



Cultural Dynamics and Feminine Identity in Little Women Movie (2019): A Study of Power Relations

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ABSTRACT

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This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the 2019 film adaptation of "Little Women" directed by Greta Gerwig, focusing on the cultural dynamics and feminine identities presented through the lens of power relations. The study examines how the film navigates the complexities of sisterly bonds, individual aspirations, and societal expectations, particularly within a patriarchal society. Drawing on feminist theories and historical context, the research highlights the agency and autonomy displayed by the March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—in their quests for personal fulfillment and professional achievements. The analysis reveals that the film's portrayal of sisterly support systems challenges prevailing gender stereotypes and reinforces the importance of women's solidarity. By contextualizing these themes within both historical and contemporary settings, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about feminist perspectives and media representation. Ultimately, it argues that "Little Women" remains a powerful feminist text, inspiring new generations with its depiction of empowered women navigating complex power dynamics in their pursuit of identity and happiness.

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1. Introduction

In a society, gender plays a crucial role in social interactions since it enables individuals to relate to one another. Community members are marked by their gender identification in their social life, which identifies the social function they should perform (Farida, 2016). The exploration of cultural dynamics and feminine identity in contemporary media remains a critical area of research, particularly as societal norms and gender roles continue to evolve. Women faced several challenges during the 19th century, which was characterized by rigid gender norms, the emergence of feminist theories, and the upholding of patriarchal structures. Women at this time were mostly confined to the home sphere, and social standards that placed an importance on morality, marriage, and motherhood shaped their identities.

Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of "Little Women" serves as a significant case study in this discourse, reflecting ongoing concerns regarding the representation of women in film and the broader implications of these portrayals on societal perceptions of gender. Researchers today grapple with issues such as the persistence of patriarchal structures that limit women's agency, the intersectionality of gender with class and race, and the impact of media narratives on public understanding of femininity. Despite notable advancements in women's rights, significant disparities persist, including wage gaps, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and challenges to reproductive rights. The film encapsulates these tensions by presenting the March sisters' diverse experiences and aspirations against the backdrop of a society that often constrains female potential.

In order to aid the researcher in their analysis of the film, this study draws on a few earlier studies that share commonalities with the subject of analysis, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. First research by (Tjahjono, 2024) titled “Indonesian Women’s Perception of Feminism in The Movie *Little Women*”. This research also examines how Indonesian women, primarily from the perspective of the March sisters, comprehend and react to the movie’s portrayal of feminism.

Second, a journal titled “Feminism in the *Little Women* Movie Reviewed from The Aspects of Career, Love, and Independence” (Tria Hapsari & Evy Tri, 2020) is concerned about the feminism shown in the movie *Little Women*, particularly from any different aspects of career, love, and independence as its say from the title. This study help me to know how those different aspects are represented in the *Little Women* Movie which has a time setting in the 19th century. This study also describes the impact of gender equality teaching and learning activities in schools during the 19th century.

The third one is a journal by (Sutrisno et al., 2023) titled “An Analysis of How Women’s Struggle Portrayed from The Main Character in The Movie *Little Women* (2019)” which as its say from the title, this study focused on the main character point of view. Her name is Jo March in pursuing her dream during the 19th century. This study also shown a few of problems that Jo March faces retrieved to gender stereotypes during her journey to pursue her dreams.

Forth, a journal titled “Gender Discrimination in *Little Women* Movie (2019) by Greta Gerwig: as a Feminism Study” by (Mutoharoh, 2019) that says feminism is a common thing that happen to women in their daily lives. This study focused on the gender discrimination and it can be found in any different form of cultural, social, and economic. This study also focused on Jo’s point of view for seeing how she deserved injustice for being independent.

This study builds on previous studies by integrating an interdisciplinary approach that combines feminist theories with sociological and psychological frameworks with a thorough analysis of sister bonds. This research acknowledges the changing conceptions of femininity during the American Civil War era and contextualizes the occurrences within that historical framework. Additionally, this research inclusive representation analysis covers all three sisters; Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy ensuring that every aspect of feminine identity is covered, in contrast to other analyses that concentrate just on certain characters like Jo March. This study provides a comprehensive knowledge of power relations and cultural dynamics through methodological rigor, contextual depth, cross-disciplinary insights, and empirical evidence derived directly from movie sequences. Furthermore, by pointing out patterns or changes in representation across time, comparison studies between various adaptations or versions bolster this study. Therefore, by offering a comprehensive examination of how these issues are still relevant now, this study greatly adds to the continuing conversations regarding feminism and media representation.

