



Redefining Manhood: Alcott's 'Little Women' as a Progressive Exploration of Masculinity

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore gender complexities in Louisa May Alcott's masterpiece novel *Little Women* through the prism of feminist and queer theories. A psychoanalytic perspective is employed in analysing the characters and their actions. The stereotyped notion of women as impassive, oppressed and vulnerable subjects, and men as active, dominating and resilient can be seen from an alternative angle. Alcott's writing emerged from her own personal and first-hand experience of living in the highly transforming 19th-century American society. The novel exhibits multiple roles taken up by both genders, simultaneously challenging and conforming to societal norms, values and customs. By applying the concepts of performativity and hegemonic masculinity, this paper analyses how Alcott's male characters subvert and redefine traditional masculinity. The portrayal of men in 'Little Women' offers a nuanced and progressive exploration of masculinity that remains relevant even today. More than being a bildungsroman, the text reveals a complex network of relationships between and among both genders.

Keywords: Feminism, Masculinity, Gender, Queer, Psychoanalysis

Introduction

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has undoubtedly won the status of a classic text since its publication in 1868. It belongs to the genre of bildungsroman by gaining world acclaim as the founding myth of American girlhood as indicated in the title. It also contributed to the category of family stories, with a particular focus on the sub-group of 'fiction for girls.' However, a deep examination of the plot reflects the role of men as a strong and parallel force in the life of the female characters. In the postmodern theoretical perspective, gender is viewed as a socially constructed, fluid, and performative concept rather than a fixed or essential identity. It challenges traditional binary distinctions, emphasizing that gender is shaped by cultural, historical, and individual factors, and can vary across time and context. Traditional masculinity has long been associated with qualities such as strength, courage, and emotional restraint (Kimmel, 2000). However, this narrow definition of manhood has been increasingly challenged by feminist and queer theorists, who argue that such rigid expectations can be damaging to both men and women

(Connell, 2005). *Little Women* is a seminal work of American literature that engages with these debates, offering a portrayal of men that challenges traditional notions of masculinity. Several critics have explored and commented on the role of Alcott and her works in the ongoing success of her literary presence. Nicola J Watson comments that *Little Women* was to exert considerable influence on the subsequent development of the girls' story in North America (15). This work combined domestic detail with tomboyish girls striving to overcome their natural indiscipline to find a place in society and a husband without compromising their own personalities. The feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir wrote of her identification with the tomboy Jo: 'I identified myself passionately with Jo ... [S]he was much more tomboyish and daring than I was, but I shared her horror of sewing and housekeeping and her love of books' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xv).

Gloria Steinem mentioned upon the probability of demonstrating female behaviour according to the novel: 'Where else ... could we have read about an all-female group who discussed work, art, and all the Great Questions – or found girls who wanted to be women and not vice versa?' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvi). It is interesting to note that this passionate identification was not just restricted to white women. In Anne Petry's words, 'I felt as though I was part of Jo and she was part of me' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvi). For Brigid Brophy, 'Having re-read it, dried my eyes and blown my nose ..., I resolved that the only honourable course was to come out into the open and admit that the dreadful books are masterpieces. I do it, however, with some bad temper and hundreds of reservations' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xv). *Little Women* and its sequels have created such an impact on its reading audience. Camille Paglia made a fierce remark that 'The whole thing is like a horror movie to me' (Alberghene and Clark 1999: xvi). Its critical history has reflected women writers' sense of its import in portraying the struggles of a budding authoress. Ursula K. Le Guin made a similar remark on Alcott, her texts and precisely the character of Jo in influencing her and a whole lot of girls who aspired to become authors. Jo had been a motivating factor in the American flowering of feminism in literary studies from the late 1970s onwards.

