REVIEW ARTICLE

Perceiving Women ed. Shirley Ardener. Malaby London 1975. xxiii, 167pp. £6.95.

This book, which was published last year, comprises six essays written between 1968 and 1973, with an introduction written in 1975. It is only since the mid-sixties that the notion of 'women' as such could have been an object of study in this way, and it may well become required reading for some women's studies courses. The papers were all read (with the exception of Edwin Ardener's) either at the "informal seminar of women anthropologists" at Oxford or at "a seminar... arranged outside the official programme of the (A.S.A. Deccennial) conference" (viii). With the advent of women's studies 'informal' and 'outside' becomes formal and inside, as another facet of an academic discourse and, perhaps, a recuperation. Of all the authors only Shirley Ardener registers the 'political' nature of the papers in their academic context. It is in confronting this problem that the terms 'muted group' and 'famineity' are introduced. I believe that both terms have greater political weight than is claimed for them, and that this denial affects their analytic value.

It is interesting to note that E. Ardener's paper, "Belief and the Problem of Women", which was written earlier than the other papers (1968), and included "(s)ince it has influenced other contributions submitted here..." (vii-viii), nowhere uses the term 'muted' or 'muted group'. These terms, according to the "Intro-duction" and to E. Ardener's commentary on his earlier article, "The 'Problem' Revisited" (1975), were introduced in discussion between 1968 and 1971, when "Sexual Insult and Female Militancy" was written. Rather, there is a term 'inarticulate', which does not necessarily mean the same as the later term 'muted', particularly as, whilst muted is opposed to dominant, hence the couple dominant group/muted group, inarticulate is not strongly coupled with an equivalent term, although 'articulate' is used.

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The problem in 1968 is posed thus: whilst women are present in monographs at the level of observation, they are completely absent at a second level, that of debate, discussion and so on, which "social anthropologists really depend upon to give conviction to their interpretations... We are, for practical purposes, in a male world"(1); there is no direct reference to the female group - "For the truth is that women rarely speak in social anthropology in any but that... sense of merely uttering or giving tongue. It is the very inarticulateness of women that is the technical part of the problem they present"(2).

The technical problem of inarticulateness turns out, however, to be an analytical problem which in most societies the ethno-grapher shares with its male members. Then "Those trained in ethnography evidently have a bias towards the kind of models that men are ready to provide (or to concur in) rather than towards

any that women might provide. If the men appear 'articulate'
compared with the women, it is a case of like speaking to like"
(2). The other side of this problem is: "if the models of a
society made by most ethnographers tend to be models derived from
the male portion of that society, how does the sumbolic weight
of that other mass of persons... express itself?"(3).

Thus the problem of 'inarticulateness' of women is one of
'symbolic weight'; a complex question, for it is not solely of
the ethnographer's own society: Ardener suggests that "the models
of society that women can provide are not of the kind acceptable
at first sight to men or to ethnographers, and specifically that,
unlike either of these sets of professionals, they do not so
readily see society bounded from nature. They lack the meta-
language for its discussion. To put it more simply: they will
not necessarily provide a model for society as a unit that will
contain both men and themselves. They may indeed provide a model
in which women and nature are outside men and society"(3).

It is in the realm of symbolism that women acquire something
more like their due representation; Ardener contends that "much
of this symbolism in fact enacts that female model of the world
which has been lacking, and which is different from the models
of men in a particular dimension: the placing of the boundary
between society and nature"(5). The bounding of self at the
level of society produces the category 'nature' as 'not-self';
it is then a cultural product and not "a concrete aspect of
universal order". Ardener continues: "Since women are biologically
not men, it would be surprising if they bounded themselves against
nature in the same way as men do"(5). For men, women's fertility
is uncontrolled, peripheral: to do with 'nature'. So "(a)lthough
the men bound off 'mankind' from nature, the women persist in
overlapping into nature again. For men among the Bakweri this
overlapping symbolic area is clearly related to women's repro-
ductive powers"(7). In his conclusion Ardener writes: "The
objective basis of the symbolic distinction between nature and
society... is a result of the problem of accomodating the two
logical sets which classify human beings by different bodily
structures: 'male'/'female'; with the two other sets: 'human'/
non-human'. It is, I have suggested, men who usually come to
face this problem, and, because their model for <u>mankind</u> is based
on that for <u>man</u>, their opposites, <u>woman</u> and <u>non-mankind</u> (the
wild), tend to be ambiguously placed"(14). It follows, then,
that "(s)ince these (reproductive) powers are for women far
from being marginal, but are of their essence as women, it would
seem that a woman's model of the world would also treat them as
central. When we speak of Bakweri belief we must therefore
recognize a man's sector and a woman's sector, which have to be
reconciled"(7).

