

## The Enduring Adaptations and Cultural Impact of The Novel “Little Women”

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### ABSTRACT

*The key work in the issue of women's rights, individuality, and sisterly love in the 19th century, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868–1869), follows three sisters' following their dreams while facing societal norms during the Civil War: Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy. The novel critiques strict gender roles via Jo March, who challenges norms by becoming a writer, highlighting Alcott's feminist view. This paper examines Little Women's relevance today through adaptations, particularly Greta Gerwig's 2019 film, reflecting current cultural values. Thematic shifts in the approaches to feminism, family, and social norms are discussed in the paper. Each adaptation represents its sociohistorical context, from conservatism in the 1933 film to the feminist critique so bodily expressed by Gerwig. The conclusion confirms the status of Little Women as an active cultural reference of continuous debates on women's independence, equity, and identity. Alcott's story about how one sisterly family struggles through to success and self-determination really denotes an emerging feminist discourse. Little Women is such an important document in helping to shape emerging feminist discussions that it manages to be a part of both literature and culture.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Little Women" is a cardinal contribution to American literature written by Louisa May Alcott and first published from 1868 to 1869. The novel, against the background of the American Civil War, describes the lives of the March sisters, namely Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy, exploring the sisterly relations in the novel, personal growth, and changing social status. She also showed different facets of their lives to reveal new ideas on feminism, individualism, and family relations set off against the typical gender roles of the 19th century. The reason Little Women attains this perpetual relevance does not come about solely on account of the literature quality but because it inspires and changes with adaptations. From the very first adaptation in 1933 to the one done in 2019, these films bear changing social discourses and feminism discourses, which, over time, have amplified the novel's cultural relevance. This research explores how screen adaptations enhance the continuous relevance of the novel within feminist and socio-cultural discourses.

In the 19th century, roles were so intermingled with one's gender, and it was expected that women would focus their attention on domestic duties and raising children. "Little Women" was written

within such a context, and Louisa May Alcott introduced into the novel quite a progressive view on women through the large March family of sisters who responded each to these conventional expectations differently. This story represents the conflict between following the social norms and the desire to gain personal independence. The feminist movements, most of all the first wave, which focused on granting women with voting rights and rights to receive education, equally influenced Alcott's work, yet she was cautious while depicting extremely radical ideas.

Scholarly analysis indicates that Alcott's representation of autonomous women confronted societal norms, particularly through her illustration of Jo March's ambitions to pursue a writing career, a profession predominantly occupied by males during that era (Sulastri, 2020; Teri, 2021). Themes of *Little Women*: One of the major themes of *Little Women* is feminism as it relates to the portrayal of women seeking their independence. The leaning toward non-conformity to traditional gender roles by Jo March and the pursuit of a career where she can be independent epitomize Alcott's criticism of 19th-century attitudes toward the place of women in society. Second, family relationships and sisterly love in the March family are important to the appeal of the novel. The relationship among the four siblings—Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy—is a model of mutual assistance and unity. At the same time, however, the story also investigates the contradiction between personal ambition and social convention. Even though Jo aspires for a writing career, Meg for a good marriage, and Amy to be an accomplished artist, such ambitions often collide with the expectations demanded by their time, as Dewi & Hadistya (2022) and Darmawan & Sari (2023) have pointed out.

Since its initial release, *Little Women* has undergone numerous adaptations, with significant renditions emerging in 1933, 1994, and 2019. Each of these adaptations has highlighted varying thematic elements that correspond to the social and cultural circumstances of their respective eras. For instance, the adaptation released in 1933 preserves a conventional emphasis on familial principles, whereas the 1994 reinterpretation more prominently showcases the feminist dimensions of Jo's persona, foregrounding her defiance against matrimonial conventions and societal norms (Bambang & Damaris, 2021). For instance, the 2019 adaptation by Greta Gerwig is probably the most progressive in her reimagining, as she combined the classic plot with a modern feminist critique of both the creative effort and societal gender roles while simultaneously showing how Jo strives to balance her artistic ambitions against what is expected of her because of her gender. For example, Widodo, 2021; Sulastri, 2020.

