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Little Women through a Feminist Lens

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ABSTRACT

Feminism as a concept has been always a little too hard to understand. Going through different phases and adapting to different definitions, it has become a broad term. Here, the aim is to analyse the movie "Little Women" (1994) through a feminist lens. The movie appears to fit nicely into the genre of literature for young girls at first glance, but it surprisingly transcends many of the nineteenth-century gender stereotypes. Little Women questioned society's definitions of stereotypical gender roles and pushed the limits of expectations put on both men and women to comply with society's standards. An attempt has been made here to link the actions of the characters in the movie to represent different phases and waves of feminism and how the movie stands as an excellent example of contemporary issues too despite being from a different time period.

Keywords: *Feminism, Little women, Radical, Liberal, Patriarchy.*

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Feminism has been a skewed concept, it has evolved over the years. The movie being reviewed here is based on the Novel of the same name by Louisa May Alcott. The Novel was written over the years 1831-32 while the (so-called) first wave of feminism is said to have begun in 1848. One seeks to question how is it then that one can analyse it from a feminist perspective and hence, critics said that the movie was merely a teenager -attracting bubbly adaptation. There lies the beauty. Although, feminism hadn't yet taken a formal form in 1830's, the awareness among women of their rights, political and social, was growing. There are many conflicts within the movie which lead us to sometimes believe that it is reinforcing the patriarchal construct of the society, as we shall see in the instances of marriage of Meg, but if one observes closely; it shall become clear that the story is trying to introduce us to the societal mind-set that existed at that time and that is subtly shunned by the characters. Hence, an attempt has been made here to highlight those instances where the characters make such statements and try to relate them into various forms that feminism has taken over the decades

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II. LITTLE WOMEN (1994)

(A) Synopsis

Little Women portrays the lives of the members of March family which consists of Marmee March with her four daughters named Margaret (**Meg**), Josephine (**Jo**), Elizabeth (**Beth**), and Amy; all with different characteristics. With their father at the war-front, their mother is left to take care of them. Meg is the eldest and the only hope for her family to be in a better condition is her marrying a wealthy man. Jo is an aspiring writer, who seeks to never marry and prosper on her own. Beth has a very small role whereby she mostly plays piano and helps her mother, she also catches a scarlet fever which weakens her heart and eventually after years, she meets a young tragic end. Amy the youngest daughter, seeks to marry a rich gentleman and be an artist.

III. AN OVERVIEW

“Jo, you have so many extraordinary gifts; how can you expect to lead an ordinary life? You're ready to go out and - and find a good use for your talent. Tho' I don't know what I shall do without my Jo. Go, and embrace your liberty. And see what wonderful things come of it”, exclaims Marmee March, a mother of four daughters, and one of the strongest characters you'll come across in the cinematic adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's novel 'Little Women'.

Although many have dismissed "little women" as an immature piece written for young girls and as such unworthy of serious consideration, a more careful examination demonstrates how much it really offers. A story of love, war, family, pain, loss, repent and much more, it explores the antiquities of life as a middle-class American during a tumultuous war, and, most importantly, provides a female focused perspective.

IV. FEMINISM

Obviously hard to define, feminism could be understood as an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and end of sexism in all forms (*Feminist Philosophy (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy/Fall 2018 Edition)*, 2018). Feminism's first wave emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the context of urban industrial capitalism and revolutionary, socialist politics. Rampton (2020) mentions that at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott (1848) proclaimed in their declaration for sentiments that “we hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal”. It was the first document of its kind. With an emphasis on suffrage, the aim of this wave was to expand opportunities for women.

Rampton (2020) emphasizes that the second wave began in the 1960s and continued into the 90s. Protests against the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969 kicked off this phase. Feminists mocked what they saw as a demeaning "cattle parade" that relegated women to symbols of beauty and was dominated by a patriarchy that wanted to keep them at home or in low-paying occupations. Feminists spoke of women as a social class and coined phrases such as "the personal is political" and "identity politics" in an effort to demonstrate that race, class, and gender oppression are all related. Third-wave feminism emerged in the early 1990s as a reaction to the second wave's alleged shortcomings, as well as the backlash against the second wave's policies and protests. Wrye (2009) explains third-wave feminism attempts to address or avoid what it sees as the second wave's essentialist conceptions of femininity, which overemphasise the experiences of upper middle-class women, according to them. It evolved in the 1980s and 1990s, emphasizing women exploring gender pluralities; "having it all"; and juggling career, sex, and motherhood. It is argued that we have moved into the fourth wave from 2012, as women turned toward spiritual concerns about the planet and all its beings, putting themselves in the service of the world, ecology, and the downtrodden (Rampton, 2020). It is the aim here to analyse "Little Women" from these feminist perspectives.

