

From Enchantment to Empowerment: Voice, Power and Autonomy in Contemporary Mermaid Retellings

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Paper Received on 09-03-2026, Accepted on 10-04-2026
Published on 12-04-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.118

Abstract:

Mermaids, sirens, and selkies are the creatures of the mysterious dark sea that have been an integral part of myths. They have been a symbol of beauty, loss, and terror. Since Hans Christian Anderson's "*The Little Mermaid*", there have been numerous versions of the tale. Disney brought the lighter version of the tale, removing the gruesome parts for the modern audience, and it became a huge success, making people forget about the original story. However, contemporary authors have neither confirmed nor denied this trend. In some narratives, mermaids, sirens, and selkies have been portrayed as ruthless temptresses who lure humans to death with their captivating voices. Disney has shown Ariel to be a submissive protagonist who eventually finds her happily ever after. Thus, mermaids can be both good and evil; they can be perceived as either angels or monsters. This paper aims to explore the alterations made to the tale and the female protagonist according to the taste of the modern audience in the following works: Liz Braswell's *Part of Your World* (2018), Alexandra Christo's *To Kill a Kingdom* (2018), and Tessonja Odette's *Kiss of the Selkie* (2021). In my paper, I will examine the following questions: The themes of Love and sacrifice portrayed in Disney's Little Mermaid compared to the modern retellings. The reimagining of Ariel's character from a meek protagonist who lost power to the bolder and darker ones reclaiming power in the contemporary retellings. The tragic ending of Ariel v/s is the modern alternate ending to the tale. Lastly, the journey to freedom, transformation, and the loss or regaining of the voice depend on the choices one makes.

Keywords: Disney, Fairytale Retellings, Feminism, Freedom, Identity, Mermaids, Selkies, Sirens, Voice

Introduction

Mermaids are perhaps the most mysterious mythical creatures of the fairy tales. Their stories have been captivating audiences for ages. Mermaids are the epitome of feminine beauty and grace. The mermaids with their long hair, striking eye colours and shining colourful fins are pleasing to the people, but what makes them stand out is their ability to sing melodiously; men are enthralled by their songs, and they lose their autonomy for a brief time.

A mermaid can either be the innocent maiden, the wicked temptress, the flesh-eating monster, or the metaphorical cross between human and animal. Perhaps the most famous of these stories is *'The Little Mermaid'*. Most people, especially those born in and after 1989, immediately think of Disney's animated film starring Jodi Benson as the titular character. But the fairy tale that it was based on, written by Hans Christian Andersen, is one of the most well-known stories regarding mermaids. Indeed, it can be considered the first real story about mermaids because it took the mermaid out of mythology and legend, and then introduced it to the fairy tale format (Nolfi).

Some other mythical merfolk that have a significant place in the mermaid fiction are Sirens and Selkies. These creatures are shapeshifters, and with the help of magic, they can also survive among humans. The mermaid fiction, just like the mermaids, is fluid in nature. "It is the fluid and liquid nature of the mermaid herself and of merfolk in general that resists categorization into all too specific allocations of belonging. Metamorphosis occurs across all domains, and in different guises, so her shape, like the shifting shape of water poured from one vessel into another, remains uncertain" (Goett). Considering the many stories on mermaids, sirens, selkies and other merfolk it can be deduced that these creatures can be both good and evil. One particular instance from *To Kill a Kingdom* by Alexandra Christo explains this,

[Mermaids]... have the capacity to be deadly, like all monsters, but where sirens seduce and kill, mermaids remain fascinated by humans. They steal trinkets and follow ships in hopes that treasure will fall from the decks.

Sometimes they save the lives of sailors and take nothing but charms in return. And when they steal the hearts we keep, it isn't for power. It's because they think that if they eat enough of them, they might become human themselves (Christo).

In some tales, mermaids are shown to be a meek and kind girl who wants to explore the human world; some depict them as ruthless killers, while others portray them as hopeless romantics who sacrifice themselves for Love. Since Anderson's original story of the Little Mermaid, there have been numerous versions of the tale. All the fairy tale retellings reflect the trends, frustrations, and problems of the society at the time when they were written. The contemporary mermaid fiction doesn't confine them to a category but adds layers to their character and empowers them.

Fairy tales reflect women's place in society. The narratives lay stress on the idea that women must secure a marriage with a man of good standing and endure the hardships that come with love, as was observed in the case of Ariel. "The encounter between man and mermaid, both driven by curiosity and a longing for escape from their respective worlds, is at the heart of the mermaid tales (Goett)". Mermaids are hybrid beings; they are half human and half water creature. They can exist in both land and water; however, the ability to survive on land comes with a high price and is often dangerous for the mermaid. Ariel gave up her voice to be with Prince Eric. She leaves the ocean and comes to the land, learns about the ways of the humans; however, it can be noted that the prince or the lover is often a passive character who is under the influence of the powerful magic or spell of the villain characters. This has been a typical case in the majority of fairy tales. In fairy tales, women are seen nurturing their family and loving their partner immensely, but their love is rarely reciprocated. However, in contemporary mermaid fiction, there is a striking deviation from this trend; the modern mermaids are not hopeless romantics. In *Kiss of a Selkie* by Tessonja Odette, the siren princess, Maisie, is not driven by selfless love and longing; her ultimate focus is to survive in the human world to avoid her label as the princess with a lethal kiss. Further in the story, we see that there are mutual feelings of love, understanding, and respect between Maisie and Brother Dorian, and their relationship and trust grow gradually with time. In *Part of Your World* by Betsy Cornwell, Ariel puts her feelings and love for Prince Eric subdued until they both defeat Ursula, who was planning to wipe out the entire species of mermaids from the

earth. This highlights the evolution of the character of Ariel from rebellious daughter to a mature Queen.

