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FEMINISIM REPRESENTATION IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S NOVEL *LITTLE WOMEN*

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Abstract
Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, a seminal work in American literature, profoundly explores the roles, aspirations, and challenges faced by women in the 19th century. Set against the backdrop of the American Civil War and its aftermath, the novel follows the lives of the March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—as they navigate the complexities of womanhood in a society governed by rigid gender norms. Through rich character development and a compelling narrative, Little Women offers insight into the evolving landscape of women's rights and feminist thought during a pivotal era in American history. This paper aims to analyze the representation of feminism in Little Women, examining how the novel both conforms to and challenges traditional gender expectations. Drawing on liberal, Marxist, existentialist, and radical feminist theories, the paper explores various aspects of the March sisters' experiences, shedding light on their pursuit of autonomy, independence, and self-determination. Through a comprehensive analysis of key passages and character dynamics, the study uncovers the ways in which Alcott's work contributes to the broader discourse surrounding women's rights and gender equality.

***Keywords**: empowerment; feminism; feminist theories; gender roles*

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INTRODUCTION

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, first published in 1868, is not only a cornerstone of American literature but also a profound exploration of the roles, aspirations, and challenges faced by women in the 19th century. Set against the backdrop of the American Civil War and its aftermath, the novel chronicles the lives of the four March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—as they navigate the complexities of growing up, pursuing their dreams, and finding their places in a society with rigid gender norms. Through its rich character development and compelling narrative, *Little Women* offers a lens into the evolving landscape of women's rights and feminist thought during a pivotal era in American history (Showalter, 1991).

At a time when conventional roles for women were largely confined to the domestic sphere, *Little Women* presents a narrative that both conforms to and challenges these expectations. The March sisters, each with distinct personalities and ambitions, embody different aspects of womanhood and the struggle for self-determination. Meg, the eldest, represents traditional values of marriage and domesticity; Jo, the rebellious and literary-minded second sister, symbolizes the quest for independence and professional success; Beth, the gentle and selfless third sister, epitomizes self-sacrifice and moral purity; and Amy, the youngest, illustrates the tension between artistic aspiration and societal approval (Elbert, 1984). Through these characters, Alcott explores a spectrum of feminist issues, from the desire for personal and financial independence to the pursuit of artistic and intellectual fulfillment (Strickland, 2016).

Alcott's own life experiences profoundly influenced her writing. Raised in a family deeply involved in the Transcendentalist movement, Alcott was exposed to progressive ideas about gender equality, education, and individualism from a young age. Her parents, particularly her father, Bronson Alcott, were unconventional thinkers who valued intellectual and spiritual development over material success (Matteson, 2007). This upbringing is reflected in Alcott's work, which often critiques the limitations imposed on women and advocates for their right to self-expression and autonomy (Saxton, 1977).

Little Women not only reflects Alcott's feminist ideals but also serves as a critique of the societal norms that constrained women's lives. The novel's enduring popularity can be attributed to its relatable characters, who resonate with readers across generations, and its progressive message about the importance of women's choices and voices (Keyser, 1999). Alcott's portrayal of the March sisters' journeys toward self-discovery and empowerment continues to inspire discussions about gender roles and equality (Douglas, 1998).

This outline aims to set the stage for a comprehensive analysis of feminist representation in *Little Women*. By examining the diverse paths taken by the March sisters, this study would illuminate how Alcott's work both mirrors and critiques the gender expectations of her time. Through this exploration, the writers will gain a deeper understanding of Alcott's contribution to feminist literature and her lasting impact on the discourse surrounding women's rights and gender equality. By delving into the characters' personal growth, struggles, and triumphs, the writers will uncover the ways in which *Little Women* advocates for a broader and more inclusive vision of womanhood.

A novel is a long, fictional narrative that typically describes intimate human experiences through a connected sequence of events. Unlike shorter forms of literature such as short stories or novellas, novels often delve into the complexities of characters and their development over time, providing a deep exploration of themes, settings, and plots. According to Kurnia (2013) that cited by Santi Gusfitasari, et. al A novel is a literary work characterized by its extended length and its incorporation of both intrinsic and extrinsic elements (Gusfitasari et al., 2022). This means that a novel not only contains internal components like plot, characters, and themes but also engages with external contexts such as historical, cultural, and social factors.

Novels can vary widely in genre, including romance and others. In literature, many works address themes of feminism, which centers on the debate over gender equality. Feminism highlights the differences between male and female genders, with males often being more dominant. It critiques gender inequality that women face in both familial and societal contexts and serves as a movement for women to achieve equal rights with men.

