

Little Women: Louisa May Alcott's Duality Between the Intentional Lessons and the Unconscious Messages

Hisham Muhamad Ismail*

Faculty of Language Studies, Arab Open University, Bahrain

Abstract—Undoubtedly, *Little Women* can be considered one of the most influential literary texts in the history of American literature in general and children's books specifically. This novel has many essential lessons and messages that may affect the development path of any girl. Louisa May Alcott cleverly presents different female characters to shed light on the issues and obstacles women faced during the 19th century in American society. The critics vary in their critical reading and examination of this novel and their understanding of the genuine intentions of Louisa May Alcott. Definitely, the reader can elicit a kind of ambivalence in this novel between the opposing attitudes and decisions Alcott offers in this novel. Throughout the different chapters and various incidents, Alcott clearly explains the suffering of both women and men in the patriarchal society and how both may live restricted life due to society's expectations and imposing limitations.

Index Terms—*Little Women*, duality, society's restriction, domesticity, patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than 150 years, *Little Women* has placed a very significant position in the history of American Literature and American Children's Literature. Louisa May Alcott's novel has received prodigious attention throughout history due to the durability of the issues and themes exposed and examined. Some critics prefer to consider the story a classic, and others prefer to classify it as a girls' book and a semi-autobiographical novel as well. Due to the magnificent depiction of womanhood and the alluring idealization of family life in American society during the mid and late-19th centuries, this novel never seems to go out of style. Throughout history, *Little Women* has achieved great success literary and commercially for different periods and cultures. In addition, various novel adaptations are on the screen and stage. For twenty-first-century critics, *Little Women* cannot be considered a quaint, childish, or imaginative didactic children's book, yet for some reason, this iconic novel keeps its popularity. Parents still offer it to their young daughters and boys safely and enthusiastically. Additionally, many researchers are still profoundly interested in examining and studying this novel to reveal its multiple lessons. The reader can explore new dimensions and issues when reading or discussing this novel.

Initially, Alcott was encouraged (pressured) to write this novel to approach young girls and to balance the influence of William T. Adams' books for boys. She responded reluctantly to these pressures from the publishers and wrote the novel to achieve popularity and fame in this field. Many critics consider both writers, Alcott and Adams, as the pioneers of the rise of gender-specific series books (Wadsworth, 2001, p. 18). Talking about this pressure is essential in examining Alcott's style in this novel compared to her style in other novels. The readers can quickly notice the significant difference between her style in *Little Women* and her style in other novels like *Behind A Mask* and *Pauline's Passion and Punishment*. Alcott showed many dualities in *Little Women*. The principal theme of this novel was to examine and challenge the traditional gender roles of 19th-century American society. From the beginning, Alcott wanted to clarify that women were not born to marry and serve their husbands. However, Alcott's duality between the intentional lessons and unconscious messages is evident and existent on every page of the novel. This confusion and contradicting emotions appeared in the characterization and depiction of the female characters, extending to the themes and messages she wanted to convey and moving to the critics' reactions towards the novel.

In *Little Women*, Alcott offers different types of female characters. The reader can find the strong, independent, tomboyish, and ambitious Jo. Also, there is the ladylike and feminine Meg, the struggling artist and spoiled Amy, and the shy and withdrawn sister, Beth. On the other hand, there is an apparent reference and focus on the traditional and stereotypical strong mother, Marmee. In addition, this duality is exited clearly in exposing the sufferings of women and idealizing the world of manhood. She starts by focusing on the obstacles women faced to achieve themselves in a male-dominated society like the 19th-century American society, then shed light on Laurie's suffering. Alcott fails to overcome this ambivalence by giving a clear vision and perspective standing on one side. Her final scenes prove her willingness to conform to society's predominant limitations.

