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Depiction of Gender Roles & Femininity in Cinematic Adaption of Louisa May Alcott's Novel *Little Women* by Greta Gerwig

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Abstract

This study aims to compare two works in different mediums: a novel titled *Little Women*, authored by Louisa May Alcott in 1868, and its film adaptation of the same title, directed by Greta Gerwig in 2019. This study explores how Greta Gerwig transformed gender roles and femininity in Little Women's novel into a film version. This study employs the fidelity theory offered by James M. Welsh and the adaptation theory proposed by Linda Hutcheon. Qualitative analysis and library research are used as research methods in this study. The results revealed that the gender roles in the film adaptation had been portrayed with some changes, to focus more on their struggles to obtain their dreams and less romantic portrayal. The writers argue that femininity in the novel is depicted with a more modern sense of femininity and more aligned with modern feminist ideas.

INTRODUCTION

The history of literature and film has been discussed extensively recently. Compared to the long-established history of literature, film's relatively young century-old history is apparent. Although cinema technology is still in its infancy, it propels narrative culture forward at a breakneck pace. This work is developed in part by other works, especially literary works. Understanding a film means understanding an expression of a literary work, and an expression of a literary work is greatly inspired by a film, which is why these two works are recognized to influence one another. The process of adapting a novel to a film is not simple. Many films have been created for a long time due to adaptation from a drama text, short story, or novel. Ideally, the text for a film should be written specifically for film because it uses a different medium to deliver a message than literary work. Bazin (2004) stated that cinema is an art form uniquely suited to capturing reality. Pertiwi and Iman (2021) mentioned that in a novel adaptation, a filmmaker reorganizes and enhances the key elements to be adopted into the film screen.

In the twentieth century, the emergence of film adaptations of literary works has increased. Welsh and Lev (2007) said that adaptation has been central to film-making since almost the beginning and could maintain its dominance into the cinema's second century. The statement above explains that the number of films that use literary works as a source of creation has a very large percentage value, especially in the United States, as the architecture of world cinema. Seger (1992) explains adaptation is a transition process, conversion from one medium to another. She no longer talks about the difference between the two mediums, the text and the film, because the two had different characters from the beginning. When

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united or linked, it will undoubtedly produce a change. A new form or trait will eventually emerge due to adaptation, and the spirit of the original text is expected to remain present in the new work. Seger called it, "Take me as I am." It was added to Seger that in adaptation, three processes that need attention are rethinking, re-conceptualizing, and understanding the adapted source text (1992). Hutcheon (2006) argues that repetition in adaptation is not merely a duplication, but it is integrally creative and inherently repetitive because it draws on existing works. Furthermore, she stated that the audience was divided into two kinds: knowing and unknowing (Hutcheon: 116). Ellis (2022) mentioned that adaptations often revive older texts, presenting them to new generations and letting them resonate within a dissimilar context of cultural elements. Welsh (2007) discusses that adaptation involves reimagining the source material to align with the new medium's unique storytelling techniques and constraints, and there is pressure to remain faithful to the source, introducing creative elements to make the adapted work stand on its own. Leitch (2007) argues that adaptations should be adjudged as works in their own right rather than as derivative or secondary to the source material because adaptations often transform their sources to suit diverse audiences, mediums, or cultural contexts, so strict fidelity is impractical and undesirable.

For centuries, women have been shaped by the stories told about them either by female or male writers. Yet, their voices often remain obscured in the literary canon, and women's roles often mirror the limitations imposed by society. Eagleton (1996) highlights it is necessary to analyzes how women are represented critically and the transformative potential of feminist criticism in reshaping literary studies. Butler (1990) discusses the binary opposition of "masculine" and "feminine" as socially constructed categories that maintain a heteronormative framework. In this framework, femininity is not a stable or universal concept but is shaped by power relations and societal norms. This study explores how women's representation has evolved from passive archetypes to dynamic protagonists in the text Louisa May Alcott (1868 and 1869) adapted to the movie Little Women film, directed by Greta Gerwig in 2019, She emphasizes different themes or character relationships.

Louisa May Alcott wrote Little Women in 1868 and 1869; an American writer published the book in two parts. Alcott wrote many popular novels, such as *Little Man, Jo's Boys, Eight Cousins, How,* etcetera. Those books were awarded as notable works. Writing has been her interest since she was a little child, and her works have brought her literary success. In 1994, the movie Little Women, based on her eponymous novel of the same name, became an enormous critical and commercial success and was nominated for three Academy Awards. D'Onofrio (2023) states that seven different "Little Women" movies have been released over the past 106 years, garnering significant critical praise.