The role of gender between woman and man are act within the society. Most people really hard to believe that gender is created by the human interaction in social life. The woman character in literary works always has its own allure (Wienclaw, 2011). This character usually can be seen from the position of the character among other characters, usually female characters in literary works are described as loving and gentle figures. The assumption that women are weaker than men, the nature of women is as a complement to men and can only develop themselves fully as wives and mothers is an unavoidable reality. Women's duties can only be oriented as husband servants who are responsible for taking care of children and women are less important to do rough things. Helene Cixious (1985) that cited by Yulia Nasrul Latifi how are men and women are binary differentiated in patriarchal perspective as follows: Activity / Passivity; Sun / Moon; Culture / Nature; Day/Night; Father / Mother; Heads / Emotions; Intelligible / Sensitive; Logos/Pathos (Latifi, 2015).

Feminism is a movement advocating for gender equality, striving to rectify historical and present disparities while questioning societal norms favoring men. Its primary aim is to establish a society where women and men enjoy equal opportunities and are valued equally. The movement has evolved through three waves: the first wave, occurring in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, concentrated on securing political equality, including the right to vote and access to education. The second wave, in the 1960s and 70s, expanded its focus to encompass legal and professional equality, addressing workplace discrimination and advocating for legal reforms. The third wave, emerging in recent decades, emphasizes broader social equality and intersectionality. It recognizes that gender inequality intersects with other social factors like race, class, and sexuality. This wave prioritizes inclusivity, diversity, and challenging cultural norms to combat gender disparities.

Rosenstand (2006) highlights the critical need for equal opportunities for both women and men. She argues against gender-based discrimination, insisting that women should not be treated unfairly simply because of their gender. Furthermore, Rosenstand supports the principle of equal pay for equal work, emphasizing the necessity for fair compensation regardless of gender. This viewpoint reflects a broader dedication to fostering a society where both women and men have not only equal chances but are also treated with fairness and equity in all areas of life, including employment and opportunities (Rosenstand, 2006).

Feminist literary criticism plays a crucial role in the women's liberation movement by disseminating feminist ideas and advocating for women's freedom. Stemming from the women's liberation movement, feminist criticism views literary works as significant contributions to advancing feminist discourse. Its primary objective is to scrutinize literary works by uncovering the underlying

ideologies that shape them and highlighting the disparities between the work's explicit content and its deeper implications. Feminist literary criticism challenges preconceived notions about women perpetuated by certain ideologies that pigeonhole women into predefined roles, thereby influencing societal perceptions of women. Essentially, feminist literary criticism aims to use literature as a catalyst for promoting freedom and equality. It represents an academic approach to studying literature that applies feminist principles to analyze and interpret literary texts (Sofia, 2009).

METHOD

Qualitative research, as explained by Pradoko in Sahir (2021), is a process used to understand human social phenomena, creating a comprehensive view represented in words and detailing informants' perspectives in a natural setting (Sahir, 2021). Unlike quantitative research, which relies on numerical data, qualitative research explores individual cases, focusing on narratives and the impacts on human lives. This approach includes research design, data collection and analysis techniques, and the research instrument. The study is further supported by the analytical descriptive method (Kutha, 2015), which systematically and accurately describes analyzed data, making it suitable for characterizing the reality of a novel in this research.

For this research, the writer employs data gathering approaches, observer techniques, and note-taking techniques. The observer approach involves observing numerous theories that can support the research, drawing from journals, books, and articles to develop these theories. Data collection is divided into two parts: primary data and secondary data. The primary data source for this research is *Little Women*, written by Louisa May Alcott. This beloved novel, first published in two volumes in 1868 by Roberts Brothers, spans 759 pages. Secondary data includes literature books, articles, research results, journals, and lecture archives, as well as other supporting materials.

The data analysis process is categorized into three main functions: data reduction, data visualization, and drawing conclusions and verification. Data reduction involves identifying, categorizing, and coding relevant data from a large dataset, helping the researcher focus on the most pertinent information. Data visualization presents the simplified data in various formats such as sentences, stories, or tables, aiding in the comprehension of complex information by highlighting patterns and trends. The researcher converts the data into sentence form and effectively displays it.

The writers read and observed the entire novel and the collected theories, tagging quotations from dialogues and narration that reflect feminism in the novel. After thoroughly analyzing the novel and theories, the writers describe the research results and draw conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Liberal Feminism

The March family's children have diligently labored to meet their own needs and support their mother. They plan to express their gratitude and affection for her during the Christmas season by using their earnings to purchase a gift.

> *"Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun; I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it," cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly manner* (p.3)

In this excerpt, Jo's statement reflects principles of liberal feminism, which advocates for individual autonomy, equality, and freedom of choice for women. Jo's assertion that their mother didn't mention their money suggests that she believes their mother respects their autonomy and doesn't expect them to sacrifice everything for the family. This aligns with liberal feminist ideals of women having control over their own lives and decisions. Jo's suggestion to use their hard-earned money to buy what they want and have fun exemplifies the liberal feminist belief in women's economic independence and agency. She emphasizes that they work hard enough to deserve to spend their earnings on themselves, promoting the idea that women should have the same financial freedom as men.

