr., School of Foreign Languages, Istanbul Technical University, Turkiye
dilekozturk@itu.edu.tr; ORCID# 0000-0001-9573-1444; https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss.1786071
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC-4.0; https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the author(s).

one gives heed to marginalized women can our "understanding of human experience" be complete ("My Writing Living," 2025). She views the voices of these women as the core of her fiction writing and defines her work as "originating in an oral tradition of articulate working-class tellers of stories" (Monteith, 2002, p. 13). However, as Barker is immersed in these voices, she realizes a rupture, a shift in her self-perception as a writer, which leads to her departure from Virago.

When Barker leaves Virago after three years, she feels she has "changed sex" (Garland & Barker, 2004, p. 185). Explaining the reason behind this change in focus Barker would say:

> I felt I had got myself into a box where I was strongly typecast as a northern, regional, working class, feminist—label, label, label—novelist. It's not a matter so much of objecting to the labels, but you do get to a point where people are reading the labels instead of the book. (Nixon & Barker, 2004, p. 6)

Barker's critique of the Virago as a publishing house upholding a tradition of supporting working-class women and ideals leads one to consider *Union Street,* a novel composed of seven stories on seven working-class women and their lifeworld. As Barker's first novel and dealing with various issues about working-class women such as childbirth, reproductive labour, abortion, prostitution, violence, murder, and rape, *Union Street* can easily be considered in this category where the labels supersede the book. However, as this study argues, Barker's representation of working-class communities in *Union Street* goes beyond conventional portrayals of women as victims of domestic violence and sufferers of poverty. Barker does not paint a rose-tinted picture of the poverty-stricken urban communities, nor does she idealize their everyday struggles. On the contrary, her style breaks the mould of social realistic narratives where the working-class communities and their daily ordeals are depicted. As Monteith claims, Barker's aim is not to follow the fashion of industrial novels as designed by Raymond Williams or to present Williams's "knowable community" but to show the cracks of a community in flux and is stuck between "an industrial past and a post-industrial future" (2002, p.5). Such unideal portrayal of the working-class communities and Barker's unorthodox narrative strategies render *Union Street* significant regarding the deconstruction of nostalgic imagination of community and place in the novel.

In *Dialogics of the Oppressed*, Peter Hitchcock devotes a chapter to *Union Street* describing the narrative of the novel as "radical writing" (1993, p. 66). According to Hitchcock, Barker's portrayal of women's lives creates a "discourse of resistance" rather than constructing an ideal dramatic world, and it offers a respite from suffering and pain (1993, p. 66). Without surrendering to nostalgia or drawing any sentimental conclusions concerning women, gender, and class, Barker concentrates on transcribing the actual experience of the women from the industrial north of England in a realistic fashion. Still, this true-to-life depiction, as Mark Rawlinson states, transcends "a positivistic, documentary register" (2010, p. 25). Therefore, Barker's realistic narration can be defined in Catherine Bernard's words "realism with a difference" (2007, p. 173) or "realism on trial" (2007, p. 175). Likewise, John Kirk considers *Union Street* as a challenge to the features of the bourgeois realist texts in the sense that the narrative structure of the novel is "nonlinear," in a style reminiscent of a collection of "short stories" (1999, p. 612). Kirk goes on to argue that the novel also differs from the conventional realist texts with its focus on representing the voice of the community through use of "dialogue and dialect" (1999, p. 613). In a similar vein, Sharon Monteith in "Foreword" to *Re-reading Pat Barker,* drawing attention to the significance of the dialogue form and its essence to Barker's novelistic career, describes Barker's use of dialogue form as the "primary site of tension" in her novels (2011, p. viii). In line with this, it could be suggested that Barker, through her reactionary conversational style and accurate representation of the circumstances of the working-class women, challenges the conventional features of the social-realist novels.

In her article "Pat Barker's critical work of mourning: Realism with a difference," Catherine Bernard elaborates on this idea concerning the realistic features of *Union Street*. She states that most realist works share a common tendency to trace the relationship between the individual and society, or the way one perceives his/her surroundings and reacts to the world around him/her.

However, in Barker's novels, this relational link appears to be faulty and fractured, which manifests itself clearly in the representation of the "house." According to Bernard, in Barker's work, the house as a significant and recurrent theme of realist fiction appears to be shattered and in ruin becoming "a dead trope fit for a dying world, an empty shell, jagged and ghostly, retaining the imprints of departed lives suspended in the vacuum of memory, unloved and uncanny" (2007, p. 176). Bernard's contention here applies to one of the most explicit spatial markers in *Union Street*, the house; however, the novel is also significant in terms of its representations of space and human-place relations in its diverse forms.

