



Marriage is Shackle: Alcott's Sobered and Muddled View of Women in *Little Women*

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ABSTRACT

Little Women is a classic work of literature that has captivated readers for generations. It tells the story of four sisters who grow up during the Civil War era in America and explores their struggles with poverty, societal expectations, and their own personal desires. While the book is celebrated for its portrayal of strong female characters and their self-awareness, it also highlights the limitations and one-sidedness of women's consciousness awakening, particularly with regard to the view of marriage. Alcott's progressive female thoughts are evident, as she portrays women who are determined to carve out their own paths and not be solely defined by their marital status. However, at the same time, there is an underlying sentiment of traditional gender roles and the idealization of marriage, which limits the full expression of a woman's agency. This dependence on men is further reinforced by the societal norms and beliefs surrounding marriage during that time, such as portraying it as the ultimate goal of a woman's life.

Keywords: *Little Women*, Marriage, Feminism, Louisa May Alcott

Introduction

Louisa May Alcott is an outstanding American novelist in the nineteenth century, and she addicts herself to amateur writing of dramas when she was very young. In 1869, she won the honor when a bookman suggested that she could write a novel about girls. Therefore, she finishes the novel *Little Women* from her observations of young people according to her memory of her family life. So, *Little Women* is about the lives and loves of four sisters growing up during the American Civil War. It is based on Alcott's own experiences as a child with her three sisters. It was written in 1867 and was a fictionalized biography of Alcott and her sisters. "It is well recognized that the happy March family portrayed in *Little Women* is a highly idealized recreation of Alcott's own family" (Dawson, 2003). The author shapes the lofty spirit of four girls in the family of March. In this novel, Alcott is the model of Jo, her older sister, Anna, and her two younger sisters, Lizzie and Abba May, who are described as Meg, Amy and Beth. As for Laurie, a very important male figure, his prototype is a young musician, Alcott encounters in 1865, when she accompanies a lady travelling in Europe. Alcott has feelings for him, but they finally have no results. Therefore, the analysis of the marriage trick in the novel also has realistic meaning to further understand the sobriety and sinking of intellectual women.

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* frankly reveals patriarchal society's burden put on women under the veil of love. At that time, American society was severely influenced by the traditional ideology and morality of the Victorian era, People recognized the kind of traditional lifestyles and values that men work outside, and women stay at home. Women are not allowed to enter the mainstream of social life, their proper place should be in the family, marriage is the only recognized form of survival for them, and they should always maintain the image of understanding wives and loving mothers. They asked women should please men and follow the value orientation made for men

in the patriarchal society. So, women completely lost their independence and autonomy. In the novel, Louisa May Alcott reveals her dissatisfaction with women's social status and social environment which implies their marriage choices and married life. She questions the traditional roles of women and has the desire to achieve females' self-reliance in male domination of society.

As Murphy (1990) rightly claims: "The power of *Little Women* derives in large measure from the contradictions and tensions it exposes and from the pattern it establishes of subversive, feminist exploration colliding repeatedly against patriarchal repression". It must be acknowledged that the author is not entirely free from the constraints of the prevailing societal norms of her time. While she adopts a critical attitude towards issues such as marriage and women's roles, she inadvertently contributes to placing shackles on women herself. Nonetheless, the author exhibits a deep understanding of the significance of women's awakening to their own consciousness and recognizes the necessity for women to strive for independence within the patriarchal system.

Feminism and Marriage

In a lot of feminist literary works, the author tends to input strong feminist emotion into the character of its own shape and the structure of the plot. The heroine in their works tends to be independent and strong, has the personality charm and higher spiritual pursuit, and even encourages other women to pursue their own ideals and lives. However, the conflict between marriage and independence is ignored.