* Corresponding Author. Email: hisham.eltahawy@aou.org.bh

Immediately after publishing *Little Women*, critics disagreed on interpreting the novel and examining the issues raised. The readers and critics are also interested in more details about Alcott's personal life and family history. So, from the 1970s onward, the novel attracted the attention of feminist critics to examine the text and the context. With this new dimension of studying the novel, many issues and internal conflicts start to float up on the surface, and the critics begin to talk about an evident ambivalence in writing this novel. For instance, Judith Fetterley points out that the novel is about routing adolescence to become graceful little women. However, the story itself pushes back against that frame, and "the imaginative experience of *Little Women* is built on a paradox: the figure who most resists the pressure to become a little woman is the most attractive and the figure who most succumbs to die" (Fetterley, 1979, p. 379). Based on the above mentioned points, the paper will try to reconsider the main areas of Alcott's duality and examine her ambivalent attitudes. So, the following discussion will be a critical reading of Alcott's depiction of womanhood in American society during the 19th century and how they suffered to achieve themselves in the work sphere. Furthermore, the discussion will examine Alcott's style in exposing the manhood world in this novel. Finally, the discussion will tackle the topic of marriage and how the female characters dealt with this topic in the context of a patriarchal society like the 19th-century American context.

Little Women, which was written between 1868-1869 by the American activist and feminist writer Louisa May Alcott is a story that revolves around a family of four daughters and the mother with the continued absence of the father, who was serving as a soldier in the American Civil War. It was written after the Civil War in response to a publisher's pressure for a novel that could appeal to young female readers, and it appeared initially in two books. The first half of the book is loosely based on Louisa May Alcott's own life; in fact, it is semi-autobiographical and reflects her experiences with her sisters in New England. After it was published, readers started to write to Alcott and her publishers, asking for more details about the girls' love lives. Most readers wanted to know whom each sister married – especially whether Jo married Laurie. It is worth noting that Alcott herself remained unmarried all her life, so, to write the development, she had to depart from autobiography and write straight-up fiction. Without her own life experiences, the novel's second part may feel less realistic. Part of the fascination with the novel is its treatment of gender roles, which balances tradition and gender distinction with more forward-thinking, proto-feminist attitudes.

Little Women is a perfect reference to explain and clarify the true meaning of the concept of duality in literature. Apparently, it is a book that tries to challenge gender stereotypes, but surprisingly moves to enhance them in many incidents in the novel. The book is full of examples of women who are not independent, and during the novel, they cannot achieve any kind of independence from male authority. So, critics consider the novel a feminist book on the surface, but sincerely it offers the opposite. The four daughters and the mother maintain a female-dominated world in which men come in second place. From the first look, the reader can feel that Alcott wants to provide strong examples of women who can move in life and achieve their dreams independently of male dominance. Ironically, throughout the different parts of the novel, the reader discovers that this intentional absence of the father and other male characters in the March sisters' life reveals a great deal of internal conflict and weakness that prevents them from moving smoothly in their social and professional life. Subsequently, Alcott returns to conform to society's context and activates the masculine role in their life to complete the picture and enjoy the happily ever after ending.

II. SUPERFICIAL (FAKE) SATISFACTION VERSUS HIDDEN DISCONTENT

From the first chapters of the novel, the girls show some degrees of discontent for not having gifts for Christmas, and the following quotation of the conversation among the four sisters clearly states this discontent:

'Christmas will not be Christmas without any presents,' grumbled Jo, lying on the rug.

'It is so dreadful to be poor!' sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress.

'I do not think it is fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things and other girls nothing at all,' added little Amy, with an injured sniff.

'We have got Father and Mother and each other,' said Beth contentedly from her corner (Alcott, 1993, p. 3).

This initial quotation shows a great deal of discontentment and anxiety, but they do not show that to satisfy their mother and not hurt her. Judith Fetterley points out that Alcott repeatedly sends out the message that girls should be content and satisfied with any conditions they may find themselves in (Fetterley, 1979, p. 372). This situation reflects the contradicting emotions of those young girls between deep discontentment and fake satisfaction. The mother plays an essential role in this feeling, urging her daughters to think of others before themselves.