The echo of human-place relations in the novel begins from the very intimate space of Kelly Brown's room in her derelict house and extends to the open and porous spaces of the Union Street and evolves through the seven chapters of the book each unravelling the displaced working-class characters Barker placed into the layers of her narrative. This displacement though is not romanticised or lamented over; the novel, as John Brannigan asserts, "demythologize[s] the homeliness and continuity of working-class culture" (2005, p. 17). As the narrative unravels, the idea of community weakens along with the idea of working-class home as the nourisher of hope and dreams, and gradually gains an unidealized, vacant meaning. Departing from these contentions, this study interrogates the ways how Pat Barker defies nostalgic imagination of working-class communities and place in *Union Street* through challenging fixed notions of "home" as a site of sanctuary and belonging and re-defines it as a contested place. Addressing the spatial dynamics of the novel, the paper specifically focuses on the first episode, Kelly Brown, within the context of two significant spatial tropes: home both as a place and idea, and the street as a public space along with the characters' engagement and relations with these spheres and with the idea of "community" itself.

## Nostalgia and "a place called home"

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2011, p. viii). Boym claims that nostalgia is not only "a sentiment of loss and displacement, but … also a romance with one's own fantasy" (p. viii); therefore, it is irretrievable or idealized. For this reason, nostalgia as a concept evokes romanticisation or idealisation of a place as well as a time, which turns this spatiotemporal longing into a myth to be remembered and recounted by the community. This is what renders nostalgia open to discussion, or "dangerous" in Boym's words. When one wants to go back to a time constantly rejecting its passage, history is being reformulated as "collective mythology" (p. xv). Therefore, as Boym states, nostalgia has sharply contrasted characteristics. Even though longing points to a shared feeling, the return to home causes social division because many predominant ideologies of today's world, especially the ideal of home and belonging serve for fostering "emotional bonding," which may create barriers to "critical thinking" and hinders progress (pp. xv-xvi).

The fact that remembering home and rebuilding it carries political and ideological implications emerges in parallel lines with *Union Street* where the echoes of the Thatcherite policies namely the idea of "Right-to-buy," scheme[1] of the Housing Act 1980 along with the issue of demolitions and slum clearance in the post-war period can be traced. Boym's contention here also resonates with Doreen Massey's ideas on place and identity which she conceptualises in relational terms, open and provisionally. According to Massey's relational sense of place, places do have a character of their own; like people, they have multiple identities. Hence, it is quite problematical to identify a place with community as places are processes rather than end-products, and they are the domain of multiple identities and histories. In this sense, places should not be necessarily equated with community, nor they should be considered as the bedrocks of identity because places are already and have always been intersectional locus of diverse and "frequently conflicting" communities (2001, p. 164). Therefore, as Massey states, the place called home has always been a construct of other places, and it was never "an unmediated experience" (2001, p. 164).

[1] A major housing policy in the UK, which was introduced in 1980 through the Housing Act. The idea was to provide opportunities for tenants with council housing to purchase their houses at a significant discount.

With these in mind, it can be stated that Pat Barker, in *Union Street*, through her description of working-class communities and places in dissolution in the post-war England pushes the boundaries of realistic depictions of community and place which are used to be equated with rootedness and homeliness. She defies nostalgia and forges a new sense of place which is contested. Moreover, Barker does not follow a nationalist trope while writing *Union Street*; in fact, the idea of a strong place attachment or a sense of community which was developed in the social realist novels of the 1970s and presented the working-class home as an idyll, breaks apart in the novel, leaving an absent presence. As Monteith aptly observes, in *Union Street* "easy community – the working classes in and out of each others' houses to borrow a cup of sugar or for emotional sustenance – is a fallacy" (2002, p. 14).

## Beyond Nostalgia: A New Sense of Community and Place

Explaining restorative and reflective nostalgia what she describes to be the defining features of one's relationship to past, Boym states, "Longing might be what we share as human beings, but that doesn't prevent us from telling very different stories of belonging and nonbelonging" (2011, p. 41). Boym's concerns overlap here with that of Barker's who in *Union Street* tells seven different stories through seven private accounts each seem to be belonging to one individual woman. Although there are seven episodes in the novel which is said to be corresponding to the seven ages of human, Barker, referring to the universality of the theme, affirms that there is actually "only one woman" in *Union Street* (Rawlinson, 2010, p. 169). In an interview with Mark Rawlinson, Barker discloses that there is a certain continuity between the characters in the sense that their memories intertwine, thereby making it more complex to decide if there are seven different women or only one woman (2010, p. 169). Either considered as one or as seven, these working-class women share the same deindustrialized and desolate space of 1970s northeastern England.

