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College of Education
Department of English



Women's Empowerment in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women

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Prepared by:

Fatima Ali Ziara

Supervised by:

Asst. Prof. Afrah Abdul Jabbar

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

{ فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِّنْكُمْ مِّمَّنْ ذَكَرَ أَوْ
أُنْتَى بَعْضُكُمْ مِّنْ بَعْضٍ }

(آل عمران : الآية ١٩٥)

صَدَقَ اللَّهُ الْعَلِيِّ الْعَظِيمِ

Dedication

To..

who has gone beyond the veil, for his endless and infinite love,
dedication, and support for his family;

To..

our mothers, who never get tired of being the world's coolest mums, for
their blessings in every choice that we make and every action that we
take; To every blunt person with loving hearts

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Abstract

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) presents a nuanced exploration of women's empowerment by challenging 19th-century gender roles and advocating for personal and intellectual growth. Through the diverse experiences of the March sisters, the novel redefines traditional expectations, illustrating that women's fulfillment can be found in independence, education, or family life. Jo March emerges as a symbol of defiance against patriarchal norms, while Marmee provides a model of strength and wisdom. The novel also underscores the importance of education and equal opportunities, emphasizing that self-development is key to women's autonomy (Showalter, 1988). Alcott's progressive ideals engage with early feminist thought, advocating for women's right to choose their own paths despite societal constraints (Elbert, 1987; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). By portraying a spectrum of empowerment, *Little Women* remains a timeless text that continues to inspire discussions on gender equality and self-determination.

Introduction

In Louisa, “Little women” in Alcott is a seminal work in American literature that has a profound impact on the representation of women in literature. Written in the 19th century, it challenges traditional gender roles and explores themes of freedom, personal development, and social change. Alcott's life and experiences played an important role in shaping the novel, as she was deeply influenced by her commitment to her progressive upbringing and social reform. “Little women” reflects the social norms of its time while simultaneously criticizing the boundaries placed on women, especially through its depiction of the four March sisters, each representing different aspects of femininity.

This research focuses on the subject of women's empowerment in the novel, examining how Alcott redefined women and contributed to early feminist discourse. By analyzing the characteristics of the novel and its leading characters, this study will uncover how March becomes a symbol of freedom, how Marmee's guidance serves as a role model, and how Alcott's criticism challenges patriarchal expectations. The analysis will also highlight its role in the novel's feminist subtexts and the widespread social and cultural movements of the time, which not only mark younger women as an emerging historical force but also as a powerful call for social change and women's empowerment.

Chapter One

1.	The Author's Life and Works
1.1	Characteristics of novel in 19 century
1.2	Summary "little women"
1.3	Major characters

1. Author's life and works

Louisa May Alcott (1832–1888) was a pioneering American writer best known for *Little Women* (1868), a novel that reflects both her personal experiences and her progressive views on women's roles in society (Matteson, 2007). Born into a family deeply involved in transcendentalist thought, Alcott was influenced by intellectual figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (Saxton, 1977).

Her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was a prominent educator and philosopher who emphasized self-reliance, individualism, and moral education. However, his unorthodox teaching methods and financial struggles placed significant pressure on Louisa and her family, shaping her early ambitions and work ethic (Showalter, 1991).

1.2. Early Life and Influences

Alcott's childhood was marked by intellectual stimulation but also economic hardship. Growing up in Boston and later Concord, Massachusetts, she was exposed to the ideals of transcendentalism, which emphasized personal growth and social reform (Saxton, 1977). Her family's financial difficulties forced her to take on various jobs, including teaching, sewing, and domestic work, which later informed her writing about working-class struggles (Matteson, 2007).

During the American Civil War, Alcott worked as a nurse in a Union hospital in Georgetown, an experience that profoundly shaped her perspective on suffering and resilience (Alcott, 1863). She documented these experiences in *Hospital Sketches* (1863), a collection of letters offering a vivid and personal account of wartime medical conditions. This work was well received, praised for its realism and emotional depth, and helped establish her literary reputation (Pizer, 1984).