Furthermore, Jo's unconventional behavior, such as examining her shoes in a "gentlemanly manner," challenges traditional gender roles and norms. This defiance of gender expectations echoes liberal feminist principles of breaking down societal constraints that limit women's choices and opportunities based on gender stereotypes. Overall, Jo's statement embodies liberal feminist values of autonomy, economic independence, and the rejection of traditional gender roles, highlighting the importance of women's empowerment and freedom of choice.

Marxist Feminism

When their father is unavailable due to his duties, one of them must step in to fill his role within the family. This illustrates the flexibility of family roles and the possibility for any member to contribute as a provider.

> *"I'm the oldest," began Meg, but Jo cut in with a decided, "I'm the man of the family now Papa is away*. (p.6)

In this excerpt, Jo's assertion of being "the man of the family" in her father's absence can be interpreted through a Marxist feminist lens, which examines power dynamics, class structures, and gender roles within society. From a Marxist feminist perspective, Jo's statement reflects the economic and social conditions of the time, where the patriarchal system often assigned men as the primary providers and decision-makers within the family. With their father away, Jo perceives herself as taking on traditionally masculine roles and responsibilities, such as providing for and protecting the family.

Furthermore, Jo's claim to being "the man of the family" highlights the intersectionality of gender and class. In the absence of their father, who likely held a privileged position within the family hierarchy, Jo, as a woman, assumes a

position of authority typically reserved for men. This challenges the traditional power dynamics dictated by both gender and class structures. Additionally, Jo's statement underscores the Marxist feminist critique of capitalism, where women's labor, both within and outside the home, is often undervalued and exploited. By positioning herself as "the man of the family," Jo asserts her role as a contributor to the family's economic well-being and challenges the gendered division of labor that often disadvantages women. Overall, Jo's declaration can be seen as a Marxist feminist critique of the patriarchal and capitalist structures that govern society, highlighting the complexities of gender, class, and power within the family unit.

Existentialist Feminism

One of the initial characteristics we learn about Jo March is her tomboyish nature; she prefers venturing out into the world to carve her own path rather than remaining confined to the home.

> *"Don't, Jo. It's so boyish!" "That's why I do it." "I detest rude, unladylike girls!" "I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!" (p.4)*

In this exchange from *Little Women*, Jo's response of "That's why I do it" to the comment about her behavior being "boyish" reflects elements of existentialist feminism, which emphasizes individual agency, authenticity, and the rejection of traditional gender roles and societal expectations. From an existentialist feminist perspective, Jo's rejection of gender norms and her insistence on behaving in a way that feels true to herself aligns with the existentialist idea of authenticity. She asserts her right to define her own identity and reject societal expectations that restrict her based on gender. Furthermore, Jo's disdain for "affected, niminy-piminy chits" reflects her rejection of the traditional feminine ideal of being demure, passive, and conforming. Instead, she values authenticity and sincerity in individuals, regardless of gender. This challenges the notion that femininity should be defined by adherence to certain behaviors or appearances. Overall, Jo's defiance of gender expectations and her insistence on being true to herself resonate with existentialist feminist principles of individual freedom, authenticity, and the rejection of societal constraints.

Radical Feminism

When Amy encounters difficulties at school due to the ignorance of her peers, she is subject to disciplinary action from a teacher at the school.

> *"I don't approve of corporal punishment, especially for girls. I dislike Mr. Davis's manner of teaching and don't think the girls you associate with are doing you any good. (p.74)*

In this statement, Meg expresses a viewpoint aligned with radical feminism, which critiques patriarchal structures and advocates for the empowerment of women. The rejection of corporal punishment, particularly for girls, reflects a belief in bodily autonomy and opposition to the use of physical

force as a means of control, which is a central tenet of radical feminism. Radical feminists argue that violence, including corporal punishment, perpetuates patriarchal dominance and reinforces gender-based power imbalances.

Additionally, Meg criticism of Mr. Davis's teaching style and the influence of the girls Amy associates with highlights concerns about the patriarchal education system and the socialization of girls within it. Radical feminists often critique traditional educational practices as perpetuating gender stereotypes and limiting girls' opportunities for self-expression and empowerment. Overall, this statement reflects a radical feminist perspective by challenging oppressive power dynamics, advocating for girls' autonomy and agency, and critiquing the patriarchal institutions that perpetuate gender inequality.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of feminism in *Little Women* demonstrates the novel's enduring relevance as a portrayal of women's experiences and aspirations in the 19th century. Through the lens of liberal feminism, characters like Jo challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for autonomy and self-determination. Marxist feminism highlights the economic and class dynamics at play, as characters navigate their roles within the family and society. Existentialist feminism underscores the importance of authenticity and individual agency, with the March sisters asserting their identities in defiance of societal expectations. Radical feminism critiques patriarchal structures and advocates for women's empowerment, exemplified by Meg's rejection of corporal punishment and her criticism of traditional gender norms. Looking ahead, further studies could explore additional dimensions of feminism in *Little Women*, such as its portrayal of race and intersectionality, as well as its impact on contemporary feminist discourse. By continuing to engage with Alcott's work, we can gain valuable insights into the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women's rights.

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