Some modern narratives point to the fact that when it comes to emotions and feelings, the merfolk is different from humans. Most merfolk do not understand love or feelings. In Alexandra Christo's *To Kill a Kingdom*, the siren princess, Lira, says,

Love is a word we scarcely hear in the ocean. It exists only in my song and on the lips of the princes I've killed. And I have never heard it from my mother's mouth. I'm not even sure what it really means. To me, it has always been just a word that humans' treasure for reasons I can't comprehend. There isn't even a way to say it in Psáriin. Yet my mother is accusing me of feeling it. (Christo)

These lines give the idea that most merfolk, except mermaids, are unable to fall in love as they don't understand the feeling. However, Lira falls in love with Prince Elian, and they fight alongside against the sea witch to save their people from further destruction and to put a stop to the killing of both humans and sirens. In both the retellings, i.e., *To Kill a Kingdom* and *Kiss of Selkie*, Lira and Maisie initially had planned to kill the Prince and the Priest; however, they experience a change of heart towards the end. In both stories, a balanced romance is seen rather than one-sided love in the earlier mermaid retellings. Additionally, for the modern mermaid, love and being loved in return are not a priority; they know their responsibilities as Queens, and their interest lies in the safety of their people and establishing peace among humans and the merfolk.

Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel, exhibited the typical characteristics of the female protagonist, who was naive, kind, friendly, a little rebellious, but submissive and sacrificial too. Similarly, in many other retellings of the tale, Ariel is shown to be impulsive and ignorant, and gets into a tricky bargain with the sea witch, and turns into a human. She fails to win the heart of the prince, and that results in the loss of her voice, freedom, and autonomy. Walt Disney's portrayal brought a significant alteration.

Disney productions went through a great shift in the themes portrayed and the characters presenting them. The discussion focused on deeper values, multiculturalism, bravery, and family. It gave the Princesses the lead, with purpose, depth and often a sense of adventure. "*The Little Mermaid*" marked

the beginning of non-passive, self-motivated female leads, with Ariel and Ursula. (Ourri)

In Disney's version, Ariel gets her happy ending, i.e., is getting married to Prince Eric; however, the contemporary fairy tales present the mermaids differently; the modern mermaids are not victims but bold protagonists who acquire power by killing anyone who threatens them or their people. Lira, the siren princess, explains that she kills humans for survival. "I've become so used to being brutal that I almost forget it didn't begin as a choice, but a requirement. Kill the humans. Help finish the war they started when they killed Keto. Be a true siren (Christo)." Further, she states that she uses her haunting song to captivate and kill only the Princes because they are the future kings who could pose a threat to the merfolk in the future. "It's the princes who hold the allure. In their youth. In the allegiance of their people. In the promise of the leader, they could one day become. They are the next generation of rulers, and by killing them, I kill the future. Just as my mother taught me (Christo)." Lira was taught that power comes with wiping out enemies, but later, Lira realised that peace can be established between humans and merfolk without killing each other. She declares, "You can't bend to the world; you have to make it bend to you." She decides to be a better Queen than her mother and finds a way to establish a working relationship between the humans and the merfolk built on the foundation of mutual trust, peace, and loyalty.

In *Part of Your World*, Bracewell presents a new Ariel; she has become the Queen of the ocean and has matured. She undergoes a character transformation. She becomes bolder and even turns into a human girl again to save her people and father from Ursula. She has learned from her past mistakes and no longer makes reckless decisions, but does what is beneficial for her people. Ariel's transformation and empowerment deviates from Disney's typical storyline of the fairy tale, where the female protagonist is submissive and helpless in front of Ursula's manipulations and dark magic. The modern Ariel rules with wisdom and moral authority. Similarly, in both *To Kill a Kingdom* and *Kiss of the Selkie*, Lira and Maisie are seen breaking free from their toxic mothers, who wanted them to be killers. Their mothers manipulated them into killing and creating chaos; however, both Lira and Maisie refuse to do it. It highlights the idea that the modern Ariel is capable of making her own decisions. The modern mermaids cannot be manipulated, controlled or silenced easily.

The contemporary authors sketch Ariel's character entirely differently. The modern mermaids, sirens, and selkies are seen as being more mature than Anderson's Ariel, who turns into sea foam to save the Prince. The modern mermaids are not

daddy's little princes, as Ariel was in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, but powerful queens who are sharp, headstrong, and rule their kingdom brilliantly and defeat the witches who try to manipulate them. These tales emphasize choice, freedom, and a love that values identity rather than erasing it.

