

UNDERSTANDING FEMINISM BY READING *LITTLE WOMEN*

Alice Juana Anggara

e-mail: alicejuananggara@gmail.com

Affiliation: Gereja Sidang Jemaat Kristus, Semarang

ABSTRACT

Feminist movement has widely been mistaken as a male-hating campaign. Louisa May Alcott was taking part in this movement by her literary works and the most famous work was *Little Women* (1868). The analysis of this book expanded the comprehension of the matter of feminism, coping with the misunderstanding about feminism among readers. The researcher took a close look into *Little Women* qualitatively, by focusing on one of the main protagonists, who is also a feminist, namely Josephine March, and the alteration of her character during her lifetime.

Keywords: feminism, womanhood, gender inequality, literature, equalize opportunity.

INTRODUCTION

Little Women (1868) was written in the setting of the post civil war time, during the Great Depression (Gilbert, 2018), in the U.S. While it was published, the first wave of feminism had not been born yet. Womanhood, though it was oppressed within the patriarchal world, remained silent and submissive, until one or two writers showed up on publications, fighting as individuals. Women had to fight against the gender inequality, but not many among them who did really care for femininity because poverty was the most distressing above all. Women at that time were remarkably limited, particularly those belonging in the middle class (BBC, "Life for Women at the Start of the 19th Century"), for the only realistic thing to help them from poverty was not to gain a big success, rather to marry a rich man. The March family was one of those who struggled to help themselves out of poverty. Poverty was at first the only afflicting trouble for the little family that the four March sisters had to create their imaginary "castles in the air" (Alcott, 1868, p. 145), where poverty did not exist in it. Jo

and Amy once had an ambitious dream to become great artists, but at the end of the book, Jo March was expected to think that "poverty was a beautiful thing" (p. 477) and later she gave up being ambitious and instead married a poor German. The Marches biographical journey within the book is as a whole a progressive learning of a woman's life, at least of a woman who lived in the 19th century, because the four different characters of the four sisters in the book portray women of that era.

Among the four sisters, Josephine March was the one that hated the idea of being a girl, and for the reason of that, all lady-like elegancies, lovelorn sentimentals, and romances, were nonsense to her. She even hated her own name thus she cut it to sound boyish. "I hate my name, too, so sentimental! I wish everyone would say Jo instead of Josephine," (p. 30) she would say. She later realized that all her attempts not to be a woman could not sustain long since growing up was surely indivertible. The boyish manner and mindset of the little Jo were clear reasons for readers to consider her a feminist, but later when she finally ended up married, readers would conclude that she had violated her oath. This study aimed to look closely into Jo's transition and to find out what can be learned from it concerning feminism.

Talking about feminism, its idea, however, is not as simple as hating boys on the negative side, nor imitating boys on the positive side, exactly as what Jo did. The essence of feminism and the reason it was formed in the first place were neglected by most people who were deceived by the sensation of the rebellious movement. Some feminist radicalists appeared to campaign hating males, or at least were judged so. Thus, people, eversince the Little Women era until now, have missed the mark of the early purpose of feminism, but this mishap always has an opportunity to be corrected, e.g. through literary learning. Alcott, despite the way she described Jo in a man-like manner, she never forgot to insert moral thoughts for the purpose of education. By considering the moral values of the book, Alcott would not be misunderstood rebelliously brainwashing young women to hate men. Speaking of the fact, feminism in its essence was not to destroy love that feminists shall hate males. Now, it is the aim of the study to find out the way to tackle the misunderstanding of feminism by learning the biographical story of the character Josephine March throughout the novel.