There had been detailed and varied rediscovery and revaluation of the text, focusing on its autobiographical quality, portrayal of women, men, identity etc. In the article "*Little Women: Louisa May Alcott's Duality Between the Intentional Lessons and the Unconscious Messages,*" Hisham Muhamad Ismail explores how Alcott, through the experiences of both women and men in the novel, highlights the suffering brought about by patriarchal systems and the constraints these structures place on individuals, showing how societal norms limit both genders. Judith Fetterley in her critical analysis of the novel measures the amount of transformation gained by each of the March girls in their innocence and girlish dreams in the beginning of the plot and contrasts it with the fine ladies that they emerge into towards the end. Ken Parille, on the other hand, steers away from the focus of the constructions and education of girlhood to the ways the text portrays boyhood in the character of Laurie, thus making it a commentary of American manhood as well. Sarah Wadsworth provided a detailed background of the origin, composition, publication and success of the novel, within the framework of the rise of gender-specific series books. Alcott's contribution to the trend of American juvenile literature found its way through *Little Women* by the end of 19th century, when juvenile publishing was emerging as an industry. Writing for boys and girls became professions and segmentation of juvenile fiction happened as 'books for boys' and 'books for girls.' Alcott became instrumental in producing a fictional world aimed precisely at adolescent girls. She has developed realistic female characters and plots that varied from earlier representations of

femininity and womanhood. Her writing signifies that she at once resisted and revised conventional models of womanhood, thus catering to the readers' interest in conventional female narratives.

The impact that her fiction produced extended beyond the expectation of the author as it is still considered a text that continues to influence its readers. Sarah Wadsworth notes that Louisa May Alcott played a crucial role in defining and shaping the qualities, interests, and aspirations of girls in her writing. Despite initially feeling reluctant to write girls' books when asked by Thomas Niles of Robert Brothers, Alcott was more interested in fairy tales and editing children's magazines. However, after repeated requests from Niles, she agreed, and *Little Women* became an instant success. This led Niles to request sequels, further cementing Alcott's role in shaping literature for young girls. Alcott was born and raised in Concord, Massachusetts which was the dwelling ground of many writers who belonged to the transcendental movement during the New English Renaissance.

Methods and Materials

The story of *Little Women* follows the lives of four sisters -Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March- growing up during the American Civil War. The novel focuses on their coming-of-age stories, dreams, and struggles as they navigate personal growth, family bonds, and societal expectations. A plethora of characterisation is evident in the novel. They display various sides of the human personality. For example, Meg, the eldest sister is portrayed as responsible and domestic, who dreams of a life of wealth and romance. Jo is the passionate, independent second sister, aspiring to be a writer, and often seen as the most unconventional. Beth, the third sister is gentle and selfless, who sacrifices for others and struggles with her health. Amy is the youngest, artistic and ambitious sister, striving to improve her social status and become a successful artist. Marmee, the mother of the four girls is the perfect example of a loving, energetic, dutiful and cheerful lady who represents conventional femininity. Mr March, the father is absent at the beginning of the novel; however, his presence is felt through the letter that is sent from the warfront to his family.

Another major male character is Laurie or Theodore Laurence, who is the charming and wealthy neighbour, who forms a close bond with the March sisters, especially Jo and Amy. He has a complicated relationship with Jo, eventually marrying Amy. John Brooke, the tutor of Laurie marries Meg and represents a typical family man. Mr. Bhaer the German professor whom Jo meets later in the story becomes a mentor and eventual love interest, offering Jo both intellectual and emotional support. The plot centres on the sisters' growth, their close-knit family, and their relationships with the men in their lives, ultimately emphasizing the importance of love, sacrifice, and personal fulfilment.