In his Introduction to *Pat Barker,* contemplating on the question why one should read Barker's fiction, Mark Rawlinson explains that her works "seize on the contemporary" and "provide far-reaching visions of the present" (2010, p. 12). It could be argued that Barker does this through tunnelling into past, looking back to the conditions surrounding working-class communities and lives, especially the plight of women in the 1970s in the northeast of England. This retrospective style also necessitates a prospective kind of reading which considers the political landscape of the 1980s, the publishing period of the book, a time characterised by the policies of the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher.

Margaret Thatcher, the "Iron Lady," served as the Conservative Party leader from 1975 to 1990, and the first female British Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990. She is mostly known for her destructive policies on the working-class society in the name of modernising the British economy, and for her conservative ideology and the resolute leadership style which has been referred to as Thatcherism. Borrowing from Jackson Ayres's definition, Mary McGlynn gives a brief outline of Thatcherism as "neoliberalism's emphases on individualism and laissez-faire economics combined with neoconservatism's demands for robust government and social authoritarianism" (quoted in McGlynn 2016, p. 311). The political panorama of the Thatcherite England gradually resonates through the novel bringing into light the questions of identity and place, home and belonging, most significantly class and community. However, as John Kirk claims, Barker's writing on class-politics and foregrounding the marginalized voices of working-class women, might also be stigmatized because of a potential "turn toward memory or nostalgia" (1999, p. 605). According to Kirk, Barker's "nostalgic memory links 'now' with 'then,' facilitating an understanding of history and identity in the present as partly a product of the past" (1999, p. 607). I would not associate Barker's style with "nostalgic memory" but argue that Barker works with the tools of the working-class to undermine the myths and aphorisms of class and class-based politics.

*Union Street* opens with the scene of a smashed window covered with a piece of cardboard which came unstuck during the night as the wind blew. This cinematic opening of the "Kelly Brown" episode is followed with an immediate remark as Kelly and her sister Linda are fighting against

waking up and leaving the so-called warmth and comfort of the bed to ready themselves for breakfast: "Time you were up … You'll be late" (Barker, 1982, p. 1). As if waking the reader up to the everyday reality of the working-class community and bringing us to the soundscape of the indistinct noise of the factory machines and the invisible ticking of time, Barker sets the scene. This smashed window not only introduces the reader to Kelly's house but also to her being which will soon come undone when an intruder, The Man, invades her bodyspace in the rape scene. This opening offering a sneak peek of Kelly's very private space emphasizes the vulnerable nature of both her house and being, demonstrating how space and subjectivity can be conceived in parallel lines.

Mary McGlynn in her article "Collectivism and Thatcher's 'classless' Society in British Fiction and Film" argues that the 1980s are marked with a discourse which reflected Thatcherite ideology of a "classless" society. Drawing examples from Pat Barker's novels and James Kelman's story "By the Burn," McGlynn contends that in such fictional texts there is a move from class-based collectivism to individualism as the novels focus on certain problems of working-class characters such as "social invisibility" and "individual isolation" (2016, p. 309). Another point McGlynn draws attention to is the portrayal of home in the novels of the early 1980s:

> Barker's *Union Street* (1982) begins with a description of a crumbling home, making manifest the predicament of characters whose security and stability are under attack. The wind here freely enters the Brown household, circulating ominously throughout this novel and its successor, *Blow Your House Down* (1984), whose very title unites reader and character, suggesting the precarity of the dwellings and, by extension, the economic situations of the women both novels take as their subjects. (2016, p. 309)

McGlynn argues that with Thatcher's government there has been a shift in how class politics and capitalism are represented in Britain, which inevitably echoed in the representation of the "working-class home, a space whose boundaries are pointedly not sacralized" (2016, p. 311). As a result, working-class home is often framed as a contested and precarious space rather than as a refuge or a site of solidarity.

