

## The Image of Women in The Film 'Little Woman'

Evyy Tri Widyahening

Teacher Training and Education Faculty, English Language Education Department, Slamet Riyadi University, Surakarta, 57136

\* corresponding author: [christiana.widyahening@gmail.com](mailto:christiana.widyahening@gmail.com)

---

### Abstrak

The purpose of writing this article is to describe the image of women in the 19th century represented by the character Jo March in the film 'Little Woman' directed by Gillian Armstrong. The image of women here is the perception of women in the 19th century in expressing love, career, struggle for existence and independence in making choices. In describing the image of women reflected in the film 'Little Woman', the researcher used a descriptive qualitative research method with the type of Library research. The results showed that women in the 19th century, especially women in the middle to upper social status, were considered as ideal women if they could fulfil the criteria as a woman who could do all domestic work in the household. Women in the 19th century were more inclined to the male view of the ideal woman at that time. The presence of the character Jo March in the film 'Little Woman' breaks the view of the ideal woman who must submit or obey the rules and do domestic household chores. The presence of the character Jo March shows that women also want self-actualization, independence, freedom to choose a life partner, express feelings, and achieve goals. In addition, the presence of Jo March as a woman who is able to actualize herself is a representation of most women in the 19th century who began to break the rules that restrained women's freedom in showing their existence along with the industrial revolution at that time. This research is examined from the perspective of feminism. The film 'Little Woman' represents the image of women in the 19th century who tried to reach their dreams, love life, and independence. And the character Jo March is able to represent the women in the 19th century who succeeded in achieving all their dreams.

Keywords: Feminism, Women's Image, Descriptive Qualitative

---

### A. Introduction

Gender and sex are two different things. Those words differentiate women and men from their biological and psychological aspects. West and Zimmerman (1987) said that sex is a classification based on the biological criteria to classify persons as females or males. There are some indicators that can be used to classify it such as external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, chromosomes, and gonads. Then, according to American Psychological Association (APA) (2012), gender refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that given culture correlates with a person's biological sex. In addition, West and Zimmerman (1987) state that gender is an achieved status that is built up through cultural, psychological, and social means. So, it can be concluded that gender refers to a person's attitude, feeling and behaviors which are typically feminine or masculine based on their biological sex.

Gender has the biggest role that influence the way people interact each other. Coates (2014) states that the most affecting social factor in communication is gender. Society treats women and men differently. It is based on how society views the culture about biological differences in terms of sex, including the expectation on how women and men speak and behave. Goodwi (1968) said that in most cases, sex and gender go together, most men are primarily masculine and most women are primarily feminine. This idea leads to the general conception that men are considered being powerful, and women considered being powerless. The term of powerful and powerless here refers to the customs.

In industrial revolution era that started around 1760, women faced extreme suffering because they were treated arbitrarily. At that time, women were only made into slaves and given lower

wages than men. Women were considered incapable of doing what men do. In addition, women did not have the right to vote. Those things moved Susan B. Anthony to fight for women's rights. Then, she and her friend, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, held a meeting with 200 women in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. In that meeting, they discussed about a resolution for equal rights. Later on, they established American Equal Right Association. The association was aiming to fight for the abolition of slavery and women's right to vote in United States. The social movement later came to be called as the first wave feminism. It took a very long time until they finally got the rights they struggled in 1920.

Humm (1992) stated that feminism is the movement and ideology that attain women's right to create the world for women beyond social equality. Then Nyoman (2015) added that dalam pengertian yang luas, feminis adalah Gerakan kaum wanita untuk menolak segala sesuatu yang dimarginalisasikan, disubordinasikan, dan direndahkan oleh kebudayaan dominan, baik dalam bidang politik dan ekonomi maupun kehidupan sosial pada umumnya. In its broad sense, feminism defines as women's movements to reject everything that is marginalized, subordinated, and humiliated by the dominant culture either in politics and economics or social life in general.

