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## D\_BY\_WOMEN\_AS\_REFLECTED\_IN\_LOUISA\_MAY\_ALCOTT\_...

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## INEQUALITY EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN AS REFLECTED IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN*: A LIBERAL FEMINIST STUDIES

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**Abstract:** This study explores women's roles and societal expectations in the 19th century, mainly as portrayed in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The analysis focuses on three main areas: family, education, and societal roles. In family life, women were largely confined to domestic roles, with ideals such as "The Angel in the House," which glorified self-sacrificial wives and mothers. Jo March, however, challenges this norm by assuming the responsibilities of the "man of the family" in her father's absence. In education, women's access was limited, reflecting broader inequalities. Mrs. March, or Marmee, becomes a pivotal moral teacher to her daughters, instilling values that transcend material wealth. Despite societal constraints, Jo and her sisters navigate personal and financial challenges, with Jo ultimately breaking traditional gender norms by pursuing a career as a writer. The study further reveals how women's opportunities were shaped by class and how marriage was often seen as the only path to social mobility. Overall, this paper highlights how *Little Women* reflects the limitations and opportunities for women in the 19th century, challenging prevailing gender stereotypes through its portrayal of women's independence, ambition, and resilience.

**Keywords:** *Liberal Feminism, 19th-century women, gender roles, Little Women, societal expectations*

### Introduction

Literature, with its broad and multifaceted meaning, is a powerful mirror that reflects the entirety of written expression. It is a unique form of written document that captures and articulates a society's values, norms, and experiences, making it a crucial tool for understanding and interpreting the world around us. (Klarer, 2004; Wajiran, 2022). A literary work is produced because of an event or phenomenon the author experiences. The phenomenon of the author's experiences will affect their feelings and the way they think. The author's life and literature are two things that cannot be separated to create a product called a literary work. Literature is a product of the contemplation and experience of the author in their social life when they encounter problems that give them value in life. Through their values and experiences, they receive a solid answer regarding their situation and problems.

Feminist literature is a fantastic topic to discuss and analyze. From the perspective of liberal feminists, women have two roles: biologically as partners, wives, mothers, and daughters, while in society, they play a crucial role in

sustainable long-term socio-economic development. Women's weaknesses and stupidity are not psychological. Those aspects come from stereotypes, making the opportunities between women and men different.

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Liberal feminism is one of the branches of feminism. Liberal feminism originates from a feminist book entitled *A Vindication of the Right of Women*, written by Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792. Wollstonecraft discusses the inequality of the educational system that women received at the time, where they were not allowed to have the same advantages as men. It makes them wives with little productive work at home and incompetent workers. Women are supposed to have individual rights to freely determine their choices in political, economic, educational, and social development aspects. In that case, the basic concept of liberal feminism is the opportunity for women to receive equal rights as human beings and the freedom to seek their desires and happiness. (Wollstonecraft, 1792).

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Louisa May Alcott is one of the late 1800s authors involved in the women's suffrage movement in Washington, DC, and joined the feminist literature in America. She chose the topic of feminism, which aims to promote gender equality between men and women regarding rights, responsibilities, and opportunities (Ellen, Carol, 1979; James, L., 1994; Zehra & Kabasakal, 2015). For all the time, the patriarchal culture is still around us that women do not have the same privileges and opportunities as men. Men and women have different roles in society. Where women are expected to stay at home, doing house courses as if they are just objects to their husbands (Valentine, M., 2007). Meanwhile, men are independent and active in society. Women authors and feminists do not want inequality for women to continue in the future.

Louisa May Alcott wrote a coming-of-age story filled with domestic life, showing the most real life of four women from the lower class in the 19th century, where they had dreams to pursue (Alcott, 1889). The novel brought instant success to Alcott as it gained attention. *Little Women* shows the struggles of Josephine March in pursuing her happiness and dreams while facing social norms and women inequalities around her. Wealthy women have all the privileges the lower-class women could never have, such as beauty, elegant dresses, beautiful skin, sparkling jewelry, wealth, and rich men. The lower-class women must work as domestic servants, as seen in March's family's life. Meg, Josephine, Amy, and Beth are Mrs. March's daughters born into a lower-class family and spent their youth working as domestic servants. However, Mrs. March always teaches them to be grateful for every blessing God has given to them. The lesson motivates them to be who they are. Josephine March, whose appearance does not reflect the 19th women at the time, is very responsible to her family. She is endowed with the spirit of self-sacrifice.

