

An Analysis of the Four Sisters' Personalities in *Little Women* from Feminism

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ABSTRACT: The famous American author Louisa May Alcott's masterpiece, *Little Women*, is one of the classics of American literature. Since its publication, the book has been warmly welcomed by a large number of readers and has struck a chord in the hearts of countless readers, especially female readers.

This paper intends to analyze the characters of the four sisters in the novel from a feminist perspective. The paper begins with a review of Western feminism. Secondly, the paper reviews the literary career of the author Louisa May Alcott. Finally, the paper explores the feminist consciousness contained in the novel through the analysis of several female characters. The paper points out that the women in *Little Women* are different from the women portrayed in traditional works in that they have a feminine spirit that seeks a sense of independence and equality.

Through a feminist reading of *Little Women*, we can see that Louisa May Alcott's demands for equal rights and freedom for women, as conveyed through her works, are also a clear reflection of the writer's feminist consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Louisa May Alcott; *Little Women*; Feminism; Literature; *Transcendentalism*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1868, Louisa May Alcott created the book, *Little Women*. Since it has been published, *Little Women* has been popular with a wide range of female readers and has been analyzed by many experts and scholars both at home and abroad. It described the life of four sisters in an ordinary family in New England in the 19th century, with the background of the American Civil War. The novel focused on female characters, accentuating feminist consciousness and the concept of personal dignity, self-reliance and self-discipline. By combining with the author's life, the development of feminism and women's literature, this paper aims to study the four sisters' personalities from the perspective of feminism.

II. DEFINITION OF FEMINISM

Generally, feminism can be defined as a social theory and political movement to end up sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression. It aims to comprehend the essence of inequality. The themes feminism probes into include discrimination, stereotype, sexual objectification, oppression and patriarchy. Up to now, there have been various types of definition of feminism.

A. Beauvoir's Feminism

Existentialist feminism is a kind of feminism by Simon de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex* written by Simone de Beauvoir is a classical work thoroughly analyses feminine issues. This book is based on the history background of the western world after World War II, which is an age that the concept of equality and human rights and humanitarianism has become more active than ever. As an advocate and successor of existentialism, Beauvoir draws intellectual thinking from Being and Time (Martin Heidegger) and Being and Nothingness (Jean-Paul Sartre), applying existentialism to the analysis and study of female condition in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir opens the book by raising the question "What is a woman?" In this book, she uses the concept of "self" and "other" to analyze the relation between the sexes. She believes that it is a mutual concept, which is that when any group identifies itself as a group, it inevitably will lead to the concept of "other" that it coexists with. Each party is "self" and "other". However, she realizes that the relation between male and female is not mutual. Male is the subject while female is the other which closely relates to the condition of female. As for the reasons of such condition, she attributes them to the patriarchy and paternalism. On the other hand, it stems from the immanence of female. It is the immanence that makes female become "the other" and the second sex.

An Analysis of the Four Sisters' Personalities in Little Women from Feminism

Overall, Beauvoir existentialism feminism can be elucidated that the femininity has evolved over the course of history, and as a free subject, women are not passive recipients. Therefore, the first step towards to transcend femininity and the concept of "the other" is to abandon their internalized sense of femininity, that is, to achieve transcendence.

B. Woolf's Feminism

Though Woolf strongly opposed to the term feminism and refused to associate her with such a term, she is regarded as one of the founders of feminism and her feminist thoughts promote the development of feminism. Her experience of sexual assault by her brother and being unfairly educated make her deeply moved by the humiliating position of women and early on developed a strong sense of anti-male power. In her book, *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf proposes that women should be provided with access to education, financial resources and economic independence. These are necessary to allow women to express their voices and pursue their interests as freely as men do. The book also addresses how women were excluded from literature, education and creativity throughout history. Woolf argues that literary history is dominated by male writers and that women have been denied the same opportunities to create their own works. She asserts that telling stories is a way of feeling empowered and since story-telling has been denied to women, they have been unfairly restricted from achieving the same level of power as men.