This study also examines how the movie presents the March sisters’ individual and collective identities, emphasizing their struggles against patriarchal norms and their own dreams and goals. This also explores power relations within the family and society, including how the characters against the gender roles and societal expectations in the 19th century. In this study also shown how this movie contributes to ongoing feminist discourses and inspires feminist perspectives nowadays.

2. Method

A research strategy that seeks to understand phenomena as they occur naturally in settings where they would typically occur is the definition of qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). This method aims to give a thorough explanation of the research topic and enable the researcher to delve deeply into many facets of the subject. The methods used in this study is descriptive qualitative. This method uses character observations and analysis to define the cultural dynamics and feminine identity *Little Women* Movie (2019).

The data used in this research is taken from *Little Women* Movie, a movie by Greta Gerwig released in 2019 which is based on Louisa May Alcott's book with the same title. These scenes serve as the main source of data for analysis. The researcher then uses information from books, journals, thesis, and other study-related references as supporting data.

In this study, data collection steps includes; watching and comprehending the scenes of Little Women Movie. The researcher choose the scenes that contains the representation of cultural dynamics and feminine identity within the characters dialogues as a support. The researcher also screen capturing those scenes of the movie and then take notes for the dialogues details.

3. Result and Discussion

The examination of Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of Little Women Movie provides valuable insights into the cultural dynamics and feminine identities portrayed by the March sisters. In this section, the researcher will put some important dialogues and how they represented the cultural dynamics and feminine identity in the 19th century. This section also shows how these few important dialogues not only summarize the March sisters' character journey but also challenge prevailing stereotypes about women's roles in the 19th century.

According to (Bravo et al., 2014) some people think that men control every aspect of women's lives and that they are less intelligent and of lesser rank than men. It is clear that men are more powerful and have a wider range of influence than women, who are obligated to stay at home.

At the beginning of this movie, it can be seen from movie scene at minutes (00:03:53 - 00:03:58) Mr. Dashwood, the publication head of the publication office that Jo submitted her story say that if the main character of her story is a girl, make sure the character ended by marrying someone or dead. Jo looks confused here. She realized at that time women are only faced with two choices, going married or death. If a woman does not marry, then she just has to die. And Jo had to accept the harsh reality of what happened at that time. As we have seen, the scene already shows that the cultural dynamics that women had to accept at the time. Women just had to get married and had no other life choices.

The next scene is represented about the difficulty of proper education for women in the 19th century. It can be seen in movie scene at minutes (00:39:32 - 00:39:39) Mr. John Brooke say that women being taught at home is much more proper. Which is sad because at that time women that want to study at school also do not have a proper education. And it also confirmed by Meg March, saying that the schools for women are so poor. It really shows how low the status of women was at that time.

Little Women Movie also shows how much higher the status of men was at that time. It proven by the movie scene at minutes (01:04:14 - 01:04:30) there's Amy March and Laurie who had a conversation. Laurie said that what women are allowed into the club of geniuses and Amy answered it was The Brontës. The Brontës were 19th century role models for become writers, which is weird at that time because it commonly did by men. And then Laurie asked Amy again by asking whose declares as a genius, Amy answered it's men. It also shows that only men are allowed to study to become geniuses.

Furthermore, in those days women were rarely allowed to earn a living. Even if they could, the money they earned was not theirs to keep. And we can see the prove from the movie scene at minutes (01:05:53 - 01:06:10) which still Amy and Laurie who had a conversation. Amy said as a woman there is no way for her to make her own money. And it also not enough to earn a living or to support her whole family. Amy also said that even if she had her own money, which she don't—the money would belong to her husband the moment she got married. If she had children, they would be her husband's not hers. They would be his property. According to (Rabia et al., 2019) some people think that men control every aspect of women's lives and that they are less intelligent and of lesser rank than men. It is clear that men are more powerful and have a wider range of influence than women, who are obligated to stay at home.