Home both as a place and idea has always been interlinked with certain controversies over "subjectivity, gender and class, culture and individuality" (Gieseking *et al.,* 2014, p. 149). All these issues run throughout *Union Street* calling into question the boundaries between private and public, inside and outside, home and away. In *Union Street*, home is not that cosy space or haven that shelters and nurtures dreams and desires. It is a space where menace prevails either through the wind, the noise, or the uncanny presence of Kelly's mother's partner Arthur, whom Kelly has "never seen before" (Barker, 1982, p. 4), and who is "still unfamiliar with the geography of the house" (Barker, 1982, p. 5). Home is no longer homely; it is shattered and in pieces like Kelly herself who struggles to pick the pieces up and put everything in place, most importantly her father and her lost childhood, which all coalesce on the shifting scene of the day when she met The Man, Lewis.

This was the day when Kelly skipped school and felt lonely: "There was a smell of decay, of life ending. Limp rags of mist hung from the furthest trees" (Barker, 1982, p. 13). She was depressed and heavy-hearted, which made her remember her father as she used to do: "She was always looking for him, expecting to meet him, though sometimes, in moments of panic and despair, she doubted if she would recognize him if she did" (Barker, 1982, p. 13). It is at this moment when Kelly was daydreaming about reuniting with his father and his lost childhood that she encounters Lewis.

Kelly's encounter with Lewis provides significant details regarding space and social relations in the novel which can be traced in Lewis's mastering over Kelly through playing with her sense of self and sense of place. The way Lewis looks at Kelly has such an overwhelming effect on her that she cannot resist but consents to go with him when he asks her to accompany him to the lake to feed the ducks. Kelly feels that for the first time in her life someone has taken notice of her and acknowledged her subjectivity: "He looked at her so intently. Other people–her mother, Linda, the

teachers at school – merely glanced her and then with indifference or haste, passed on. But this man stared at her as if every pore in her skin mattered. His eyes created her" (Barker, 1982, pp. 15-16). However, Kelly interprets the supremacy of the gaze in a wrong way and misreads The Man's intentions. She follows him, still daydreaming about his father as they get to the pond.

Upon their first meeting, when The Man asks Kelly where she lives, Kelly assuredly gives the description of the site where she lives, the Union Street. Kelly's providing the coordinates of her place puts Union Street on a map which is demarcated by the once-industrialized sites of England. However, The Man remaps Kelly's space immediately disrupting the spatial route in her mind and manipulating her sense of space. He tries to reassure her saying, "It is quite a long way then. … I don't think you ought to walk all that by yourself. I'll see you to the bus stop. … *I know a short cut*" (Barker, 1982, pp. 24-25). The short-cut Lewis has in his mind for Kelly becomes the longest way home for her as they walk in silence. This was a silence which initially did not bother Kelly because she was too tired to talk. However, she would soon understand that it would not be that easy to leave this man and go away as the nature of the silence "change[s]" and "become[s] deeper, tense, finally a vortex sucking them both under" (Barker, 1982, p. 26). As they leave the Moor behind and walk through the path The Man directs them, not only the silence but also the abandoned sites that they pass engulfs her leaving her with an unsettling feeling. Kelly struggles to find her way in darkness under the gaze and the oppressive treatment of The Man. Unable to coordinate herself through the menacing navigation of The Man and in the derelict space of the neighbourhood, Kelly loses hope with each step and feels terrified and lost. Consequently, the shortcuts and streets follow one another; giving her a no sense of a familiar space. Finally, she was "somewhere" but "nowhere near where she wanted to go" (Barker, 1982, p. 27). As they pass through the "ashen" streets, the neighbourhood with "mixed factories and housing" with the boarded-up houses and dwellings waiting for redevelopment or demolition (Barker, 1982, p. 26), Barker gives the reader a glance into the 1980s in England where slum clearance and demolition work were changing the face of the city.

Slum clearance,[2] an urban renewal strategy, emerged in the 1950s as part of the post-war projects of city-planning, and had a devastating effect both on the working-class communities and the surrounding landscape. Based on the statistics by Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG)/Department of Environment (DOE), the years spanning between 1955 and 1985 witnessed the demolition of 1.46 million houses across England and Wales, which resulted in the displacement of 3.66 million people (Yelling, 2002, p. 234). The destruction of the slums was an extension of the policies regarding council housing and home ownership which started as early as the 1920s and continued to the interwar years gradually evolving into a "socio-spatial polarization" of the communities and neighbourhoods (Jones, 2010, p. 515). The issues regarding housing and city planning find an echo in *Union Street* where Barker provides the reader with an initial picture of the city and its dwellings in the process of demolition and redevelopment.