1.3. Literary Career and Little Women

Before gaining literary fame, Alcott wrote sensational stories under the pseudonym A.M. Barnard. These early works, filled with intrigue, revenge, and gothic elements, contrasted sharply with the moral and domestic themes of her later novels (Showalter, 1991). However, it was *Little Women* that cemented her legacy. Published in 1868, the novel is a semi-autobiographical account of her own family life, following the lives of the March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—as they navigate societal expectations and personal aspirations (Matteson, 2007). The protagonist, Jo March, is widely recognized as an alter ego for Alcott, reflecting her own struggles with gender norms and her aspirations as a writer (Saxton, 1977).

Written during the American Realism period, *Little Women* diverged from the idealized portrayals of women in earlier literature, offering a more nuanced and relatable depiction of female ambition and domestic life (Pizer, 1984). Alcott's use of everyday experiences, humor, and emotional depth made the novel an enduring classic (Matteson, 2007).

Following its success, Alcott wrote sequels including *Good Wives* (1869), *Little Men* (1871), and *Jo's Boys* (1886), which continued the story of the March family. These works explored themes of education, morality, and the challenges faced by women seeking independence in a male-dominated society (Showalter, 1991).

1.4. Feminist Ideals and Social Activism

Beyond her literary contributions, Alcott was an active advocate for social reform, particularly in the areas of women's rights and abolitionism. She was involved in the women's suffrage movement and became the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Massachusetts, after women were granted limited voting rights in 1879 (Showalter, 1991).

1.1. Characteristics of novel in 19 century

1.1.1. Realism and domestic imagination

The novels from the 1900s, especially in America, often focus on practical illustrations of normal life. Younger women follow the *Mars sisters - me*, as follows, *Bath and Amy* - as they grow up, struggle and pursue their dreams in a sensible way (Elbert, 1987). Unlike the romantic stories of past literature, *Alakot* portrays general stories, financial difficulties and personal bounce. It is consistent with home fiction style, which emphasized family life and middle -class values (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

1.1.2. Morality and preaching subject

Many novels from the nineteenth century aim to teach moral classes. In younger women, every sister learns values such as humility, endurance and generosity. For example, as a teacher to manipulate the mood, and Amy feels the importance of goodness of vanity (Showalter, 2010). This reflects the preaching purpose of literature in the Victorian era, which was expected to shape novels to shape character and virtue (Spencer, 1996).

1.1.3. Feminism and changing gender roles

Although 19th century society played strict roles in women, small women require subtle conditions for these criteria. The most famous man or woman in *March*, *alakot*, rejects traditional expectations she writes a lot of money, and refuses to marry for reputation (Matteson, 2007).

It is consistent with overdue feminist movements from the 1900s, making younger women a precursor to modern feminist literature (Solatter, 2010).

1.1.4. Sentimentalism and Emotional Appeal

Nineteenth-century novels frequently used sentimental storytelling to evoke deep emotions. In *Little Women*, moments like Beth's illness and dying are designed to create empathy and ethical reflection (Elbert, 1987). This sentimental style turned into a common in literature of the duration, reinforcing values of love, sacrifice, and family bonds (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

1.1.5. Social Commentary and Class Issues

While *Little Women* is a personal tale, it additionally subtly reviews social elegance differences and gender boundaries. The March own family struggles with financial problems, yet they value tough paintings over wealth (Matteson, 2007). This displays the era's worries about magnificence of mobility, the role of girls, and the significance of education (Showalter, 2010).

Alcott's *Little Women* embodies many key traits of nineteenth-century novel practical home life, moral coaching, feminist thoughts, sentimentalism, and social statement. These factors made the radical a lasting conventional that continues to influence literature nowadays.

