

A GENDER PERFORMATIVITY ANALYSIS ON GENDER NORMS PORTRAYED IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN*

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Abstract

This research analyses gender norms and performativity in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) using Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. Alcott's semi-autobiographical portrayal of the March sisters paints a vivid picture of nineteenth-century American gender norms and their societal ramifications. This study focuses on Jo March and Theodore "Laurie" Lawrence and examines how their refusal to comply with standard gender norms reveals the performativity of gender. Jo, an outspoken and ambitious writer, and Laurie, a sensitive aspiring musician, are both subjected to social pressures to conform to traditional conceptions of femininity and masculinity, resulting in feelings of alienation and misfitting. By examining their problems, the research demonstrates how gender, as defined by societal and cultural assumptions, limits individual expression and imposes conformity. The study uses Butler's framework to show how Alcott's characters adopt gendered behaviors to fulfill society's expectations, emphasizing the tension between uniqueness and societal conventions. The research dives deeper into Alcott's subversion of preconceptions, as seen by Jo's rejection of traditional female roles and Laurie's challenges to masculine standards. Finally, this research emphasizes *Little Women's* ongoing importance as a critique of gender stereotypes and a reflection on the larger societal assumptions that shape identity. This study reinforces the importance of Alcott's work in conversations about gender performativity and societal expectations by locating it within feminist discourse.

Keywords: *feminism, gender norm, gender performativity, romance*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a means of human expression. Literature is often found in structured and written words such as play, poetry, and prose. Literature also serves as a mirror, describing reality while also reflecting the culture, norms, and attitudes of society and individuals in a given age. This is also why, at different times, certain writers and literary works have distinct features according to the social and historical context. *Little Women* was originally published on September 30, 1868, three years after the end of the American Civil War. The setting of time of the novel takes place in the recent nineteenth-century life in America; it is a difficult time for women to express themselves in public (Ratnaningrum, 2009). This is the reason why Louisa May Alcott wrote about the struggle that women experienced at that period. In the late 19th century, an American author, Alcott successfully presented a coming-of-age novel entitled *Little Women* that depicts the story of four young siblings as they face together the struggle of girlhood to womanhood, promoting the traditional gender roles of women during that time to their children's audience.

Women in society stereotypically are creatures that need protection, consolation, and justification from men. Women are also not allowed to do the "outside" work and are supposed to stay at home and do domestic work such as taking care of their children, cooking, and house chores. However, men always do the "outside" work to earn income for the family. From time to time, women start to realize that they deserve more than they already have, just as men do. Women started questioning their rights as men, they started to use any platform to speak up for what they believed. They wanted to be noticed for their existence and would use any means to actualize their dream.

This form of discrimination is mostly experienced by women. Women are treated as second-class citizens. Women were not given the right to vote or have a job equal to men, the right to free speech, freedom to own land. It was because

of those Feminist movements caused by women's civil rights; concluded that women's suffrage rights. The concept of feminism constructs that by dictionary definition, it claims to seek gender equality. Feminism was a movement for understanding women's right to vote, and own property, and it evolved over the years to fight against so many societal issues that affected women. Feminists demanded more equality and freedom to make their own decisions. They demanded equal status in the workplace and reduced male dominance. These led to a series of efforts by different feminists to make their different ideologies converge into something that can make society more equal. The Feminists carried along with themselves the ideologies of all genders, races, inequality, and discriminators (Dubois, 2000).

For some feminists, seeking to redress a variety of manifest injustices, happens in the first wave of feminism, most notably the right to vote. It started in the 19th century and was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on voting. With the second-wave feminists, different perspectives were necessary to achieve workplace equality for women, which it successfully achieved with the equal pay laws enacted everywhere. Furthermore, some feminists continued it and led it to third-wave feminism. The third-wave feminism from the 1990s until the present time is now more relatable; the main focus of third wave feminism is not just on the legal and economic discrimination of women. Still, on the ways, society socially discriminates against women in terms of gender roles, gender violence, reproductive rights, stereotypes, rape culture, bodily autonomy, and male privilege. It calls for a balance of male and female CEOs, political leaders, teachers, nurses, and athletes without any gender exception (Rampton, 2015).