*Little Women* finds its place in the canon and curricula; it is often taught in schools as part of formative American literature. It still speaks to important social issues, especially about the feminist movements. The novel "*Little Women*," according to feminists such as Gaspersz et al. (2022), has played a leading role in shaping social talks with regard to gender equality and all those spheres which a woman can take part in, considering both private and public spheres. Its influence on popular culture extends even to this day, with continuous adaptations into films in 1994 and 2019, into theatre productions, and onto television.

The continuous relevance of the novel to culture itself reveals much about the prevalence of the novel in regard to the contemporary feminist discourses of Lestari & Firmansyah, 2021, and Gerung & Hidayat, 2023. There were several forms of precedent with regard to the permanent changes that the novel "*Little Women*" made and its continuing relevance for culture. First of all, Louisa May Alcott's "*Little Women*" has been a part of the cultural reference pool since the late 19th century. The perpetuation of its relevance is manifest in numerous adaptations and scholarly discussions regarding its themes on feminism, individualism, and family ties.

This literature review integrates recent studies and discussions related to different adaptations of *Little Women* produced from 2019 to 2024 that consider the cultural impact and relevance of these productions in contemporary feminist discourses. The second considers the historical and social context in which the societal norms of the 19th century, so rigidly bending toward gender roles and societal expectations, established a framework for Alcott's narrative. Indeed, as analyzed by scholarship, \**Little Women*\* seems to run entirely against these conventions, depicting the independence and ambitions of its female protagonists, particularly within the context of post-Civil War America.

According to Anjali Tamang (2023) comments, Alcott's portrayal of the March sisters actually constitutes a reflection of the patriarchal society in which she lived and reflects the degree to which women fought for independence and self-expression out of such constraint. The third aspect is themes in *Little Women*. Feminism and women's struggle for autonomy are central ideas in *Little Women*. Jo March is presented as a feminist character who is ambitious and independent against all the societal norms. Hidayati (2023) shares that Jo's character relates to modern viewers because she is a symbol of a woman who fights for her rights.

Additionally, the novel explores family dynamics and sisterhood, illustrating how these relationships shape the sisters' identities and choices. This exploration remains relevant today as it reflects ongoing discussions about women's roles within both familial and societal contexts (Zhang, 2023). The latter work, *Adaptation Studies*, considers the new readings of *Little Women* in light of, among other versions, the recently released Greta Gerwig film in 2019 that elicited so much interest regarding its creative take on Alcott's story. Indeed, Gerwig's film stays true to the spirit of the novel while adding a modern twist to the narrative appealing to audiences today. In Vox, 2019.

Critics have in their review stressed that Gerwig's film identifies ambitions, women's equality, and the agency of women while maintaining the story's integrity. New York Times, 2020. The present adaptation has sparked debates about the way in which storytelling can evolve and yet retain its core essence.

The final investigation examines the cultural importance of *Little Women*, which remains a significant work within the literary canon and educational frameworks globally. Its impact transcends the realm of literature, permeating popular culture as a driving force behind feminist movements. The representation of women's challenges in the novel aligns with modern concerns, including gender wage disparities and societal norms (Toorak College, 2019).

Researchers argue that Alcott's works are integral to feminist discourse, as they inspire subsequent generations to challenge traditional female norms (NPR, 2019). Where the previous studies were concerned with the cultural repercussions of the different forms *Little Women* has taken on, this research tries to extend the exploration of how Alcott's themes, more so those about feminism, equality of genders, and personal ambitions, are still relevant to modern life by observing the thematic shifts in these different adaptations.

Research Questions: 1) How do *Little Women* adaptations seem to reflect the changing nature of society, especially regarding the roles of women and feminist principles? 2. What contributions to culture and feminism has the novel offered across different generations, as evidenced by its numerous adaptations?

## 2. METHOD

This research explores, in a qualitative manner, how *Little Women* has thematically and culturally evolved, considering the many adaptations of the work. A comparison, therefore, for the purpose of this study, will be done between the original 1868–1869 novel and its major film adaptations, especially the 2019 interpretation by Greta Gerwig. In considering these various representations, this paper aims to evaluate the way themes of feminism, family relationships, and individualism are portrayed and represented under various time and social contexts.