Additionally, the mother asked them to provide breakfast to their impoverished family in the neighborhood as a Christmas gift. The girls agreed to do that reluctantly. On the other hand, the father, in one of his letters sent during his military service period, exhorted his daughters to "conquer themselves so beautifully that when I come back to them, I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women" (Alcott, 1993, p. 14). His message was to urge his daughters to renounce themselves as women and try to achieve themselves away from others' expectations or thinking about them. The four sisters felt ambiguous and unsatisfied between the mother's slogans and the father's tips.

Nevertheless, the reader can understand that Alcott wants to convey a message that the purpose of women in that society is giving to others before giving themselves. In other words, the woman should satisfy others' needs before looking at herself and her needs. Unfortunately, she reinforces this notion by making the sisters comply with the mother's slogans and offering their breakfast to the neighbors.

III. *LITTLE WOMEN*: DIFFERENT FEMALE TYPES AND EVIDENT AMBIVALENCE

The duality has inadvertently appeared in the most robust female character of the novel, Jo. It is well-known that this character represents Louisa May Alcott herself. She wants to take advantage of being one of the major players in the novel's incidents and reflecting her sufferings and misery clearly but fictionally. Jo or Josephine is considered the most independent of the four sisters. She is presented as stubborn, high-spirited, confident, and tomboyish. She does not like to be called a girl or young lady but to be called a "businessman-girl." Giving this tomboyish character to the most robust female character in the novel is evidence that Alcott uses masculine features as a standard and a benchmark for female independence and strength. The reader can understand that woman's independence should be measured according to the degree of similarity of her personality and behavior to a man's personality and behavior regardless of her mind or her dream and ambitions. In *Little Women*, Alcott utilizes and idealizes her experiences to give power to the young generation of girls and suggests a new context in which women can pursue their careers and support their families without losing their femininity. From the early beginning of the novel, the reader learns that the four sisters and the mother should work hard to support their life, particularly with the intentional absence of the father.

Furthermore, each of the sisters has an artistic talent, but their domestic responsibilities require them to stop thinking about these talents or developing their skills. For example, Meg has an acting talent, but she swiftly wishes to enjoy her domestic dreams, as mentioned: "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" (Alcott, 1993, p. 202). Meg, the eldest sister in the novel's early beginning, conforms to the patriarchal notion of society. She abandons her professional dreams to give the privilege to the domestic ones. The same thing can be applied clearly to both Beth and Amy. Beth is a timid and withdrawn girl who prefers staying home to going to school. She ends up with death due to her illness. Amy, the spoiled youngest sister, is the most ladylike of the four sisters and the easiest to accept the sisters' concept of marriage and financial dependence.

In the representation of Jo, Louisa May Alcott is presented in this novel as having apparent duality regarding the purpose of writing itself. She is conflicted between her aspiration to be a famous and well-known wealthy writer and her need to support her family and accordingly this conflict impacts her writing style and the topics used in her first stories and other novels. She receives genuine encouragement from her family to pursue her professional dreams and achieve her independence. On the other hand, she meets the harshness of the patriarchal society's expectations in this field. This conflict is obviously reflected in both her personal decisions and her fiction. Throughout the novel, Alcott portrays this conflict between artistic ambitions and domestic duties as a woman. Most of her novels' heroines reflected the torn feeling between self-reliance and social limitations and between the desire for professional development and family responsibilities. Anne E. Boyd pointed out that for Alcott and other female writers, "the central drama of their lives was this struggle to overcome the obstacles of their society's prejudices against women becoming serious artists" (Boyd, 2004, p. 13).

So, the reader can notice the duality of the purpose of writing moves parallelly with many obstacles found on her way from the early steps of her professional career. So, Jo shows persistent courage to manage all challenges because she genuinely desires to fulfill her dreams and support her family. She tries different jobs before submitting her first piece of writing, but she finds "writing as the available career that produced the maximum independence" (Brodhead, 1995, p. 76). At the same time, she works hard to "balance between her genius with the work that paid" (Maibor, 2004, p.108). Clearly, and after the success of *Little Women*, Alcott fluctuates between writing as her professional aspiration and writing to support her family. This fluctuation and inner conflict infiltrate her topics, writing style, and characterization in most of her writings. Later, she could convince herself to write to gain money and be considered part of her responsibility as a dutiful daughter. At this stage, she reaches a balance between her ambitions and her domestic duties. Elizabeth Keyser points out that (Jo) "has learned to subordinate her needs for artistic expression to the needs of her family and to use her talents to support the family" (Keyser, 1982, p. 457).