Alcott's novel was rejected because of so-called inappropriate content, which included an interracial marriage between a white woman and a former slave (Reisen, 2019, p.154). Feminist themes can also be seen in works like *Rose in Bloom*. Due to her past works, Alcott desired that her writing should speak out on the injustices placed upon humanity and encourage society to end the repression. Alcott breaks many stereotypes by giving two of her main characters, Jo and Laurie, names that would usually denote someone of the opposite gender. Also, Alcott uses Beth's death to symbolize the death of the ideal woman. Within this literature, this paper will analyze the struggle of one of the characters in *Little Women*, which are Jo March, and Theodore "Laurie" Lawrence. With the first of feminism formally beginning in 1848 and *Little Women* being written in 1968, this paper will elaborate on the novel to find any sort of performative stereotyping between women and men at that period.

METHODOLOGY

Judith Butler formulates gender performativity theory. Butler explains the idea of sex derived from the theory of Simone Beauvoir. Butler explains that gender and sex are different, and gender is the result of constructs, created by the surrounding culture and society. Language plays an important role in the construction of gender identities. In Sara Salih's article "On Judith Butler and Performativity", she states that "gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a "masculine" man or a "feminine" woman (Salih 2002, p. 56). She continues by saying that "gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language (ibid)." That is to say that the ways language frames gender acts as a signifier for how that gender should be embodied, and that there is no gender outside of language. Going back to the theme of "doing" Salih says, "It is not that an identity "does" discourse or language, but the other way around language and discourse "do" gender" (ibid). As a result, words like "masculinity", "femininity", "woman" and "man" inherently carry a specific set of burdensome guidelines that limit gender expression.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Little Women shares several parallels with the author's original narrative. Alcott was the second of four children. Her first sister was Anna Bronson Alcott, and this character in *Little Women* inspired her to create Meg. The second-youngest March sister is based on Alcott's sister of the same name, Elizabeth Sewall Alcott, while the youngest March sister is based on Alcott's youngest sister, Abigail May Alcott. Jo's character is based on Louisa May Alcott's persona (Kaminski, 2010). The first daughter of the family, Meg March, was portrayed as the ideal daughter and woman at that period. She is more in her mother's character trait, which is more feminine, well-behaved, and romantic. Her character could be

portrayed as an ideal American daughter and woman in the 19th century. Her struggle of overcoming her wants and her eventually ending up with John Brooke for love and not for wealth shows major character development for Meg throughout the novel. However, getting married and having children were the expected outcomes for every girl during the 19th century. So, she always tried to fulfill her role as a woman at that period.

The protagonist of the novel, Jo, Josephine March. She is more on the boyish side and always shows disappointment for not being born as a boy. Somehow this character is portrayed based on Alcott herself. Jo is portrayed to be very outspoken and very rebellious. Jo also has a passion for writing, and she thinks that becoming a writer could make her freely speak her opinion and mind. "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy... Writing books is my greatest ambition, but I can never accomplish it unless I leave home and lead an independent life." (Alcott, 1994, p. 35)

Her headstrong personality is also very different from what conventional female characters from the 19th century usually looked like. Alcott drew Jo out to be a very original character with her bold, brave, daring but most importantly, real nature. Her character mostly shows how unequal society is with women and her character somehow shows as a protest towards society when it comes to women. The third sister, Beth, is a more old-fashioned girl in the 19th century who is not too strong or kind. Alcott killed her character though sickness could be some portrayal of reality through fiction. Beth did not think much about what the other sisters usually thought about. Her only priorities included music and other than that, she was more or less content with where she was and what she had.

In the novel *Little Women* author Louisa May Alcott highlights the importance of identity formation during the navigation of adolescence. Through the characters, Josephine 'Jo' March and Theodore "Laurie" Lawrence Alcott illustrates how both Jo and Laurie's refusal to conform to their heteronormative familial traditions creates a sense of misfitting through which aspects of gender performativity are revealed. In Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, she talks about how all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence as the result of social interactions and cultural inscriptions. As Butler points out, this seems to lead to the conclusion that "gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (Butler, 1990, p. 25)

Laurie, the Marches' lovely, humorous, and intellectual next-door neighbor, becomes particularly close to Jo but eventually marries Amy. Between the release of Part One and Part Two, Alcott received numerous letters requesting that she marry Jo to Laurie. Perhaps Alcott had Jo marry, but not Laurie, to both delight and teach her readers. Laurie, like Jo, struggles with his grandfather's expectations of him. Laurie is not manly enough for his grandfather because he does not wish to enter the business sector. Similarly, Jo is not feminine enough for her sisters since she swears, dirties her gloves, and always expresses her opinion. "I hate business, and I hate being in this office. I wish I could just live in Europe and play music forever." (Alcott, 1994, p. 307)