In the 2019 *Little Women* film, Gerwig shows the society in the film that has always treated women and men differently, giving birth to a dominant side between men and women. Men who have greater power than women are frequently referenced in the literature. According to Cartmell and Whelehan, "the most important issue in the adaptation of a literary work into a film is the loyalty to the original source - the novel" (1999). It will be interesting to study gender roles and femininity as the writer's focus in analyzing the film *Little Women.* Thus, the writer aims to explore the differences between women and men seen from society's perspective on the characteristics of women and men in *Little Women* and its movie adaptation and how the film adaptation portrays the role of societal norms in shaping gender roles and femininity through their actions and relationships.

METHOD

The method used in this library research is the qualitative method. The original text is read carefully, and take detailed notes. The next step is to watch the adaptation and make the documentation to analyze the data to maintain a clear record of our observations and link them back to specific parts of the novel. The writers will examine how gender roles and femininity are presented based on the story and the film by pointing out the differences, such as those in the novel and the movie.

The library was researched using two kinds of data: primary and secondary data. The primary data is the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The writer will read the novel to understand the story of

Little Women and the movie Little Women, directed by Greta Gerwig in 2019. The writer will watch the film on an online streaming platform, HBO GO, and then try to match the issue related to this research and some materials related to the primary data. Secondary research is applied to engage with scholarly critiques, reviews, and adaptation theories and highlight gender roles and femininity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study will analyze how gender roles and femininity in *Little Women's* novel (1868 and 1869) are portrayed in *Little Women's* movie (2019). This chapter focuses on adaptation because the preceding chapter details the novel *Little Women*. The writer will concentrate on the analysis of adaptability, particularly gender roles and femininity, in this study. The writer divides this analysis into two sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter explains the alterations of gender roles in *Little Women*. The second sub-chapter explains Gerwig's faithfulness and represents femininity in *Little Women's* movie.

For the first part of the discussion, Jo is the first character that will be analyzed. Gerwig shows Jo in the opening of her film differently than the novel to engage the viewers. In the novel, Jo's physical traits have a tomboyish appearance. She is frequently seen wearing pants, vests, and boots instead of the beautiful gowns and ribbons that her sisters prefer. Gerwig begins the story of *Little Women* with a backward narrative that shows Jo's appearance to be slightly more feminine. The second scene shows Jo writing a letter to Laurie. Jo's character in the novel does not highlight the dramatic side of her romance, especially with Laurie. The changes in gender roles are strongly evident in this scene. Gerwig presents the character of Jo as feeling more romantic in this scene, which is slightly different from the novel. This alteration could affect the audience that Jo still has a feminine side besides her independent personality. Jo March comes alive to Gerwig's screen, portrayed as the same strong-willed, passionate young woman. Weaver (2020) states that the film presents life as a single woman in those days, which was considered an incredibly lonely existence.

The second character that will be analyzed is Meg. The alteration is portrayed in the part where Meg attends a party at the Moffat's house. In the novel, Meg looks awkward and feels uncomfortable when attending the party because it is attended by nobles. In the film, Meg is seen enjoying the party and feeling part of the noble ladies who were at the party. Meg's gender roles in the film emphasize the realistic lives of women who should attend lavish parties, look graceful, and get married. In the novel, Meg is an older sister who fights for her younger siblings while her father and mother are not at home.

The third character is Beth. In the novel, Beth is depicted as a careful and humble daughter who adheres to society's ideals of women's responsibilities. Beth represents the ideal woman of the nineteenth century, who is peaceful, loving, and kind. She is comfortable with domestic responsibilities and does not want to disturb contemporary gender norms. Gerwig's adaptation gives Beth's character greater complexity, emphasizing her significance in the film. Gerwig slightly alters Beth's character in the film adaptation, questioning established gender roles. Despite Beth's kindness and caring, the film focuses more on her musical talent and passion. Beth uses her passion for music as a means of self-expression to break free from the constraints of conventional women. The alteration in Beth's character in the film gives her a more independent and powerful representation that enables her to defy gender stereotypes and express her aspirations through her gift in music.

The fourth character is Amy, the last daughter of the March family. Amy appears more closely in the novel following conventional gender roles and cultural expectations. She concentrates on improving her artistic abilities, especially in painting, to increase her possibilities of marrying an ideal partner and achieving financial freedom. Amy's character changes slightly in Gerwig's adaptation in terms of gender roles. The film focuses on Amy's artistic dreams and intentions to be accepted for her gifts and gain independence in her work. In the film, Amy's motivation to overcome barriers faced by female artists in a patriarchal culture appears in Gerwig's adaptation. Thus, Gerwig makes several alterations to portray Amy's character.