Josephine March expresses an independent woman with a burning desire for her future. She fights for equal liberty for all women, as they are supposed to

have the same privileges as men regarding freedom, education, and opportunity. Josephine March tells the readers that it is completely fine to be different from others because there is no word “wrong” when choosing. There is no word “wrong” in being different. Jo March delivers the meaning of women's freedom in her characterization of *Little Women*. As Josephine March portrayed in *Little Women*, her character became the mirror of liberal feminism in this era. *Little Women* is filled with a message for all women worldwide that an independent woman with the ambition to pursue her dreams does not make her anti-men. A woman who has a higher education does not make her cannot have a dual role as a mother and leader in society. A dual role opens an excellent opportunity for the dream women pursue, more respect from others, and enhanced social and personal growth and development. Unfortunately, the issues of women's inequality in this novel remain true. Not all women can have the same rights and opportunities. Society in this era still limits the dreams for the pursuit of goals.

## Literature Review

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There is much previous research dealing with the inequality of women. The first research is a thesis by Dewi Artika Puspitasari (2016) entitled “Liberal Feminism Values Seen through the Main Female Character in Kinberg’s Mr. and Mrs. Smith.” The thesis focuses on the liberal feminism values depicted in Kinberg’s movie, Mr. and Mrs. Smith. The result of this research is that the main female character has critical, intelligent, independent, confident, and responsible characterization. The research demonstrates that liberal feminism values, as seen through Mr. and Mrs. Smith, are equal economic and political opportunities, liberty, and education (Puspitasari, 2016).

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The second research was conducted by Ahmad Ibnul Wahid (2014), entitled “The Meaning of Happiness for March Sister as Reflected in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women: A Psychological Approach*.” The researcher focuses on the characterization of the main characters in *Little Women*, the meaning of the main characters' happiness, and the moral values in this novel. The result of the thesis points out that Josephine March is persistent and friendly, loves to be praised, and loves to create a peaceful atmosphere around her. Furthermore, their meaning of happiness is to love everyone around them, such as their mother and father, brother, and sisters. Another thesis result shows that missing their father and helping each other is one of the meanings of their happiness. In addition, the moral values seen in *Little Women* are divided into positive and negative. The positive values are obedience to older people, responsibility for saving their father, and caring for each other. On the other hand, the negative values are violence to their sisters, complaining to each other, and insulting each other (Wahid, 2015).

The third thesis was written by Aprillia Annisa (2021) entitled “An Analysis of the Main Character in the *Little Women* Novel by Louisa May Alcott: A feminist

Approach.” The research highlights three types of feminism, as seen through *Little Women*. The study also analyses why Josephine March wants freedom like a man. The research results show three types of feminism as seen through *Little Women*: liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism. The researcher states that every character depicts feminist values through their conversations, behavior, and attitudes, especially Josephine March, who plays an important role (Annisa, 2021).

The fourth thesis was written by Liebertus (2021), entitled “The Fight against Gender Inequality in Greta Gerwig’s *Little Women* Movie Script Revealed by the Women Characters.” The thesis discusses how each of the female characters in *Little Women* movie experiences gender inequality and how the characters deal with the gender inequality they face. The research applied Burroway’s theory of characterization to analyze the characterization of each character in the movie. It shows that Marmee and Jo March are hard-working women, and Meg is mature. Amy is short-tempered, and Beth is shy but kind and sweet. The researcher also talks about how the women characters fight against gender inequality. Marmee, as a mother, must face the economic problem, and it can be seen that Marmee is an independent woman. According to the thesis, women cannot be who they want to be since society expects women to marry rich men and be feminine. The research also found that women are considered weak as they cannot do anything, and all they can do is seek fulfillment as a wife or mother. (Liebertus, 2021: 40).