In *Little Women*, gender studies, feminist theory, and masculinity theory are reflected in the ways the novel addresses the roles and expectations of both women and men in 19th-century American society. Gender Studies analyses the complex interaction of gender with other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, religion etc. Thus, the focus is on gender identity and representation. Its root lies in the field of women's studies related to women, feminism, gender and politics. Within its domain, there is an attempt to promote gender equality and oppose discrimination against women and other marginalized groups. Key to the concept of gender is the expectations regarding characteristics, attitudes and likely behaviour of both men and women to the

role played in the society. Men are supposed to perform the instrumental function, whereas women are conserved to do the expressive function in a patriarchal system. Several domains consider 'gender' as a practice sometimes considered as something performative. Gender studies have been influenced by the feminist theory of psychoanalysis discussed by Julia Kristeva and Bracha L. Ettinger and informed by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and object relation theory. Feminist and queer theories offer a range of concepts and frameworks for analysing masculinity. Judith Butler's concept of performativity (1990) suggests that gender is a performance, rather than an essential identity. This concept is particularly useful for analysing how Alcott's male characters perform and subvert traditional masculinity. Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (2005) is also relevant to this analysis. Connell argues that traditional masculinity is a social construct that is maintained through power relationships and cultural norms. Alcott's portrayal of men in 'Little Women' challenges this hegemonic masculinity, offering alternative models of masculinity that are more nuanced and progressive.

Freud's concept of language and identity centres on the idea that language is a medium through which the unconscious mind expresses repressed desires and conflicts. He viewed language as a tool for the ego to negotiate between the id (instinctual drives) and the superego (moral constraints). Identity, in Freud's view, is shaped by early experiences, particularly through family dynamics, with language playing a key role in structuring the ego and shaping how individuals understand themselves to others. Repressed memories and desires often resurface through slips of the tongue or dreams, revealing unconscious aspects of identity. Lacan's concept of language and identity revolves around the idea that the self is formed through language. Central to his theory is the *mirror stage*, where the infant first recognizes its reflection and begins to form a sense of self, though this self is always fragmented and incomplete. Lacan argues that identity is never fully coherent but is always mediated by language, which structures the unconscious. He posits that the *symbolic order* (language, social norms) shapes the subject, and the self is perpetually in flux, defined through relationships with others and the linguistic structures that govern them.

Julia Kristeva's psychoanalysis integrates Lacanian and Freudian ideas with her own concepts. Central to her theory are the distinctions between the *semiotic* (the pre-linguistic, bodily drives) and the *symbolic* (the realm of language and societal norms). She explores how the unconscious is structured by language and emphasizes the importance of the maternal body in early development through the idea of the "chora." Kristeva also examines how literature and poetry can express the semiotics, challenging conventional language and offering new ways to understand identity and subjectivity. Her work intersects with feminist theory, critiquing patriarchal structures and offering more fluid conceptions of gender and identity. Bracha L. Ettinger's psychoanalysis introduces the concept of the "matrixial" as a way of understanding subjectivity, emphasizing interconnectedness and shared experience. She challenges traditional psychoanalytic ideas of the separate, isolated subject by exploring how the boundaries between self and other are fluid and co-constructed, especially through maternal and generational relations. Ettinger's work blends psychoanalysis with art theory and feminist thought, proposing that the matrixial space allows for the development of more inclusive, relational forms of subjectivity beyond patriarchal norms.

In the novel, Psychoanalytic theory can be applied to understand the characters' psychological development, particularly through their family dynamics and individual desires. The

March sisters' relationships can be viewed through a Freudian lens, especially in terms of their desires for love, identity, and autonomy. Jo's rejection of traditional femininity and her desire to be a writer could be seen as a rebellion against societal expectations of women, while her close bond with Marmee might represent an idealized mother figure, fulfilling her emotional needs. Meg's longing for wealth and romance could be interpreted as a desire for the idealized "father figure" and societal stability, while Amy's pursuit of artistic success may reflect an unconscious desire for validation and self-worth. The presence of male characters like Laurie and Mr. Bhaer adds another layer to the psychoanalytic reading. Laurie's early infatuation with Jo can be seen as a type of Oedipal desire, where he unconsciously seeks to "replace" her mother figure, Marmee, with a romantic partner. The novel's focus on sibling rivalry, identity formation, and the characters' emotional growth aligns with psychoanalytic concepts of the formation of the self and the complexities of familial relationships.