The pursuit of independence is often antithetical to traditional marriage because the core of traditional marriage is the oppression of women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (2018) is a pioneer of the American feminist movement. As She writes in her work, "Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants" (p.5). In traditional marriage, in order to consolidate the absolute power of men in the family and the subordinate position of women in the marriage, women are confined to the private domain of the family. After two industrial revolutions, men took up almost all profitable occupations in every field, policy, economy, culture and so on. However, Women are confined in the family, serving the family and husband, and gradually lose their equal social status with men. Women are often seen as secondary beings whose identity is usually defined by men, especially in marital relationships. Marriage of female in full is determined by their husbands, women's accessories as their husbands, and according to husbands and the needs of the society to depict the image of the perfect wife and mother, to standardize the women's identity construction, makes the female status in marriage field is forced to blanking, even under the influence of the ideology of male dominance. In this process, women themselves also participate in the process of the disappearance of female identity.

American feminists in the 19th century had a clear understanding of the oppression of traditional marriage on women, and most of them were unmarried women who participated in the movement. "Feminist women, married and single, were sharply attuned to the problems in which marriage might entrap them" (Levine, 1989, p.156). So, the attention paid to the oppression of traditional marriage

steadily increases among feminist women even women. Through the analysis of the traditional marriage's destructive effect upon women, we can further know the unfair suffering of women in history and modern times. And in *The Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott justly intentionally or unintentionally shows four couples' after-marriage life behind reality. This is the dilemma of her identity between traditional ladies and modern women which is also implied in her novel with the marriage choices of four sisters.

The Marriage of Mrs. March

In fact, the marriage question is not only directed at the causes of the relationship between women and men but of the social relation of males' dominant place over females. However, Alcott overturns the acquiescent male-and-female relation by reducing the male presence in the family and transferring men's responsibility to women. "Each matriarchy is a school for wives, each-in its very strength of purpose-has the potential of being 'a new woman's colony' as well" (Auerbach, 1976, p.7). At the beginning of the book *Little Women*, the father Mr. March is far away from home during the Civil War. This special arrangement of the novel implies the absence of the father and husband's role in the family. The marriage of Mummy seems to be a decoration and she lives life without a husband. From the beginning to the end of the novel, Mr. March has less of a presence. The marriage between Mrs March and Mr March is totally different from and goes against the model of traditional marriage which is based on patriarchy, "a kind of sexual hierarchy which presumes women as the role of mother and wife, domestic labourer and consumer within the family" (Eisenstein, 1979, p.334). In fact, Mrs March shoulder the man's role in her family as well as taking the identity of her wife and mother into account.

However, this overturn is incomplete which is the rebellion against male dominance as well as the continuation of women's self-oppression. The background of war provides the premise of women's self-consciousness awakening. Women have more opportunities to replace the male's work which was allocated by men previously in the interests of men. In *Little Women*, it is obvious that Mr. March is not the pivot of the family. His life is totally supported by his wife and child both in economic and spiritual aspects due to his illness at the war. Contrary to traditional marriage in which women are always forced to put their all lives on their husbands and their children and are delicate to deal with the trials things happen in domestic life. Mrs. March has her own work in a hospital taking care of the wounded soldiers and earning money to support her family. So, it seems that Mrs March has completed the revolt against patriarchy and transgressed the line between gender. But under the oppression of deep-rooted patriarchal ideology, women's consciousness awakening is not thorough enough. They create new female virtues to re-bind themselves, as manifestations of self-slavery. This image of women perfectly fits the code of conduct and ethics for middle-class white women: "our cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter, 1966, p.152) . So, under the cover of independence, Alcott wants to create such a character that Carter the model of 19th-century women fit the traditional expectation for women, another type of restriction imposed on women.

And Alcott uses the character Mrs March to convey this thought of true women for Mrs. March

bears most of the responsibility of educating her children. In fact, all her four daughters are influenced by her thoughts during the process of growth. She always wants to cultivate children's sense of independence. Her plan for her daughters is "to be beautiful, accomplished and good and lead a useful and pleasant life" (Alcott, 2004, p.151). She advises the daughters to work regularly to obtain "a sense of power and independence" (Alcott, 2004, p.180). Mrs March puts great emphasis on the importance of women's necessary work and guides her daughters to know the meaning of work. These ideas coincide with the four virtues. Beneath the surface of her self-sacrifice and unremitting efforts, she is deprived of the basic security of life, and the men in charge of their lives often fail to fulfil their responsibilities. So traditional female virtue and religious piety finally bring Mrs. March a kind of Cinderella-like satisfaction.