The fifth research was conducted in 2021 by Raden Roro Sekar Tedak Wahyu Nungrahenti entitled “Women’s Struggle against Gender Inequality Reflected in *Little Women* Novel: A Feminist Perspective.” The research used the feminist study approach and descriptive analysis to elaborate the data compiled. The result of the research shows that there are five kinds of gender inequality that the characters in *Little Women* experience such as stereotype, marginalization, subordination, violence, and burden. The research found that Jo March faces the social stereotype that expects women to be elegant and well-mannered. Women also see that they do not have essential roles in all aspects, making them suffer. In addition, the research also shows that the character in this novel is secondary since men have a higher position than women. The characters also experience violence and burden. The result of the thesis also found that there is a sexual division of labor and hierarchies of power seen in *Little Women* (Nungrahenti, 2021).

The relations among the five studies above can support this research. However, there are some differences between those studies and this research regarding the object and theory used. The first research used the same theory as this research, which is liberal feminism, but applied the theory to different subjects. The first research used the Mr. and Mrs. Smith movie, while in this research the theory is applied to the *Little Women*. On the other hand, the



9 second research was conducted using psychological theory to analyze *Little Women*. The third research used feminist theories such as liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism. Meanwhile, the fourth and fifth studies used different perspectives on feminism.

1 This research is different from previous studies. It only focuses on the roles of women in the 19th century, as seen in *Little Women*, and the issues of inequality that women experience in this novel, using Mary Wollstonecraft and Rosemarie Tong's liberal feminism theory.

## 14 Research Method

15 This study employs a qualitative research method to explore women's roles and societal expectations as portrayed in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. Qualitative research is chosen because it allows for a deep, contextual understanding of the social and cultural dynamics that shaped women's roles during the 19th century (Alberto et al., 2013; Sara & Lorna, 2012). This approach helps uncover the novel's central themes of gender inequality, family structure, and social norms.

Data Collection for this research was conducted through textual analysis of *Little Women*. The primary text, Alcott's novel, was analyzed in detail to identify key passages that illustrate women's roles in family, education, and society. In addition to the novel, secondary sources such as academic articles, books, and literary critiques related to 19th-century gender roles and the novel's historical context were also reviewed. These sources provided further insight and supported the analysis of the novel's themes.

The analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which involves identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within the text. The researcher carefully read and re-read the novel, noting significant instances where women's roles were depicted in family life, education, and social activities. These themes were categorized and compared with historical data to draw connections between the fictional narrative and the real-life social expectations of women during the Victorian era.

Triangulation was used to ensure the reliability of the analysis by incorporating multiple secondary sources to compare and verify the findings from *Little Women*. This helped validate that the novel's portrayal of women was consistent with historical realities and scholarly interpretations. The researcher also ensured objectivity by focusing solely on textual evidence from the novel and cross-referencing it with existing academic discussions on gender roles and inequality.

Finally, the findings were presented by linking the identified themes from *Little Women* with broader social contexts. The discussion focused on how the novel reflects societal expectations, class differences, and women's struggle for

independence in the 19th century. The method provided a comprehensive framework for examining how literature reflects and critiques the social structures that governed women's lives during that period.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. The roles of women

At the end of the 19th century, women experienced various acts of discrimination in a social environment where they were not given the liberty to be what they wanted and make choices. Society limited upper—and middle-class women's choices to marriage and motherhood or spinsterhood, both of which resulted in domestic dependency (Cruea, 2005). It shows that women's roles are limited to domestic environments. Society considers a woman's voice to be unimportant, which limits women's roles in many aspects of society.

#### a. *Family (The Angel in the House)*

During the Victorian era or 19th century in America, noblewomen did not have to work hard to provide basic needs for their families. An aristocratic lady enjoyed her husband's wealth, reading books, painting, and hanging out with her friends. She also had domestic servants ready to help her day and night. Therefore, in the Victorian era, a term for women came from the poem by Coventry Patmore, "The Angel in the House." In the Oxford Dictionary, this term means that an ideal woman is a woman who entirely devotes her life to her husband and family. For this reason, lower-class women are jealous of their lives and yearn for a life like the upper-class women who do not have to work hard to live and enjoy their husbands' wealth. This can be seen when the March sisters share their dream palaces, and Meg says that she wants a magnificent palace filled with sparkling objects like stars and domestic servants so she does not have to work.