*This will also involve thematic analysis:* the identification of persistent motifs or their changes within the narrative along the temporal dimensions. Further, it shall consider how cultural and social contexts—especially those bearing on gender roles, feminist movements, and expectations—have influenced the understanding and presentation of the themes in the literary work and its movie versions.

*Data Collection:* Primary Sources: The primary texts in this research will be Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, dated 1868–1869, and three of its major film adaptations, namely those of 1933, 1994, and 2019. Three adaptations across time are being considered to present observations of how themes

and cultural interpretations change with time. Secondary Sources: Secondary data shall pertain to academic articles, critical reviews, and feminist critiques of literature.

The main secondary materials will stand on feminist theory, cultural studies, and critical literary analyses of the novel and its adaptations, understanding such works within the various socio-historical conceptions. Dewi & Hadistya, 2022; Sulastrri, 2020; Gaspersz et al., 2022.

*Thematic Analysis:* This research will pinpoint and examine prominent themes within *Little Women* and its various adaptations, including but not limited to feminism, individuality, and familial relationships. The examination will investigate the manner in which these themes are highlighted or redefined across different adaptations, especially concerning the changing landscape of feminist discourse and societal values (Teri, 2021; Bambang & Damaris, 2021).

*Socio-Historical Influences:* This study will investigate the influence of socio-historical contexts on the various adaptations of the novel. It encompasses the cultural and political climates of the 1930s, 1990s, and 2010, focusing on how these eras shaped the representation of gender roles, women's autonomy, and family dynamics. The analysis will consider the ways in which each adaptation either addresses or mirrors the evolving perspectives on women's rights and feminist principles throughout history (Gaspersz et al., 2022; Widodo, 2021).

*Feminist Perspectives:* A significant part of this study will focus on feminist perspectives, particularly in regard to the portrayal of characters like Jo March, an embodiment of feminist ideals of self-reliance and autonomy. This paper will investigate how feminist interpretations of such characters and their family relations have evolved, if at all, in light of contemporary feminist movements and discussions on gender (Sulastrri, 2020; Dewi & Hadistya, 2022)

### 3. RESULT(S) AND DISCUSSION

#### *Themes in the Original Novel*

*Feminism:* Within the narrative of *Little Women*, Jo March stands out as a groundbreaking representation of feminist principles. Her defiance of conventional gender roles coupled with her ambition to attain success as a writer, illustrates a yearning for autonomy that confronts the societal standards of the 19th century. Jo's endeavor to harmonize her creative aspirations with the societal expectations imposed upon her as a female character offers an early depiction of feminist thought.

Her reluctance to marry and refusal of traditional feminine roles are part of a constant struggle between personal freedom and expected gendered behavior that has been contested by Sulastrri (2020) and Teri (2021). In this manner, Jo has become an icon of feminism, typifying autonomy and the subversion of entrenched social stereotypes. Family: The sisterhood in *Little Women* is constitutive in the story for not only how sisters can enable but also how they may fight one another within a close family circle. The various natures and hopes of the sisters in the March family personify various facets of womanhood in the family circle. The story reveals that family ties and love, not material wealth or prestige, are the solid grounds on which the girls stand through the fierce battles of life.

The concept of sisterhood transforms across different generations, mirroring the evolving societal standards pertaining to gender roles and the independence of women (Gaspersz et al., 2022). The lasting connection among sisters embodies an ideal that resonates with audiences, illustrating that familial unity continues to be vital even as personal ambitions develop.

*Ambition and Society:* One of the major themes in *Little Women* is the struggle between societal expectations and personal objectives. Each of the March sisters faces societal pressures to fulfill traditional female roles while at the same time endeavoring to realize her own life ambitions. Jo's ambition to be a writer, Meg's desire for a socially adequate marriage, and Amy's search for artistic fame—these are instances of how personal ambitions struggle to penetrate the demands placed by society upon them (Darmawan & Sari, 2023). It is one of the general societal chains clamped on women in the 19th century and emphasizes the difficulty of asserting an individual identity in the face of society's demands.