The fifth character is Marmee, the mother of the March sisters. Alcott portrays Marmee in the

novel as a caring, wise, and devoted mother figure to her family. She presents Marmee as a caretaker, a parent, and encouraging to her children. Marmee also has a typical function as a housewife, responsible for household responsibilities and childcare. However, in Greta Gerwig's adaptations, there are some alterations to Marmee's character regarding gender norms. Marmee is portrayed in the film speaking up more firmly and passionately about feminism and social justice. She encourages her girls to pursue their aspirations and overcome the difficulties of living in a patriarchal environment.

The last character that will be analyzed in the first sub-chapters is Laurie. In the novel, Laurie is described as a pleasant, rich, and lovely young man. Laurie has demonstrated a passion for softer gender roles, such as his love of music and artwork, yet has typical male attributes like independence and bravery. His best friend Jo, a member of the March family, is a close friend. However, Laurie's character has been modified with some alterations in terms of gender roles in the Greta Gerwig *"Little Women"* movie. In addition to being presented as a nice and pleasant man in this movie, Laurie also exhibits a more nuanced side when deviating from the traditional expectations of masculinity at the time.

The following discussion is about Gerwig's faith in representing femininity in the Little Women movie. The first character to be analyzed is Jo. In the novel, Alcott portrays the element of femininity when Jo cares for and supports her sick sister, Beth. The writer opines that Gerwig decides to keep this part in her movie to remake the same situation, the same feeling of the femininity of Jo's character. Jo pays extra attention to comfort and care for Beth during challenging moments. The writer thinks Jo's concern for Beth demonstrates a woman's instinct despite her tomboyish and independent personality. This demonstrates that femininity is not restricted to traditional duties but also includes attributes such as compassion and caregiving. Gerwig also included this part in her movie. In addition, Jo's femininity is also seen when she expresses her enthusiasm in continuing her writing with emotional feelings because she has always encountered obstacles in becoming a writer. Still, she can apply it calmly, with patience, and without haste. Jo's tomboyish side is not felt at all in this scene.

The second character that will be discussed is Meg. Meg's femininity appears both in the novel and the movie. Alcott portrays Meg as a kind and loving woman and a mother to her younger sister, she also represents a woman who accepted the social norms at that time. In the film, Meg's femininity appears when Meg accepts social stereotypes of women. She wants to marry and have a family with the guy she loves. Gerwig represents Meg as a woman who is subservient to the role of women as a second gender in the stereotypes of society at the time. The audiences who read the novel will relate because what happened in the film also happened in the novel. Meg's femininity is also evident in the scene where she attends a party with Jo by her neighbor, Mrs. Gardiner. In Gerwig's film, Meg looks gorgeous in her beautiful purple dress. She does not look like a girl from a poor family at all. Meg, described as a graceful woman who likes glamorous things, can be seen clearly in this scene. Gerwig fully adapted this scene from the novel because it is an essential part of Meg's character that could represent Meg as the ideal woman at that time. Meanwhile, Beth's femininity is portrayed in the novel, and Gerwig's film adaptation focuses on a scene where Beth's emotions are conveyed differently but still reflect her feminine side. Another example of Beth's dialogue cuts is in the novel when Marmee March reads a letter to their children, deaf, by the father who is fighting on the battlefield on Christmas Day. Beth's feminine side is very strong in this part when Marmee reads the letter. In this scene, Beth has nothing to say about the letter, but the part where he wipes away the tears and continues his stitches does not appear in the film. Bet just fell silent and stared blankly at the window. However, the lack of expression shown by Beth does not reduce her feminine side, even though it is only shown on her face. This may be influenced by the soft, graceful, and innocent facial contours of Eliza Scanlen (Beth's cast), which makes the minimal scene feel enough to describe the femininity of Beth's character.

Another femininity also appears in the scene when Beth visits sick children at their home. In this scene, Gerwig does not put a single dialogue about how Beth represents carefulness to the neighbour who needs some help in the winter situation. Besides, in the novel Alcott put some dialogues that illustrate Beth's femininity in this situation. However, this little scene is quite enough to show Beth's feminine

qualities because Beth feels the role of the mother in this scene. Women at that time were synonymous with gentleness and affection instead of men, who were challenged to express those feelings because they were more focused on work and war.