"I should like a lovely house, full of all sorts of luxurious things—nice food, pretty clothes, handsome furniture, pleasant people, and heaps of money. I am to be mistress of it and manage it as I like, with plenty of servants, so I never need to work a bit..." (Alcott 254)

This illustrates that Meg wants to be an ideal woman, as society expects a true woman to be. Like other wealthy Victorian women, she dreams of living as an angel in the house. It is seen from how she describes her dream house in detail that Meg is already intrigued by the lifestyle of noblewomen. In addition, Meg is known as a woman with feminine characteristics and amiable. She always cares about her appearance, attitude, and manner. However, Meg is the one who struggles the most with family poverty. This reason leads her to become a daydreamer. Meg's words also illustrate the life of a noblewoman who takes a role as the angel in the house at that time, where she lives well and only needs to take care of her husband and children. Society believes that women who earn

wages are not faithful women. Society believes a true woman stays at home taking care of household duties. This discourages Meg from being an earner in her family because she wants to be a noblewoman. Thus, she is disappointed that she has lost all the pretty things she was fond of, and sometimes she misses those happy times. Her mind imagines being the angel in the house that society expects. However, she now lives in the middle of a middle-class woman, where she needs to work harder and harder, which she cannot complain about.

b. Man of the *family*

8 March's family also experiences the same struggles as other middle-class women. Meg works as a nursery governess for the Kings, and Jo does the same. Jo, who has no choice, agrees to work as Aunt March's companion. Both work hard to support their family as their mother works as a volunteer. Society considers that a perfect role for women is to be a wife and mother because they are weak, and the world outside belongs to men, so hard-working women seem strange to society. Upper-class women view men as physically strong individuals while women are weak. Men are independent, and women are dependent. Men belong to the public sphere, and women are private. Men are the only breadwinners in the family, and women do the house chores.

22 Therefore, Jo is frustrated because women's roles are rarely seen in the family sphere. Jo's frustration makes her wonder if she were a man. Indeed, she could play an essential role in the family to help her mother better financially. Jo would rather be able to go to war helping her father than spend her time sewing at home because it does not suit her adventurous personality. Due to her role, which she considers not big enough for her family, when Mr. March dedicates his life to being a volunteer in the Civil War, and her mother works away from home. Jo is determined to take over the role of the man of the family. Jo is determined to care for her mother and sisters while her father is away, serving in the Civil War.

"I'm the man of the man of the family now Papa is away, and I shall provide the slippers, for he told me to take special care of Mother while he was gone." (Alcott 9)

Instead of following the stereotype of society being an ideal woman, Jo takes a big step to replace his father's responsibility to take care of her mother and support her family financially. Jo feels she should be the man of the family not only because she feels she is a tomboy, so she has a male spirit, but also because she feels she is the one who can take care of her family when her three sisters are focused on their duties and imagination. Jo reveals her role as the man of the family when she shows her great sacrifice to her family by selling her hair to get money to help her mother go to the Civil War to nurse Mr. March, who is very ill. This shows Jo is responsible and willing to sacrifice for her family

6 as if she were a leader. It is a scene rarely seen in middle-class society during the 19th century. Furthermore, it proves that the role of women in the family in the 19th century is not just as the angel in the house but can be more than that. A woman can have significant responsibilities in the family and be the man of the family. A woman's role in the family can also be that of a sole earner who earns most of the income for her family. Jo's braveness shows that a woman is physically not weak.

c. Education (*Teacher*)

Apart from being a volunteer, Mrs. March also became a teacher to her four little girls. Her little girl, Beth, did not continue her formal schooling because she had difficulty overcoming her social anxiety. Thus, Beth could not feel the world's freedom outside and could not study at a school like Amy.

"Beth was too bashful to go to school. It had been tried, but she suffered so much that it was given up, and she did her lessons at home with her father." (Alcott 66)

When her father goes away to serve in the Civil War, her mother helps her to teach her. However, there are times that Beth has to study on her own because her parents are busy serving far away from home. Even though Beth did not go to school to get a formal education, she has a talent for playing piano that she continues to improve.

11 Cogan (1989) mentioned that education prepares a woman to manage a household, raise children, and help transmit culture, gentleness, and morality to future generations. In this case, Marmee understands her role as a teacher: to transmit morality to her daughters. Marmee teaches her little girls to live a happy youth. She wants her children to grow up to be women loved and respected by many, even though they are from middle-class families. She also wants them to find the right man and love them for love, not for their wealth. Marmee is careful with her words when she delivers the messages to her daughters. She gives her children one of the essential life lessons not included in the formal school subjects to remember that money is not everything.

