

Muted Group Theory and *The Little Mermaid*

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The muted group theory was further studied by Cheris Kramarae, who studied several modes of communication that pertained to women and the way they communicated, but was originally proposed by social anthropologist Edwin Ardener. Griffin suggested that Ardener “began to realize that mutedness is due to the lack of power that besets any group occupying the low end of the totem pole. Ardener claims that mutedness does not necessarily mean that low-power groups are completely silent, but that the issue is “whether people can say what they want to say when and where they want to say it” (Griffin, 461).

The muted group theory deals with the development of vocabulary among a dominant and muted group relationship. The language of the dominant group typically models to the muted group how they are to communicate in the dominant-controlled environment. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel readjusts the way she communicates in the human world, especially when she literally has no voice to speak with. This also ties in to the observation that Griffin makes in *A First Look at Communication Theory* where he suggests that there is a masculine advantage to name experiences. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel discovers a fork from an abandoned ship and questions the name of it to Scuttle who decides that it is to be named a “dinglehopper” and is used to brush hair. From that point forward, Ariel utilizes the name “dinglehopper” when referring to a fork because her trusted friend Scuttle decided on the name of it. This example supports the fact of the masculine power to name experience.

The muted group theory can also be connected to the feminist standpoint theory, which “analyze how patriarchy naturalizes male and female divisions, making it seem natural that women are subordinate to men” (Wood, 61), as well as the regular standpoint theory. In her article *Muted Group Theory and Communication: Asking Dangerous Questions*, Kramarae

describes the difference of standpoint theory and muted group theory. She claims that “neither muted group theory nor standpoint theory suggest that any individual or group as the only truth, but both argue for the importance of challenging and providing alternatives to dominant explanations of the way the world works” (58). In regard to the muted group theory in *A First Look at Communication Theory*, Griffin describes women to be the muted group that is being described, and men to be the dominant group. In this essay, *The Little Mermaid* will be evaluated by Griffin’s perspective on the theory.

Context of *The Little Mermaid*

The Disney movie *The Little Mermaid* is about a young, curious teenage mermaid named Ariel who longs to explore and live above the surface of the water. Being one of the many daughters of a very powerful god, King Triton, as well as being the youngest, she is greatly restricted to her father’s rules to stay under the sea and out of sight of humans. In her father’s words, “Mermaids and humans do not mix”. Of course, being the curious mermaid she is, Ariel pops up onto the surface of the ocean once in a while to observe humans and their behaviors because she wants to be like them. As she is in her cavern full of treasures, the sights and sounds of fireworks going off captures her attention and she decides to swim to the surface to check it out. It turns out to be a birthday celebration of a young unmarried prince named Eric, whom she falls in love with later on in the movie. As the celebration continues, the ship that Prince Eric and his shipmates run into a rough storm that causes everyone to abandon ship. Prince Eric ends up falling overboard after saving his dog, and Ariel, who is watching the entire time, ends up saving Eric by swimming him to shore. As Eric lays unconscious on the shore, Ariel sings about how much she already loves him, then quickly swims away because she knows that this love for him

is forbidden by her father. Eric believes that she is the one he is meant to marry, but he is unsure of her identity.

On the other hand, Ursula, the sea witch, supposedly “helps” unfortunate “merfolk” to achieve her own goals. Her main goal is to overthrow King Triton and capture his power for herself, and she does this by taking advantage of Ariel and her unlikely situation of having fallen in love with Eric. Ursula offers Ariel a pair of human legs in exchange of her voice. The only catch is that Ariel has to receive “true love’s kiss” from Prince Eric before the sun sets on the third day in order for the spell to become permanent. If she fails to do so in a time span of three days, she will return to being a mermaid and belong to Ursula for eternity. Ariel agrees to this deal, turning her into a mute human. Ariel is almost able to fulfill the deal, until Ursula sabotages it by turning herself into a beautiful, young lady who casts a spell on Eric to fall in love with her instead of Ariel. In the conclusion of the movie, Eric and Ariel end up defeating Ursula after her attempt in becoming the new ruler of the sea and freeing all the souls that were under Ursula’s contract, including King Triton. Under Triton’s blessing, Ariel and Prince Eric get married and live happily ever after.

Application of Theory to Scenes of *The Little Mermaid*

The Little Mermaid displays many characteristics of the muted group theory, especially through events that the protagonist, Ariel, experiences. Throughout the movie, Ariel is surrounded by dominant figures that are mostly comprised of the male gender. Her language is shaped by the friends and family in life, which include her closest male animal friends Flounder the fish and Scuttle the seagull. Because she is only a teenager and does not know much about the world around her, she goes to Flounder and Scuttle for knowledge and advice about the world above the sea. Because Ariel is the youngest daughter of King Triton, her voice is almost

immediately overthrown by her father's because she still lives under her father's rules. In Wood's article from *Women and Language*, Wood describes the correlation between social location to feminist standpoint. Wood suggests that "social location shapes women's lives in material, as well as social and symbolic, ways" (61). As seen in the scene where Ariel sings about her longing to "explore that shore up above", being in the environment that she lives in restricts her, causing her to want to explore more places other than the place that she is constantly in now.

Besides living in a male-dominant environment, other than the existence of Ariel's sisters, Ariel encounters the muted group theory in regard to the antagonist of the film, Ursula the sea witch. Because of Ursula's main goal of becoming the new ruler of the sea, she takes advantage of Ariel's situation by offering her a potion that will give Ariel what she wants. In doing so, Ursula is utilizing her dominant position over Ariel to achieve her goal. On the other end, Ariel is put into the "muted group" position that was observed from the beginning of the film. Other than literally being muted (by having her voice taken away), her metaphorical voice becomes overlooked, marginalized, and rendered silent. Anytime Ariel attempts to talk to her father, her father always disregards what she has to say to him. Oftentimes, for women to get what they desire, they cannot speak with their own voice or language. They must lose their voice and agree to the terms and language of the dominant group, which assume to be men, to get what they desire. In the case of Ariel, because she is restricted to interact with humans by her father's ruling, she believed that she would be able to get what she wanted by agreeing to Ursula's terms of giving up her voice. In regard to the standpoint theory mentioned toward the beginning of this essay, *The Little Mermaid* is mainly portrayed through Ariel's experiences as well as her emotional journey.

Conclusion

As has been noted, the Disney film *The Little Mermaid* displays several characteristics of the muted group theory, which Griffin defines the muted group as “people belonging to low-power groups who must change their language when communicating publicly, thus, having their ideas be often overlooked” (461). In this case, the muted group are women, specifically mermaids in *The Little Mermaid*. Ariel, the protagonist, constantly has her voice neglected by many others until she decides to give it up in exchange for her desires. When she becomes mute, she is literally considered to be part of a muted group, where she utilizes body language and symbols to communicate to the humans. All in all, muted group theory is a theory that allows a low-power group to reexamine ways that they can dig themselves out of being a “low-power” group. They have an opportunity to get their voices heard. In Ariel’s situation, she was able to get her voice heard to get what she wanted.

References

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