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But in addition to this first theme of inarticulateness as
unrecognized symbolic weight, there is a second, interwoven
theme of the <u>dominance</u> of man's models. It is only weakly or
ambiguously stated in 1968, which is not surprising, for as

E. Ardener syas (1975): "The paper reprinted above is now
somewhat old, and as composed just antedated the main impact
of the new feminist literature. It is important to stress
therefore that it was not seen as a contribution to that
literature"(19). If we look at the male or ethnographer's
model where "like speaks to like", we find "...it is because
the men consistently tend, when pressed, to give a bounded
model of society such as ethnographers are attracted to"(2).
Why? Men's models are characteristically dominant in ethnography
because "(i)f men are the ones who become aware of 'other
cultures' more frequently then do women, it may well be that
they are likely to develop metalevels of categorization that
enable them at least to consider the necessity to bound them-
selves-and-their-women from other-men-and-their-women. Thus
all such ways of bounding society against society, including
our own, may have an inherent maleness"(6). So the heavy
marking, both theoretical and ideological, of such male spheres
as the economic and political at the expense of the more female
areas of symbolism has a functional (and functionalist) aspect.
Ardener continues: "(i)f men, because of their political
dominance, may tend purely pragmatically to 'need' total
bounding models of either type (against nature or other societies),
women may tend to take over men's models when they share the
same definitional problems as men. But the models set up by
women bounding themselves are not encompassed in those men's
models. They still subsist, and both sexes through their common
humanity are aware of the contradictions"(6). 'Inarticulateness'
then is more than that women's separate models are not 'recognised'
by men or by ethnographers. For "(m)en's models of society are
expressed at a metalevel which purports to define women... Not
only women, but... inarticulate classes of men, young people,
and children"(14).

In the "Introduction" and "The 'Problem' Revisited" (below)
emphasis is moved from the first theme of inarticulateness as
an expression of symbolic weight not recognized by men to the
second theme of the repression of expression through male
political dominance. The shift is presented as the effects of
the dominance of one model over another, described in terms of
'mutedness'. Firstly, dominance is reflected in the maleness
of appropriate language registers: "... because the arena of
public discourse tends to be characteristically male-dominated
and the appropriate language registers often seem to have been
'encoded' by males, women may be at a disadvantage when wishing
to express matters of peculiar concern to them. Unless their
views are presented in a form acceptable to men, and to women
brought up in the male idiom, they will not be given a proper
hearing". Indeed, "because of the absence of a suitable code
and because of a necessary indirectness rather than spontaneity
of expression, women, more often than may be the case with men,
might sometimes lack the facility to raise to conscious level
their unconscious thoughts" (viii-ix). Nevertheless, women's
ideas or models of the world around them might find a way of
expression in forms other than direct expository speech.

But there is a second, more radical way that dominance is expressed: if "...a society may be dominated or overdetermined by the model (or models) generated by one dominant group within the system" this dominant model "may impede the free expression of alternative models of their world which subdominant groups may possess, and perhaps may even inhibit the very generation of such models" (xii - my italics). But in this case, what is the status of women's models? Shirley Ardener suggests that (1) such muted groups find it necessary to structure their world through the model(s) of the dominant group - "transforming their own models as best they can in terms of the received ones"(xii). (2) That contradictions arise, for while "there may be presumed to be a considerable degree of 'fit' between the dominant model and their (the members of the dominant group's) structural position in society", this is not so for members of subdominant groups "for whom the 'fit' might be very imperfect. As a result the latter might be relatively more 'inarticulate' when expressing themselves through the idiom of the dominant group, and silent on matters of special concern to them for which no accommodation has been made in it" (xii).

