



Revisiting Louisa May Alcott's Little Women: A New Historicist Perspective

Shreya Pathak *

UG Student
Amity University, Lucknow.

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into Louisa May Alcott's renowned novel "Little Women" through the lens of New Historicism, aiming to discuss the interactions that take place between literature and historical contexts. By evaluating the book in context of 19th century American social dynamics, this paper claims that the novel's portrayal of domestic life is much more complex than the usual interpretations suggest. Through a new-historicist lens, Alcott has used the central characters- Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy to explore the societal expectation put on women during a time of social and economic crisis. The major themes discussed in this research paper are gender roles, domestic life, ambition, family and class dynamics. This analysis will help readers gain a better understanding of little women's ongoing relevance by focusing on issues that still resonate with people of this generation.

Keywords- New Historicism, little women, Louisa May Alcott, gender, power, 19th century America

Introduction :

During the period of Civil War in America, Louisa May Alcott came up with a wonderful novel that depicts the story of sisters and coming of age. After analyzing Little Women (1868), it became clear that the author aimed to pay tribute to the women and their strength and resilience in challenging years in the United States' history. From these experiences of the March sisters we get to view the social aspects of the Civil War period. When applying the New Historicism perspective, we are likely to have a better understanding of the concerns and changes in American society. As we all are aware that Little Women has made an impact on the different generations of readers with themes that tackle love, self discovery and family. However, beneath this cheerful narrative there is a rich scenario which is a reflection of the era in which the piece was written. This research paper will help to understand the historical background of the 1860s and provide an analysis of Alcott's representation of the March sisters and their opportunities and challenges in the context of education, marriage, and families of the period.

For the readers who are not aware of the storyline of Little Women, it is a story that follows 'the lives of the four March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—and details their passage from childhood to womanhood.' Little Women was first published in two parts. The first part talks about Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy- A Girl's book and the second part was titled 'Good wives'. But later on they both were combined and published as a single novel named Little Women. Each character is significant in their own way, Meg being the eldest daughter acts in agreement to the social rules set on women during that period, Jo comes out as a person who challenges the social norms and seeks for independence. Beth is depicted as the kind- hearted sister and Amy who is the youngest of them all is an artist who is in the favor of women's education and career. Alcott through these characters highlights the limitations and the possibilities that women faced during the 1860s.

This work aims to analyze the novel with the help of New Historicism which is one of the most significant theories in literary analysis of the late 1980s. It is a 'literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author and the history of the critic'. To give you a brief understanding of how a New Historicist examines a text I would like to quote these lines from CliffsNotes 'A New Historicist looks at literature in a more historical context, examining both how the writer's times affected the work and how the work reflects the writer's times, in turn recognising that current cultural contexts color that critic's conclusions'. For a deeper insight of New Historicism one has to get acquainted with its principles and key aspects, which will be discussed further on in detail.

Using the approach of New historicism, we will not only discuss how the novel reveals the specific period of America but also explain how it is relevant to today's audience and how people continue to fight for women's rights. In the later part of the paper, we will look at themes such as gender expectations, domesticity and school, education and family, in order to establish how the novel captured the spirit of the cultural practices in the society during the time it was written.

As the title suggests, we will analyze Little Women through a New Historicist lens, so it is necessary for us to have a better understanding of this theory. Unlike many other theories which analyze a work only through its text, New Historicism focuses on the historical and cultural aspects of it. It suggests that, to understand a text, it's important to know the roots of the writer. It views literature as a product of its time and cultural realities. New historicism focuses on understanding a text within its historical and cultural context which also includes examining the political and economic conditions of the time

in which a particular text was written. It points out that the meaning of a text is not stable. Different readers can come up with distinguished interpretations of their own. It is also concerned with power structures as many writers of this period have mentioned dominant ideologies in their work which makes the reader understand the sufferings of the people being dominated.

Now you may be wondering who is credited for the emergence of this theory. The answer is Stephen Greenblatt who is also known as the 'Father of New Historicism'. He is an American literary historian and author who coined the term New Historicism in his book, 'The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance' (1982). This book emphasized the importance of examining a text within its historical aspect. He came up with this theory to oppose the other popular theories of that time. According to him, these theories are narrow and they often neglect the broader aspects of a text.

He also came up with a term 'field of force' which says that in New Historicism different perspectives and ideologies intersect. It helps readers analyze the political, economics and social aspects of the time period in which a text was produced. Greenblatt's work has been influential in shaping literary theories and it was popularly applied in different works such as literary and cultural texts.