Accordingly, Alcott presents the four sisters to embody her suffering as a female writer in the male-dominated society during the 19th century. All of them have some artistic talents and skills, but they struggle to balance between developing their skills and pursuing their professional ambitions on the one hand and conforming to society's limitations and their domestic duties on the other hand. The reader learns that Meg and Beth, for example, quickly switch to move with these domestic limitations and renounce their dreams. In contrast to the other two sisters, Jo and Meg have a more independent spirit to achieve their dreams. They want to prove themselves as women outside the stereotypical frame of marriage and other domestic stuff. Ironically, both return to square one and conform to patriarchal dominance. Amy receives the marriage proposal from Laurie with a more enthusiastic spirit to use his family wealth and finds her financial independence through Laurie's support. Jo shocks her readers with her decision to accept the marriage from Professor Bahaer and abandons her writings for the sake of her family. This ending decision may confirm a clear message that a woman could not find her independence away from the family and her husband's support, particularly in a patriarchal society such as the 19th century American society.

IV. ALCOTT'S MALE CHARACTERS: ANOTHER ASPECT OF DUALITY

It is worth noting that most of the critical readings of the novel come from the feminist point of view, focusing on the female characters and their issues. However, the reader can find Alcott's duality clearly embedded in her portrayals of the male characters, starting from the father's absence at the novel's early beginning and the negative portrayal of Laurie. So, the reader can understand that Alcott inadvertently reinforces gender role stereotypes. While the novel intends to challenge these gender roles about women, she unconsciously enhances them, notably when she portrays Laurie, for example, as a not real man as he does not want to conform to society's expectations of true gentlemen to work masculine work. In other words, he must follow the same steps as his grandfather to be a businessman and leave his financially unproductive dreams. Alcott starts her novel by praising and idealizing the manhood world and wishing to be a boy to enjoy her capital time and release herself from the social limitations imposed on women. However, she quickly turns to expose Laurie's suffering in the patriarchal society, similar to her and her sisters' suffering. Like many 19th-century middle-class young men, Laurie's struggle is "the ultimate submission to cultural expectations for young men narrate a typical confrontation with the limitations of gender roles (Parille, 2001, p. 34).

Throughout the novel, Alcott presents Laurie as a subject of what was mentioned by many critics "ethic of submission" (Parille, 2001, p. 34). The readers can understand "submission" as a framework restricting women's lives and forcing them to conform to their society's defined limitations. In other words, they "could not rebel against the conditions of their lives, and they had to stay put and submit" (Freibert, 1987, p. 67). Alcott presents Laurie surrounded by men (his grandfather and his tutor) to compare the surrounding environment of March girls and Laurie. She shows that the masculine environment lacked the emotional support and love found on the other side. So, Laurie's life lacks all kinds of support that are found for her. Again, the reader is shocked by the radical change in Laurie's decision and the conformity to the family and society's expectations to be a proper gentleman when he decides to work with his grandfather. Ironically, this decision is taken after being supported and urged by Amy. Alcott gives the privilege of the upper hand to one of the female characters as if she wants to deny the fake dominance of men at that time.