"...I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace..." (Alcott 170-171)

The unforgettable moment for a mother in the 19th century was to see her daughter marry a rich man, but it did not matter for Marmee, as for her, women should be loved, respected, and treated fairly. The most important thing for Marmee is for her daughters to understand and apply the moral lessons that have been taught. Thus, her role in education is to become a teacher who transmits life lessons to her children to enlighten them that the life they live is

6 what they have to be grateful for. The result of this can be seen in the way Marmee acts towards her daughters. Marmee always allows her little girls to improve their talents in playing the piano, drawing, and writing. Even though she is busy, she always finds free time to console her children. She is a teacher who does not restrict her children from pursuing their dreams and with whom they fall in love as long as it makes them happy. Marmee proves that the role of women in education during the 19th century was to be teachers for their children.

#### d. Society (Women as Domestic Servants)

Like other lower-class women working as domestic servants, Meg and Jo experience the same struggle. Meg works as a nursery governess to help support her family after completing her early childhood education. She does not love the job because it is far from what she could have imagined. However, she must be grateful for what God has given her, as she is lucky enough to work for a wealthy family. She seems very happy to work in the aristocratic family since she can enjoy the luxurious things she used to have.

Margaret found a place as a nursery governess and felt rich with her small salary. She said she was 'fond of luxury,' and poverty was her chief trouble. (Alcott 63)

Even with a minimum wage, Meg still feels happy as long as she works for a wealthy family because she is a woman who loves luxury, which reminds her of her life before becoming a little March girl who has to work to fulfill what she wants. It shows that middle-class women, lucky enough in the Victorian era, worked as domestic servants or governesses like Meg March. Meg enjoys her work because she prefers receiving minimum wage to a higher salary but has to work in prostitution. It also proves that being a domestic servant or nursery governess is a job that middle- and lower-class women mostly have.

#### e. Women as Writers

Jo's dream is to do something splendid: become a great writer. She also sees that being a writer is the answer to supporting her family's financial and literary career, which was common for women in the 19th century. This job is considered suitable for a woman.

4 So Jo was satisfied with the investment of her prize money and fell to work with a cheery spirit, bent on earning more of those delightful checks. (Alcott 471)

Her journey from being Aunt March's companion to becoming a writer is not easy and short. She believes in herself and that she can get a better job. It is a job that allows her mind to express herself and her ideas without restrictions. Meg and Jo show that domestic servants and writers were two common jobs for

women during the 19th century since money was the most crucial thing for middle- and lower-class women. Therefore, they work hard and do anything they can to support their families' finances.

## 2. Women's Inequality as Reflected in *Little Women*

### a. Inequal in Liberty

Jo is an independent and future-oriented tomboy. Unlike her two feminine-looking sisters, Meg and Amy, Jo does not care about the luxurious life of noblewomen. She prefers challenging and adventurous activities. Jo's personality is different from that of her sister, Meg, who looks elegant and feminine, like a noblewoman from the 19th century.

'No, winking isn't ladylike. If anything is wrong, I'll lift my eyebrows and nod if you are all right. Hold your shoulder straight, take short steps, and don't shake hands if you are introduced to anyone. It isn't the thing.' (Alcott 45)

It shows that society at the time was very concerned about appearance and behavior, so women were required to be feminine, elegant, and patient. In addition, women needed to marry, which is considered a factor that encourages social stability and moral behavior. (Wajiran, 2018) A marriage involves transferring property in the family, which is one reason why women should be married. In *Little Women*, this is seen when Mrs. Moffats plans for Meg to marry Laurie because he is rich.

"The idea of having 'plans' and being kind to Laurie because he's rich and may marry us by-and-by! Won't he shout when I tell him what those silly things say about us poor children?" (Alcott 168)

The researcher sees the stereotype of aristocratic women from Jo's words above. It is clearly illustrated in the conversations of Jo, Meg, and Marmee. It shows that Mrs. Moffats, as a noblewoman, thinks that if the March family treats Laurie well, the rich man will marry March's sister. Thus, it is seen that they treat someone because they have specific intentions for that person. On the other hand, the conversation illustrates that aristocratic women believe that the only way for lower-class women to have a better life is to marry a rich man. Hence, they are dependent on their husbands. Marriage is the only value for women.