In his books 'Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Shakespearean Negotiations, and Marvelous Possessions', he has clearly focused on the interaction between the actual reality and literary and historical writing, rather than focusing on just one of them.

In his book Renaissance Self-Fashioning, he talks about the relationship between an individual and the text and also an individual and the discourse. He says that a self is formed due to absolute power like church or family. It is also formed with a connection to someone who is marginalized. As a result of this a stranger is discarded due to his otherness. Therefore, it leads to a loss of oneself. According to Greenblatt's new historicist perspective, authors of the time were restricted due to cultural constructions, writing gave them a power to define the world around themselves and demonstrate their enemies as aliens.

To understand Little Women better it is important for us to have a deeper understanding of the person who actually brought this novel to life. Louisa May Alcott was born in 1832 in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Her father Amos Bronson Alcott was known to be a significant figure during the transcendentalist movement. This movement emphasized the idea of individualism and connection with nature. Her father had a great impact on her writing and she was very much influenced by him. She was fond of notable figures like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. They influenced her writings and her views upon the world.

As she was entering her teenage years, the Civil war in America started. The war took place from 1861 and lasted till 1865. Alcott who at that time wanted to enter the literary field left those pursuits to serve as a nurse in the union army. Her experience as a nurse deeply influenced her work in the later years. Around 1863 she published her work 'Hospital sketches'. People praised her for vivid imagery and storytelling in her work. As previously stated, the civil war had a huge impact on her writing in Little Women. The book is heavily drawn around Alcott's own experiences from her childhood and from the times she served as a nurse. She talks about the struggles of the March family in the absence of Mr. March and she also highlighted their financial problems to reflect on the challenges faced by many other American people.

Alcott was deeply inspired by the Transcendentalist ideals during her life. Her writing reflects the goodness of people and the spiritual significance of nature. When you read her works, you realize that the characters written by her undergo personal transformations and how they become self-reliant, showing the values of the power of an individual.

Alcott's work is known to be an influential figure in American literature. She has empowered many women and girls with the characters from her work who defy social expectations and pursue their own paths. Her work is celebrated for the portrayal of strong, independent women and she still continues to be a woman that many girls look up to. By understanding more about her own personal experiences, we will now have a better understanding of Little Women through the eyes of the author's.

Little Women is a novel which is deeply rooted into the American Civil war. The novel is set during the wartime and through the characters, Louisa has revealed the outcomes of the war. The war had a huge impact on all the American families and the book reveals the struggles faced by the March family.

When talking about the influence, the Civil war had a huge impact on the themes and the characters of the story. The book reflects the struggles of the March family in the absence of Mr. March and also the financial struggles they had to go through. That period also had a profound impact on the lives of the women. As the 'men' went to the war, women had no less work to do than them, they also took up new roles in the workforce and in the home. This in turn led to a shift towards the set traditional roles forced upon women and women began taking up more work and started becoming independent.

The war was a brutal conflict brought upon the lives of people in the nation. As men enlisted, women had to be left behind and had to face economic hardships and shortage of food. During that time, it wasn't common for women to take up jobs and make money of their own. Therefore, it led to many problems which came upon them as diseases and financial struggles. Little Women doesn't actually show the ongoing war but it gives subtle clues like Mr March's absence as the chaplain of the union army.

In the beginning of the novel, we see how Marmee talks about visiting the Hummels. They are a poor German family who live near the March family. They are plagued with several diseases and children have caught the scarlet fever. Among the sisters, Beth was the closest to them and she used to bring food and other necessities for them. While caring for the Hummels' children, Beth unfortunately also contracts the Scarlet fever which ultimately leads to her death.

The Hummels reveal the struggles of the poor and how important it is to be generous towards them. The March family and Laurie, the rich neighbor are compassionate towards them and help them as much as they can. This also highlights the difference between two social classes.

The historical context of the novel remains significant to date. It reveals the challenges faced by people during wartime, especially women. Themes such as the importance of education and empowerment of women remain relevant.

The project feels incomplete without talking about this dialogue from Jo in the novel, 'Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for. I'm so sick of it'. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* revolves around the dreams and sacrifices of the four sisters- Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. Although, their dreams are overshadowed by the ongoing Civil War. They still don't stop having dreams of their own.

