

Exploring Women's Struggle In The Victorian Era: A Gynocritical Analysis Of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

Kanimozhi. K¹, Dr. A. Selvaraj²

¹*Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University

²Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University

***Corresponding Author:** Kanimozhi. K

*Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University

Abstract:

This study explores the complexities of women's problems throughout the Victorian Era via a gynocritical examination of Louisa May Alcott's iconic novel, "*Little Women*." The story examines several facets of Victorian-era women's lives in the eyes of the March family. Examining the interplay between family relationships, educational opportunities, and civic engagement, this research aims to shed light on the many obstacles women encountered at that time. The study delves into how Alcott depicts the March sisters' and their mothers' experiences within the limitations of Victorian society using a gynocritical perspective. The study, which draws on the story and historical backdrop, elucidates the expectations placed on women, the roles they played in the home and the classroom, and the agency they displayed in the public sphere. The research finds striking similarities between the story and the larger social and cultural milieu of the Victorian era using a mix of textual analysis and secondary sources. In addition, it delves into the interplay between gender, class, and authorial viewpoints, specifically with regard to Alcott's own ideas and life events. The results of this study highlight the importance of "*Little Women*" as a portrayal of the challenges faced and triumphs achieved by women during a critical era in history. This study sheds light on the multifaceted experiences of Victorian women and how they continue to impact modern conversations about gender and society by placing the book in its socio-historical context and using a gynocritical perspective.

Keywords: Victorian Era, Women's Struggle, Family Dynamics, Education, Public Sphere, Gender Roles

Introduction

Many social norms and expectations were placed on Victorian-era women, which limited their opportunities for education, public service, and domestic tasks. Many works of literature from that period reflect these difficulties and provide insights into how women lived their lives in a patriarchal culture. "*Little Women*" by Louisa May Alcott is a classic because it depicts strong women dealing with the issues of her day. This presentation uses a gynocritical perspective to analyze the book by Louisa May Alcott and the complex issues faced by Victorian-era women, particularly as they pertain to family relationships, educational opportunities, and civic participation.

It is crucial to understand the historical setting of "*Little Women*" and its author before analyzing the book. Amos Bronson Alcott was a transcendentalist thinker; Abigail May Alcott was a social worker and champion for women's rights; and Louisa May Alcott was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on November 29, 1832, the second of four daughters (Reisen). Ideas that would influence Alcott's work and activism came from her progressive upbringing in a family that placed a premium on education and social change.

Financial difficulties affected the Alcott family throughout Louisa's youth despite their academic ambitions. At an early age, Louisa began working to support her family. She did things such as teaching, sewing, and doing housework. These events taught her the hard truth about poverty and gave her the will to overcome adversity. (Matteson).

In an effort to support her family financially, Alcott began writing tales and poetry in her early twenties, marking the beginning of her creative career. Saturday Evening Gazette published her first piece, "The Rival Painters: A Story of Rome," in 1852 (Reisen). Her 1868 book "*Little Women*," however, was a publication that really launched her to literary stardom and solidified her place in American literary history as one of the greats.

As the March sisters (Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy) and their mother, Marmee, face the trials of puberty and adulthood in the midst of the Civil War, "*Little Women*" follows their lives. The book presents a complex depiction of strong women who challenge conventions and carve out their niches in a male-dominated society; it takes place in Concord, Massachusetts. By drawing on her own life and family, Alcott gave her character complexity and depth, allowing them to navigate the difficulties of sibling love, ambition, and love.

A coming-of-age tale at its heart, "*Little Women*" honors the strength, ingenuity, and kindness of its female heroines. Alcott emphasizes the many obligations placed on Victorian-era women, from caring for one another and the home to

sacrificing one's own needs via the struggles and victories of these characters. In addition, the book delves into topics such as female solidarity, friendship, and sisterhood, highlighting the importance of women's connections in overcoming patriarchal cultures.

Aside from delving into family relationships, "*Little Women*" shed light on the value of education for Victorian-era women. The March sisters show an insatiable need for information and intellectual curiosity that goes beyond society's expectations, even though they have little chance of formal schooling. Jo stands out as a representation of strong female characters because she wants to be a writer, a traditionally male-dominated profession.

More than that, "*Little Women*" subtly but surely touches on the subject of women's participation in public life. Although the story mostly centres on domestic life, it discreetly questions established gender norms by showing women who want more from life than just being a housewife. The March sisters exemplify a spirit of independence and self-determination that challenges traditional ideas of femininity through their charitable activities, creative endeavors, and volunteer labor. Taking a gynocritical stance is crucial for understanding "*Little Women*" for what it is: a representation of the difficulties women faced in the Victorian era. One feminist literary theory that Elaine Showalter helped establish is gynocriticism, which emphasizes reading and studying literature through a female lens and the ways in which gender influences literary representation (Showalter). This approach, when applied to Alcott's "*Little Women*," reveals hidden meanings and subtexts that shed light on the real-life struggles faced by Victorian-era women.