The image of women in struggling to get their rights can be seen in the movie entitled 'Little Woman' which was produced in 1994. The film 'Little Woman' told about the struggle of March family in the 19th century during and after the American Civil War. There were five main female characters in this film namely Mrs. March, Jo March, Meg March, Amy March, and Beth March. They struggled to live without a man in the family because their father or the husband of Mrs. March went to fight in the civil war. This film showed that women and men can take the same responsibilities, but they still did not get the same opportunities. It can be seen from the one of the main characters namely Jo March. She was a smart woman, energetic, brilliant but she was not allowed to get a higher education just like men get. This film also showed that in the 19th century the society considered women as weak and powerless. It can be seen from the scene when Amy March was punished by Mr. Davis, her teacher. He said that it was as useful to educate a woman as to educate a female cat. In that film, the society in Concord Massachusetts thought that women were supposed to be a good mother who stayed at home with no high education, had no good career, and had no rights to vote. But this film also showed that women could have a big dream, a good career, a free person in deciding her way of life, and a brave person to be independent. Jo March became the main character in this film who could reach her dreams to be a writer, a strong woman, and she also could choose the best for her life. So, 'Little Woman' itself cannot be taken literally, but it can be an image of a woman who does not have anything but she has a big heart, a big dream, a big passion and a big struggle to reach what she wants in her life. This film tries to explain about the image of women's view freely in terms of love, career, and independence.

The title of the film "little women" refers to women who are considered to only have small roles and receive low stereotypes in society, but in reality 'little' here is a 'power' in actualizing their abilities in various fields and their role in society cannot be underestimated. Therefore, the struggles of women who are looked down upon by society are finally gradually becoming equal to those of men.

## **B. Research Methods**

The method used in this study was descriptive qualitative with the type of the research is library research. Arikunto (2006) stated that *penelitian kualitatif yaitu suatu metode penelitian yang*

*menghasilkan data berupa tulisan dan perilaku yang diperoleh dari pengamatan subyek.* It meant that qualitative research is a method of the research that produce the data in the form of writing and behavior obtained by observing a subject. The source of the data in this study are divided into two, namely primary data and secondary data. In this research, primary data used was the film entitled ‘Little Women’ which was released in 1994 and directed by Gillian Armstrong. This film was based on the novel with the same title and written by Louisa May Alcott in 1868. Then secondary data in this research was taken from books, internet sources, articles in scientific journals and other materials which could support the primary data. In collecting the data, the researcher used documentation technique to collect the data and to find the data needed such as transcript, notes, books, et cetera by taking notes the relevant dialogues. In analyzing the data, the researcher used interactive model of data analysis by Miles and Huberman.

### C. Results and Discussion

#### 1. The Image of Women in Seeing Love, Career and Independence in the 19th Century as reflected in the Film Entitled ‘Little Women’

Women in the 19th century was divided into three social classes namely lower class, middle class, and upper class. Lower class women in 19th century had to work to support their family financial. They often worked in the upper-class family as their nannies and maids, as the same time they still had to take care of their own family such as households and children. In America at that time or in the 19th century, lower-class women usually came from a poor farmer family. While middle-class women in the 19th century also had to work to support their family financial which was not stable enough. The types of their work were very different with the lower-class women. They usually worked as a private teacher for the upper-class family. In America at that time, middle-class women had received a high education, so that they had a different work with lower-class women. They could work as private teachers, typewriters, switchboard operator, et cetera. In contrast, upper-class women in the 19th century did not have to work to support their family financial. They did not have to do anything except their hobbies because they had lived in luxury. They also did not have to take care their children or households because they had nannies and maids to do that. All those portrayal of the upper-class women in the 19th century could be seen on ‘Little Women’ film especially in the scene 597,598, and 615. In that scenes, people could see the maids cleaned the house of upper-class women, they prepared the dress for upper-class women, and helped the upper-class women to wear the corset.

From the film ‘Little Women’, people could also see the portrayal of women in the 19th century in the aspect of love, career, and independence especially for middle-class women and upper-class women. The middle-class women in the film were represented by March family while the upper-class women were represented by women from the noble family.