There is also a scene where Jo gives her mother some money to buy a train ticket to visit her sick father. It's from the movie scene at minutes (01:12:28 - 01:13:00) and when her mother asks her where the money came from, Jo takes off her head covering and shows that she cut her hair short almost like a man. It was a brave step taken by Jo for the sake of her family's survival. By cutting her hair like a man, Jo also showed that she was going against the societal norms that applied to women in the 19th century.

In this movie, it's clearly shows that Jo doesn't want to get married. And of course, when her sister—Meg was about to get married, Jo naturally persuaded her sister to stay with her sisters at home. It's from the movie scene at minutes (01:32:00 - 01:32:04) she said that her sister will be bored of her husband in two years and the sisterhood will be interesting forever. Jo also shows that female relationships over romantic ones.

The last one is a scene that proves how sick the society was. At minutes (01:42:30 - 01:42:46) Jo said that women have minds and souls as well as just hearts, and women got ambition and talent as well as just beauty. She is feeling sick of people saying that love is all a woman is fit for. As we can see, Jo saying that not without a reason. In this movie shows how the society continued to pressure women to marry, even to marry rich people so that their lives would be prosperous.

It doesn't mean the stereotype that women should marry is over now. In fact in today's reality, there are still many people who say that women should get married. Regardless of age, sometimes some parents also tell their daughters to get married immediately. If even the young ones are told to get married, let alone the age at which they think they are no longer young and must get married and have children. Women have the right to determine their own path in life. Marrying, working, having children and pursuing dreams, women deserve that opportunity. Women deserve equal status with men. Women also have the right to have the same freedom as men in any aspect.

By the end of the movie, Jo had achieved her dream. Publishing a book and establishing a decent school for everyone who wants to learn. Jo also founded a school for girls and boys, not just for girls. Meanwhile, Meg and Amy, who decided to get married, live happily with their respective families.

From the research results above, we can conclude that March sisters are having their own problems. In this section, researchers found several problems that occurred in the 19th century and were clearly depicted in the movie *Little Women*.

Women should married, According to (Dwikurniarini, 2020) taking care of children, maintaining homes, and carrying out other household tasks are frequently associated with women. This highlights the fact that women's function belong in the house and have no bearing on public activities. Women's biological reproductive processes such as childbirth and breastfeeding are always linked to domestic work. Meanwhile we know that having children is a natural function of a woman, but at that time it is considered as a woman's inherent obligation (Ghufran et al., 2020, p. 3). This shows that at that time, what was already created or formed for women was something that could not be changed. Women could not to not get married, women could not work other than taking care of children and the home, even women could not to not give birth. What we have to change is the mindset towards women's nature. We should not view women as mere objects. Because basically, the function of women is more than just that. Women are also entitled to their human rights. Women have the right to decide who they want to live with and who they want to be. Women have the right to be fully human without having to fulfill the standards that have become the mindset of society.

Women rarely get proper facilities in terms of education, In the 19th century, there is very few women were allowed to study in schools. That is why this movie shows that women should learn from home, made clear by a statement that says that "only because schools for women are so poor". It shows that the schools at that time were not suitable for women. Of course, it made it impossible for women to go to school as they should. In that century, women were indeed very limited in their movements. That is the cause of the mindset of people who think that only men can go to school and have smart brains. At that time, women were also considered weak and did not have the strength to solve all the problems that existed. They thought that it was men who could solve them and considered men as rulers and women as second-class human beings (Dwikurniarini, 2020). It means that no matter how far or how high a woman tries to study, it will be meaningless in the society at that time. Women's status will always be low and unequal to men.

Lack of gender equality, from some of the points discussed earlier, it is clear that at that time the patriarchal culture was still very clear in its existence. In the movie *Little Women*, it has been represented very clearly. Starting from Jo who had difficulty publishing her book. It doesn't stop there, when Jo has succeeded in getting Mr. Dashwood as the head of the publisher to publish her

book Jo still has to argue with Mr. Dashwood about how much royalty Jo will receive. At that time, of course, women also experienced limitations in making money. This is also evidenced by the scene when Amy says that women have no way to earn money. Amy also said that if she had money, it would belong to her husband when she got married. Followed by Amy's words saying that if she has a child, the child will fully belong to the father. It shows that at that time women and men did not have equal human rights, only men could work and have money.