1.2. Summary “little women”

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868 p. 69) is a landmark work in 19th-century American literature, offering a rich historical perspective on family, personal growth, and gender roles during the American Civil War (Elbert, 1984). The novel follows the lives of the four March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—who navigate societal expectations, personal ambitions, and family bonds within a rapidly changing cultural landscape (Keyser, 1999).

1.2.1. Plot Overview

Set in a modest home in Massachusetts, *Little Women* begins with the March sisters and their mother, Marmee, experiencing their first Christmas

without their father, who is serving as a chaplain in the Union Army (Saxton, 1977). Despite financial hardships, the family maintains a strong sense of generosity and resilience. Their wealthy neighbor, Mr. Laurence, and his grandson, Laurie, become close friends, enriching the sisters' lives with new experiences and relationships (Matteson, 2007).

As the story unfolds, each sister faces personal challenges:

- Meg marries John Brooke, Laurie's tutor, and learns to navigate the complexities of domestic life (Showalter, 1991).
- Jo, an independent and aspiring writer, moves to New York, where she meets Professor Friedrich Bhaer. Their relationship develops into a marriage, and they later establish a school for boys (Trites, 2007).
- Beth struggles with illness following a battle with scarlet fever. Her early death profoundly impacts her family, especially Jo (Reisen, 2009).

Amy pursues her artistic aspirations, travels to Europe, and ultimately marries Laurie, completing the family's journey through love, loss, and self-discovery (Bedell, 1980).

1.2.2. Themes and Cultural Context

Little Women embodies several defining characteristics of 19th-century literature: Realism and Domestic Life: The novel provides a realistic depiction of everyday family life, emphasizing personal growth and moral development (Pizer, 1984).

Moral Lessons: Alcott incorporates ethical themes through the sisters' experiences, reflecting the era's belief in literature as a means of moral instruction (Keyser, 1999).

Gender and Societal Expectations : The novel critiques traditional gender roles, particularly through Jo's character, who resists conventional expectations for women in favor of independence and ambition (Fetterley, 1978).

Alcott's personal experiences strongly influenced the novel. Raised in a financially struggling but intellectually rich family—her father, Amos Bronson Alcott, was a prominent transcendentalist, and their family friends included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—she had a unique perspective on education and self-reliance (Matteson, 2007). Her experiences as a nurse during the Civil War also contributed to the novel's realistic portrayal of hardship and perseverance (Reisen, 2009).

1.2.3. Reception and Legacy

Published in two volumes (1868 and 1869), *Little Women* received widespread acclaim for its authentic portrayal of family life and its progressive depiction of female ambition (Showalter, 2010). The novel has been translated into numerous languages and adapted into various films, television series, and stage productions, reinforcing its lasting cultural impact (Trites, 2007).

Alcott's work is celebrated for challenging 19th-century gender norms while offering a timeless exploration of personal identity and family bonds. Through its enduring influence, *Little Women* remains a foundational text in American literature and feminist literary studies (Saxton, 1977).

1.3. Major Characters

Margaret "Meg" March

As the oldest sister, Meg is 16 years old at the beginning of the novel. She is depicted as responsible, kind, and nurturing, often assuming a motherly role among her siblings. Meg accepts traditional domestic roles and, in some accounts

, acts as a caregiver for a wealthy family. She eventually marries John Brooke, Laurie's tutor , and has twins, Daisy and Demi.

Josephine " Jo " March

At the age of 15, the second oldest sister, Jo, is introduced at the beginning of the story. She is depicted as strong -willed , independent, and passionate about writing. Jo challenges social norms and aspires to be a writer-a trait that reflects various themes throughout Alcott's work . She later marries Professor Friedrich Bhaer , and together they open a school for boys.

Elizabeth "Beth" March

Beth is the third sister of the March family , who is 13 years old at the start of the story. She is known for her gentle , shy, and selfless nature, possessing a profound love for music, especially piano. Her delicate health is a significant concern throughout the narrative ; after contracting scarlet fever, Beth suffers from lasting complications that ultimately lead to her death-a tragedy that deeply impacts the entire family.