##### a. Love

Rubin (1970) said that love is a human emotion toward the others that is more intense and deeper that involves stronger desire for physical intimacy and contact. In the film ‘Little Women’, the women of middle-class were represented by March family. They consisted of Marmee March (a mom of 4 daughters), Meg March, Jo March, Beth March, and Amy March. In this film, Marmee’s daughters had different characteristics. Jo March was described as an ambitious and rebellious girl. Jo challenges societal norms with her dream of becoming a writer and asserting her independence. While Meg March embraced her role as the traditional

homemaker, showcasing the complex choices women had to make in the face of societal expectations. Then, Amy March defied expectations by pursuing her art and showcasing that women can both talented and ambitious. Last, Beth March who exemplified the nurturing and selfless nature often associated with women, emphasizing the importance of compassion and sisterhood.

This family showed that they had a strong bond and they braved to confess their desire to choose someone that they loved. It could be seen from the scene when Marmee and Meg March had a conversation about Meg's engagement with John Brooke. From that conversation, it could be seen that middle-class women in that time who reflected by the character of Meg March braved to confess her wish, opinion, and desires in choosing her own life companion. Even John Brooke was a poor guy but she loved him. Here, there was also Meg' struggle between her desire for a traditional family life and the desire for personal fulfillment. In this conversation, Marmee, as her mother, let her to be with John Brooke as long as he had a house. It also could be said that middle-class parents in that era had one step forward thinking in giving their children freedom to choose their own life companion. One of scene also showed about Jo March's struggle in achieving her love. She did not like to be a romantic and melancholic woman. She also hated the idea of getting married with someone from a rich family without love. She hated the reason to marry with a guy from a rich family which was to improve the family financial not because love. She did not want to get married for the money. Rather than depended on the men, Jo preferred to earn money by herself by selling her own book. So, it could be said that Jo March put her career first before her love life. She had a high self-confidence that she could make some money from her book so that she should not have rely on the marriage to support her family financial. Jo March chose Friedrich who also a writer, as her husband. Jo March really proved her words that she did not want to get married because of money by refusing Laurie's proposal who told her that he could spoil her with the luxury things. She followed her heart and finally she met her love that was Friedrich. Even Friedrich was not rich, but Jo was deeply in love with him.

In the film 'Little Women', there was also shown about the upper-class women who did not really think about love as long as they could marry someone on the same level as them or even richer. The effort of upper-class women was to get men from the rich family and it was shown in one of the scenes when one of the characters namely Belle held a luxury dance party. Belle was a beautiful woman and also elegant. Belle held the party in her big house and attended by high class guests. The upper-class women in the 19th century often held a luxury dance party with the intention to meet the upper-class men. Generally, the kind of dance party as seen in this film used by upper-class people both men and women can get to know each other deeply. While the upper-class women danced with the men, they usually talked about their family. So, they could know each other how rich their family was.

So, the two social classes were very different in viewing the meaning of love. Meg March, as a representative of a middle-class woman, did not really care about the family background of the man she loved. Even if the man was poor as long as he was good and had a house. Meanwhile, women from the upper-class thought that love was something that was shown by marrying someone of equal (equal wealth) so that for them worldly happiness and

glory could be maintained if they married a man from a very rich family, even though it was not based on love.

#### b. Career

Education has the biggest role for someone to get a decent work. Education is the bridge for someone to get a good career path. Collin and Walts (1996) stated that career is an individual's development in learning and working throughout life. In the film 'Little Women' career of middle-class women was represented by Meg March. Here, Meg March worked as the private teacher for King family's children. This scene proved that middle-class woman had to work to support her family financial even though she was unmarried. For the middle-class women in that era, they got basic education such as reading, writing, arithmetic. While for the upper-class women, they could get a higher education and could study until high school or some of them went to college.