The Marriage of Meg March

Alcott's contradictory thoughts towards women also impact Meg March's marriage choice causing her to struggle in the romantic illusion and realistic oppression. Meg March, the eldest daughter and the most beautiful and meek of the sisters, yearns for a marriage based on love. Meg eventually chooses a poor and honest husband John. When she was young, the tight family financial situation led Meg to crave money and servants. As the eldest sister, she needs to learn to do domestic chores which encourages her overvaluation of wealth and desire to have servants. Compared with her younger sisters who want to write or paint just like living in the castles in the air, what she wants just is domestic. Although Meg envies the rich life and faces the traditional pressure from Aunt March who thinks Meg should marry well to assist her family, she marries John for the sake of love. But this choice can't help her escape the imprisonment of marriage. Meg's marriage eventually makes her lose herself and becomes an accessory. Ironically, all these sisters cannot own what they want but return to be mediocre wives of different men.

The perception that a woman's work is made work generates the encounter between Meg and John over her dress and his coat. In protest of the limitations imposed by John's modest salary and desiring to impress a wealthy friend, Meg orders a fifty-dollar silk dress. Meg has been warned by her mother about John and here she discovers one of the sources of this warning. John "was very kind, forgave her readily, and did not utter one reproach" (Alcott, 2004, p.317). He simply cancels the order for his overcoat. In response, to Meg's inquiry, he comments, "I can't afford it, my dear" (Alcott, 2004, p.18). Consumed with guilt, Meg swallows her pride and her desire, prevails upon her friend to buy her dress, and uses the money to get John's coat. "One can imagine ... what a blissful state of things ensued" (Alcott, 2004, p.18). Finding a way to survive in a narrow space defined by a masculine culture is that patience, submission, self-sacrifice, and compromise with the environment. Meg sacrifices her pursuit of beauty for John's coat. The love of marriage becomes the shackles of her life, and she needs to put herself second to John's needs. The coat and silk dress now have some connotational meanings. This coat is the moral burden that men impose on women, driving women to abandon themselves and forcing women to be inferior in their sexual status. If we regard the search for love as the awakening of self-consciousness, while the marriage is deconstruction.

Among sisters, Meg is the most standardized modelwomen of the 19th century when the social convention advocated that women belong to the domestic sphere. Unlike Mrs March, Meg is in a worse situation losing of economic foundation. From a neediness point of view, "This blissful state, however, is based on the premise that John needs and deserves a coat because he has to go out in the world and work. Meg, on the contrary, neither needs nor deserves her dress because, with no real work to do in the world, she has no basis for attention to the self" (Fetterley, 1979, p.375). The loss of economic status in the family caused Meg to lose her self-identity and become complacent about being a housewife. "My husband shall always feel free to bring a friend home whenever he likes. I shall always be prepared. There shall be no flurry, no scolding, no discomfort, but a neat house, a cheerful wife, and a good dinner. John, dear, never stop to ask my leave, invite whom you please, and be sure of a welcome from me" (Alcott, 2004, p.305). Obviously, Meg is proud of her identity-housewife, which reflects her recognition of her attached role. Women must restrain their words and actions because they are financially dependent on men for their income and emotionally dependent on their approval. Alcott stirs up the conflict between love and marriage, between women and men, which is an unregulated debate for even Alcott herself is stuck in the thought's predicament.

The Marriage of Jo March

In *Little Women*, Jo March has two marriage choices between Mr. Bhaer and Laurie. Jo repeatedly refuses her childhood partner Laurie who is young and rich, and after many years, she chooses a halfway acquaintance Mr. Bhaer who is old and poor. The reason we want to explore this choice is to explore the awakening and compromise of Jo's female consciousness. Jo chooses to refuse Laurie because of her rejection of traditional marriage's limitations. Jo and Laurie belonged to two very different worlds. They don't perceive and understand each other's needs. Although Jo grows up with Laurie, financially they are worlds apart. After Mrs March and four sisters delivered Christmas breakfast to the poorer Hummel family, they had to eat bread and milk themselves. Joe and Meg go to the party without a decent dress. Amy has to wear old, ill-fitting clothes left over from her cousin, and Beth's piano keys are yellow and tone-deaf.

