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Who are these People? Let's Find Out!

Niall E. Walsh

Texas State University - San Marcos

Lindsay Kline


Anastasia E. Zaluckyj

Crystal O. Nwokoro

BeLynn Hollers

See next page for additional authors

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Presenter Information

Niall E. Walsh, Lindsay Kline, Anastasia E. Zaluckyj, Crystal O. Nwokoro, BeLynn Hollers, Paul Z. Armstrong, and Lindsay Caudill

Niall Walsh

Dr. Morrison

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Muted Group Theory: A Struggle for Representation

As we have observed throughout the semester, women are a historically disenfranchised demographic that struggle to defy an oppressive silence placed upon them by a patriarchal society. This silence has the ability to manifest itself in several ways; however, this paper will focus primarily on the various inadequacies of language that contribute to the perpetuation of the silent woman. In order to gain a better understanding of how language in our society has failed to represent women, a number of texts will be examined by implementing Cheri Kramarae's Muted Group Theory. Through this lens, it will become apparent that the patriarchy in which we exist is tailored to cater only to the male experience, while women are forced to search for an avant-garde means of agency.

Before any texts are introduced, it is imperative that the concept of Muted Group Theory be understood. Muted Group Theory asserts that, "... women are a 'muted group' because the language of our culture does not serve women as well as it does men. Women cannot express themselves as easily as men because the words we use have been formulated based on the male experience" (Borchers 130). In other words, since women have largely been excluded from aiding in the evolution of our language, their perspectives have been omitted. Because of this omission, women are forced to operate within the constraints of a patriarchal mode of communication if they wish to be heard.

However, even when women are able to navigate this biased system of hindrances, they are still not guaranteed a voice. Muted Group Theory explores several implications that emerge from the English language's failure to accommodate women. As we progress, the foremost features of Muted Group Theory will be brought to light.

The first characteristic of Muted Group Theory I'd like to discuss draws attention to how women signal that they are unhappy with their available means of communication. Kramarae states that, "Women are more likely to state their dissatisfaction with dominant modes of public discourse. Because those modes do not fit with female experiences, women will call attention to the inadequacy of male language. Literature... is often used to voice this dissatisfaction" (Borchers 131). To expand on this idea, it is likely that literature is utilized to demonstrate this dissatisfaction, as opposed to simply attempting to explain it. Through literature, a picture can be painted with words in order to illustrate a struggle that would otherwise be overlooked. A great example of this is contained within Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*. *The Penelopiad* is a recreation of *The Odyssey* from the perspective Penelope, Odysseus' wife. What's interesting about this novel is that Atwood incorporates a chorus of twelve young maids that were hanged by Odysseus for sleeping with Penelope's many suitors. Even at face value, the maids acting as a central part of the story can be viewed as social commentary. By resurrecting the maids, Atwood is suggesting that since these women were silenced in life, death actually facilitates their acquisition of agency. Though this claim may initially present itself as immoderate, death represents the ultimate escape from a patriarchal society. Since the maids have transcended the customs of the living, they are finally able to break their silence.

In addition to what the maids represent as a concept, they also demonstrate their dissatisfaction by repeatedly pointing out their subordinate position in their society. Atwood writes, “If I was a princess, with silver and gold, And loved by a hero, I’d never grow old: Oh, if a young hero came a-marrying me, I’d always be beautiful, happy, and free!” (Atwood 51). This quote implies that in order for a woman to be “free” in this society, they must succumb to patriarchal tradition. Obviously, Atwood is using this whimsical rhyme in a sarcastic manner. What this sarcasm actually suggests is that women are ensnared in a culture that refuses to acknowledge them. Furthermore, even the structure of this quote is evidence of a faulty communication system. Traditionally, “... the female writer is seen as suffering the handicap of having to use a medium (prose writing) which is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes” (Barry 126). What this means is that Atwood deliberately chose to have this maid communicate in a formal metrical structure in order to show that effective female communication can only be achieved via a traditionally male medium. Another possibility is that Atwood wanted to draw attention to the structure by intentionally challenging the masculine nature of poetry. In either case, it is clear that the maids in *The Penelopiad* indeed fit the criteria of a muted group.

The second characteristic of Muted Group Theory that’s relevant to this examination states that, “Women are not as likely to create words that become highly recognized and used by both men and women. Women are often excluded from the production of new words” (Borchers 131). William Shakespeare is a fine example of this concept. In fact, Shakespeare-online.com, a website that has compiled a list of all the words Shakespeare invented, asserts that, “The English language owes a great debt to

Shakespeare. He invented over 1700 of our common words by changing nouns into verbs, changing verbs into adjectives, connecting words never before used together, adding prefixes and suffixes, and devising words wholly original” (Mabillard). This information is important because it is unlikely that a talented female writer in this era would have received credit for similar accomplishments. In addition to that, if a female writer had invented her own words and then used them in her own plays, there’s no chance that she would have been taken seriously.

Another interesting example of ineffective female communication can be found within Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, when Lavinia is found mutilated. Titus exclaims, “... what shall I do Now I behold thy lively body so? Thou hast no hands, to wipe away thy tears: Nor tongue, to tell me who hath martyr’d thee...” (Shakespeare). This outburst is revealing because Titus (a man) is able to lament Lavinia’s mutilation, but Lavinia herself is incapable of expressing her own grief. Although Lavinia is the victim of this atrocity, Titus, as well as his male counterparts, are the only characters that are able to voice their sorrows.