SUMMARY

Little Women was a story of the four little sisters living at Concord, Massachusetts: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. Their father was serving the country in the Civil War. They were poor but they befriended a wealthy neighbor, Laurie. As the girls grow older, each faces her own personal demons and moral challenges. Jo, the most favorable heroine, the boyish girl who was growing while pursuing her ambition to be a great author. She was sick of the lady-like being people demanded of her. She hated it when her sister Meg had to marry a man named John Brooke. She hated it when Laurie proposed to her. She always thought women are more than just beauty. However, she learned to soften her heart eventually after her being in New York, starting her writing career. By her meeting with a professor from Berlin, namely Friedrich Bhaer, she learned to open her heart and be wiser. About her writing career there, her writings were at the first attempt rejected because post-war audiences demanded entertaining publications, not which were aimed to moralize. Because of one or two things, she gave up writing for a while and decided to return home. After a long waiting at home, she realized how lonely she was and craved for someone to fulfill the void in her heart. She gave the clue through a published poem which led her to meet Bhaer again, who later became part of the extended March family. With him, Jo started a boarding school for boys at Plumfield.

FEMINISM

The idea of feminism was formed as the issue of a fatal oppression towards women's rights. Mostly oppressors were males for sure, like Aristotle when he declared that "the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities," (Selden et al., 2005, p. 115) but this statement does not cover all males. Women had lived under this hierarchical oppression, and the iniquity finally ceased when the wave of feminism arose. Feminist writers fought against the claim that language was formed by men, and that women writers did not belong in men-initiated discourse. Women writers did not own their freedom to create their own discourse with female experience; instead, they had positioned themselves as a comparison to men. In the first wave of feminism, Woolf asserted that "gender identity is socially constructed and can be challenged and transformed" (Selden et al., 2005, p. 118). The socialculture was to be blamed for the

fraud idea which differentiates male and female. The idea of gender had hindered women as human beings from realizing their own destiny beyond the sexual role and from achieving ambitious goals in life.

The gender-differentiating idea was initiated by the patriarchal culture. A feminist Gloria Watkins or Bell Hooks defined patriarchy as a system where males are constitutively made superiors and dominions over everything and everyone believed to be weaker, undoubtedly is female, as an onset which final result is a “dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (Salvaire, 2017). Difference is the villain because it divides parties and decides which reigns over another. What makes it even worse is not just because it violates women’s rights but men’s rights also. Boys cannot freely express their feelings but instead pretend as if they do not have emotion. Hence, feminist movement was born as a rebel towards inequality and fought to gain equal opportunity for each party, not turning over the table, by creating a world where females have power over males, nor for female to omit their emotion manly.

DISCUSSION

Little Women (1868) is divided into two parts by a certain periodical partition whereas the first part tells about the younger March sisters and the latter part the older ones. This analysis will focus on one of the main characters, i.e. Josephine March or simply Jo. Jo signified a significant change within the two parts, particularly the change of her thought of woman. The first part of the novel began with the story of the four girls playing pilgrims. Characters and settings were introduced in this chapter. Meg was associated with beauty and maturity, Jo the boyish girl, Beth the lovely selfless saint, and Amy the artistic young lady. All the sisters encountered their own problems in life, e.g. Meg found poverty was the most distressing trouble and Amy her nose. Jo, anyway, found that her growth distressed her. She observed that a girl of her time ought to grow up being a lady. She preferred to stay a child unless she lost all the fun. Jo remarked that, “It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boy’s games and work and manners! I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy” (Alcott, 1868, p. 6). One interesting point of Jo’s remark is why not being a boy disappointed her? Was she not given the same opportunity as boys had? Even though the next chapter mentioned about her regretting not being in school and having to work

instead, these could not be the suitable reasons for her disappointment. She decided to work to support the family because their father was in the army. Looking up to further chapters gives a clue to the reason for Jo's disappointment. In chapter four, the narrator noted that "Jo's ambition was to do something very splendid" (p. 41). Women's fate of being a lady, a wife, a mother did not sound splendid to her. She aimed to create her own fate, which was something very splendid. Moreover, she gave her opinion that what distressed Jo above all was that she could not "read, run, and ride as much as she liked" (p. 41). She could not read much probably because her time was limited by the working hours. But the 'could not run and ride' denotes that because she was born a girl, she 'could not run and ride'. Girls were much more limited in the Victorian era than now.