Laurie, however, has never experienced such privation, and his home is "On the other side was a stately stone mansion, plainly betokening every sort of comfort and luxury, from the big coach house and well-kept grounds to the conservatory and the glimpses of lovely things one caught between the rich curtains"(Alcott, 2004, p. 46). The huge gap in material condition raises a lot of rumor. For people like Aunt March, Laurie is the best husband choice for women. However, Jo cannot accept him. "I don't like favors; they oppress and make me feel like a slave. I'd rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent" (Alcott, 2004, p.63). Under the secular eyes, Jo gives birth to rebellious ideas and refusing Laurie is evidence of her independent personality. So, whether she loves Laurie or not? When she realizes her lonely stasis, she finds that "even Teddy had deserted her" (Alcott, 2004, p.497). The feeling of love and dependency must exist between them. But her strong self-esteem impels them away from each other.

Jo marries Mr. Bhaer because there are a lot of common between them, which is different

between Jo and Laurie she thinks. Their similar family background and tight economic situation soothe her sensitive mind. Jo's father has lost his fortune and earns very little. Her mother has to hard work and the two older children, so Meg and Joe, have to go out to earn money. Mr. Bhaer, from Berlin, is even worse off. As a teacher, Mr. Bhaer often wears patched clothes and shoes. With little income, he has to support two young nephews whose parents are dead, which makes his life even more difficult. The choice of Mr. Bhaer will greatly take care of her self-esteem without worldly scrutiny.

Although Jo's choice of Mr. Bhaer is a rejection of traditional values at that time, this choice is full of compromise. Even Jo struggles to not marry and refuses Laurie many times. But when Jo eventually finds out all her sisters are married and looks like they are happy, she finds she is afraid of a sense of loneliness. So, Jo marries Bhaer who, as the Germanic and ursine connotations his name suggests, is the heavy authority figure necessary to offset Jo's own considerable talent and vitality. In exchange for German lessons, she will darn his socks; at their school, he will do all the teaching and she will do the housework; he regards her work about her family numbers as sensational literature with timely warning. Mr. Bhaer begins to guide Jo to learn to accept female identity through the way of being married. This seems to be the encouragement and support for Jo's female consciousness, but in fact, Jo has been successfully disciplined by traditional Phallogocentrism.

Foucault points out that modern power are always combined with knowledge to construct seemingly neutral scientific discourses, but in fact, these discourses contain a series of criteria to regulate women's behavior, for example, the behavior of modern women must conform to the criteria contained in the biological essence category of "female". Therefore, writing is male's work and Jo encounters various difficulties coming from male editors. As men take control of making rules, Mr. Bhaer disapproves of her scribbling. His inappreciation hinders the development of Jo's writing career and eventually turns Jo into a cosmic wife and mother, which seems to be doomed to Jo's destination. After being disciplined by male power, Jo completely loses the ambition and spirit of teenage time and also deviates from her original intention that she once preferred to dress up as a boy - refusing the bondage and deprivation of marriage. Like her sisters except Beth, and like other women, she is eventually stripped of her name and becomes Mrs. Bhaer. Therefore, Jo's marriage choice is a choice under certain circumstances of struggle-she chooses a man who shares common interests with her, and her marriage is finally a compromise to male power -- women must get married.