With the use of both primary and secondary sources, this thesis will examine "*Little Women*" during the Victorian era through the lenses of family, education, and civic involvement. The March sisters' and Marmee's (the mother's) experiences will perhaps shed light on the difficulties women encountered in this watershed era in history.

Last but not least, "*Little Women*" is a moving tribute to the strength and determination of Victorian-era women. Compellingly exploring the complexity of women and the continuous battle for equality, this book delivers timeless ideas and fascinating characters. Through a gynocritical examination of Alcott's masterwork, we can learn more about Victorian women's lives and how their experiences continue to impact our current conversations about gender and society.

Discussion:

Family aspects

In *Little Women*, a novel where their father was fighting in the Civil War, Louisa May Alcott placed a strong emphasis on the family element of the book, which shows the hardships faced by the four March Sisters and their mothers as they tried to survive Victorian times. Mrs. March looks after the four girls and their friend, Hannah, while their father, Mr. March, is away from the war in Washington. One day, the March family receives a letter informing them that Mr. March is very sick and invites Mrs. March to visit. Here, Jo makes a great sacrifice to cut her one asset—her hair—and sells it to assist Mrs. March in paying for the trip. This and many other struggles illustrate the novel's focus on family. The book *Little Women* illustrates family themes in the following ways.

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. (LW 6)

The data presented above indicates that in March, the Sisters who were attending to the Christmas issue at home did not have a father present. Like most men of the day, their father enlisted in the Civil War. At home, the ladies were. Without their father, Marmee had to work outside to provide for their family. Hannah, an elderly lady, is a devoted servant who lives with the March sisters and Marmee. Back then, they were all getting Christmas presents, and they were all trading ideas about what to put in theirs. However, they would also want to get Marmee a Christmas gift, but their current budget would not allow it. That is where Jo said, "Mother doesn't say anything about our money, and she won't expect us to give up everything ...". (LW 7). Marmee also didn't expect anything and then continued with, "Let's each buy what we want and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to get it". (LW 18) This exemplifies the March Sisters' determination to provide for their family. Yes, women of the Victorian era were definitely "the angle of the house." However, the fights waged by the March Sisters to provide for their children demonstrate that women's rights and movements existed even then. In this period, when most women still work to support themselves and their families, Grylls (1949) claims that it is very difficult for single women to make ends meet.

Ednah D. Cheney, who authored the biography of Louisa May Alcott and published it in 1898 under the title *Louisa May Alcott, her life, letters, and journals*, described Louisa as a devoted daughter who worked tirelessly to provide for her family. Even though she is the second kid, she already shows signs of becoming a leader among her peers. In the fight for women's rights throughout the Victorian period, she was also an outspoken feminist.

We shouldn't enjoy ourselves half so much as we do now. But it does seem so nice to have little suppers and bouquets, and go to parties, and drive home, and read and rest, and not work. It's like other people, you know, and I always envy girls who do such things, I'm so fond of luxury," said Meg, trying to decide which of two shabby gowns was the least shabby." (LW 53)

Even after a week has gone, you may still feel the holiday spirit. There is no father there this Christmas, only Marmee and the March sisters. Because their mother is so smart, the March Sisters are children who quietly accept life as it is. The warmth and care of a mother encapsulates the numerous ideals passed down through generations. That their sister Meg would push the sluggish to get up and about after a vacation was not shocking at the time. Meg did evolve into a kind sister who adored her siblings. Even though she is a bit of a narcissist, her ideal self is a wealthy housewife who does not have to leave the house and can afford to wear anything her heart desires.

Farber claims (in Gunindi, 2011) that family problems, particularly in the Victorian era, were a unifying factor that brought people closer together. Something that acts as a mutual support system. Keep in mind that it might have an impact on societal and cultural values as well. This book mirrored the experiences of women who were oppressed and who had to struggle to survive. It is worth noting that the biography of Louisa May Alcott, *Her Life, Letters and Journals* (1898), does not mention that the character Anna Bronson Alcott, portrayed by Meg in the novel, acted in such a manner.

Education aspects

Included in the educational component is the fact that the March family's life is not easy. Amy attends classes, Meg finds a job, Jo assists Aunt March while working, Beth studies at home, and Jo also finds a job. The book *Little Women* exemplifies the two main schools of thought on education that existed throughout the Victorian era: the more informal and the more conventional. What follows is a data set that displays the March Family's educational struggles.