Besides, women in the 19th century also had no freedom to explore the outside world, as seen in Jo's conversation with Laurie.

'If I were a boy, we'd run away together and have a capital time, but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper and stop at home. Don't tempt me, Teddy, it's a crazy plan.' (Alcott 373)

Jo here describes women and their limitations. A woman is assigned to be at home helping her mother clean the house, which is considered valid when she

marries a man. Meanwhile, Jo is not that type of woman. Jo realizes that women should also be able to try new things and explore the world outside. Additionally, it is not a right for one gender only. Jo wants freedom and change like men do. Unfortunately, Jo could not do it because, at the time, home was the best place for women.

The researcher discovers that women during the 19th century were ultimately destined to marry and become housewives. Women do not have the right to make decisions and determine their future. Furthermore, Jo's thinking is considered narrow, which arises because she is young.

'Don't be alarmed. I'm not one of the agreeable sort. Nobody will want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family.' (Alcott 433)

In Jo's words above, he argues that a family should have one maid. By this, she means that one man should sacrifice for the family, which is her. Jo is an independent woman who sacrifices for her family. She is not only a woman in charge of caring for the house but also a woman who helps her family as a man or breadwinner. In this case, Jo thinks that a woman can also be the primary income earner in a family. Jo proves it with her sacrifice, ambition, and persistence in working all the time to help her family.

'I don't like that sort of thing. I'm too busy to worry about nonsense, and breaking up families is dreadful. (Alcott 434)

In the following conversation, the researcher considers that the "it" Jo means marriage. As explained above, Jo is a responsible woman and cares for her family. The four March sisters had spent their youth together. They believe there will be a time when they will live separated from their family. Meanwhile, Jo assumes that the marriage will break her family up as they will have their own lives with their husbands, not help the family, and are locked in the house, losing their youth. Therefore, Jo does not like the idea of marriage and having children.

#### b. Inequality in Education

Laurie is a neighbor of March's family and a close friend of March's sisters, especially Jo. They met when Meg and Jo went to a party. They exchanged stories, and Jo asked if Laurie would continue his education to a higher level. Jo's reaction shows how excited Jo is to hear Laurie can continue his education at college.

'How I wish I were going to college! You don't look as if you liked it.' (Alcott 50)

From the quotation above, the researcher analyses Jo's experiences when women did not get access to higher education. As previously explained, Jo is a tomboy who loves challenges and adventures, so it is no wonder Jo also wants a

better education for herself. However, seeing women in the 19th century have a better education is challenging. The main factor that causes this inequality is the difference in privileges. Laurie was born into a wealthy family, so he has the privilege of getting a proper education and continuing his education to a higher level. On the other hand, Jo lives in a lower-class society where they do not have a chance to access education and higher education. Only women from the upper class can get a higher and better education. The researcher also finds that other factors influence women's lack of access to higher education. This factor is not the main factor but an additional view of why women do not have access to better education. The factor is gender differences, which also affect their role in the social community. Women cannot be leaders in social, economic, and political forms. Women are unable to lead and make decisions because they are not as intelligent as men. Women mostly use their hearts to make decisions, while men use their heads (brains). The social, political, and educational domains are not intended for women. The place of women is home and kitchen. Thus, education for men plays a vital role because it helps them to grow, develop, improve, and be ready to take a role in society.

c. Inequality in Opportunity

The researcher finds other evidence that March's sisters receive minimum wages, which are not the same as those of men. No matter how hard they work, the wages they get cannot make their lives more comfortable.

Margaret found a place as a nursery governess and felt rich with her small salary. (Alcott 63)

In the statement above, the researcher sees that women at the time generally worked as nursery governesses like Meg. The lower-class women work for more affluent families. Meg is a part of the middle class, so she can be considered lucky because she has a better opportunity to work for an aristocratic family. During the 19th century, there were only a few job choices for women with high job risks. Women usually work as domestic servants, factory workers, and writers with minimum wages. As Meg said, she only receives a minimum wage, which means that women at the time did not receive a wage that equaled the risk of the work as much as men.