The Marriage of Amy March

In *Little Women*, "only Amy is willing to conform to the social standards and abide by the expectations laid on her" (Sánchez Lorente, 2023, p.9). She is a person who is good at using rules and transforms herself according to changes in the environment and is eager to join the upper society and is envious of the British aristocracy. She is aware of the role of women in society during that time and recognizes the importance of having a man to support them to advance. Marrying a rich man and improving the situation of herself and her family is the best choice for her. She is so practical that greatly frees herself from the traditional image of a submissive women. Just like what Prasad (1994)

says, "Alcott reveals that a girl who strives for true womanhood will make more progress than one who rejects tradition outright" (p.38). In a society where men hold power, for a woman to have a successful, albeit challenging, aspiration, she must be agreeable and conform to a qualified woman. It is because of her deep understanding of women's status that she can make full use of this weakness to break the incarceration. The identity of females is not the weakness but the devices that can benefit her and accomplish the goal of entering the upper class.

But she gives up rich and kind Fred and finally follows her heart and marries her neighbor Laurie. Her decision to marry was not primarily motivated by financial gain. This is evident in the fact that when Laurie wastes his time, she criticizes him; but when he is striving towards a fulfilling life, he gets Amy's genuine affection. "She is using her charms as a woman to get what she wants, not in a way where she objectifies and interiorizes herself, but subtly manipulates the situation to steer it in her favor" (Sánchez Lorente, 2023, p.10). As a positive and refined egoist, Amy rebels against what Mrs. March teaches as a meek and beautiful woman. At the same time, she is the earliest daughter to leave home and knows women's living conditions even though she overemphasizes the importance of men and money, but her self-consciousness awakening is earlier than her sister Jo.

However, the realities of Amy and Jo's lives differ significantly from their cherished aspirations. Neither of them aspires to a purely domestic existence. Amy wants "to be an artist, and go to Rome, and do fine pictures and be the best artist in the whole world" and Jo wants to "write books, and get rich and famous" (Alcott, 2004, p.156). However, when Amy ventures to Rome to actively pursue her ambitions, she begins to realize the distinction between talent and genius, recognizing that she possesses only the former. As a result, she decides that in the future, her involvement with art will primarily be as a patroness, encouraging and supporting the work of others. After realizing the cruel fact, however, she pinned all her hopes on men and attempted to achieve upward social mobility through marriage. She begins to apply her mother's dictum that "to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman" (Alcott, 2004, p.116), far better than being a famous artist. Although Amy never completely gives up her art, she places it in the service of home and family (Fetterley, 1979, p.372). In the end, the youngest and most rebellious daughter also returned to the family under the arrangement of Alcott.

Conclusion

Through the window of family, Alcott explores the value and situation of women themselves. The different marriage choices of the female characters in the novel are not only related to family education but also inseparable from the social and cultural reality they face. Through the characters' choice of marriage, the author aims to make trade-offs between ideal expectations and moral norms, gender identity, reading market, and negotiate between female self-worth and traditional pressures.

In examining each of these marriages, it becomes evident that the heroines gradually lose their sense of self and become absorbed into their respective families. Despite possessing some degree of independent self-awareness, the heroines find themselves trapped within the confines of a patriarchal culture, unable to break free from its vicious cycle. This portrayal reflects the harsh reality of

women's oppression within a patriarchal society. Within the context of marriage, these heroines' identities are completely determined by their husbands. They are reduced to being mere accessories to their husbands, conforming to societal expectations and adhering to the image of the ideal wife and mother. Consequently, women's individuality is forced to fade into the background within the realm of marriage. Under the pervasive influence of male dominance ideology, women themselves inadvertently contribute to the erasure of their own female identities.

It is important to note that the author does harbor certain idealistic notions when it comes to the institution of marriage and the concept of love. These ideals may reveal inherent ideological limitations and a degree of detachment from the realities faced by women in society. While advocating for women's empowerment, Alcott's portrayal of unrealistic fantasies surrounding marriage and love highlights the complexities of her perspective. It can be argued that these contradictions and limitations in Alcott's thinking serve as a reflection of the broader social context in which she lived. The influence of societal expectations and the deeply ingrained gender norms of the era undoubtedly influenced her views, leading to inconsistencies in her approach to addressing women's issues. However, this should not overshadow the author's genuine recognition of the importance of women's self-awareness and their need for independence in a patriarchal world.

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