A further parallel can be drawn between Barker's portrayal of the place as a ramshackle neighbourhood and Svetlana Boym's depiction of the city in *The Future of Nostalgia*. Boym states that "at the end of the twentieth century the urban dweller feels that the city itself is an endangered landscape" (2011, p. 80). Barker, in a way takes the reader to a journey in the derelict landscape of the twentieth century through Kelly's experience. This "antinostalgic" and "endangered landscape" in Boym's words (2011, p. 80) stands out more clearly when Kelly starts wandering around the streets day and night following the assault.

After the rape incident, Kelly starts strolling around the city morning and evening. It is as if trying to challenge that day she had been assaulted, Kelly attempts to transgress the boundaries of the cityscape and the gendered notions of mobility. To regain her space and play with the idea of the places where she is granted access freely or denied, she wends her way across the city through the dark, cold, and uncanny streets in decay:

> Kelly now turned her back altogether upon the spurious safety of home. More than ever,

[2] The demolition of old houses and their replacement by tower blocks and new estates.

> she haunted the streets by night. She liked particularly the decaying, boarded-up streets by the river. There were a whole community had been cleared away: the houses waited for the bulldozers and the demolition men to move in, but they never came. (Barker, 1982, pp. 59-60)

No matter how threatening the street is, Kelly soon makes the street her home roaming fearlessly all the time. Walking and appropriating the street space, she learns and unlearns its alleys, the tricks and traps:

> The street was her home now. Once over the step she was more herself. She picked her way along the cracked pavements as delicately as the cat that, seeing her, whisked itself into the gutter. There was a square of light cast by the fish and chip shop window. She hurried across it. Outside, in the street, it was not darkness that frightened her, but light. (Barker, 1982, p. 48)

The street space and the everyday practice of walking offer Kelly a chance to transgress the borders of the streets and the self. This idea can be interpreted within the light of the French philosopher Michel de Certeau's ideas on walking as an everyday spatial practice. De Certeau conceptualizes space and place in relation to people and everyday practices. In his major work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), De Certeau underlines that spatial practices can transform and subvert discipline and power mechanisms through everyday practices such as walking, wandering, and travelling. These everyday practices grant people a space of their own and certain possibilities related to mobility and help them unsettle the established systems and principles in society. Through these practices space is used, modified and re-shaped by people. For instance, according to De Certeau, footsteps on space have the power to construct space, shape and reshape it, thereby creating alternative versions of it. Walking remodels spaces and places and performs spatial stories. As the footsteps move around space, space opens itself in a mode of enunciation. Moreover, walking has its own rhetoric in the sense that the person practices and realizes the possibilities of his movements and his limits inventing many more alternative moves and having the agency on his spatial progress. De Certeau, therefore, claims that "the long poem of walking" has the power to subvert the established rules of spatial organizations as it is neither totally outside them nor within them (1984, p. 101). In line with De Certeau's ideas on spatial mobility and subversion, it can be stated that walking and wandering through the streets, Kelly leaves behind the "spurious safety of home" (Barker, 1982, p. 59) and the idea of a family of her father and mother being together and happy in the dire conditions of their house and their abject poverty. Nothing surprises her now, as she roams the streets in a boy's tee-shirt and jeans, defying the norms of the public space and the expected codes of gender. In one of these nights, she experiences another incident which might have affected her potentially, yet she does not feel afraid. When a man in the dark shadow calls her and asks her name, Kelly does not hesitate to approach and talk to him. When he shows her his sexual organ, Kelly is not afraid or surprised but looks at it with "unblinking eyes" (Barker, 1982, p. 49). This time, Kelly reverses the gaze acknowledging that she has the power. She challenges and subverts the patriarchal mechanism and revolts against the domineering structure of the street space, where men wander in dark, appear under the shadows and trap young women and children, simply to satisfy their need to be recognized and to be seen. Through walking on the streets at night, invading the territory of these men and violating their mobility, Kelly subverts the system, robs the men of their space and reclaims her own space and subjectivity.

Another incident which exemplifies Kelly's subversion of the system, and her revolt is her breaking into the headmaster's office in school. Invading the space of the headmaster's office, Kelly almost gets an orgasmic satisfaction in the feeling of destruction as she walks silently through the "forbidden corridors" of the school as an "intruder" (Barker, 1982, p. 49). She violently destroys the place and marks it all over with her performative acts. She smears shit over headmaster's chair and desk, intending to leave a trace. As if releasing her anger and frustration through swearing, she writes "PISS, SHIT, FUCK," and "CUNT" on the blackboard. With this act, crossing the line between order and chaos, undermining the "us" and "them" dichotomy, Kelly learns how to master

the space and regain her agency.