Amy Curtis March

The youngest sister, Amy, is 12 years old at the beginning of the novel. She is artistic, ambitious, and very conscious of social status and appearance. Despite her earlier pride and materialism, Amy matures significantly throughout the story . She travels to Europe, hones her artistic talents, and eventually marries Laurie. Her daughter, named Elizabeth, is named in honor of her late Aunt Beth.

Chapter Two

2.	Jo March as a Symbol of Independence
2.1	Feminism and Social Change
2.2	Women's Empowerment in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women

2. Jo March as a Symbol of Independence

Jo March, the protagonist of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), is defined by her bold, headstrong personality and her resistance to the societal norms of 19th-century womanhood. She is a fiercely independent young woman who dreams of becoming a writer and values personal freedom over conventional expectations like wealth or status. Jo's character is notable for her tomboyish demeanor, fiery temper, and deep love for her family, which contrasts with her desire for independence and self-expression.

As a symbol of independence, Jo challenges the traditional roles assigned to women during her era. Her rejection of Laurie's marriage proposal underscores. This novel highlights independence in every life through the characters. The characters have a personality about persistence and independence as a human Being . The most dominant character for determining independence is portrayed in Jo March. A strong girl who fights for her dream and she loves liberty for her own (Miles & Huberman, 1984). There are four kind of independence in Jo March:

a. Independence in Society

In the novel, Jo's independence is reflected in her awareness of the importance of education for her siblings and those around her, even though she herself lacked access to formal education. Furthermore, during that era, education for women, particularly schooling, was quite rare. Women have an important role and position in various aspects of life. The family is a small unit within society. A woman's role here is often represented as a wife and/or mother. However, this does not exclude the possibility of women achieving independence in a broader societal scope beyond the family. Women are able to determine their independence, whether it involves choosing to marry or not, having children or not, or becoming career women instead of full-time housewives. Women's

independence in society is regarded as universal independence—the freedom to make life’s choices. A woman’s choice is not confined to the family; she may also have a career outside of it (Miles & Huberman, 1984,p. 18).

Jo believed that women have the right to liberty and control over their own lives. Women should not be treated as property. Jo aspired to be a career woman and opposed the idea of marriage, yet she was also a woman with emotions. She could not deny that she felt lonely and needed someone to connect with, even though she did not believe in marriage (Ibid, 1984).

b. Independence in Education.

Education is one of the most important necessities in life. Everyone has the same right to receive proper education, regardless of gender. Both men and women have equal rights and independence when it comes to education. With proper education, individuals can enhance their skills and gain numerous benefits in life (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 18).

c. Independence in Economy

Women play an important role in the economic sector. On a smaller scale, women contribute by managing and organizing financial cycles within their households. Moreover, economic independence can stem from women taking charge of financial planning, including income and expenditure. Jo is a hardworking woman. She recognizes her talent and makes use of it. She works as a writer to support her family financially. To avoid burdening her family, she chose not to sign her name on her writings initially Jo March is a realistic woman with great talent and a strong desire to become a writer. She understands that she needs money to sustain her life and therefore cannot write solely for artistic fulfillment without being paid. She is practical, acknowledging that nothing in life is free, and uses her skills to gain financial independence (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 18).

d. Independence in the Workplace

Women have the right to make decisions about their own lives, including choosing their occupation. Both men and women should have equal opportunities to pursue the careers and professions they desire. At the end of the movie, Mr. Dashwood offers Jo royalties from the sales of her book. However, Jo disagrees with the terms. She needs money immediately and insists on upfront payment. Jo understands that waiting for book sales offers no guarantee of financial stability. This decision reflects her persistence and determination to maintain control over her choices and avoid being manipulated. Regarding copyright, Jo refuses to sell the rights to her book to the publisher.

She rejects Mr. Dashwood's offer to purchase the copyright because she values ownership of her work. Jo asserts her independence by deciding to retain full control over her book, refusing to be governed by the publisher's demands (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 18).