#### *Analysis of Changes*

Little Women has been adapted multiple times over the years. Each of these adaptations reflected the social and cultural milieu of the time in which it was created. For example, the 1933 adaptation stayed true to the book's traditional values and focused on the themes of family and morality; the 1994 movie adaptation took a more modern approach and emphasized Jo's feminist ideals and her rejection of traditional roles (Bambang & Damaris, 2021).

However, the 2019 adaptation by Greta Gerwig is uniquely the most feminist version, as it portrays Jo not only as a writer but also as a creative person victimized by patriarchal systems in both her professional and personal life. According to Widodo, 2021, an occurrence of this type serves as a reflection of shifting social perceptions about feminism and gender equality. Greta Gerwig's 2019 movie adaptation opened an entirely new perspective on that very classic, Little Women, adding a modern touch of feminism to the original plot. It epitomizes how far Jo fights against the patriarchal world of writing. Whereas all other adapters make a flattering description of marriage and settling down, Gerwig shows the determination of Jo to forge her path—both personal and professional.

The cinematic work additionally utilizes a nonlinear narrative structure to illustrate the changing roles of women, interweaving historical and contemporary elements to provide commentary on the enduring significance of the novel's feminist themes (Sulastri, 2020; Widodo, 2021). By means of these innovative techniques, Gerwig situates Little Women within a modern feminist dialogue, presenting a critique of both past and present gender disparities.

This means that the cinematic techniques Gerwig uses—a disjointed narrative structure and fresh, new visuals—can redefine the portrayal of the sisters. The juxtaposition between Jo's current older self and her younger self—a young rebel—in this non-linear narrative underlines the way time has passed and what women can do in a society: Teri, 2021. The vivid visual representation and costumes representative of the era reinforce the narrative's foundation in the 19th century, concurrently enabling the contemporary feminist motifs to resonate with current viewers (Bambang & Damaris, 2021). Such methodologies augment the depiction of the March sisters, portraying them as both reflections of their historical context and enduring icons of opposition to gender norms.

### ***Cultural influence***

Little Women as a reflection of the evolution in viewpoints regarding society and feminism over time: The novel Little Women further reflects how women's social roles have faced continuous fluctuations in meaning. Such variable interpretations in different adaptations hint at changing feminist ideas and a greater context about gender equality.

Transitioning from the conventional principles prevalent in the early 20th century to the progressive feminist reinterpretation presented in the 2019 version, Little Women functions not only as a historical artifact but also as a framework for analyzing current feminist challenges (Gaspersz et al., 2022; Sulastri, 2020). The story's emphasis on the March sisters' self-sufficiency and familial connections highlights the shifting cultural conversation regarding women's rights and individual freedom. The inclusion of Little Women in both educational frameworks and within popular culture cements the status of the book as a pivotal text in the study of American literature, feminism, and gender roles. It has continuously been a part of both high school and college curricula and thus remains relevant to the culture.

Furthermore, the numerous adaptations have solidified the novel's position as a significant cultural reference point, with contemporary films, literature, and discourse situating Little Women in relation to current feminist ideologies (Lestari & Firmansyah, 2021). The themes of aspiration, autonomy, and camaraderie persist in their relevance, demonstrating that the novel's cultural influence endures robustly.

Cross-generational significance pertains to continued dialogues on women's rights. Such continued relevance of Little Women manifests an ability to speak to present discussions about women's rights, independence, and identity. It is both in the novel and within its various adaptations that dialogues have been opened regarding the places of women in private and public spaces, hence making it a driver of feminist discourses.

The changes in representation of the March sisters from generation to generation reveal something—that is, the problems of gender equality and self-determination are not over yet and have kept inspiring new generations of both readers and viewers alike (Dewi & Hadistya, 2022; Widodo, 2021).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Research on *Little Women* serves as a testimony to its incredible versatility, not only as a work of literature in its own right but also as a cultural artifact. First published in 1868, this novel has maintained its relevance today because it changed with society yet retained its core of feminism, family, and striving ambition. Adaptations such as Greta Gerwig's 2019 movie have allowed *Little Women* to remain a staple in discussions on gender equality and identity by serving as a touchstone for women's roles, both historically and today. The novel's rendering of women in positions of self-determination, especially via the character of Jo March, remains immensely resonant with contemporary discourses of women's rights and self-determination, placing it at the core of feminist literature.