Both Jo and Laurie suffer a sense of misfitting because they believe they are different from the norm or that they do not "properly" occupy the areas of masculinity and femininity. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2011, p.592) discusses the idea of misfitting in her article "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept" and defines it as "varying lived embodiments that can dematerialize if social barriers no longer disable it". Both Jo and Laurie's annoyance of feeling one's body is out of place in familial and socially manufactured situations Jo feels out of place in the world of femininity. She is unable to empathize with her sisters' concern with vanity, such as doing their hair, or their desire for marriage and domestic existence. "It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners! I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go and fight with Papa. And I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman," (Alcott, 1994, p. 11). Laurie, on the other hand, feels out of place around lads his age who want to pursue young women and go to college. Furthermore, she experiences discomfort in adhering to and participating in family traditions, "I don't care what happens to me, so long as I never have to go into that dismal old office and grind like my father." (Alcott, 1994, p. 144).

Laurie, on the other hand, feels out of place. Returning to the performativity concepts, the characters in the story frequently embrace "that which is to be anticipated" to avoid feeling out of place. Jo frequently bites her tongue out of a desire to seem "ladylike" and opts for dresses over pants. Despite wishing for a profession in music, Laurie starts hanging

out with young men his age and pretends to be enthused about the thought of becoming a merchant. This contrasts with boys his age who want to date young ladies and go to college

Jo is frustrated by the March family's dedication to dressing well, especially Meg, Jo's oldest sister. Meg continually chastises Jo for her lack of femininity because she is the epitome of the "right woman" and says things like, "You are old enough to leave off boyish pranks, and to act better, Josephine, (Alcott, 1994, p. 12)." Or "When you were a small girl, it didn't matter as much, but now that you are so tall and have your hair pulled up, you should keep in mind that you are a young lady, (Alcott, 1994, p. 9)" Jo answers by expressing that she is "worse than ever now, (Alcott, 1994, p. 153)" about being a girl. Jo comments, "Meg will be all engrossed and no use to me, (Alcott, 1994, p. 36)" as her mother and she talks about the possibility of Meg getting married.

Theodore Lawrence who also dislikes his first name and prefers the name "Laurie" — also shares Jo's frustrations in being split between one's desired profession and the expectations of one's family. Like Jo, Laurie also describes his dream career when talking about his "Celestial City". In doing so, Laurie describes "his castle" as one where he is "a famous musician" and is "never bothered by money or business but just enjoy myself and live for what I like". (Alcott, 1994, p. 105) Both Jo and Laurie make valiant attempts to concede to their family's wishes but the reason behind their desire to conform may be born out of more than familial duty. There is plenty of evidence that even those of us who consider ourselves not to be racist or sexist engage in implicit bias and that there is "moreover, a tendency to remain largely unaware of this phenomenon" (Fielding 1986, p. 285). That is to say that our inherent biases can alter our perceptions so that we see those who do not embody, for example, gender, in the same ways that we do as "other". This "othering" effect can be detrimental to adolescent development. Feeling as though one does not fit in can lead to self-deprecation and, as aforementioned, performativity practices.

CONCLUSION

In *Little Women*, both Jo March and Laurie Lawrence make attempts to break binaries for gender norms. Jo, who deviates from her femininity and wishes to be a boy and writer, resents her sister Meg who is so content with womanhood and the duties that accompany it. Theodore, who deviates from traditional masculinity and wishes to be a musician and traveler, resents the grandfather who will only be appeased if he goes to college and takes part in the family trade. Both Theodore and Jo are forced to give up some of the most unique aspects of their character, and pieces of their individuality to conform to societal norms. Throughout the novel both Jo and Laurie adopt what Butler coins gender performativity practices to avoid being perceived as "other". However, despite their valiant efforts to conform, both Jo and Laurie often feel misfitted in the realms of "traditional" masculinity and femininity. The traditional gender roles for both young men and woman are proven to be unsatisfying for both characters who ultimately end up following their gendered scripts, rather than writing their own.

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