Another instance of her duality is her dealing with the character of Professor Bhaer. She presents this professor as a gentleman different from her mentality, cultural background, and social level. This portrayal of the professor helps the reader understand why Jo changed her mind and married Bhaer. Elaine Showalter, in her introduction to the novel, points out that Jo's German husband (Bhaer) is presented as "unconfined by American codes of masculinity" (Showalter, 1989, p. xxvii). When Alcott presents Laurie as an American boy, she introduces Bhaer as a true gentleman. Throughout the novel, Bhaer can convince Jo to stop writing sensational books. In addition, the independent and determined Jo changes her mind and decides to give priority to her family and support her husband. Finally, the portrayal of Laurie, Bhaer, and the father gives the reader a clear indication of Alcott's genuine duality and contradicting emotions. One more point, the reader can understand Alcott's manipulation of these male characters to release some of her inner conflicts towards the masculine hegemony and to shed light on the drawbacks of men's minds and attitudes, particularly her family has suffered from the impracticality of her father. So, the inherent contradiction can be considered a part of *Little Women's* message and reflects the women's position in 19th-century American society compared to the men's position.

V. THE TOPIC OF MARRIAGE AS A PART OF ALCOTT'S DUALITY

The most prominent part of the novel that reflects Alcott's duality can be the topic of marriage. Alcott defines marriage from a very stereotypical perspective through the words and tips of the mother, Marmee. Marmee wants to teach her daughters to be (little women) and enjoy a happy life with their husbands like all mothers at this age. Towards the novel's end, Marmee rejoices in gathering all daughters along with their husbands and children. She feels satisfied that they found their happiness and identities in their marital life. Between the novel's beginning and the ending scene, the reader finds a great deal of duality in Jo's attitude toward marriage and her decision to marry. Most prominently, the reader should remember that Alcott remained unmarried until the end of her life, and she devoted her life to writing and supporting her ideas. Most modern readers and critics do not accept how Alcott concludes her novel by marrying Professor Bahear. They consider this end as unexpected in comparison to the context of the novel and the ideological background of Alcott herself.

On the other hand, some critics point out that her decision to marry Bhaer is very logical and moves with the sequence of the novel's incidents. She agrees to marry this person (professor Bhaer) while she rejects Laurie's love and marriage proposal at the novel's beginning. With this decision, Alcott puts both Laurie and Bhaer in comparison in front of the readers to justify the decision and give them the criteria for choosing the right husband. Through this decision, Jo wants to compromise between writing and love, between her personal life and professional career. In other words, she wants to clarify that there are no issues at all for the girl to get married, form a house on the one hand, and pursue her dreams and achieve her goals. Jo's choice of Bhaer rather than Laurie asserts her desire to blend love and work together. According to Laurie's wealthy family and social class, Jo thought he could never let her work and pursue her professional goals. This social class believes that women's only eligible work sphere could be inside their house and domestic spheres. In addition, Jo does not have emotions or respect for Laurie's personality, and she does not find him as a man who could attract her attention and embrace her. She finds him as a boy and similar to her in some situations. In other situations, she finds herself better than him but more independent than him. It is worth noting here to refer to Alcott's suffering with her father and his impractical decisions, which affected the entire family. So, when she decides

to marry, she selects someone unrelated to her cultural background or affected by the social standards of American society during the 19th century. Professor Bhaer is more educated, older, and better than her. So she decides to choose him and justifies her decision by saying, “little women can only love up, not across or down; they must marry their fathers, not their brothers or sons” (Fetterley, 1979, p. 381).

From the beginning, Alcott introduces the eldest sister, Meg, as the most ladylike and a woman-child. Meg is the first and easiest sister to submit to the domestic sphere and accept the marriage proposal of John Brooke to form her family and support her husband; she abandons all of her dreams and ambitions for the sake of the concept of marriage and to be a housewife. Amy is the second to accept the marriage decision and is waiting to receive any sign from Laurie. She convinces herself that marrying Laurie is based on love, but some critics find that Amy chooses the easiest way to achieve her financial support through Laurie’s wealth. The most independent and tomboyish sister’s marriage decision also shocked the family members and the reader. Jo’s decision to get married has attracted many critical commentaries, particularly from feminist critics; some critics believe that her marriage is an inevitable consequence and submission to the expectations of the patriarchal society. The most ironic stage in this novel comes when Jo leaves everything to give her family the deserved support and care. After Jo’s marriage to Bhaer, Alcott submits to the patriarchal society with all of the restrictions despite her early rejection of such systems. In the end, Alcott’s novel presents what Judith Fetterley calls “the ambivalence . . . of what it means to be a little woman . . . it accurately reflects the position of the woman writer in nineteenth-century America, confronted on all sides by forces pressuring her to compromise her vision” (Fetterley, 1979, p. 382). So, the reader can find the duality and ambiguous messages as an integral part of understanding the novel with all of the background references to Louisa May Alcott’s personal life.