Another place that Kelly breaks into is a Victorian house near the park, which she assumes to be owned by The Man. Among the various big and luxurious Victorian houses bordering on the park, she chooses the one which has a small playground in its lush greenery and cultivated garden. She goes from one room to the other leaving her trace every corner, touching and fingering every item on her way until she sees her own reflection and her shattered face in the mirror that she smashes. As she realizes that the owners are coming back, she leaves the house through the French windows feeling regret that she had not damaged the place as much as she had thought.

However, no matter how much Kelly tries to defy against the presence of The Man in his mind and body through such performative acts, his image persists like "a homunculus, coiled inside her brain" (Barker, 1982, p. 56). There was no point in throwing the remaining conkers in her pocket on the ground as an act of erasing the memory of that day. It was also futile to convince herself that she was not afraid or vulnerable for she was in fact terrified. Accordingly, learning to live by the lingering face of The Man in her mind, Kelly makes Union Street her new home performing her spatial practices from dawn to dusk.

Nonetheless, the very same Union Street does not offer a shelter for Kelly's mother, Mrs Brown. Mrs Brown feels desperate and devastated upon learning the fact that her daughter had been assaulted. At first, she thinks it might help to open up but she could not think of anyone to confide in: "She needed a woman to talk to, but in all this sodding street there wasn't one of'em you could trust. They'd all turned against her" (Barker, 1982, p. 35). Somehow hesitated whom to turn to, Mrs Brown finally decides to go and see Iris King who "built like the side of a house, seemed to offer the same assurance of shelter" (Barker, 1982, p. 36). However, ironically enough, Iris who "mothered half of the street" (Barker, 1982, p. 196), cannot offer a haven for Mrs Brown who felt shattered by the news. Therefore, like the boarded houses in the Union Street that are in the process of demolition, or like the steelworks and abandoned factory sites, the community was also tearing apart in the wave of an erosion of trust: "Behind the family's back they talked, grown-ups and children alike. The whispering never stopped. Behind closed doors voices spoke out more freely" (Barker, 1982, p. 45). Mrs. Brown at once feels relieved to think of Iris as a confidante; however, she later questions her own motive of turning to her because she knew she could not rely on Iris's discretion. In their meeting, even if Iris seems to be comforting Mrs Brown, she burns with disapproval. When she goes to kitchen to get some tea for Mrs Brown, Iris feels reassured that she no longer must sympathize with her, and she can now freely criticize her and pass judgments about her motherhood. Meanwhile, inside Iris's "fanatically clean and tidy living room" (Barker, 1982, p. 38), Mrs. Brown already knew that she could not rely on Iris who would probably start gossiping about her daughter as soon as she leaves.

Although Mrs. Brown feels deeply in need of company, someone who would sympathize with her; she thinks that nobody would understand her and the extremity of her pain in this broken up community. Similarly, Kelly does not feel content with the sympathy she receives; on the contrary, she thinks that no one tried to understand what had happened or what the repercussions had been. What she has already seen in the eyes of the community was not sympathy but "an unadmitted speculation" (Barker, 1982, p. 47). Even though her friends did not ask any questions but continued to play with Kelly in the usual manner; they knew instinctively that Kelly was not the same child that they used to play with, a fact which their parents did not want to see (Barker, 1982, p. 45). This aloofness which the community displays suits Kelly because she also intentionally distances herself both from her home and her mother as if she has found a new sense of place and belonging in isolation. Having learnt to live without the support of the community or the compassion of her mother, Kelly also finds it challenging to feel or express sympathy towards others. Therefore, she cannot empathize with her mother or soothe her when she learns Arthur has left. Her mother's "crumbling" face reminds her of The Man, which makes her consciously suppress any inclination toward pity or empathy (Barker, 1982, p. 59). Kelly feels contempt both for society and for her mother whose "exterior had cracked to reveal an inner corruption" (Barker, 1982, p. 59). Consequently, Barker draws a parallel between the vulnerable nature of homes and

their inhabitants, implicating that there has never been a thoroughly united working-class community but only one which is divided and destroyed. In a way, as John Brannigan contends, *Union Street* displays "a community in the painful process of dissolution, a community which struggles to register its existence at all" (2005, p. 17).