2.1. Feminism and Social Change

- **Feminism and Social Change in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women**

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) is widely recognized as a progressive novel that engages with themes of feminism and social change. At a time when women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere, Alcott's portrayal of strong, independent female characters challenged societal expectations and paved the way for discussions on gender equality. The novel critiques patriarchal norms through Jo March's defiance of traditional gender roles, Marmee's encouragement of independence and self-reliance, and the overall message that women should have the right to choose their own paths in life.

- Jo March and the Rejection of Traditional Gender Roles

Jo March is the novel's most overtly feminist character, embodying a rejection of the 19th-century ideal of womanhood. She openly resists expectations placed on women, refusing to conform to the conventional roles of wife and mother. Instead, she prioritizes her ambition to become a writer, an unconventional choice for women at the time. "I'd rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe" (Alcott, 1868, p. 248), Jo asserts, making it clear that she values independence over marriage. This stance was radical for its time, as women were largely expected to find fulfillment through marriage and domestic duties (Showalter, 1988).

Although Jo ultimately marries Professor Bhaer, her partnership is based on intellectual compatibility rather than societal expectations. Unlike traditional literary heroines who find their worth in marriage, Jo continues her writing career, demonstrating that a woman's identity is not solely tied to her marital status (Elbert, 1987). Through Jo, Alcott challenges the rigid norms of her era, presenting an alternative vision of femininity that values ambition, creativity, and self-sufficiency.

- Marmee's Influence and the Advocacy for Women's Independence

Marmee serves as another powerful feminist figure in the novel, guiding her daughters toward self-reliance and moral strength. Unlike many 19th-century maternal figures who reinforce submission and dependence, Marmee encourages her daughters to think for themselves and develop their individual talents. She advises Jo, "I am angry nearly every day of my life, but I have learned not to show it" (Alcott, 1868, p. 89), revealing her own struggle against societal constraints. Marmee's acknowledgment of female anger and repression reflects an early feminist awareness of the emotional burdens placed on women (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979).

Marmee also emphasizes the importance of work and financial independence. She encourages her daughters to develop skills that will allow them to support themselves, rather than relying on marriage for security. This aligns with Alcott's own feminist beliefs, as she herself remained unmarried and supported her family through her writing career (Elbert, 1987). By presenting Marmee as a strong, wise maternal figure who values independence, Alcott promotes a vision of womanhood that extends beyond domesticity.

- **The Novel's Engagement with Feminist and Social Change Movements**

Beyond its individual characters, *Little Women* reflects broader feminist ideals that were emerging during Alcott's time. The novel subtly critiques the limited opportunities available to women, advocating for education, meaningful work, and self-determination. Alcott herself was influenced by transcendentalist thinkers, including Margaret Fuller, who argued for women's intellectual and social equality (Showalter, 1988). This influence is evident in the novel's portrayal of women striving for personal and professional fulfillment.

Furthermore, *Little Women* engages with the social change movements of the 19th century, including abolitionism and women's suffrage. The March family's progressive values, evident in their charitable work and discussions of social justice, reflect Alcott's own involvement in activism.

2.2. Women's Empowerment in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

2.2.1. Gender Roles and Feminist Perspectives

Little Women has long been regarded as an early feminist text, particularly because of its critique of traditional gender roles. According to feminist scholars, the novel challenges the notion that a woman's ultimate goal is marriage and motherhood. Jo March, in particular, defies expectations by aspiring to be a writer and embracing independence. "I intend to make my own way in the world," she declares, demonstrating the early seeds of feminist empowerment (Alcott, 1868).

Scholars like Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), discuss how female protagonists like Jo embody a rebellion against the confines of the 19th-century domestic ideal. They argue that Jo's desire for a career and her rejection of traditional femininity are reflective of Alcott's own struggles as a woman writer in a male-dominated literary world.