A series of possibilities is being developed here. (1) There are models that are not 'recognized' in the official structure. (2) There are areas of concern for the subdominant group which cannot be publicly discussed or expressed: a group may be relatively inarticulate in any situation where the interests of the group are at variance with those of the dominant group. However, a 'muted group' may still generate a counterpart model (xii). But even as a "private view of the world" this still poses the question of the process of overdetermination of the model, for these counterpart models "...are not generated independently of those of the dominant structure, but are to some extent shaped by them..." (xiii). This brings sharply into question the third possibility:(3) That there are regions where there appear to be problems that are inhibited, that are never developed. This category is not, of course, a real possibility.

Yet S. Ardener writes: "...it may well be that while both groups generate ideas of social reality at the deepest level, muted groups find that, unlike dominant groups, they must inhibit the generation of ideas close to or at the level of the surface of events, since the conceptual space in which they would lie is overrun by the dominant model of events generated by the dominant group". This is expanded: in an autonomous (dominant) system the two orders of structures (surface and deep) are linked by certain transformational rules. Then a muted system composed of the deep structures of a muted group and the imposed surface structures of a dominant group will be held together by more complex logical relationships. "If such a system is to be envisaged without a collapse, some adequate binding relationships must nevertheless obtain, so perhaps we must assume that generally muted groups manage to form rickety or cumbersome links between the two orders of structures"(xiv).

The problem is that in such a space 'groups' can only be defined by the dominant structure. 'Inarticulate' has not become 'muted' but 'muted group', with which it is not synonymous. "Thus the dominant and the muted groups may each generate different structural premisses, and still come to accept a common statement of perception" (xiv). What defines a muted group other than an outside or post-hoc definition?

Further elaborations become necessary to maintain this definition of a muted group. Thus the 'objectives' of a muted group must be 'encoded' or 'transformed' in terms of the dominant group; a "clear perception of purpose may be clouded or over-determined in this way by the dominant ideology; the process of generation of... ideas is thus made more complicated"(xv). There is then "...an adjustment in the system of members of a muted group which transforms their own unconscious perceptions into such conscious ideas as will accord with those generated by the dominant group". This leads even to a kind of psychologism: "We could envisage, perhaps, that the construction and maintenance of any coherent conceptual system conjoining the deep models of a muted group with the surface models of the dominant group would require from the members of the muted group the investment of a great deal of disciplined mental energy. This investment may be one reason why they are often seen to be more conservative than members of dominant groups, even clinging to models which seem to disadvantage them... but after lifetimes of adapting in order to achieve a precarious accommodation, should we be surprised if the prospect of beginning again should be resisted? (xvi-xvii).

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The ambiguity inherent in the use of the term 'muted group' is also present in "The 'Problem' Revisited". E. Ardener describes mutedness as "a technically defined condition of structures - not some condition of linguistic silence"(22), and the accompanying foot-note (4) points out that "sub-dominant p-structures generate only indirectly - through the mode of specification of the dominant structure" (26). Muted implies both 'dumb' and 'of a reduced level of perceptibility', "(t)he muted structures are 'there' but cannot be 'realized' in the language of the dominant structure"(22). The term 'inarticulate' is reinvoked: "One of the problems that women presented was that they were rendered 'inarticulate' by the male structure; that the dominant structure was articulated in terms of a male world-position. Those who were not in the male world-position, were, as it were, 'muted'" (21-22). A group is muted then "...simply because it does not form part of the dominant communicative system of the society - expressed as it must be through the dominant ideology, and that 'mode of production', if you wish, which is articulated with it" (22; 1973).

This question of 'groups' which are "rendered 'inarticulate'" is partially resolved by the introduction of the concept of a world-structure. "The ultimate negativity of attempts to modify dominant structures by their own 'rules'

derives from the totally reality-defining nature of such structures. Because of this essential element the manifold of experience through the social may be usefully termed a 'world-structure', for it is an organization both of people and of their reality"(22). Then if we think in terms of a world-structure which defines 'relevant' reality "...if the male perception yields a dominant structure, the female one is a muted structure"(24). Nevertheless, in Ardener's conclusions there is still a separation, this time of the effects of englobing and of dominance: "The woman case is only a relatively prominent example of muting: one that has clear political, biological, and social symbols. The real problem is that all world-structures are totalitarian in tendency. The Gypsy world-structure, for example, englobes that of the sedentary community just as avidly as that of the sedentary community englobes that of the Gypsies. The englobed structure is totally 'muted' in terms of the englobing one. There is then an absolute equality of world-structures in this principle, for we are talking of their self-defining and reality reducing features. Dominance occurs when one structure blocks the power of actualization of the other, so that it has no 'freedom of action'. That this approach is not simply a marxist one lies in our recognition that the articulation of world-structures does not rest only in their production base but at all levels of communication: that a structure is also a kind of language of many semiological elements, which specify all actions by its power of definition" (25).