In this film, March family has established a school but finally it stopped operating because of their school accepted black students. Before, they were a rich family so it was not wondered that all girls in March family had a good education and one of them (Meg March) had a job as a private teacher. In addition, Marmee was the supportive mother, she supported everything that her children wanted to do in every aspect of life such as education and career. There was also one scene where Jo March went to New York to try to achieve her dream as a writer. Jo March wrote many stories and she already tried to send it to many publishers. One of her stories entitled 'Lost Duke of Gloucester' was published and she earned five dollars. It made her so sure to grow her ambition as a writer. She went to New York alone. At that time, a woman with a single status was not tolerated to travel alone because it was considered not safe for them (in Wiesner, 2007). Even though Jo March had to overcome many obstacles such as humiliated by an editor because she was a woman, but in the ended she succeeded in achieving her dream as a writer by publishing her novel about her life entitled 'Little Women'. In addition, she also succeeded in achieving her dream to build a school with the help of her husband, Friedrich. The character of Jo March wanted to break the tradition that women did not depend on men and could do everything all alone especially that related to reach their goals. In this film, the upper-class women were represented by Aunt March who described as a rich woman. In one of scene, she was doing embroidery while Amy March read a book for her. It also could be confirmed that the upper-class women did not need to work hard to support their family financial but they had to do feminine hobbies such as embroidering, painting, and playing music instrument.

#### c. Independence

Kon (1989) stated that independence is the ability of someone to make and carry out importance decision by himself or herself without direction from the others and responsible for the consequences of their action or decision. In the film, the aspect of independence was only showed by the middle-class women that represented by Marmee, the mother of March sisters, while the upper-class women did not have independence because they could not make or carry out a decision by herself since everything in their life was decided by their parents. Buckingham (2005) said that father was the only person that recognized by law and all rights

over the persons of wife and children. So, for the upper-class women all the decision including their marriage was decided by their parents especially their fathers. The independence of the middle-class women could be seen in one of scene when Marmee decided to withdraw Amy from school while her husband went to the war. From that scene, Marmee represented the independence of middle-class women who could make such a big decision without asking her husband's opinion. Marmee just asked Amy whether she could discipline herself at home and when Amy nodded her head which meant she agreed. Marmee also made another decision that was Jo March would be the one that supervised Amy for her study at home. The independence could also be seen in one of scene when Marmee asked Jo March to go to Aunt March's house to borrow some money to buy train ticket for Marmee. However, Jo could not do that. Then, she sold her hair to the salon and she got some money to buy the ticket for her mother. So, it could be said that she could even make a big decision by herself in urgent circumstances that could affect her future. Hair was like a crown for women but she decided to sell her hair and bought a train ticket for Marmee, her mother. Besides that, the independence of Jo March also could be seen from one of scene when she went far away from her house. She went to the new place that she never been there before all alone. She tried her best to get new experiences to achieve her dreams.

While for the upper-class women who was represented by Aunt March, it could be seen from one of the scenes in the film when Aunt March advised Marmee to marry Meg with a rich family. Upper-class parents thought that by marrying her daughters to a rich guy from a rich family would save family financial. Upper-class family considered that marriage was as a business.

Those all were the portrayal of the love, career and independence from the middle-class women and upper-class women that could be seen from the film 'Little Women'. Those aspects were closely related with the ideal women of the men in the 19th century. Welter (1966) said that there are four cardinal virtues of ideal women in America in the 19th century such as piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. Piety was the importance things for men in America in 19th century because they thought that if women were religious, they could be a good mother. Purity meant virginity. Men in America in the 19th century regarded virginity as women's greatest treasure that should not be lost until their marriage. Submission meant that men were women's superior by God appointment. Women had to understand their position as the submissive responders and should not act for herself. Domesticity meant that the proper place for women in the 19th century was stayed at home. Their roles at home were to take care of the households, children, and did something that considered feminine such as cooking, gardening, embroidering, painting, reading a novel, et cetera.

## 2. Gender Roles that can be seen in The Film 'Little Women'

UNESCO (2003) stated that gender is the role and responsibility of men and women that created in the society and culture. Buckingham (2005) added that gender is the expectation of the society to the male and female associated to their behavior of being feminine or masculine. The film 'Little Women' showed how women were confronted on two opposite sides. Then, this film also showed the exploration of sisters' pursuit of their individual passions not because the pressure of societal. The evidence could be seen in [table 1](#).