2.2.2. Economic Independence

Little Women also touches on the theme of women's economic independence. Alcott herself had to support her family through writing, and her portrayal of Jo's struggles as a writer underscores the difficulties women faced in achieving financial self-sufficiency. The novel's portrayal of Jo selling her stories and the family's reliance on their own labor (as opposed to inheritance or marriage) highlights the importance of women earning their own living. Critics have pointed out that Alcott's focus on financial independence through hard work offers a progressive view for her time. For instance, historian and literary critic Anne Boyd Rioux in *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy: The Story of Little Women and Why It Still Matters* (2018) argues that Alcott was ahead of her time in portraying financial independence as central to a woman's empowerment.

2.2.3. Jo March as a Feminist Icon

Jo March is often hailed as a feminist icon due to her refusal to conform to traditional feminine ideals. In an era where women were primarily expected to marry well and devote themselves to their families, Jo's rejection of both a traditional domestic life and marriage, at least for most of the novel, was radical. While her eventual marriage to Professor Bhaer is often interpreted as a compromise to societal expectations, many scholars view it as Jo's own choice rather than a surrender. Literary critic Susan S. Lanser, in her work *Feminist Perspectives on the Novels of Louisa May Alcott* (1994), notes that Jo's growth

as a character represents Alcott's exploration of how women could balance their personal desires with societal demands. Jo's marriage, in this light, becomes not a symbol of a return to traditional norms, but a choice that still affirms her individuality.

2.2.4. The Diverse Paths of Empowerment

While Jo is often viewed as the central figure of female empowerment, *Little Women* also emphasizes that empowerment is not a one-size-fits-all concept. Meg, Amy, and Beth each follow different paths, yet all are portrayed as empowered in their own right. Meg finds fulfillment in motherhood and marriage, demonstrating that a woman's empowerment can be found within the domestic sphere. Amy, with her artistic aspirations, ultimately seeks success and recognition in the male-dominated art world. Even Beth, though her path is marked by sacrifice and illness, embodies an empowering spirit of grace, selflessness, and inner strength.

2.2.5. Alcott's Personal Influence on the Novel

Alcott's personal experiences as a working woman significantly shaped the empowerment themes in *Little Women*. Growing up in a progressive, intellectual household and experiencing financial hardships, Alcott was acutely aware of the limitations women faced in her society. According to *Alcott: A Biography* (1980) by Madeleine B. Stern, Alcott's own experiences as a woman author in the 19th century were fraught with struggles for respect and recognition. She was advised by publishers to write domestic novels for women, and much of her early success came from penning "blood-and-thunder" thrillers under a pseudonym. These early struggles to find a voice parallel Jo's character in *Little Women*, whose journey toward finding her authentic self mirrors Alcott's own battles.

Conclusion

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott offers a compelling look at women's empowerment, challenging societal expectations of women in the 19th century. Through characters like Jo March, Alcott critiques the limited roles available to women and advocates for independence and self-expression. Jo's desire to become a writer rather than follow traditional paths of marriage and motherhood reflects Alcott's own feminist beliefs, as noted by Gilbert and Gubar (1979), who argue that Jo represents a rebellion against these constraints.

However, Alcott's portrayal of empowerment is multifaceted. As Anne Boyd Rioux (2018) points out, Alcott shows that financial independence and career ambition are vital aspects of a woman's empowerment, but characters like Meg and Amy demonstrate that empowerment can also come from choosing traditional roles if those choices are made freely and thoughtfully. Susan Lanser (1994) highlights that Alcott offers a broad vision of empowerment, allowing women to define their own paths, whether within or outside traditional gender expectations.

Ultimately, Madeleine B. Stern (1980) emphasizes that Alcott's own struggles as a woman writer influenced the themes of independence in Little Women. The novel not only presents a feminist message but also reflects Alcott's personal journey toward self-expression and recognition.

In conclusion, Little Women celebrates the idea that empowerment comes from making one's own choices, whether that means pursuing a career, marriage, or something entirely different. Alcott's portrayal of women remains inspiring and relevant, offering a timeless message about the power of self-definition.

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