Woolf's work has been crucial in the development of second-wave feminism, as it calls for an examination of psychology and social context in order to bring about change. Her writings also criticize society's expectation of how women should behave in order to gain acceptance. Woolf argues that women should be given the opportunity to express themselves without societal pressures and create identities that are independent of expectations.

III. LOUISA MAY ALCOTT AND LITTLE WOMEN

Louisa May Alcott's life and works were deeply intertwined with the cultural and intellectual currents of her time. Growing up in a household influenced by Transcendentalism and surrounded by some of the most prominent thinkers of the era, Alcott's literary output reflects both the personal and societal themes she encountered. In particular, her novel *Little Women*, which has become a beloved classic, exemplifies many of the ideas she absorbed from her environment. Alcott's journey as a writer, from her early works to her most famous novel, was shaped by both her personal experiences and the philosophical ideals that informed her worldview. The following sections will explore Alcott's literary career, focusing on her early writing and the eventual success of *Little Women*, before examining the influence of Transcendentalism in shaping the themes and characters of the novel.

A. Alcott's Literary Career

Louisa May Alcott was probably destined to be a writer. Indeed, she was born into an impressive environment and grew up as a distinctive young girl. Her young, happy and unique childhood, which was surrounded by the most distinguished intellectuals of her time, would later shape her writing.

Her father encouraged writing and at the age of eight Louisa kept a diary in which her moods, her passions, her feelings and anxieties were recorded. At the age of 17 she wrote her first novel, *The Inheritance*. By her 20's she realized that her talent lay in writing. In 1852 her first poem, *Sunlight*, was published in *Peterson's Magazine* under the pseudonym Flora Fairfield. She rapidly understood the reading market and managed to shape her writings to the market. As she started to experiment with various styles of fictions, she quickly developed into a more confident and accomplished author.

In 1855, she published her first book, *Flower Fables*. Alcott initially wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Alcott wrote a story after a story for *The Saturday Evening Post* using the method of writing sentimental stories. These early pieces forced Alcott to tell a story in a limited number of pages. Alcott edited her stories according to the market of *Gazette* and the specifications of her columns, beginning to discover how stories fit into various magazines. By 1860, Alcott had made a name for herself in *The Saturday Evening Post*. She also began writing for other markets, and the most notable was *The Atlantic*. *The Atlantic* of March 1860 published her first piece, *Love and Self-Love*, for which she received \$50. Seeing a thriving market for sensational stories in cheap newspapers and magazines, Alcott began to try to write these stories. These stories were based on excitement and featured a world of witches, villains and savages, with suicidal murder, vice and infidelity often being the themes. In the spring of 1862 she completed *The Passion and Punishment of Pauline*, a story of revenge, infidelity and murder set in Cuba.

She enrolled herself as an army nurse in Washington D.C in 1862. During the Civil War, Louisa was registered as an Army nurse in Washington DC in 1862. During the time she worked as a nurse, she developed typhoid fever, and due to a fever, she was only in the hospital for six weeks. In *Hospital Sketches*, published in 1863, she recorded her experiences as a nurse. A year later, *Moods* was published.

Though so far she had established a promising literary career, she still didn't earn enough. A job offer as a travel companion to Europe was welcome. It was also the realization of a lifelong dream. She returned from Europe in 1866. At this point her Bostonian publisher Thomas Niles would have asked her to write a novel for girls. The writing of this novel took up two and half

An Analysis of the Four Sisters' Personalities in Little Women from Feminism

months and was a fictionalized record of her childhood, *Little Women* which was based upon her and her sister's coming of age, set in the Civil War was born. The novel was an instant success, earning her eternal fame and fortune. It was translated into 50 languages.

A sequel, *Good Wives*, followed with as much success as *Little Women*. These successes were followed by the publication of *Old Fashion Girl* in 1870. Another trip to Europe followed. In 1871 *Little Men* was published, in 1873 came *Work*, in 1874 *Eight Cousins* and finally in 1876 *Rose in Bloom*. She also wrote dedicated pieces for *The Woman's Journal*, as she was active in the women's suffrage movement.

