

Analyzing Jo's Marriage in Little Women

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Abstract

Using the original book Little Women, by examining the character of Jo in Little Women, her characterization, her qualities, her marriage and society's perception of her, go on to put into perspective the fact that the status of women in the former society was very slim. In my thesis I focus on Jo's marriage to Prof. Bhaer because it contrasts very strongly with her own attitude towards marriage; Prof. Bhaer is not a very good man, so why does Jo want to marry him?

How does this relate to Alcott, the author of the book, herself?

In 2023, the goal for women my age is to become strong women, pursuing independence and freedom from traditional gender expectations. This goal may seem to suggest development and progress for women, but in fact, the role of women is still being restricted. In China's workplace, not only has pay equality between men and women not yet been realized, but also women still face a lot of injustice. Let's look at a set of data. Overall, in contemporary China, one recent news article reported, based on statistics, that the average male salary is 12% higher than the female's for the same type of position. However, compared with the same period last year, women's salaries rose by 5%, slightly higher than the 4.8% increase in salaries for men in the workplace. (In 2022, the average salary of women).

Apart from the difference in salaries between men and women, there's another gap: Education. In ancient China, it was impossible, even absurd, for women to gain education. The only thing they could do was to take care of their husband, fully obey, and comply with his requests. Today, on the face of it, Chinese women and men have the same access to education, and schools do not

restrict enrolment based on gender. In 2011 the difference between the two ratios of gaining education reached 27%, although in the higher end of education, the ability of gaining education for men is still stronger than women. But men still have a big advantage in the doctoral degree: in China, 17% more PhDs were awarded to men than to women, which is the smallest gap between male and female PhDs in the past 10 years and perhaps a sign of progress.

Perhaps the still unequal situation for women is why an American classic like *Little women*, a 1868 novel about four girls growing up to be "good little women" in Civil War Era America, is still so popular world wide. It is Rachel's favorite book in "Friends", and it is the refuge for the souls of Lilla and Elena in the "Neapolitan Tetralogy". More than 80 years ago, Mr. Yang Jiang and Mr. Jin Yong, who were still teenagers, read this novel—Even today, the novel remains a must-read in the growing up process of girls from generation to generation, and it is a reflection of the ambition of almost all girls and women

In the March family, there are four sisters in total. Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. All of them have struggled for their daily life and tried hard to meet the standards of "good women. The second sister Jo, the main character, is the most deviant girl in the family. She is strong, optimistic, unconventional, and seems like a tomboy. The book opens with a conversation between the four sisters:

‘Jo does use such slang words!’ observed Amy, with a reproving look at the long figure stretched on the rug.

Jo immediately sat up, put her hands in her pockets, and began to whistle.

‘Don’t, Jo. It’s so boyish!’

‘That’s why I do it.’

‘I detest rude, unladylike girls!’

‘I hate affected, niminy-piminy chits!’(5)

Amy calls Jo “Boyish”, implying that she is abnormal and non-gender conforming. As a young lady, Jo seems to be a girl contradictory to the impression of traditional young women. She speaks in a way that is very different from traditional women. As a result, she is often reprimanded by the rest of the household.

When Jo and Meg are walking to work after their mother goes off to do a good deed for a neighboring family, they talk:

“If Marmee shook her fist instead of kissing her hand to us, it would serve us right, for more ungrateful wretches than we are were never seen,” cried Jo, taking a remorseful satisfaction in the snowy walk and bitter wind. “Don’t use such dreadful expressions,” replied Meg from the depths of the veil in which she had shrouded herself like a nun sick of the world. (65)

In this scene, Jo expresses regret that the girls were selfish and not appreciative of their mother’s many sacrifices. Her reasoning reflects appropriately “feminine” sensitivity and devotion to her mother, though her words aren’t necessarily considered “appropriate,” judging by Meg’s response. Even though Jo and her sister Meg are quite close, here Meg also reprimands Jo for using “dreadful expressions” like “ungrateful wretches.” In other words, to her society, it is more important that Jo speak and be seen as womanly rather than that she has appropriate emotions.