In his chapter, "Small Worlds" in *Pat Barker*, Brannigan considering Barker's writing in a continuum of working-class fiction, claims that Barker in *Union Street* uses an experimental narrative style through which she gives voice to the women from the working-class communities. Brannigan defines Barker's novel as a narrative written in "omnipresent narration" (2005, p. 15), as it "mov[es] between characters without moving beyond what they know and how they think" (2005, p. 15). This experimentation, as Brannigan maintains, together with Barker's drawing attention to the experiences and feelings of women in post-industrial communities can be considered her challenge to the popular genre of social realist novel and social realism. However, as Brannigan asserts, the idea of community in the novel is defined by its absence. These communities in fact have been "abandoned, and … become transient, rootless places" as opposed to the post-war novels which usually depicted working-class communities as deeply rooted and organic, "changeless and continuous" (2005, p. 16). Brannigan's defining the portrayal of such communities in negative terms can be further linked to Arif Dirlik's ideas on place-based communities. In his article about globalism and place, Dirlik draws attention to the dangers of fixing the identity of places and people through an overemphasis on the idea of community. Dirlik argues that when places identify themselves through a sense of community or "place-bound" identity (1999, p. 166), they often cover up the power dynamics and exercise of authority embedded in place or the injustice associated with it. In this sense, it should be contended that Barker not only draws attention to the dissolved nature of the community in the novel but also focuses on exposing its fault lines through an emphasis on poverty, oppression, and a certain form of solidarity that, while present, proves insufficient.

Barker's representation of the shifting dynamics of community as well as instances of solidarity remains blurred throughout the novel in diverse ways but most specifically in the scenes where Iris King is observed in full detail. Even though Iris displays an overly critical point of view in Kelly's case, her relationship to other women in the street reveals glimpses of the possibility of a strong sense of community. For instance, in the "Muriel Scaife" episode, when Muriel Scaife's husband is immediately taken into hospital, it is Iris who suggests Muriel to step into the ambulance, assuring her that she will take care of the children. She also resolves to collect money for a wreath going from door to door, and she would even be discrete enough to think of getting a vase to put on the grave of Mr. Scaife, with the leftover of the wreath. While trying to find solutions to the financial, social and psychological problems of the street Iris in a way acts as the interconnecting character of the novel and its seven stories. Iris believes in the possibility of solidarity against the hardships they experience in everyday life, at home or at the workplace. Therefore, she never hesitates to assist the women surrounding her whenever she is needed. She is always in and around the lives of her neighbors and their stories, which shows how she values communal solidarity and support.

Iris also stands out in the last episode through her assistance to Alice Bell who in her effort to *survive* in poverty has resolved to *starve* herself. Trapped in this paradoxical position, Alice resists the idea of leaving her home and going under institutional care but spends her days in bed as a reaction to the increasing coal prices. As she was confined to her bed, the neighbors would always drop by to visit her and offer help. However, it was always Iris who spent most of her time with Alice Bell exchanging gossip and comment, which would somehow bond Alice into the street. Nevertheless, this bondage would break when Alice had the stroke, and people would start withdrawing from her and leave her alone, even though they sympathized with her. It was only Iris who would visit her and listen to her stories patiently. Trapped in nostalgia, Bell would take refuge in memories and storytelling until she would feel no longer strong enough to speak. Still, she would want to act, to transgress, and "to die with dignity" "in her own home" (Barker, 1982, p. 260). One day, before Iris looks in to check on her, Alice Bell resolves to leave home. She sallies

forth to the hills "carrying a web of voices, a child shouting, a young girl laughing, a woman crooning over her child, with her up the hill" (Barker, 1982, p. 263), where she would meet a child/girl, Kelly. Thus, Kelly opens the novel and closes it hand in hand with Alice Bell, with whom she formerly thought "might communicate the secret of life" (Barker, 1982, p. 67). This final scene leaves the reader with a glimpse of hope and puts an emphasis on the community's potential for solidarity and unity, yet with a calculated resistance to nostalgia.

Still, it should be noted that no matter how much Barker resists to nostalgia while portraying the urban landscape and the social relations of the characters in *Union Street*, there are specific moments when the characters feel nostalgic about the past and display a sentimental longing for a past period when they felt a sense of unity and belonging. A case in point is Kelly's preferring to wear her mother's sweaters and smelling them to reconnect with her childhood. However, Barker's depiction of these moments does not enable one to draw clear conclusions because the sentiment or wistful affection is often neutralized and made ineffective within the course of the narrative.