V. THE THEME OF SECOND WAVE AND RADICAL FEMINISM

The movie starts with one fine Christmas Eve, narrating how the March's, one of the finest families, had slid into poverty due to the repercussions of war. At the outset itself, it displays the gender stereotypes in existence in those days when Amy tells Jo not to use words such as 'awful', 'blast' or 'wretch' because it was unacceptable of a girl's behavior although their mother, Marmee never disapproves of it. Marmee is viewed as a mother who allows her girls to live their life on their own conditions. Upon a comment by Mr. Brooke, the tutor of their neighbour Mr. Theodore Lawrence (**Lawrie**), on how energetic her girls were, she's quick to remind him that, "young girls are no different than boys in their spirits for exertion. Feminine weakness and fainting spells are the direct result of our confining young girls to the house bend over their needle work and restrictive corsets". This is an instance where one could find a subtle hint of radical feminism where Marmee rejects the ideals of femininity set by society. Through this statement, one is reminded of Mary Wollstonecraft, she argues that women are not naturally inferior to men, but appear to be only because they lack education. She suggests that both men and women should be treated as rational beings and imagines a social order founded on reason.

When Meg expresses that she likes it when praised, she couldn't help but like it. Marmee explains "I only care what you think of yourself. If your value lies in being merely decorative, I fear that someday you might find yourself believing that's all that you really are. Time erodes all such beauty but what it cannot diminish are the workings of your mind. I so wish, I could give my girls a more just world". This can be seen as referring to existentialist feminism that according to Rampton (2020) is a concept that says, woman must become a self, a subject who transcends definitions, labels, and essences

Moreover, according to Vukoičić, (2017), radical feminist theory is based on the fact that gender inequality is the foundation of all other inequalities and oppression. Dow (1996) explains that repression against women takes place in the patriarchy that is a hierarchical system of male domination over the female gender, which consists of, and is maintained due to the characteristics which include:

- I. The obligatory motherhood and limiting the reproductive freedom;
- II. The social construction of femininity and female sexuality through the creation and presentation of subordinative image;

Upon Jo's questioning that why it was such that Lawrie could do as he likes and no one thinks less of him, Marmee explains that Lawrie was a man and as such he may vote, own property, preserve any profession of his choice, and wouldn't be as easily demeaned. There is also an instance where Amy tells that her teacher Mr. Davis said it was as useful to educate a woman as to educate a female cat whereupon Jo disapproves of him. She expresses her wish, "If only she could be like her father and go to the war and stand up to the lions of injustice." Jo could be classified here as the ideal heroine of radical feminists. She is tomboyish, discards the notions of femininity, and seeks to live her life on her own terms. She even sells her hair to make money for her mother to visit her wounded father at the hospital. She rejects the marriage proposal by Lawrie since she believes that she could never be a 'wife'. By doing all this, Jo defies the subordinative image of a woman.

VI. THE THEME OF LIBERAL FEMINISM

Baehr (2020) states that liberal feminism is the most generally accepted social and political ideology by feminists, stressing equal individual rights and freedoms for women and men while underplaying sexual differences. Liberal feminists call for gender equality and stress the importance of social, familial, and sexual structures in ways that facilitate women's sovereignty and self-fulfilment. Belonging to the first wave of feminism, it stresses on political equality, more so on the right to vote.

As the story progresses, Jo is seen working as a governess in New York. At a regular evening table at her lodgings, a general discussion about certain constitutional rights pops up. While a man makes a remark that a lady had no need for suffrage if she had a husband. Whereby Jo expressed herself as “I find it poor logic to say that because women are good, women should vote. Men do not vote because they are good; they vote because they are male, and women should vote, not because we are angels and men are animals, but because we are human beings and citizens of this country.” Here we see her as an ideal Liberal feminist. She believes in the equality of rights for men and women and sees them with the lens of citizens and not different genders. She isn’t a misandrist, she gets inspired by the men around her, her father who gets wounded in the war, from Laurie who is so free spirited, from Friedrich who encourages her to write from the depths of her soul.

VII. THE CONFLICT

Towards the end, Amy gets married to Laurie and Jo to Friedrich. One might see this is going against the ideals of Jo who seemed to never be tied in such a relationship. Such is the conflict in the movie, she wants to be a writer and do great things, but finds herself within the limitations of various institutions: selfless femininity, marriage, and family. It should be emphasized here that these institutions are generally seen as the weakening forces in the perspective of the third wave. But, it should be observed that even if the movie is not so much radical, trying to change the world altogether, it attempts to provide a room for empowered, autonomous women in the existing patriarchal systems.

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Hence, one could say that *Little Women* is a ‘not-so critical’ satire on the then existing societal mind-set which tried to downplay the capabilities of women. It narrates the lives of these women, splendid in their own ways, having different dreams but none less important than other. The subtle instances of feminism are amusing and worth pondering over. One also gets to learn about the time period during and just after the Civil war and find an amazing group of role models in the March family. But, there seems a lack of the seemingly developing Fourth wave of feminism over the whole discourse of the movie. The fourth wave, as it is generally understood brought Issues that were central to the earliest phases of the women’s movement such as like sexual abuse, rape, violence against women, unequal pay, slut-shaming, the pressure on women to conform to a single and body-type and the realization that gains in female representation in politics and business, are very slight into the public discourse. It is no longer considered “extreme,” nor is it considered the purview of rarefied intellectuals to talk about

societal abuse of women, rape on college campus, Title IX, homo and transphobia, unfair pay and work conditions Rampton, 2020). Perhaps this could be because of the immense technological development and globalization today that movements as such are possible. Imagining such a scenario in the time period in which “Little Women” takes place is next to impossible. However, there do lie many latent questions in the movie which are very contemporary: how would a woman strike a balance between general societal notions of marriage and household and her dream of doing anything genuinely remarkable.

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