The last sentence apart, this still lacks the subtlety of the original formulations. The problem of structures either absent from official histories or present but unexpressed has entered again. A class (or group or whatever) is only one when it has consciousness of being a class, and the process of self-definition is a specific, overdetermined one, which may well involve the gaining of a 'meta-discourse'. Self-definition in this sense, though, creates a new entity: there is no deeper reality to be uncovered or unveiled. Ardener's "Mutedness occurs simply because it does not form part of the dominant communicative system of society - expressed as it must be through the dominant ideology..."(22) makes sense if we see mutedness as a condition of the process of self-definition - a profoundly heterogenous concept to that of dominance - a specific and not generalizable case of a change in the rules.

Judith Okely's paper examining exchange of phantasies between Gorgio and Gypsy men and women gives no material that would clarify the notion of a muted group; the change that allows women to be taken note of in this particular way happens in the ethnographer's own society. Hilary Callan looks at one of the premisses 'underlying' a structure; that she can do so is perhaps part of a more general questioning she notes. However, the set of apparent paradoxes she relates are normally never perceived because "these conditions belong to the peculiar class of assumptions which, within the terms of a given socio-intellectual system, cannot be stated". Cannot be stated, firstly by those committed (morally and professionally) to the system, but also, by its very nature. "The second point is much more difficult

to express. It is possible, as I have indicated, to hold fierce
arguments with people and in this context to force from them
statements - some more logical than others - about principles
underlying the system. It would, however, be rash to relate
these admissions too straightforwardly to the normal, smooth
functioning of the Embassy machine. To state the assumptions
is already to distort them - whether in any consistent direction
I am not sure. But it seems to be true that 'embeddedness' is
the nature of these assumptions" (99-100).

The very definition muted demands a shift in such premisses.
The alternation dominant/muted has its specific origin in such
circumstances; its usefulness has been in the specific situation
of the emergence of the women's movement, as a (polemical) inter-
vention. They refer to power relations, and to the control of
'the state of affairs as defined by common sense'. Then the
search for any underlying continuity, such as femineity, sub-
scribed to by both Drid Williams and Hilary Callan, is suspect.
Shirley Ardener writes: "...beyond the search for new models of
various sets which can include both men and women (we find) a
desire, conscious or not, to identify a specifically female model
(of that 'special nature') in which the essential attributes,
physical, spiritual and moral appear: a model of what we may
perhaps term 'femineity' of the deepest structural level and
greatest generality, which is quite distinct from the old,
supposedly male-derived 'femininity' with its load of associated
'secondary sexual characteristics'"(46). This notion of femineity
is applied to both the Cameroons and the West: "Is this the level
at which the Cameroon women and the liberationists meet? Both
seem concerned with the 'deep structure' of human identity".
Since "the one element which the generators have in common apart
from their humanity is their sex", we have to consider that,
other than chance, "whether or not we are dealing here with
phenomena of a universal kind" (49). But although always present
the male/female difference is not always marked, or marked in
the same way. Even the notion of "the dignity of (women's)
sexual identity" is derived from a specific historical situation;
it cannot usefully be claimed to exist where and when it is not
expressed. Although femineity is not a biologism, it cannot be
generalized: its application to other circumstances shows a
political rather than a paradigmatic solidarity.

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All the papers here develop specific analyses of great
clarity, but that their subject matter and the approach taken
are chosen for specific 'local' reasons cannot be ignored, or
this choice is transferred to the material. This is felt rather
than said throughout the book; the contributions illuminate the
issues they approach, and show up several contemporary false-
problems, but they do so without seriously threatening to "split
apart the very framework in which they conduct their studies".

Tim Jenkins