## Conclusion

Reading *Union Street* as "a lesson in the discourse of resistance" Peter Hitchcock expresses that Barker's novel depicts the lives of seven women in a realistic, grounded way without offering overly dramatic stories or solutions to their difficult social conditions, which is one of the strengths of the novel (1993, p. 66). This style, as Hitchcock believes, sparks a glimpse of hope with regards to discourses around women narratives, offering a new perspective to see how women survive through resistance and revolt against the oppression in community. In this sense, Barker in *Union Street*, through unconventional portrayal of working-class women and their encounters with place and people, demonstrates how places and communities should be conceptualised open and relationally in an anti-essential and anti-nostalgic way. This idea strikes a sympathetic chord with relational understanding of space in contemporary geography, one that is open, porous, and susceptible to multiple invasions and interpretations. As Doreen Massey reminds us what defines the sui generis nature of a place is its being "the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations" (2001, p. 156). Places, in Massey's words, like identities, are a locus of interactions and trajectories, always on the making and becoming. They are the fusions of various influences as well as the "articulations of social relationships" (1995, pp. 182-191). Therefore, imagining *Union Street*, as the representation of a place with its diverse problems as the slum clearance, poverty, sexual assault, oppression, cheap labour, reproduction, gender inequality, yet along with glances of hope through struggle and defiance as in Kelly's case, enables us to conceive its identity as open and relational rather than as a community bound by nostalgia and longing for an everlasting past. Through realistic representation of the street and home along with the fractured subjectivities and true-to-life depiction of womanly struggle, Pat Barker challenges the conventional depiction of place and people as timeless and static in *Union Street,* thereby re-defining it as a ruptured state full of cracks, yet porous, open to infiltration of rays of hope.

## Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkiye (TUBITAK) under the 2219 International Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Program. The author gratefully acknowledges their support in facilitating this study.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ELALT 6 (English Language and Anglophone Literatures Today 6) Conference, held on October 29-30, 2022, at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## References


Barker, P. (1982). *Union Street.* Virago Press.

Bernard, C. (2007). Pat Barker's critical work of mourning: Realism with a difference. *Etudes anglaises*, *60*. 173-184. https://doi.org/10.3917/etan.602.0173

Boym, S. (2011). *The future of nostalgia*. Basic Books.

Brannigan, J. (2005). *Pat Barker*. Manchester University Press.

De Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life* (S. Rendall, Trans.). University of California Press.

Dirlik, A. (1999). Place-Based imagination: Globalism and the politics of place. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center), 22*(2), 151-87. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40241454

Garland, C. & Barker, P. (2004). Conversation between Pat Barker and Caroline Garland. Pat Barker interviewed by Caroline Garland. *Psychology and Psychotherapy*, *77*(2): 185-99. https://doi.org/10.1348/147608304323112483

Gieseking, J. J., Mangold, W., Katz, C., Low, S. M., & Saegert, S. (Eds.). (2014). *The people, place, and space reader*. Routledge.

Hitchcock, P. (1993). *Dialogics of the oppressed*. University of Minnesota Press.

Jones, B. (2010). Slum clearance, privatization and residualization: the practices and politics of council housing in mid-twentieth-century England. *20 century British history*, *21*(4), 510-539. https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwq025

Kirk, J. (1999). Recovered perspectives: Gender, class, and memory in Pat Barker's writing. *Contemporary Literature*, *40*(4), 603-626. https://doi.org/10.2307/1208796

Massey, D. (2015). *For space*. Sage.

Massey, D. (2001). *Space, place, and gender.* University of Minnesota Press.

Massey, D. (1995). Places and their pasts. *History Workshop Journal*, *39*(1), 182-192. https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/39.1.182

McGlynn, M. (2016). Collectivism and Thatcher's "Classless" society in British fiction and film. *Twentieth Century Literature*, *62*(3), 309-336. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26806752

Monteith, S. (2011). "Foreword." In Pat Wheeler (Ed.). *Re-reading Pat Barker* (pp. vii-xi). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Monteith, S. (2002). *Pat Barker.* Northcote House Publishers Ltd.

*My Writing Living: Pat Barker.* (2025, March 14). ALCS. https://www.alcs.co.uk/news/my-writing-living-with-pat-barker

Nixon, R. & Barker, P. (2004) An Interview with Pat Barker. *Contemporary Literature*, *45*(1), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.2307/3593553

Rawlinson, M. (2010). *Pat Barker*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Yelling, J. (2000). The incidence of slum clearance in England and Wales, 1955-85. *Urban History*, *27*(2), 234-54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44613144