Meanwhile, Marmee has felt this inequality since she was Jo's age. She could not do much about the disparity of employment opportunities for women. Jo once asked why her mother never gets angry, and her mother replied.

'I've been trying to cure it for forty years and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it, and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so.' (Alcott 138)



It shows that Marmee could not control her emotions because of the circumstances. Inequality at work is one of them. Marmee works as a volunteer with a small salary and must work harder to support herself and her four children. Moreover, the situation after Mr. March helped his unfortunate friend caused them to fall into poverty. This situation frustrates Marmee about what she has to do to survive.

As explained above, Marmee is faced with a situation regarding the stereotype about marriage that occurred among lower-class women at that time. In this case, the researcher finds out that Marmee taught her children about valuable things in life about marriage.

"My dear girls, I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting... I'd rather see you poor men's wives if you were happy, beloved, contented than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace." (Alcott 171)

From Marmee's advice above, the researcher sees a connection between the advice given and Marmee's life. For forty years, Marmee felt very disappointed, angry, and frustrated with the inequalities that occurred in social life. Marmee understands how parents want their daughters to marry noblemen. Marmee seems to be a witness to the life of a woman after marriage at that time. She sees that many women cannot develop their talents and are buried deep in their dreams because they are married. A woman becomes an object for her husband and is not valued as a woman. Marmee believes that love is needed in a marriage. So, marrying a rich man who does not love and respect a woman is the same as failing to provide a comfortable home for his wife.

Meanwhile, Jo, in this case, has a structured and planned way of thinking. Jo is the type of woman who is independent and does not want to depend on men. So, she does not think of marrying a rich man and having children. She only focuses on pursuing her dreams to earn money and help her family. It is her main goal. She keeps sending each story to a publisher called *The Spread Eagle* for publication. Jo's career in literature continues to skyrocket. As her career in literature continues to soar, Jo finds her satisfaction when her hard work finally pays off with more money she has received.

3 Jo enjoyed a taste of this satisfaction and ceased to envy more affluent girls, taking great comfort in the knowledge that she could supply her wants and needs, ask no one for a Penny. (Alcott 472)

In this sentence, the researcher sees the satisfaction that a woman gets by working hard to achieve her dreams. Jo becomes an independent woman with her income and does not depend on men. Jo's words also show that she has broken the negative social stereotype where they consider that women are not

12 suitable to work outside, women can only depend on men, and women are not as intelligent as men. Jo proves that women can generate their income without any interference from men. Even though she is independent, Jo realizes something at the end of the story. Her strong ambition turns out to be too much, and she admits it is a mistake. At the end of the story, Jo marries his boarding housemate in New York, Professor Bhaer. However, the reason for marrying Professor Bhaer is not because he is wealthy but because of love. Jo chose the right man for her not because he was rich but because he loved and respected Jo as an individual, not just an object. Jo applies the teachings her mother taught well and is very satisfied with them. In this way, the researcher sees that the liberty described in the novel *Little Women* is the freedom to determine the future, achieve the highest dreams, and become independent.

### 19 Conclusion

The researcher concludes that liberal feminism is a branch of feminism that views women as having complete individual freedom. *Little Women* implicitly describes women's roles in the 19th century in several aspects, such as household, education, and society. In the family aspect, in *Little Women*, women's roles are divided into two: angels in the house and breadwinner. A woman's role in education is limited to being a teacher for their children. It is because a woman can transfer knowledge to her children to make their future better and brighter. On the other hand, in terms of society, the choice of jobs for women is limited to domestic servants, factory workers, and writers.

The next point is the depiction of inequality against women in terms of liberty, education, and society, which occurs in *Little Women* through the lens of liberal feminism. In *Little Women*, it is clear that women cannot determine their future. Women only have one way to have a more comfortable and prosperous life: marrying a nobleman. Women are limited in the world of marriage and the domestic environment. In the aspect of education, Jo March struggles to gain access to a higher education because she is from the middle class. She has to work hard for her family. Furthermore, even in the aspect of opportunity, Jo March experiences inequality by not having more opportunities to get better jobs. Meg only receives a minimum wage, which is not equal to men.

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