Meg who is the eldest sister is depicted as the responsible and caring sister. She acquires an interest for music and acting but later in the novel her aspirations change and she yearns for a life filled with love and a comfortable home. During a scene where Jo asks her to leave with her and make money she says, 'Just because my dreams are different than yours doesn't mean they're unimportant. I want a home and a family and I'm willing to work and struggle, but I want to do it with John'. She tells Jo that even though her dreams are different doesn't mean that they are not valid or important. This highlights her individuality and personal choice.

Jo, the second eldest sister is portrayed as a passionate and independent woman who dreams of becoming a writer. She wants to break free from the social constraints but many times she is conflicted by financial problems and her lack of confidence to publish her work under her own name. She is against the idea of women being limited to domestic life and marriage. She even faced a lot of rejection from the publishers but that didn't stop her from re-writing her work. She critiques social issues and wants to make a positive change through her writing. Throughout the novel she undergoes personal growth and learns to balance her ambitions with the needs of her family. Initially, her determination leads to her literary success.

Beth is the most gentle and kind sister who is known to be selfless and for putting everyone's needs before her own. She possesses a talent for playing piano and finds pleasure in simple things. She is the peacemaker in her family and is the closest to Jo. In the novel we see how compassionate she is towards the Hummels' family. Unfortunately, she contracts scarlet fever and later dies. This leaves a huge impact on Jo and teaches her to cherish moments in the present.

Amy, the youngest of them all, is the most artistic of all her sisters and is passionate towards drawing and painting. Amy finds joy and solace in art and uses it as a form of self expression. She moves with her aunt to Europe to study art with an ambition of becoming a renowned artist. She desires to be independent and have a life beyond the social constraints. She undergoes personal development and becomes a mature person who develops an understanding for the people and world around her.

The relationship between the sisters is the most crucial part of the novel. Despite the distinctions in their dreams and ambitions, they stood for each other during the hard times. In the presence of all the challenges the March sisters came out to be even stronger. Alcott gave life to these characters to highlight the challenges faced by the women during and after the Civil War. Their ambitions still resonate with the women of the present time. This novel remains one of the most important pieces of literary work in feminism and has influenced women to be independent. It teaches them that it is fine for us to have dreams of our own despite all the social constraints. Some people assume that war time had only been difficult for the people who were enrolled in the army but what they don't acknowledge is the sacrifices made by the women who were left behind.

Conclusion :

Analyzing *Little Women* through the New Historicist lens has given us a new perspective towards the novel. Delving into Alcott's personal life, her experience while being a nurse during the wartime and being the daughter of a Transcendentalist makes us understand what inspired her to write this book. Reviewing the-book through the lens of the main societal themes of Civil War, we understood better the difficulties and achievements of the March family. It is impossible to overestimate the impact it had on the representations of female characters in literary works. The novel has been translated into many languages and adapted into movies and plays.

In conclusion, *Little Women* is rightly popular for its portrayal of the struggles women went through in 19th century America and what they had to sacrifice in order to achieve their dreams. This project has given us an insight on who Louisa May Alcott was, the Civil War in America and themes related to little women to appreciate this novel even more. It has also become evident how one can use literature as a method of mirror to history.

Works Cited :

1. Alberghene, Janice M, and Beverly Lyon Clark. *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*. New York; London, Garland, 2014.
2. Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. 1868. New York, Baronet Books, 1989.

3. Fetterley, Judith. "Little Women!: Alcott's Civil War." *Feminist Studies**, vol. 5, no. 2, 1979, p. 369, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177602>.
4. Lennox, S. (1992). "Feminism and New Historicism." *Monatshefte**, 159–170. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30161348>.
5. "Louisa May Alcott's 'Magic Inkstand': Little Women, Feminism, and the Myth of Regeneration on JSTOR." *JSTOR**, www.jstor.org/stable/3347148?searchText=Louisa%20May%20Alcott%27s%20%22Magic%20Inkstand%22&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DLouisa%20May%20Alcott%2527s%20%22Magic%20Inkstand%2522&so=3&rel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_phrase_search%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Abf9087e9a7bdd7067ccb0f752208bael.
6. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Louisa May Alcott | Biography, Childhood, Family, Books, & Facts | Britannica." *Encyclopædia Britannica**, 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Louisa-May-Alcott.
7. Veenstra, Jan R. "The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt: On Poetics of Culture and the Interpretation of Shakespeare." *History and Theory**, vol. 34, no. 3, 1995, pp. 174–198, www.jstor.org/stable/2505620, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505620>.