Was it just girls then who were limited that time? Chapter five tells about a boy who was as much limited as the March girls. A boy next door named Theodore Laurence alias Laurie was unhappy despite his affluent family. Jo, as if she was a boy herself, knew what Laurie needed thus she intended to suggest the old Laurence what was good for his grandson. She thought, "That boy is suffering for society and fun. His grandpa does not know what's good for him and keeps him shut up all alone. He needs a party of jolly boys to play with, or somebody young and lively" (p. 50). Jo's observation reveals that boys were not so different from girls for they needed love, care, friends, and fun as much as girls needed.

The hidden issue within the story of Jo and Laurie was that they were living in the patriarchal society that allowed superiority. Many sources give a throwing-back point of view to life in the nineteenth century, particularly in the post civil war era, concerning the oppression of women's rights. BBC reported that women could not vote nor partake in politics for the reason of their intellectual inadequacy. Godey's magazine argued that women too had qualities that men had, meaning to destroy the wall of "mental inequality of the sexes" (Godey & Hale, 1856, p. 92). Alcott through this book which seemed intended to moralize children implied the purpose of restructuring the paradigm existed within the patriarchal society. Jo played brother and regretted being a girl because she meant to do "something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it,

and mean to astonish you all some day. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream" (Alcott, 1868, p. 150). Many girls living in the postwar depression did have the opportunity to make their dream come true if they meant to be someone who was not a mother or a wife. Jo always knew she had the potential to be an author that she was sick not being able to be what she wanted to be. For this reason, Jo was playing brother with her sisters and that she hated being girlish.

Hooks, an influencing feminist, pointed out what is wrong with patriarchal culture by saying that "the first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is...that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves" (Hooks, "Bell Hooks Quotes"). As sentimentals and lovelorn things were hateful to Jo, masculinity refused those things too. Jo was trying masculinity within womanhood and she had not recognized its negative outcome yet. Little Jo behaved like a boy and wished she was one, but feminism did not make females males. Feminism intended to equalize the opportunity given to males and females. In the world feminism would create, Jo could be just Jo and Laurie Laurie; the successful author Jo and the lovable and friendly Laurie would be in it. These were what the patriarchal society could not provide. Living in this patriarchal world restricted men to feel and women to work and this disadvantaged both sides.

What appeared in the second part of the novel was Jo's emotional transition. In chapter 32, she decided to wander off to New York to start her career. Her reason was that she intended to avoid any affairs with Laurie because she had a sense that Laurie had a feeling towards her. She said to her mother one day, "It may be vain and wrong to say it, but—I'm afraid—Laurie is getting too fond of me" (Alcott, 1868, p. 342). Anyway, she could not escape forever because through her letters in the next chapter, she revealed her first meeting with a German professor named Friedrich Bhaer whom she found interesting. Alcott using third person omniscient point of view described a shift took place here. Jo March was described giving the professor "her heartiest respect" (p. 367). and that she "valued his esteem, she coveted his respect, she wanted to be worthy of his friendship, and just when the wish was sincerest, she came near to losing everything" (p. 367). These words have much to tell about Jo's transition because she never had the same feeling towards any male friends before.

A tragic irony came in chapter 35 when Laurie proposed to Jo and she delivered a terrific refusal. Jo claimed that, "I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man" (p. 379). Poor Laurie knew that she wrote letters about Professor Bhaer and that irritated him very much for Jo to say that she would stay a maid all her life. Laurie assumed that Jo would marry someone though she said no. Laurie's expectation came close by in chapter 42. This chapter is entitled 'All Alone'(p. 449). and here is where the turning point can be easily found.