B. Transcendentalism in Little Women

Alcott grew up in a Transcendentalist atmosphere; her father was close friends with Thoreau and Emerson, who frequently visited Alcott's house to teach her to read and to share their perspectives on life. In *Little Women*, where Alcott tells the tale of four sisters with various personalities who ultimately conquer their flaws and grow, transcendentalism had a significant impact on Alcott's life. The narrative embodies transcendentalism in its upbeat, hopeful, and autonomous spirit.

In *Little Women*, the four sisters have demonstrated the ideologies of the transcendentalism. In valuing the spiritual world over the material world, Meg coincided with the philosophy of transcendentalism. Transcendentalism believes that the primary responsibility of people in society is self-improvement rather than the deliberate pursuit of wealth. Under her mother's guidance, Meg transforms from a vain girl into a woman who values the spiritual world, which reflects the transcendentalist philosophy of valuing the spiritual over the material.

Transcendentalist defies external authority and tradition, but follows the development of the human personality and emphasizes that one must believe in one's own thoughts. Throughout her life, Jo has maintained her own attitude and approach to events. Her spirit of self-reliance and perseverance in adversity is essentially the same as the qualities stressed in Transcendentalist.

Despite having a brief being, Beth will be cherished for her compassion. Because Beth was always so considerate, consistently placed others' needs before her own, and was full of compassion and concern for the world. People saw the goodness of humanity in her. Transcendentalism emphasizes the value of the human being, which Beth exemplifies through her compassion and duty.

Amy is a cheerful and aspirational young lady. Amy has always worked hard to fulfill her dream of becoming a painter. Despite the major concerns and insults she endured, she never lost faith in her skill and abilities to become a painter as other kids her age did. Transcendentalists contend that individuals need to have faith in and optimism about their futures. Amy is viewed as a person who thinks she can improve if she puts in the effort and gets beyond her flaws.

Transcendentalism enriches the characters in *Little Women*, adding charms to the characters while allowing them to find spiritual fulfillment and the best life for each of them.

IV. FOUR SISTERS' PERSONALITIES

The March sisters, each with their distinct personalities and aspirations, represent the complex and diverse roles of women in society during the 19th century. Their unique journeys of growth, love, and self-discovery are at the heart of *Little Women*, offering readers a rich exploration of the diverse paths women could take in that era. From Jo's defiance of traditional gender roles to Meg and Amy's pursuit of true love while balancing societal expectations, and Beth's quiet, angelic presence that embodies selflessness, Alcott creates a vivid portrait of four women navigating their place in the world. The following sections will delve deeper into the individual personalities of each sister, exploring how their distinct traits and choices shape their lives and contribute to the novel's enduring legacy.

A. Jo: The Heroine

Jo, the much beloved little woman, is often perceived as the heroine of the novel. It is Jo who stands out most when reading the novel. Unlike her sisters, she challenges the normative patriarchal society and does not try to fit in, as Amy and Meg so splendidly do, nor does she flee from it as Beth does. Instead, she defies society. She does not want to be a girl; she wants to be a man, just as she does not want to be with Laurie. She wants to be Laurie. Alcott seizes every opportunity to stress Jo's masculine attitudes and

aspiration. She constantly describes Jo as being more masculine than feminine. "I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy's games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy. And it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay home and knit, like a poky old woman!" (Alcott, 1994: 4) Jo's gender transgression becomes a strong part of who she is. She does not like to wear dresses, she does not want to have to wear gloves, she would rather fight instead of her father, she longs to go to college, she hates needle work and other domestic chores, and she loves to run wild and

An Analysis of the Four Sisters' Personalities in Little Women from Feminism

cherishes independence. Her rebellion will determine her character and her life. Indeed, Jo becomes the democratic and independent heroine.

The suffocating culture in which Jo lives is to blame for her male desires. In fact, she dislikes being confined to her house or being female since she identifies women with domestic confinement, submissiveness, and limits, whereas males are autonomous, strong, and capable of writing.

Jo's well-known anger was one of her most recognized characteristics. Jo, however, is not the only one who has had to learn to control her rage; her mother has also had to learn to control her rage. However, she has learnt to contain her wrath, and she encourages her daughter to do the same. Although it is not directly mentioned, it is hinted that this rage stems from the unpleasant and suffocating treatment of women in the nineteenth century.