The continued relevance of *Little Women* to feminist discourse, even to literary studies, underlines its critical role in the examination of gender equality. As cultural mores change, the main ideals of the novel remain very current to understand the struggle of women for autonomy and self-expression. The different renditions of this novel are by no means less a valid medium of its story, keeping it alive for present audiences and affording them new, innovative ways of looking at its central messages.

Through the adaptation of the narrative to various historical periods, both filmmakers and academics facilitate the ongoing relevance of the novel in addressing modern concerns, especially those related to women's independence, professional ambitions, and societal norms (Bambang & Damaris, 2021; Gaspersz et al., 2022).

##### *Future Research Directions:*

Directions in which further research on *Little Women* and its adaptations might go include the following: Cross-cultural studies of adaptations and translations have the potential to provide considerable insight into how the novel's themes are received in different parts of the world, particularly where social mores around gender differ significantly.

Comparative considerations of feminist rewriting across the different periods can more deeply be brought into our understanding of how each engages in dialogue with feminist discourse. These would also include trends in feminist ideologies in adaptations of *Little Women* in their evolution from the 1930s to the present.

The intersectional feminist outlook can capitalize on that to explore how race, class, and sexuality influence the differential representation of women in the novel and its adaptations. This would take the discussion from strict Western feminist outlooks to the study of varied representations of feminist concerns found across international adaptations.

The following paper traces the continued relevance of Louisa May Alcott's work with *Little Women* to historical and cultural contexts. Findings one managed to glimpse upon through the given research are summed in the following manner:

Strong and independent female leads counteract the stereotypical portrayal of women in the novel. Other themes, such as family bonds, love, ambition, and identity, are deeply woven into the story line. More importantly, Jo March has been considered by many to be an embodiment of feminism; she strongly pursues her dream of being a novelist, aside from what others think of her. SUCCESS Touring 2023; TIMES OF India 2023.

On the level of the American Civil War, *Little Women* present historical background constituting an attack on the traditional social and cultural norms of that time. The work questions the restricted roles of women in 19th-century settings and portrays their ability to live purposeful and substantial lives out of the domestic confines. Reference: Toorak College 2023; Wikipedia, 2024.

This book has been serving many generations and has been influential in popular culture; it informed the narration of female identity through literature and further into the media. In that respect, it has spawned many adaptations, rereadings, and reinterpretations concerning themes of female empowerment and resilience. SparkNotes, n.d.; Smithsonian Magazine, 2023. The findings show that *Little Women* is still current because it has remained in a continuation of effect in literary discourses, education, and feminist debates.

**Possible Further Research Directions** Given that this research encompasses various subjects, future research may branch into various lines of thought. **Adaptation Analysis:** Further study can be done on the detailed comparative study of various adaptations of *Little Women* as it discusses the unique renditions of the themes and characters of the novel that different filmmakers and directors have portrayed.

A look at the feminist perspectives adopted by producers such as Gillian Armstrong and Greta Gerwig could find both sharp contrasts and similarities in the creatives' perspective on the work. Wikipedia, 2024; EduVest Green Vest, 2023. **Cross Cultural Interpretations:** The cultural translation of *Little Women* within various cultures is an interesting field of study.

Analyses focusing on the aspect of translation and adaptation in Indonesia or any other nation will highlight unique cultural nuances that can enhance or even change the meaning of the original story EduVest Green Vest, 2023. **Feminist Readings:** A continued use of feminist theoretical perspectives in reading *Little Women* continues to disclose new insights into the struggles and triumphs of the characters. Analyzing the dynamics of current feminist movements in relation to Alcott's literary contributions could elucidate the extent to which her ideas remain applicable in the present context or require modification (Sytrisno et al., 2023). By exploring these avenues, scholars can enhance our comprehension of the persistent significance of *Little Women* within literary discourse and its ongoing importance in contemporary culture. Through these routes of engagement, *Little Women* scholarship has evolved to consider the novel as a perennial yet at the same time dynamic text informed by significant feminist theory while continuing to problematize views of women's roles and aspirations.

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