While she gets reprimanded for not looking and speaking like an appropriate woman, Jo’s ability of regulating her emotions is what matters most. For example, after she refuses to take her sister to the theater and in retaliation, Amy burns Jo’s handwritten and precious set of stories, Jo is furiously angry, punching her sister and exclaiming

‘You wicked, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and Ill never forgive you as long as I live.’

Meg flew to rescue Amy, and Beth to pacify Jo, but Jo was quite beside herself, and with a parting box on her sister’s ear, she rushed out of the room up to the old sofa in the garret and finished her fight alone. (P130)

When Jo really has a bad mood, it is hard for her to control her anger and even avoid doing something harmful to others who destroyed her mood. Jo here does not control her anger, which is represented elsewhere as a masculine emotion, and in fact hits her sister.

Subsequently, Jo ignores Amy's overtures, which almost results in her sister’s death. One day soon thereafter, their friend and neighbor, Laurie, invites Jo to go skating. Meg encourages Amy to follow them, thinking that this will allow the sisters to end their quarrel. However, Jo sees Amy yet ignores her and doesn’t pass on a warning about bad ice on the river.

For a minute Jo stood still with a strange feeling in her heart, then she resolved to go on, but something held and turned her round, just in time to see Amy throw up her hands and go down, with a sudden crash of rotten ice, the splash of water, and a cry that made Jo’s heart stand still with fear. She tried to call Laurie, but her voice was gone. She tried to rush forward, but her feet seemed to have no strength in them, and for a second, she could only stand motionless, staring with a terror-stricken face at the little blue hood above the black water. (135)

Even though Jo is still mad at Amy, she expresses panic and helplessness, as well as urgency, when she sees her sister fall into the water. In that moment, all the anger in Jo's heart is replaced by guilt, and her temper dissipates with Amy's accident. Jo and Laurie save Amy, and Jo does

really regret her impulse. After Amy has been dried off and sent to bed early, Jo talks with her mother about how to control her emotion. Mrs March tells her that she has struggled-with her bad temper as well.

“Yours, Mother? Why, you are never angry!” And for the moment Jo forgot remorse in surprise. ‘I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo, but I have learned not to show it, and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so.’

“Poor Mother! What helped you then?”

“Your father, Jo. He never loses patience, never doubts or complains, but always hopes, and works and waits so cheerfully that one is ashamed to do otherwise before him.”

(P139-140)

Mrs. March could not control her mood when she was really young, until she met Mr. March, who tried his best to help her with her trouble. At that time, Mr. March acted like a father being patient to his daughter, which gives us a hint of the relationship between Jo and Professor Bhaer, who is twenty years older than Jo, later.

Overall, in Volume One, we see Jo struggle against gendered expectations for women. As Claire Bender argues, this seems consistent with the author’s belief system:

Louisa May Alcott was a staunch feminist, and this ideology often came through in her stories. An example of Alcott’s feminist belief system includes the way the characters of Laurie and Jo are portrayed as nonconforming to their gender-stereotypical roles. Jo vacillates between a feminist character and a more traditional role, while Laurie is given more stereotypically feminine attributes. (1)

What Bender refers to here is the relationship between Jo and her neighbor, Laurie. They meet in person at a dance and wind up bonding over their mutual dislike of such social events.

“How is your cat, Miss March?” asked the boy, trying to look sober, while his black eyes shone with fun.

“Nicely, thank you, Mr. Laurence; but I am not Miss March, I’m only Jo,” returned the young lady.

“I’m not Mr. Laurence, I’m only Laurie.”

“Laurie Laurence,—what an odd name!”

“My first name is Theodore, but I don’t like it, for the fellows called me Dora, so I made them say Laurie instead.”

“I hate my name, too—so sentimental! I wish every one would say Jo, instead of Josephine. How did you make the boys stop calling you Dora?”

“I thrashed ’em.”