For you don't have to go to school with impertinent girls, who plague you if you don't know your lessons, and laugh at your dresses, and label your father if he isn't rich, and insult you when your nose isn't nice. (LW 7)

According to the information provided, Amy has a hard time fitting in at school. Mistreatment at school is something she often encounters. She is the object of her friends' scorn since she was born into poverty. Until Amy remarked that, similar to the facts shown above, the March sisters were sitting around complaining to one another and thinking their problems were worse than anybody else's. What you wear, who has children, and how difficult family life is all seen through the lens of social class and wealth discrimination in the Victorian period.

Amy has attended a regular school, unlike anybody else in her family. There were two main types of schools in Victorian England: official and informal. As to Demir (2015), children from the middle class get formal education, whilst those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds receive informal education at home. Amy had a tough time with her education in general and school in particular due to the fact that her socioeconomic status was different from her peers'. Abby May Alcott, a sister of Sister Louisa May Alcott and Amy's embodiment, also completed her formal education. Similar to Amy, she had exceptional painting skills. Louisa May Alcott does, in fact, draw parallels between many parts of her life and the story.

She loved music so dearly, tried so hard to learn, and practised away so patiently at the jingling old instrument that it did seem as if someone (not to hint Aunt March) ought to help her. Nobody did, however, and nobody saw Beth wipe the tears off the yellow keys, which would not keep in tune when she was all alone. She sang like a little lark about her work, never was too tired for Marmee and the girls, and day after day said hopefully to herself, 'I know I'll get my music time if I'm good. (LW 61)

Despite their differences in personality and outlook, the March sisters each bring unique skills to the table. Beth, for example, had exceptional musical talent on the piano. From an educational standpoint, she had never attended a traditional school. Beth avoids school because she is too timid. Her parents made an effort to enrol him in school, but she was so frightened that they ultimately decided to let her decide. With their father away and their mother enlisted to provide their skills and labor to the Soldiers' Aid Society, Beth continued to study as much as she could on her own. This was how she studied.

Beth wishes she could attend a regular school, although she hardly says anything negative about it. However, it was a common practice for Victorian-era women to depend on their innate musical abilities and acquire a variety of skills in the comfort of their own homes. Victorian mentality demanded that women be able to become "angels of the house" in the realms of art, music, and language (Demir, 2015). Elizabeth, Louisa May Alcott's sister, has the same skill as her sister: the ability to play the piano.

Public Work Environment aspects

As a result of their father's absence due to the war, the March family suffered, particularly financially. Children have to work to help out financially because of the way things are. Jo is an elderly widow's companion, and Meg is a governess for a wealthy family. Mother March was very caring. She showers her girls with unconditional love, encourages them no matter what, and teaches them to give to others in need. The March sisters form a strong bond with Laurie, the grandson of Mr. Lawrence, their wealthy next-door neighbor. When it comes to money, Lawrence is always there to assist in the March weather in the storm of life without dad. The data below illustrates the public environment components that occurred in the March family.

How would you like to be shut up for hours with a nervous, fussy old lady who keeps you trotting, is never satisfied, and worries you until you are ready to fly out the window or cry? (LW 6)

Getting money to maintain their families is a problem for March's sisters. There are several challenges in the work environment. As can be seen from the statistics, Jo said something very nasty about Bibi March. While she knew she would not like working there, she found solace in Bibi March's extensive collection, which he kept at his house. If Bibi March nods off, Jo goes to the library. Domestic servitude was a common occupation of women in Victorian times. Louisa May Alcott's treatment of her aunt mirrors that of *Little Women's* protagonist.

It is naughty to fret, but I think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross, and my hands get so stiff, I can't practice well at all." Beth looked at her rough hands with a sign that any one could hear at that time. (LW 7)

From what we can see in the statistics, Beth also expresses her dissatisfaction with her existence. Amy often bemoaned the constant criticism she endured at school; Meg grappled with her job environment; Jo battled her annoyance with Aunt March, but he persevered for financial benefits. On the other hand, Beth mentioned that housework was painful. In the first two data points, we see a pattern that is consistent with Brozak (2010): the middle class would labor for the upper class, and the women who remained at home would work to prepare themselves to be homemakers, while the males would be the breadwinners.

Conclusion

In this section, the researcher concludes that Louisa May Alcott's work has several values of struggle based on her analysis. Consider problems in the family, school, and public sectors. Living with a family suffering in March was difficult. They need to find other ways to make ends meet now that their fathers are not around. Their unity and mutual support show us that family is the foundation of strength. The researcher also discovered parallels between Louisa's life and the events depicted in literature.

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