Queer theory can be explored through the relationships and identities of the March sisters, particularly in how they challenge traditional gender and romantic roles. Jo March, the most rebellious and independent of the sisters, can be seen as defying conventional gender expectations displays non-normative gender roles. Her rejection of marriage and desire for a writing career, as well as her androgynous demeanour (cutting her hair short, dressing simply), challenges the traditional roles prescribed for women. This can be read through a queer lens as a resistance to heteronormative expectations. Jo's close, almost intense, relationships with her sisters and her platonic bond with Laurie further complicate the narrative of heterosexual romance. Her emotional depth in relationships with women could be seen as reflective of a more fluid or non-normative emotional landscape. Moreover, Jo's refusal to marry Laurie and her eventual marriage to Professor Bhaer might be seen as a rejection of the traditional romantic plot in favour of a different kind of personal fulfilment, suggesting a queering of the traditional romantic arc. Through these lenses, *Little Women* can be seen as subtly engaging with themes of gender fluidity, romantic autonomy, and resistance to societal norms around sexuality and relationships.

Results and Discussions

Alcott's male characters in *Little Women* are often overlooked in favour of the more prominent female protagonists. However, a closer examination of Laurie, Friedrich, Mr. March and others reveals a nuanced and progressive exploration of masculinity. Ken Parille comments about a sort of commonality that can be seen in the life of Jo and Laurie. Laurie is the representative of many mid – and late-nineteenth-century middle-class young men. His struggle parallels that of the March girls in the ultimate submission to the cultural expectations of both genders during the time. Jo March who is the protagonist of the novel is the mouthpiece of Alcott herself. She is initially depicted as a tomboy, characterized by her independent spirit, energetic personality, and disdain for traditional femininity. In the early chapters, Jo rejects societal expectations for women and often engages in activities traditionally associated with boys, such as climbing trees, reading adventure novels, and practising dramatic performances. For example, in the opening chapter (*Playing Pilgrims*), Jo is described as having "a boyish" nature and is seen struggling with the limitations placed on her as a girl: "*I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy!*" (Chapter 1). Her frustration with the constraints of womanhood is very clear here, as she longs for more freedom and the opportunities she perceives as available to boys.

Jo's tomboyish behaviour continues throughout the novel, as she frequently struggles with domestic tasks and prefers intellectual pursuits. Jo's vision of an ideal life is to become a renowned writer instead of following the conventional path of being a wife or mother, as shown when she says in Chapter 8 (*Jo's Journals*): "I want to do something splendid... something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead." This quote reflects her desire to break free from conventional roles and create her own legacy. By the end of the novel, Jo experiences significant personal growth, especially in her understanding of love, relationships, and her own femininity. In Chapter 47 (*Harriet's Christmas*), Jo emotionally matures and realizes that it's possible to strike a balance between independence and meaningful connections with others. This transformation is evident in her eventual romantic relationship with Professor Bhaer, which challenges her earlier dismissal of traditional roles. Jo's journey from a tomboy to a more conventional, yet still independent, woman reflects her growing self-awareness and understanding of her place in the world, showing that she doesn't have to forsake her individuality to mature.

Laurie, the charming and affable young neighbour, is often seen as the embodiment of traditional masculinity (Elbert, 1985). He is wealthy, good looking and with a charming nature, he becomes a close friend of the March sisters. However, Alcott also portrays Laurie as emotionally expressive and vulnerable, particularly in his relationships with the March sisters (Alcott, 1868). This vulnerability is a crucial aspect of Alcott's redefinition of manhood, emphasizing the importance of emotional expression and intimacy in male relationships. Laurie represents the societal expectations of masculinity during the 19th century. He is expected to be charming, wealthy, and powerful, but he also struggles with his passions and dreams. Towards the end, we see a huge transformation in Laurie as he says: "I am not a little woman, but a little man. I'm too proud to go back to my old habits." (Chapter 47, *Surprises*). This quote highlights Laurie's initial difficulty in meeting conventional masculine expectations and his emotional sensitivity, a challenge he eventually overcomes as he redefines his own sense of self.