“I can’t thrash Aunt March, so I suppose I shall have to bear it;” and Jo resigned herself with a sigh. (P46)

During the whole process of communication, we see that both Jo and Laurie want to break the stereotype of gender. She wants to be called Jo rather than Josephine, just as Laurie also hates his name. Laurie can “thrash” those who tease him, presumably because he is a man and this is appropriate behavior, but she cannot thrash Aunt March since she is a girl and she has to keep a good nature. Jo longs to be uninhibited and free and not have to follow a particular amount of etiquette.

But as time goes on, the girl who used to be gender non-conforming, both verbally and mentally, changes. Her transformation is recognized and honored at the end of Volume One. Jo's father, Mr. March, returns from serving as a chaplain in the Civil War, having recently recovered from a grave illness. He speaks to each girl in turn. To Jo, he says

“In spite of the curly crop, I don't see the ‘son Jo whom I left a year ago,’” said Mr. March. “I see a young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug as she used to do. Her face is rather thin and pale just now, with watching and anxiety, but I like to look at it, for it has grown gentler, and her voice is lower. She doesn't bounce, but moves quietly, and takes care of a certain little person in a motherly way which delights me. I rather miss my wild girl, but if I get a strong, helpful, tender hearted woman in her place, I shall feel quite satisfied. I don't know whether the shearing sobered our black sheep, but I do know that in all Washington I couldn't find anything beautiful enough to be bought with the five-and-twenty dollars my good girl sent me.” (P391)

From Mr. March's words, we can see that Jo has continued to change, perhaps to cater to the society of the time, going on to sacrifice her nonconformity to become a lady, a responsible and well-mannered woman who would make her father proud.

Three years later, all the girls have grown up. Meg has married John, Beth has had a severe illness, and Amy has gone to Europe with Aunt March. Jo has become more and more of a "good girl" with good manners, always being there for the people she loves and cares. After being a successful writer, Jo earned a lot of money, but at that time, her beloved sister Beth is suffering with a return of the great illness that will kill her. Jo decides to spend her hard-earned money on a trip for her beloved sister and Marmee.

To the seaside they went, after much discussion, and though Beth didn't come home as plump and rosy as could be desired, she was much better, while Mrs. March declared she felt ten years younger. So Jo was satisfied with the investment of her prize money, and fell to work with a cheery spirit, bent on earning more of those delightful checks. She did earn several that year, and began to feel herself a power in the house, for by the magic of a pen, her 'rubbish' turned into comforts for them all. (P471)

Knowing that her sister is terminally ill and may not be on this earth much longer, she spends the money all on her sister, hoping that she'll go out and travel and see more of the wonderful sights of the world in the limited time she has. Jo loves Beth dearly and so her generous gift is given out of love, an appropriate female emotion.

Whether in her father's compliments to Jo or in Jo's own behavior, we see an increasingly "normative" young woman who looks like she is becoming what society expects her to be, but who is still reluctant to marry, wanting to be free and able to make a life for herself. Truly, Jo is a girl who is brave, warm-hearted and optimistic, but she seems disinterested in the opposite sex, showing both consciously and subconsciously, a rejection of marriage. When Laurie tells her that every girl ends up getting married, including Jo, she replies: 'Don't be alarmed. I'm not one of the agreeable sort. Nobody will want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family.' (433)

While she gradually reduces her use of slang and behaves in a way that seems more "feminine," Jo is still different from the "traditional" women, which is that she doesn't want to get married. Whenever anyone, including Aunt March, brings up the matter of marriage with Jo, Jo will retort and even get angry and impatient. After having the conversation with Jo, Laurie

states that 'Mark my words, Jo, you'll go next.'(P434) which also hints that he's going to propose to Jo later on.

Indeed, After Laurie realizes he loves Jo, he decides to ask her to marry him. Jo, however, turns him down. They go out for a walk, a common activity, yet Jo is anxious because she senses Laurie may be planning to speak.

She always used to take his arm on these occasions, now she did not, and he made no complaint, which was a bad sign, but talked on rapidly about all sorts of faraway subjects, till they turned from the road into the little path that led homeward through the grove. Then he walked more slowly, suddenly lost his fine flow of language, and now and then a dreadful pause occurred. To rescue the conversation from one of the wells of silence into which it kept falling, Jo said hastily, 'Now you must have a good long holiday!'

