

**Sexism, Racism, and *The Little Mermaid***

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“Out of the sea. Wish I could be part of that world.” These lyrics from “Part of Your World” from *The Little Mermaid* have been a part of pop culture for decades. In a way to reminisce on nostalgia, bring the stories to a new audience, and of course to make money, the Walt Disney Company has been remaking some of its most popular films in live action. The most recent Disney movie to receive the live-action treatment is *The Little Mermaid*. When you remake something, whether that be a movie, book, or even research essay, you tend to make changes that make the original creation better fitted for the new audiences it will reach when it is released. Changes can be made to something, such as *The Little Mermaid*, for several reasons. However, even though they are done out of love for the story, some changes can face a lot of backlash. Comparing both versions of *The Little Mermaid* from 1989 and 2023 has shown lots of changes due to the rise of feminism and diversity, which has caused the new version to get a lot of backlash before the movie was even released.

When remaking any movie, it generally goes through a different creative team. The original 1989 version of *The Little Mermaid* was directed by John Musker and Ron Clements while the 2023 version was directed by Rob Marshall (*The Little*, n.d.). The directors for both versions of the film did special things in their version that made it unique and special to them. The most obvious and biggest example of this is the fact that the 1989 version was fully animated while the 2023 version is fully live-action. The 2023 version has a runtime of 135 minutes while the 1989 version has an 83-minute runtime (*The Little*, n.d.). With the longer runtime, the live-action version has new things in it that aren't in the original. For example, there are numerous scenes in it that flesh out Prince Eric's character more, as well as scenes that build up the relationship between Eric and Ariel that did not exist in the animated version (Marshall, 2023). There are also new songs that were introduced in the new movie. Alongside Alan

Menken, who is the composer for both movies, Lin-Manuel Miranda joins him as the lyricist in substitution for the late Howard Ashman, who worked with Menken on the original film. These new songs are called “Wild Uncharted Waters,” which is about Prince Eric singing that he will not stop searching for Ariel until he finds her again, “For the First Time,” which is Ariel’s inner thoughts as she experiences the land for the first time, and “Scuttlebutt,” which is Scuttle singing to Sebastian and Ariel about the scuttlebutt, or gossip, that Prince Eric has chosen somebody to marry (Marshall, 2023). The 2023 version of the film decided to omit the song “Le Poissons” from the track list, which was about a chef attempting to cook Sebastian while he tried to escape (Musker and Clements, 1989). I believe this was removed from the movie due to the fact that it was not relevant to the new version. One final general change between the two movies is that in the 1989 film, Scuttle was a boy voiced by Buddy Hackett, whereas, in 2023, Scuttle is a girl voiced by Awkwafina (Musker and Clements, 1989; Marshall, 2023).

Some of the changes between the 1989 and 2023 versions of *The Little Mermaid* were brought about due to the rise of feminism. Being the powerful female protagonist of a movie means that girls, and boys, of all ages will be watching to see how the main character is portrayed. If the main female character is shown as powerful and equal to men, then that is the message pushed out into society. The same can be said if the main female character is shown to be weak and dependent on men. There are a couple of line changes in songs to support the feminist movement. For example, in “Poor Unfortunate Souls,” Ursula is trying to convince Ariel to give up her voice in trade for human legs to go to the surface. In the original 1989 version, when Ariel voices her concern, Ursula responds by saying that Ariel has her looks and to not “underestimate the importance of body language.” Then continuing to say that “on land it’s much preferred for ladies not to say a word. It’s she who holds her tongue who gets a man.”

This promotes the idea that as a girl is growing up, she should experience “a loss of voice and loss of a sense of self as she silences herself” because of what Disney has shown in this movie as the “perfect girl” (Henke 1996). These ideas are not from the “original folk tellers, nor of the original writers such as Perrault or Andersen; instead, they are the values of Disney's male writers,” who at the time believed that exact thing that women should stay silent (Henke 1996). In the 2023 version of the film, those lyrics are simply removed and instead, we get new dialogue between Ariel being unsure about the deal and Ursula trying to sell it to her. Another lyric change due to the rise of feminism is in “Kiss the Girl” when in the animated film, Sebastian sings “Possible she wants you, too. There is one way to ask her. It don't take a word, not a single word. Go on and kiss the girl.” The live-action Sebastian sings “Possible she wants you, too. Use your words, boy, and ask her. If the time is right, then the time is tonight. Go on and kiss the girl.” This change is to show that consent is needed, in order for the kiss to take place. This gives Ariel a voice, or in this case, she gives a look of consent, which in turn gives her more power than her 1989 counterpart. Another example of a powerful feminist change is with the Daughters of Triton as a whole. In the original movie, the Daughters of Triton are just performers to entertain their dad, whereas in the new movie, they have more power, due to the fact that “each sister watches over the seven seas in the ocean” (*King Triton's*, n.d.).

*The Little Mermaid* doesn't happen to be the only movie released in 2023 that promotes feminism. The highest-grossing film of 2023, *Barbie*, promotes feminism in a way different from what will be mentioned in *The Little Mermaid*. Through the film, *Barbie* shows feminism by actively flipping the roles of male and female while they are in Barbieland but shows both Barbie and Ken the reality of things when they travel to the real world, which starts the conflict of the movie, as Ken brings patriarchy back to Barbieland. Barbieland has a “second (or is it first?)

feminist awakening” that leaves Barbie herself wanting to leave Barbieland in turn for the real world, in comparison to “the history of Western feminism itself,” where due to them not wanting things to stay the same, “the second-wave feminists of the 1960s turned against the suffragettes before them” (Hu, 2023). Whereas *Barbie* shows feminism head-on throughout the movie, through the examples shown above, it’s clear that *The Little Mermaid* takes a more subtle approach to feminism.

Feminism is not the only thing that changed the movie from iteration to iteration, the rise of diversity also caused some changes within the film. For example, the Daughters of Triton in the 2023 version watch over the seven seas, so the girls are played by a variety of actors with different racial backgrounds. This includes Ariel herself, whereas in the original animated film, Ariel is white and voiced by Jodi Benson. However, in the new live-action version, Ariel is black and played by Halle Bailey. This casting decision faced a lot of racial backlash as fans of the original film and the Chinese government claimed that it was bad that they were changing the race of the Disney princess. The internet users of China are “echoing some people in the United States who have expressed anger that the Atlanta-born actress does not resemble the light-skinned character of the 1989 animated film” (Hale, 2023). The practice of changing the race of characters is not a new idea. For example, in “2014, Marvel changed the identities of some of its heroes, such as the mantle of Captain America being passed from Steve Rogers to Sam Wilson” (Burroughs, 2023). Marvel fans didn’t see this as a problem, so the question is, why did Disney fans provide so much backlash to the race change of Ariel? It’s sad to say that this backlash was expected. In an interview, Bailey says, “As a Black person, you just expect it and it’s not really a shock anymore” (Gardner, 2023). This opinion of the race change of Ariel does not make sense, as in this movie with the Daughters of Triton watch over the different seas

all over the world. Ariel watches over the Red Sea, which borders Africa, meaning that Ariel being of African descent makes sense and racial backlash is not warranted (Harbert, 2023).

Even though at the core both movies are the same story, they have various differences because they went through different creative teams. From general additions to updates because of feminism, and backlash it received due to the main character's race being changed, the new version of *The Little Mermaid* had a lot of backlash before the movie was even released to theaters. Do you agree with the criticism this movie got? Anyone can go under the sea right now and watch both versions of *The Little Mermaid* on Disney+ right now to decide if this movie deserved the bad press it got, or if it stays faithful to the original.

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