The next characteristic of Muted Group Theory posits, “Males have more difficulty understanding females than females do understanding males. Females are used to seeing the world through the eyes and language of men, but men seldom are forced outside of their experience” (Borchers 130). An excellent example of this hypothesis at work can be found in the tale of *Griselda*. Griselda is portrayed as a humble wife who is forced to endure her husband’s numerous cruel tests in order to prove her loyalty. Although she passes every test, her husband is never quite satisfied. After her husband explains the first test, which involves killing their first-born child, Griselda replies, “My

child and I, with heart-felt obedience, Are entirely yours, and you may save or kill Your own thing; do as you will” (Chaucer). This is evidence of Griselda complying with the patriarchal structure that enslaves her. She knows that this test is entirely unnecessary, but at the same time, she is aware that the society in which she exists favors men over women.

Another relevant conclusion that can be drawn from the story of *Griselda* is that the king, Griselda’s husband, represents the societal force that prevents invitational rhetoric from becoming a reality. Invitational rhetoric can be thought of as, “... an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (Borchers 212). Invitational rhetoric might also be thought of as the ultimate goal of Muted Group Theory. If an exchange of ideas can occur where everybody is valued equally, then there is no doubt that a common ground could be established. From there, conversations could take place in which all parties would be considered legitimate, which would lead to the understanding of all possible perspectives. However, this concept presents invitational rhetoric in its idealized form. Ryan and Natalle write, “We believe invitational rhetoric suffers from a misinterpretation of its epistemological grounding, and, as a result of this error, falls short as a theoretically useful model of either dialogue communication or alternative rhetoric” (Ryan and Natalle 69). This assertion suggests that the concept of invitational rhetoric is inherently flawed because its true meaning is never interpreted correctly. In the case of *Griselda*, it might be said that this misinterpretation is due to the ignorance perpetuated by a patriarchal society. In other words, since men have never been exposed to the same hardships as women, the common ground that invitational rhetoric seeks to expose is nonexistent.

The final characteristic of Muted Group Theory I'd like to discuss asserts that, "Females seek ways to express themselves outside of the male experience. Women seek alternative forms of expression that do not always take the form of traditional ways of communicating" (Borchers 130). This aspect of the theory is arguably the most difficult to achieve, simply because challenging the dominant mode of communication in any culture is an arduous task. However, that is the exact reason that this characteristic is so crucial to understand. More often than not, this notion cannot be realized. There are a variety of reasons for this, but the most troubling can be attributed to a lack of resources. To elaborate, let us take a look at an example Borchers provides. Prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, "... women lacked a term for [sexual harassment] and struggled to have their voice heard in a society at large" (Borchers 132). This is a troubling thought, to say the least. The fact that women were forced to endure countless instances of sexual harassment with no way of explaining what was being done to them emphasizes just how miserably language has failed us. When the implications of this linguistic insufficiency are considered, one begins to wonder what else we could be missing.

A fitting literary example of women lacking the terms to defend themselves against men can be found within Jean Rhys' novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This novel follows the story of a woman by the name of Antoinette, who is eventually written off as mad by her domineering husband. What's interesting about this are the subtle ways in which Antoinette's husband abuses her. Although he never engages in abusing her physically, there are a few methods by which he goes about mentally abusing her. The most prominent technique he utilizes is calling her by a name other than Antoinette. During a heated argument, Antoinette says, "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to

make me into someone else, calling me by another name: I know, that's obeh too.' Tears streamed from her eyes" (Rhys 88). This comment depicts Antoinette falling victim to psychological abuse, a concept that was likely not recognized in the 1800's as a legitimate problem. Because of this, Antoinette has no chance to overcome what is being done to her. What's more is that since this was an ongoing phenomenon, Antoinette was eventually psychologically damaged, as anybody would be. However, this fact is significant because her psychological damage was a direct result of an unchallenged patriarchy. Though it may not have been apparent at that point in history, "An emotionally abusive atmosphere fosters... A 'muted interaction,' an inability to communicate, a lack of control over one's life, the forfeiture of one's will, and the loss of faith in one's own judgment..." (Nesbit and Karagianis 178). Essentially, the emotional and psychological abuse that Antoinette endured directly led to the aforementioned results, which eventually caused her husband to label her insane. However, he is too ignorant to make these connections. After their argument concludes, the husband thinks to himself, "Pity. Is there none for me? Tied to a lunatic for life- a drunken lying lunatic-gone her mother's way" (Rhys 99). This remark simply reinforces the horror that is derived from not being able to communicate a serious problem. Antoinette's husband is the epitome of a patriarchal society that doesn't understand the struggle of women. Because of this ignorance, a serious problem is written off as a fantasy, which is exactly how the male language keeps women silent. Since our language is sufficient to communicate the experiences of men, who are historically the dominant demographic, flaws that are exposed by a minority demographic are tossed aside and given no serious consideration.

Muted Group Theory is a concept that strives to expose the inequality embedded within the most rudimentary aspects of our culture. Although this theory brings to light a handful of inherent linguistic inadequacies, it is still not given the attention it deserves. The most likely reason for this is that we, as a society, consider our communication skills to be more or less efficacious. However, the ability to communicate effectively should not be taken for granted. Just because the system in place works most of the time does not mean that we should be satisfied with it. The ability to represent one's self via a cultural medium has a direct correlation to the possession of agency. If one is not able to properly communicate their experiences to the rest of the world, their identity is not considered valid. Though there is no simple path to rectification in this scenario, we can begin by acknowledging that women are indeed a muted group. If, from there, we can entertain the notion of invitational rhetoric, then it will be possible to amend our language in such a way that no perspective is neglected.

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