Exploration of Gender Roles

No	Traditiona l Gender Roles	Challenging Gender Roles
1	March sisters' adherence to societal expectation	Representation of Jo and Amy's aspirations beyond marriage and motherhood
2	Societal pressures on women to conform	Jo's refusal to adhere to gender expectations and her desire for independence
3	Meg's struggle between her desire for a traditional family life and the desire for personal fulfillment	Exploration of sister's pursuit of their individual passions

Table 1 On the traditional side, women's roles were still bound by societal rules which were represented by the March sisters, such as March sisters' adherence to societal expectations, societal pressures on women to conform and Meg's struggle between her desire for a traditional family life and the desire for personal fulfillment. On the other hand, there were things in life that challenge women. This other side, which was contrary to the traditional side, has shaped women to break through the traditional role of women to become women who dared to have opinions, have choices for their own good, and have the opportunity to actualize themselves as individuals whose skills were worthy of being taken into account. This was represented by Jo and Amy March who had aspiration outside of society's traditions regarding marriage and motherhood. Apart from that, Jo March's refusal to comply with gender expectations and her desire to be independent were also part of the representation of female thinking at that time.

**D. Conclusion**

This film celebrated the unwavering support and love among the March sisters, emphasizing the importance of sisterhood in navigating life's challenges. It also showed how the sisters' shared experiences, both joyful and difficult, highlight the bond that transcends societal expectations and reinforces the strength of their sisterhood. The film showcased the way in which the March sisters which represented by Jo March empower one another, encouraging each other to pursue their dreams and defy societal limitations. The film 'Little Women' critiqued the restrictive societal norms in that time, shedding light on the absurdity of limiting women's potential to marriage and motherhood. Through the characters' struggles and triumphs, the film highlights the need for gender equality and challenges the idea that women's worth is solely defined by their marital status. The film 'Little Women' has had a profound impact on the feminist movement and popular culture. It continues to inspire future generations with its strong female characters and its

exploration of themes such as identity, independence, and the pursuit of dreams. The film’s enduring legacy lies in reminding us of the resilience, strength, and power of women.



## References

- Buckingham, S. (2005). Women (re)construct the plot: The regen(d)eration of urban food growing. *Area*, 37(2), 171–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2005.00619.x>
- Coates, J. (2014). *Women, men and language: A sociolinguistic account of gender differences in language, Third edition. Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language, Third Edition* (pp. 1–245). Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315835778>
- Collin, A., & Watts, A. G. (1996). The death and transfiguration of career—and of career guidance? *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 24(3), 385–398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069889608253023>
- Djajanegara, S. (2000). *Kritik Sastra Feminis: Sebuah Pengantar. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.*
- Gender: Psychological perspectives (3rd ed.). (2002). *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, 3(2), 65–67. <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpslg.2002.3.2.65>
- Goodwin, D. W. (1968). Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity. *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 206(6), 1310. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1968.03150060084031>
- Guidelines for psychological practice with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. (2012). *American Psychologist*, 67(1), 10–42. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024659>
- Humm, M. (1992). Book Review: Conflicts in Feminism. *Feminist Review*, 40(1), 121–122. <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1992.18>
- Kon, I. S. (1989). The Psychology of Independence. *Soviet Education*, 31(9), 57–64. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RES1060-9393310957>
- Nyoman Kutha Ratna. (2015). *Teori Metode dan Teknik Penelitian Sastra : Dari Strukturalisme Hingga Postrukturalisme Perspektif Wacana Naratif. Pustaka Pelajar* (p. 406). Pustaka Pelajar.
- Rubin, Z. (1970). Measurement of romantic love. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 16(2), 265–273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0029841>
- Suharsimi, A. (2006). Metodologi Penelitian Suatu Pendekatan Praktek. *Jakarta: Rineka Cipta*, p. 172. Retrieved from <http://journal.um-surabaya.ac.id/index.php/JKM/article/view/2203>
- UNESCO. (2003). Baseline definitions of key concepts and terms. *UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework*, (April), 1–3.
- Welter, B. (1966). The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860. *American Quarterly*, 18(2), 151. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179>
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender and health. *Journal of Chemical Information and Modeling*, 1(2), 125–151.
- Wiesner, M. E. (2007). World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. *Journal of World History*, 18(1), 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2007.0008>