"Independent" is quite a suitable word to describe and represent Jo's personality. The establishment of Jo's sense of female independence is evident in the way she forms her views on marriage. After resolutely refusing Laurie's proposal, Jo audaciously pleads with Meg to escape before her wedding. At this point, she clearly recognizes that marriage is a complete denial of a woman's sense of independence and that once a woman accepts marriage, she will inevitably be domesticated by male authority. This is why Jo is a different kind of independent woman from those who first became independent and then submissive in order to please men's sense of domination; she is truly a "new woman" who is striving for femininity.

On the other hand, she understands that financial independence may not help her escape from the alienation and control of women by the patriarchal discourse and that mental and emotional self-reliance is the key to constructing a female power discourse and exploring the freedom and equality of women in the new era. Words are the best weapon to shake or even eliminate the pedantic idea of "female weakness." It is clear that Jo's quest for writing is also her quest for economic and social independence.

Fortunately, Jo eventually found a place for herself in a patriarchal society, taking her place in the world of literature and establishing an irreplaceable place for herself.

B. Meg and Amy: Chase True Love

Because they were writing for a specific audience, these authors often lacked the bravery to keep their heroines unmarried in the nineteenth century. These novels are not in favor of convenient marriages. However, society was and continues to be centered on money and dominated by men. A woman can only have control over her money if she chooses to be celibate. This predicament could not be ignored by these female writers. Lovers are less important in such novels since they promote the development of independent women. As a result, the conventional melodramatic genre in which charming prince saves a damsel in distress is uncommon in these tales. The heroine will marry, but she will do so wisely and deliberately. The true hero is a solid, decent, generous, frank, hardworking, dynamic man who understands and respects women.

As the March sisters decide on their own marriages in the latter section of *Little Women*, they do make their own decisions. They carefully and autonomously select their spouses under the guidance of their mother, and they are deserving of their success as a wife.

The eldest sister, Meg, abandons Aunt March's inheritance in order to pursue love.

She says to her aunt, "My John wouldn't marry for money, any more than I would. We are willing to work and we mean to wait. I'm not afraid of being poor, for I've been happy so far, and I know I shall be with him because he loves me, and I" (Alcott, 1994: 324).

Despite Aunt March's concerns, Meg chooses to marry the impoverished man she loves. Meg battles with wealth and vanity later in life in order to discover her happy marriage. When she was younger, these things made her weak. Meg was a normal traditional woman, yet she has the courage to keep going for the happiness she wants. She decides to marry Mr. Brooke, a poor man. After their marriage, they cooperate on all aspects of raising children as a family. To create a happy family, the husband and wife share their joys and sorrows.

As the narrative first began, Amy was a pretentious young girl who constantly considered her own interests even when helping others. Her family attempts to discipline her conduct then, before she grows up, because she is spoilt and a bit rebellious. She is, nevertheless, an extremely intelligent girl who is capable of doing everything she determines to. She shares Meg's belief that money may improve one's lifestyle and purchase comfort. Amy definitely understands in her mind that she wants to marry someone who is more wealthy since she despises poverty. Later, when Fred Vaughn, who is far wealthier than Laurie, makes a proposal, Meg even believes that Amy is going to accept him even if he is not her adored.

But having given it much thought, she ultimately refused it politely but firmly. "Fred is a good fellow, but not at all the man I fancied you would ever like," Laurie said (Alcott, 1994:580). She realizes that something more significant than wealth and status was required to fill her heart with such optimism. It takes a lot of bravery for a lady to turn down a wealthy man's marriage

An Analysis of the Four Sisters' Personalities in Little Women from Feminism

proposal in such a charming way. Amy ultimately achieves her goals on her own. Eventually, she is still devoted to her inner desires and chose Laurie as her spouse on the basis of love. She chose Laurie because of his excitement for life and work, not because of his wealth. She rejects Fred and marries Laurie for love after realizing Laurie is her true love.

Little Women supported women's individual identities and idealized marriage as an equal partnership. With the exception of Bess, the March sisters are able to make excellent and rational marriage while maintaining their genuine identities.