Jo gave up writing because she found out that her writing did not sell and later decided to return home. Jo's favorite sister, Beth, suffered scarlet fever for so long and died afterward. In the house full of memories, Jo lived with her father and mother. That was the time where she felt terribly lonely. She observed the postpartum Meg improved a lot in her talking, thoughts, and feelings and she admired how marriage created a beautiful change in women. She said, "Marriage is an excellent thing, after all. I wonder if I should blossom out half as well as you have, if I tried it?" (p. 452). Jo must have forgotten that she would have broken her oath then if she turned out married. The key description of Jo's transition is quoted as follows.

She had often said she wanted to do something splendid, no matter how hard, and now she had her wish, for what could be more beautiful than to devote her life to Father and Mother, trying to make home as happy to them as they had to her? And if difficulties were necessary to increase the splendor of the effort, what could be harder for a restless, ambitious girl than to give up her own hopes, plans, and desires, and cheerfully live for others? (Alcott, 1868, p. 453).

Whatever happened to Jo then, whether she would marry someone or remain unmarried her whole life did not really matter for she had come to the conclusion that nothing deserved more than giving up everything for the sake of her family. Although in the end Jo was married but she had made her mind a good transition priorly. Out of her softened heart she wrote again and even gained greater success within the same chapter. Also, she admitted her mother's diagnosis that she was in the state of loneliness and that she did not mind trying "all kinds (of love)" (p. 456). She once secured her heart only for loving her family and felt quite satisfied with it, but ever

since this update, she began to stop being exclusive and gave chances for her heart to love others too.

Within these last four paragraphs, the second part of the novel had been extracted to point out Jo's alteration. However, the point to discuss here was not the love affairs. The crucial point revealed within the context is loneliness. Loneliness appears to be nothing, but research shows that it has severe neurological impacts (Brody, 2017). Jo thought she was all set with her family around, but the mother made a correct diagnosis that she was all lonely and incomplete ever since Beth died. No father or mother or Laurie could cure this but the one Bhaer. Jo had behaved manly for so long by neglecting her feelings. When she first befriended Laurie, she made the same diagnosis towards his illness that the boy needed company, but she barely could identify her own illness when she met one. The older Jo in the second part had the same problem as the boy Laurie in the first part. They both were lonely, and loneliness tormented them.

There is a clear difference between a feminist and a misandrist which is commonly disregarded by many people. A feminist fights for equality for both genders and because in the patriarchal culture females' rights are globally violated. A feminist has no intention to dignify females over males but to create an equality of opportunities given to both genders. Equality itself is still so broad but one thing to be sure is that it is a mental equality, not merely an outward appearance. Feminism demands an equality which diminishes differences and standards at once. Therefore, feminism does not make males females or vice versa. Jo did not have to pretend to be a boy to be equal. Women like Jo and Amy should not doubt to pursue their dreams to be great artists. Lonely lads like Laurie and Jo should not neglect their feelings and be ashamed of showing it thus putting on masks. The essential goal of feminism is for the inner self of both genders to share equal opportunities to do, to be, to feel anything they want to without any doubt or fear.

CONCLUSION

The main character of the novel *Little Women* named Jo was known to be boyish and befriended her neighbor Laurie. She regretted being born a girl for the reason of

having a desire to be an author. Jo represented those women whose dreams were given up because they were not men that they could be whatever they wanted to be. But women were not the only victim of the patriarchal society, in fact, the boy Laurie too was not satisfied with his life because nobody cared for him. Girls were limited in their doings and beings the way boys were limited in what they are feeling. The novelist Alcott drew out this picture to signal a global need to stop this inequality and to make her desired world a reality where Jo--without having to be a man--were able to be a successful author and Laurie--without having to be a girl--were able to admit that he was lonely and needed love. What Alcott longed for had been all feminists' dreams though feminists tend to be accused of hating males and destroying love. Feminism was formed simply to fight inequality, not to switch over the superiority from males to females, but to execute it to its roots.

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