Women have to look feminine, In the 19th century, women were always expected to look feminine in terms of their physique, behavior, and role in the family. As you can see, all the scenes in this movie are set in a significant time. In that era, we can see from many references that women were definitely dressed elegantly like a royal princess. In this movie, all the women wear dresses that are made of soft materials and form curves that symbolize elegance. Because in those days, if women did not look like that, they were often considered immodest. Women were also required to be a complete woman. They must be gentle, submissive to men, and even women must remain in their nature as the points above that have explained about the conditions of women's roles at that time. The obligation for women to look feminine in 19th century America was a reflection of social and cultural norms that were deeply rooted in a patriarchal society. Despite the pressure to adhere to such standards, the rise of the feminism movement began to challenge this view and paved the way for changes in the way women were viewed in society.

One of the figures of feminism who came from America was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In that era, she fought to change society's view of the role of women and demanded recognition of their rights. According to (Indaryadi, 2022) Elizabeth Cady Stanton's greatest wish was for society to acknowledge the presence of women. It is apparent discrimination when women's rights and existence are combined with those of their partners, or husbands. In actuality, the men she views as possessing broad perspectives on rights and responsibilities—such as those who fought to free the slaves—remain true to the traditions of the previous society, which maintains male superiority and views women as inferior. Behind the curtain and the confines of marriage, these men—who are purportedly fighting for justice and the elimination of slavery—remain silent against women.

The other one is Susan B. Anthony was a journalist and activist who worked to advance women's equality, especially the ability to vote. She was well-known for her tactics for promoting legislative changes, including starting the publication "The Revolution" and spearheading campaigns and petitions to increase voting rights. Anthony collaborated frequently with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the two of them came to represent the American suffragette cause (Nurmila, 2022).

Another figure of feminism is Lucretia Mott. According to (Nurmila, 2022) Mott actively participated in a number of conventions and campaigned to free women from prejudice and end it. She participated in the founding of groups that fought for women's voting rights, including the American Women Suffrage Association and the National Women Suffrage Association, and she co-signed the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments.

There is a complicated interplay between past efforts, current societal standards, and ongoing obstacles that impact women's aspirations today about gender equality and feminism. Expectations from women as they pursue equality and fight for their rights in many areas of life are a reflection of both their recognition of enduring obstacles and their desire for advancement. Achieving equality in the workplace is one of the main goals for women nowadays. Even though they represent almost half of the workforce worldwide, women continue to confront major gaps in possibilities for growth, leadership roles, and income. Women worldwide make about 51 cents for every dollar earned by men, making the gender wage gap a persistent problem. Many women anticipate that companies will expand their representation in positions of decision-making and enact stronger rules that support equal pay for equal work. This requirement recognizes the value that many perspectives offer to leadership in addition to being fair. Nowadays, as they juggle job and family obligations, women also want a better work-life balance. The COVID-19 pandemic made already-existing disparities worse by forcing many women to juggle work and additional caring duties. Policies regarding parental leave, childcare assistance, and flexible work schedules are becoming more widely recognized as critical elements of workplace equity. Employers are expected by women to acknowledge and support their dual responsibilities as caretakers and professionals.

Another critical expectation is a safe working environment free from sexual harassment and discrimination. A staggering 77% of those who believe more work is needed on gender equality cite sexual harassment as a major obstacle. Women expect stronger legal protections and organizational policies that not only address harassment but also create a culture of accountability. This includes training programs for employees at all levels to foster an environment where respect and equality are prioritized.

Expectations are rising for more women to hold leadership positions in a number of different industries. In corporate boards, governmental offices, and other high-level roles, women are disproportionately underrepresented. In addition to having the role model effect, having more women in leadership positions promotes more equal decision-making procedures. Women anticipate that companies will aggressively seek diversity programs that advance deserving female applicants to positions of leadership. Women's expectations on gender equality are not uniform; they differ greatly depending on racial background, financial class, sexual orientation, and place of residence. This must be acknowledged. Systemic inequality and gender discrimination often create additional hurdles for women from underprivileged groups. For example, compared to their white colleagues, women of color may face more obstacles in the form of income discrepancies and career prospects. As a result, modern feminism needs to adopt an intersectional perspective that acknowledges these various perspectives and promotes equity on several fronts.