VI. CONCLUSION

In *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott examines the traditional gender stereotypes as she understands and experiences them during her time. She manages to some extent, her objective by providing a complicated picture of girls and women. On the other hand, Alcott represents a great deal of duality and internal conflict in portraying these characters to the extent that the critics disagreed about whether the novel “seeks a new version of women’s subjectivity and space or argued for a repressive domesticity” (Parille, 2001, p. 34). Through different themes like love, family, marriage, sacrifice, principles, and ambitions, Alcott depicts women’s suffering in 19th-century American society. Throughout different types and styles of female and male characters, Alcott tackles the impacts of the patriarchal notion on these characters and their journey to achieve or give up their dreams and conform to the standards of this notion. Throughout the various levels of relationships, Alcott sheds light on the male dominance and the restricted social and professional spheres imposed on women at that time and in this society. This novel is full of different types of duality. The reader can experience this ambivalence in some cases as intended and conscious, and in other situations, it can be through unconscious messages and a reflection of the actual internal conflict of Alcott herself.

Undoubtedly, *Little Women*’s themes and contradictions have inspired many academic studies, stage performances, and films. Most of these works often reinterpret the novel to convey the same message or amend one to suit the time and culture of this work. So, many critics consider the effects of this novel as long-lasting effect and consider Louisa May Alcott as a pioneer in the field of girls’ books and digging into the details of 19th-century American society. She has the privilege of drawing a crystal clear picture of the status of women in this society and examining men’s struggles with the standards of the patriarchal notion. Finally, the most significant, this quintessential American girls’ book has impacted children’s literature and women’s literature since its publication during the 19th century.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alcott, L. M. (1993). *Little Women*. Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- [2] Brodhead, R. (1993). *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America*. University of Chicago Press.
- [3] Boyd, A. (2004). *Writing for Immortality: Women and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [4] Fetterley, J. (1979). “Little Women”: Alcott’s Civil War. *Feminist Studies*, 5(2), 369-383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177602> (Retrieved on 1 Dec.2023)
- [5] Freibert, L. M. (1987). [Review of *The Wide, Wide World*, by S. Warner & J. Tompkins]. *Legacy*, 4(2), 66–68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25679004>
- [6] Keyser, E. L. (1982). Alcott’s portraits of the artist as a little woman. *International Journal of Women’s Studies*, 5(5), 445–459.
- [7] Maibor, C. (2004). *Labor Pains: Emerson, Hawthorne, and Alcott on Work and The Woman Question*. Routledge.
- [8] Parille, K. (2001). “Wake up, and be a man”: *Little Women*, Laurie and the Ethic of Submission. *Children’s Literature*, 29(1), 34-51. <https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.0.0794> (Retrieved on 1 Dec.2023)
- [9] Showalter, Elaine. (1989). *Introduction to Little Women by Louisa May Alcott*. Viking Penguin Inc.
- [10] Wadsworth, S. (2001). Louisa May Alcott, William T. Adams, and the Rise of Gender-Specific Series Books. *The Lion And The Unicorn*, 25(1), 17-46. <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2001.0015> (Retrieved on 1 Dec.2023)

Hisham M. Ismail - Assistant Professor of English Literature at Arab Open University – Kingdom of Bahrain and Head of Training, Continuous Education, and Community Service. Dr. Hisham is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy UK. He has more than 20 years of experience in academia and professional development. Dr. Hisham is working on developing the employability skills of AOU graduates and the technological transformation during the post-pandemic period. His research interests are; ethnic literature, the reflection of campus life in literary texts, the psychological barriers in language acquisition, and educational leadership.