In Anderson's *The Little Mermaid*, we see that Ariel becomes one of the daughters of air; however, in Disney's version, she gets her happy ending with Prince Eric.

It marked the start of more progressive female representations, with women being more than victims or damsels in distress, and with the slight inclusion of a non-heteronormative and a not all white society. Ariel took chances and became the focus, despite the loss of her voice, the character was given determination and was not completely victimised like...[the former Disney Princesses]. (Ourri)

The modern authors also give different endings to their adaptations of *The Little Mermaid*. In the modern narratives, "happy ending" is not just about defeating the witches and falling in love, but having determination and a strong will to achieve anything. For Maisie, in *Kiss of a Selkie*, a happy ending is breaking free from the curse that made her kiss lethal and being free from the control of her mother, Queen Nimue. In Liz Bracewell's *Part of Your World*, Ariel regains her voice and ensures that the merfolk remain free from the dark magic of Ursula. Ariel is not a hopeless romantic anymore but a wise and powerful queen who saves her people. Ariel is her own supporter; she motivates herself, saying, "You've become a queen, a woman with a complicated personality. You have hidden depths and a wisdom and intelligence that all went unnoticed before by an idiot prince whose heart couldn't listen to anything his ears couldn't hear. Ariel felt a little giddy. I control storms and the heart of a prince. I like that (Braswell)."

One important thing to notice in this retelling is that being voiceless results in inner transformation of Ariel as she learns to use her powerful magic as the Queen of the ocean, she solves the problems maturely, thus she finds strength in her voicelessness too. Similarly, for Lira, a happy ending meant acting as a bridge between the humans and the merfolk and putting a stop to bloodshed. She says, "Me, trapped in the confines of my mother's murderous legacy. And the ocean, calling out to us both. A song of freedom and longing" (Christo). Lira refuses to live a life as a ruthless killer; she reshapes her own world. Another important deviation from the original story and the Disneyfied version of *The Little Mermaid* is that the Princes are no longer the passive characters. In all three of these retellings, the male protagonists, Prince Elian, Prince Eric, and Brother Dorian, play a crucial part in

aiding the female protagonists in defeating the sea witches. In modern mermaid fiction, the female protagonists are seen reclaiming their voices and resisting their killer legacies and becoming powerful rulers.

The most common method used by the villains to exert power is silencing the female protagonists in the fairy tale narratives. Ariel's transformation into a human girl comes at the cost of her voice and freedom. She loses her voice because Ursula tricks her into entering a twisted bargain. In *Part of Your World*, Bracewell's Ariel, in spite of losing her voice, becomes a powerful queen; she comes back among the humans to correct her mistakes. She is successful in reclaiming her voice, which was her strength and her source of happiness. "Her voice had been such an important part of her life before. The merfolk celebrated her for it. Her father excused her occasionally questionable behaviour because of it. Eric loved the girl who rescued him because of her singing (Braswell)." Ariel's voice was what gave her a unique identity. Ariel's transformation indicates that the modern mermaid fiction empowers the mermaid she not only to regain her voice but also her identity and freedom.

As examined in the book *Good Girls and Evil Witches*, Ariel, while still beautiful and with a great voice, craves knowledge. She is curious and not prepared to settle for what society and her family have deemed as good enough (Davis, 2007). However, the rebellious progressive Ariel takes a massive shift in character when the story meets its first disequilibrium and antagonist, Ursula. (Ourri)

In *Kiss of Selkie*, Maisie chooses to live an isolated life as a common girl rather than being a killer princess. Her heart is full of compassion for the people. Even though her mother Queen Nimue puts a curse on her that would kill her if she doesn't kill brother Dorian, Maisie chooses to keep Dorian alive, not fearing the consequences. Unlike other princesses, Maisie doesn't prioritize romantic love; she values her freedom and individuality. Similarly, Lira loves the ocean, she loves her people and she despise killing the innocent. She chooses to break the barrier between humans and sirens and risks her own life for it.

Conclusion

The modern mermaid fiction has evolved since Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. The modern mermaids are not passive heroines who need a Prince Charming; they are powerful Queens who save kingdoms. For them, "their happy ending" is not falling in love but chasing freedom, creating their own identity, challenging the oppressive forces, reclaiming personal agency, and voice. These women are not only personifications of beauty but powerful forces that tame the storms of life. These

mermaids are adventurous yet mature enough to make the correct choices. “In contemporary culture, mermaids have taken on new layers of meaning, resonating with modern themes and social issues. They are often seen as symbols of transformation and freedom, reflecting the evolving perceptions of identity and self-discovery” (Mermaids: Unveiling myth). Modern mermaid fiction redefines feminine power; the mermaids have their own choices, their own voices, and they write their own happily ever after.

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How to Cite this Article: How to Cite this Article:

Kumar, Jubby, and Manish Shrivastava. “From Enchantment to Empowerment: Voice, Power and Autonomy in Contemporary Mermaid Retellings.” **Research Journal of English (RJOE)**, vol. 11, no. 2, 2026, Oray's Publications, pp. 111–118. DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.01.118.