The last analysis of femininity appears in Amy's character. Alcott shows how Amy's feminine characteristics evolve throughout the novel, from her teenage years defined by an emphasis on beauty to a scene in the film adaptation in which she dresses up for a party. The femininity in Amy's character changes as the story progresses. Teenage Amy is described as spoiled and sometimes a little selfish. The femininity inherent in young Amy focuses on appearance and physical beauty. This can be seen in the scene where Amy wants to go with her sisters Meg and Jo to a party to which she is not invited. It can be seen that Amy is wearing clothes like a fairy, and her hair is braided back as if preparing to go to the party.

Interestingly, Gerwig describes another femininity in the adult version of Amy's character. Adult Amy has a different focus when it comes to femininity. Adult Amy is portrayed as an elegant, independent woman obsessed with marrying wealthy men. Therefore, she has to raise her social caste. It could have happened because of the influence of Aunt March, who pressured her to become an upper-class woman. The independent side that exists in adult Amy enhances her femininity. Amy puts aside her obsession with marrying a rich man or choosing to marry the man she loves. As time went on,

Amy realized that marriage was not just about pursuing social castes. Cosslett (2019) points out that *Little Women* depicts a complicated sister relationship and their struggle to achieve dreams. In addition, she adds that the adaptation overflows with new perspectives and is pertinent to contemporary viewers.

Gerwig's adaptation shows a nonlinear narrative by switching past and present to illustrate how the five sisters' lives and choices have evolved. They struggle to achieve their dreams, allowing the audience a more critical examination of the societal expectations of women's gender roles. Peigina (2021) argues that the film presents an ambiguous ending, which can be interpreted as a breakthrough glorifying the freedom of choice and variability of women's lives and as a cowardly concession to romantic conventions to please everyone at once.

CONCLUSIONS

After examining the novel and its adaptation, the writers argue that in the adaptation of *Little Women,* Gerwig represents the gender roles and femininity of the female characters by focusing on their struggles to resist traditional gender roles and placing less emphasis on romance. However, the writers found several essential and new scenes of *Little Women* after examining gender roles and femininity. The alterations made in the adaptation significantly impact today's audiences, mainly as the director included additional dramatic and romantic scenes into the film. Pollock (2023) claims that Gerwig knew audiences would not feel sympathy with Jo's destiny for many years, so she accomplishes her film with a twist in with two endings.

In terms of femininity, the writer discovers eight conflicts portrayed in the film adaptation, two of which are additional scenes. The alterations make them relatable and fascinating; they make the film more marketable for teenagers. We argue that the gender roles in the novel have been adapted amazingly because Gerwig created a new color in conveying a message related to gender roles that are slightly different from what is in the novel. Gerwig focuses on Jo's character to lead the storyline from beginning to end, while Alcott uses a third-person perspective in the novel. In addition, the storyline that Gerwig applies in her film is non-linear. Gerwig marks the plot using two color tones: the cold signifies the past, and the warm colour represents the present time. In the novel, Alcott uses a linear plot. This can be easily observed so that the reader can understand the development of the characters because Alcott explains the characters in her novels sequentially, from teenagers to adults. However, in the film, Gerwig uses a non-linear plot that can confuse the audience in understanding the development of characters, especially Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, and Laurie.

This affects how gender roles are experienced by the character due to the jump in time settings and

place, so it could change their gender roles in a short time. The writer also feels the impact of this plot, but as the story progresses, the reader will be able to understand the plot. Moreover, the writer argues that Gerwig can precisely portray the novel's message in this significant plot difference.

Concerning femininity, some parts of femininity do not appear in the novel and are only shown in the film. The different ways in which femininity scene is presented in the adaptations also vividly indicate the more dramatic way Jo sits at her writing desk expressing her feminine side in deep emotion, and when Amy talks with Laurie about her feelings after she rejects her fiancé. Gerwig gives a more romantic impression in these two scenes because of the romantic dynamics they experience. There is no significant difference from the novel version in the other six femininity scenes. The author believes that Gerwig maintains these six scenes to show his fidelity to the novel's story.

Overall, Greta Gerwig wants to portray gender equality in a realistic way. Gerwig does not eliminate women's femininity in this film, she gives the impression that women do not have to leave their femininity fighting for equality. Gerwig's *Little Women* reforms give a more fluid understanding of femininity and are more aligned with modern feminist ideas.

In addition, the cinematography of Gerwig's film does not disappoint. The setting and colour tones used are very good in representing life in the United States in the 19th century; the selection of good costumes and the right actors and actresses also supports this. *"Little Women"* 2019 has a relevant story, making it a timeless film.

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