The aspirations that women have for gender equality are greatly influenced by their education. Women who have access to high-quality education are empowered because they get the knowledge and abilities needed to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, differences in educational possibilities persist according to socioeconomic position and gender. Women want schools to put gender equality first by encouraging girls to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) degrees and eliminating prejudices that prevent young women from choosing particular professions.

Women's expectations are still influenced by cultural views on gender roles. Conventional beliefs frequently suggest that women should put their families before their careers or adhere to particular social expectations of femininity. These days, a lot of women reject these prejudices and hope that society would change to accept different identities and lifestyle choices without passing judgment. To combat negative preconceptions and encourage acceptance of different life pathways, institutions, communities, and individuals must work together to bring about this cultural transition.

In conclusion, a wide range of issues such as workplace parity, safety from harassment, work-life balance, representation in leadership roles, access to education, cultural change, and intersectionality, are all part of what women demand from gender equality today. All parties involved must actively listen to one another and take real steps to advance genuine gender equality when these expectations change in tandem with societal shifts. In order to go forward, it is necessary to acknowledge previous successes and make a commitment to tackling current issues head-on and with utmost urgency.

4. Conclusion

Throughout the 19th century, women's identities were formed by patriarchal frameworks that prioritized marriage and domesticity, especially to the cultural dynamics around femininity. But this time also set the stage for feminist action and philosophy, which would challenge these standards in later decades. It is necessary to comprehend these historical settings in order to analyze how women's identities are portrayed in literature and movies today, including the ones in "Little Women." The fact that many cultural stereotypes still exist despite the progress made toward gender equality when we consider these subjects in the present underscores the continued importance of talking about feminism, gender roles, cultural dynamics, and patriarchal institutions.

The movie emphasizes how women were frequently perceived through the prism of their marital status, with their identity and value being strongly associated with their responsibilities as mothers and spouses. This expectation reinforced the idea that finding a suitable husband was a prerequisite for personal pleasure, in addition to restricting women's freedom. The insufficient opportunities for education that women in this era had are also highlighted in the film. Even if some characters, like Jo March, want to follow their dreams of being independent and writers, women's access to higher

education and career advancement is limited by larger societal norms. The story demonstrates how education was frequently seen as superfluous for women because they were more equipped for taking care of their homes than for pursuing intellectual interests. In addition to limiting individual potential, the lack of educational resources maintained a cycle of dependency on men for social and financial stability. The movie also depicts a world in which men ruled women's life, determining their potential and choices. It also shows us how women's freedom to express themselves freely and seek jobs outside of traditional expectations was restricted by the tight definition of gender roles. Moreover, the obligation for women to present themselves in a feminine manner is vividly portrayed through the characters' experiences. Little Woman Movie also illustrates how societal norms influenced both behavior and appearance—women were expected to embody ideals of beauty and grace that reinforced their roles within the domestic sphere. This pressure to conform to traditional femininity frequently clashed with personal aspirations for independence. In the end, "Little Women" is a call for reform from a modern day as well as a historical perspective. It challenges prevailing conventions about marriage, education, and femininity in order to highlight the importance of gender equality. The movie promotes valuing women for who they are outside of their duties as spouses or mothers by showcasing their goals, abilities, and social achievements. Viewers are encouraged by "Little Women" to reevaluate antiquated ideas of femininity and embrace a more equal vision for women's roles in society by witnessing the tenacity and fortitude of its female characters.

In conclusion, "Little Women" encapsulates the complex interplay between cultural dynamics and feminine identity during the 19th century. Through its exploration of marriage obligations, educational limitations, gender inequality, and societal expectations regarding appearance, the film emphasize the challenges faced by women in their pursuit of autonomy and self-fulfillment. As we reflect on these themes today, it becomes evident that while progress has been made toward gender equality, many cultural stereotypes persist—highlighting the ongoing relevance of discussions around feminism and women's rights in contemporary society.

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