Friedrich Bhaer, the German professor who marries Jo March represents a more nuanced and progressive form of masculinity. He is a symbol of alternative masculinity who values kindness, humility, and intellectualism. He is also shown to be a supportive and loving partner to Jo and tries to empower the women in his life. Friedrich is often portrayed as a foil to Laurie, embodying a more mature and responsible form of masculinity (Showalter, 1991). However, Alcott also highlights Friedrich's nurturing qualities, particularly in his relationship with Jo (Alcott, 1868). This portrayal of Friedrich challenges traditional notions of masculinity, emphasizing the importance of caregiving and emotional support in male relationships. Mr. March, the patriarch of the March family, is a more complex and nuanced character than is often acknowledged (Saxton, 1977). Alcott portrays Mr. March as a kind and compassionate father, who is also struggling with his emotional vulnerabilities (Alcott, 1868). He is also depicted as a symbol of moral authority and guidance. He represents a more nurturing and empathetic form of masculinity. He values his relationships with his daughters and is willing to listen to and support them. He is the indirect force behind the energy, enthusiasm and lively nature of Marmee and her daughters. Marmee reflects on his nature to Jo: "Your father, Jo. He never loses patience, never doubts or complains, but always hopes, and works and waits so cheerfully that one is ashamed to do otherwise before him." (Chap 8, *Jo Meets Apollyon*, p: 79). This portrayal of Mr. March challenges traditional notions of patriarchal

authority, emphasizing the importance of emotional expression and vulnerability in male relationships.

The presence of various other male characters with its versatility makes the novel a fascinating experience. John Brooke who is the tutor of Laurie marries Meg March and represents a more practical and responsible form of masculinity. He is hardworking and a supportive and loving partner to Meg. Mr. Laurence, Laurie's wealthy and kind grandfather, who becomes a benefactor to the March family also represents the nurturing and protective nature of masculinity. Professor Kingsley, who is a friend of Friedrich Bhaer, represents a more intellectual and cultured form of masculinity. Mr. Dashwood is a wealthy and snobbish acquaintance of the March family, who represents a more arrogant and entitled form of masculinity. All these male characters play important roles in the novel, influencing the lives and experiences of the March sisters and representing different aspects of masculinity. Overall, they represent a range of different forms of masculinity, from traditional and societal expectations to more nuanced and progressive forms of masculinity.

Conclusion

Alcott's portrayal of men in *Little Women* challenges traditional notions of masculinity, offering alternative models of masculinity that are more nuanced and progressive. By applying the concepts of performativity and hegemonic masculinity, this article has analyzed how Alcott's male characters subvert and redefine traditional masculinity. The article concludes that Alcott's portrayal of men in *Little Women* remains relevant today, offering a powerful critique of traditional masculinity and its limitations. The novel holds relevance in today's world when considering gender dynamics, not just for women, but for men as well. It presents complex portrayals of male characters like Laurie and Professor Bhaer, who, despite their traditional roles, also confront societal expectations and personal growth. Discussing gender roles, *Little Women* invites reflection on how men are shaped by similar social pressures - such as the expectation to provide, marry, and behave in a stoic, "masculine" way. Laurie, for example, undergoes significant emotional growth, learning to redefine his identity beyond romantic pursuit, and ultimately deciding on a life path that values deeper emotional connections and personal fulfilment, challenging traditional notions of male success and desire. Additionally, the novel's portrayal of male-female relationships offers insights into how modern men can navigate partnerships with greater emotional openness, vulnerability, and mutual respect - qualities that are often undervalued in traditional depictions of masculinity. In today's evolving gender discussions, *Little Women* highlights how breaking free from rigid gender norms can be liberating for both men and women, encouraging more nuanced and authentic expressions of identity for all.

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