C. Beth: An Angel with Music

The reader learns about Beth's values in the first pages of Alcott's novel. Beth's first words are "We have a father, a mother, and each other" and later, in the same conversation with her sisters, Beth says that she wants to spend the money given to her on new music (Alcott, 1994: 3). Beth's family was important to her, and like her sisters, she was very talented. Her passion for music is most evident in the section Beth Finds the Palace Beautiful, where Beth is invited to play the piano in Mr. Lawrence's home. Beth's dream was to look after her parents in her childhood home. Furthermore, unlike Meg, whose dreams change as she grows older, Beth's dreams remain the same until her death. Equally important, and similar to Meg's dream, Beth's dream was not as career-oriented or ambitious as Jo and Amy's dream.

Beth's passion for music is evident throughout the novel. When Beth is not helping her family with their chores, she is seen talking and playing the piano. Beth had the opportunity to play in Mr. Lawrence's home, which was a welcome change to the old piano in her house, and it is not surprising that one of the few times Beth responds to an outsider, is when she is invited to play the piano at Mr Laurence's house. Additionally, when Beth plays Mr Laurence's piano, she describes the music coming out of the piano as "the voice of a beloved friend", further illustrating the close bond Beth has with her talents. In contrast to Jo and Amy, Beth stays at home, and is therefore unable to start a music career. Moreover, Beth cannot afford to take music lessons, or buy a better piano, and is therefore stuck with the old piano she currently has, until she is given Mr Laurence's piano. Therefore, while Beth could further improve upon her talents, she rather stays at home with her parents.

Beth's character, and the grief she leaves behind after her death, is explored through the symbolism of spring. As Beth is shy in nature and therefore does not speak as much as her sisters, Alcott interprets Beth's character with spring-like symbolism and states that she will live happily till the little cricket on the hearth stops chirping, and the sweet, sunshiny presence vanishes, leaving silence and shadow behind" (Alcott 38). The themes of sunshine and birds are mentioned several other times in the novel as well. After the first night in which Beth survives the chicken pox, Alcott describes that the sun has never risen so beautifully, "and never had the world seemed so lovely as it did to the heavy eyes of Meg and Jo", after they have taken care of Beth all night long (Alcott, 1994:177). Furthermore, right before Beth's death, "the spring days came and went, the sky grew clearer, the earth greener, the flowers were up fairly early, and the birds came back in time to say goodbye to Beth" (Alcott, 1994:393).. When Beth finally passes, "a bird sang blithely, snowdrops blossomed, and the spring sunshine streamed in (Alcott, 1994: 394). The theme of spring, a time for renewal, brings life to the difficult topic that arises in *Little Women*.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the development of the feminist movement, independence and the pursuit of equality has been the core of feminism. Louisa May Alcott, as a firm defender, participant and promoter of feminism, portrayed the four March sisters in *Little Women* who are independent, optimistic and full of feminist consciousness. Jo represents the characters and exhibits the most recent concepts. She is bright, endowed with admirable traits, and independent. Amy is a great artist who exudes purity and beauty. She eventually develops such a kind heart that she founds a charity. The angel of the novel, Beth, fearlessly confronts death. She perseveres despite having had several setbacks in her life. Meg, a kind and charming girl, pursues a life of wealth in her youth. She finally abandons her father's property, though, in her quest for everlasting pleasure, choosing to marry a poor man instead. After the marriage, Meg and her husband respect each other and share the household duties. This demonstrates how women are now in control of their own futures rather than being the men's followers. Compared to other female writers of her time, Alcott's feminism was perhaps more sophisticated at that time.

To sum up, Louisa May Alcott made a significant contribution to women's literature with *Little Women*. *Little Women* demonstrates to readers that a woman can become unique without compromising her traditional femininity. By highlighting women's freedom and the equality of men and women, Alcott effectively conveys her feminism in *Little Women*. Alcott exemplifies the appeal of women to freedom, equality, and the pursuit for true love, as well as the traits of conventional feminine virtues, which strongly demonstrates her feminist viewpoint.

An Analysis of the Four Sisters' Personalities in Little Women from Feminism

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