'I intend to.'

Something in his resolute tone made Jo look up quickly to find him looking down at her with an expression that assured her the dreaded moment had come, and made her put out her hand with an imploring, 'No, Teddy. Please don't!' (P433-434)

Laurie does fall in love with Jo because he thinks Jo is a wonderful girl who deserves to be cherished for the rest of his life and that he would do anything for her. So he expresses his thoughts very firmly and bravely, but Jo's instinctive reaction is to reject them.

Because Jo doesn't want to get married, she is repulsed by the very idea of marriage. So She says to Laurie:

'I don't. I never wanted to make you care for me so, and I went away to keep you from it if I could.'

‘You, you are, you’re a great deal too good for me, and I’m so grateful to you, and so proud and fond of you, I don’t know why I can’t love you as you want me to. I’ve tried, but I can’t change the feeling, and it would be a lie to say I do when I don’t.’ (635)

Moreover, she tells him, “ I don’t know why I can’t love you as you want me to, I’ve tried” (636). It seems that her relationship with Laurie made her think that Laurie would propose to her, so she expected it before Laurie even asked. She tried so hard not to disappoint Laurie that she tried to love him, but she can't. She doesn't want a romantic relationship with Laurie. Although she says she doesn't know why, subconsciously she is still very repulsed by romance.

She still wants to be free and alone, and she doesn’t want to commit to marriage a life that should be led by herself. Jo is sad since she lost her best friend, so she keeps being lonely for a long time. But when Laurie comes back, she is disappointed to find that he was with Amy. Even so, she slowly accepts this fact and is happy for Laurie and talks to him pleasantly.

While living in New York, however, she met Professor Bhaer, an old, poor man teaching together with her in order to earn money. He is rather kind, with great patience and interests toward Jo’s work. They met when Jo is a home teacher to support the family. This following conversation takes place when Jo describes him to Mrs. K.:

I saw a gentleman come along behind her, take the heavy hod of coal out of her hand, carry it all the way up, put it down at a door near by, and walk away, saying, with a kind nod and a foreign accent, ‘It goes better so. The little back is too young to haf such heaviness.’

Wasn’t it good of him? I like such things, for as Father says, trifles show character. When I mentioned it to Mrs. K., that evening, she laughed, and said, ‘That must have been Professor Bhaer, he’s always doing things of that sort.’ (P585-586)

This is the first impression we have of Professor Bhaer, who is a mature, father-like man 20 years older than Jo. Jo mentions him for many times in her letter, for his appearance, his “suffering” with students, and his good temper. They become friends and he critiques her writing. He encourages her to become a serious writer instead of writing "sensational" stories for weekly tabloids. Day to day conversations make their bond grow deeper.

As mentioned before, after Laurie came back home, Jo surprisingly found that Laurie and Amy got married, and she finally accepted the fact and sincerely congratulated Laurie and Amy, having a enjoyable conversation with Laurie. The conversation happens when Beth dies, Amy and Meg get married, and Jo feels lonely.

Then Mr. Bhaer arrives, tall bearded gentleman, beaming on her from the darkness like a midnight sun (790), and she is excited to invite him into the house and introduce him to the whole family. Who would have thought that such a girl who rejected marriage would end up marrying an old professor?

Jo is more focused on spiritual pleasures. But with Laurie's nature, it was clear that Laurie was not a fellow traveler who could share with Jo the spiritual pleasures of the sea of books and words. In contrast, Jo's choice of Professor Bhaer was the most spiritually compatible with her at this time. Their compatibility shines through during Professor Bhaer's proposal scene.

‘Ach, mein Gott, that is so good!’ cried Mr. Bhaer, managing to clasp his hands in spite of the umbrella and the bundles, ‘Jo, I haf nothing but much love to gif you. I came to see if you could care for it, and I waited to be sure that I was something more than a friend. Am I? Can you make a little place in your heart for old Fritz?’ he added, all in one breath.

‘Oh, yes!’ said Jo, and he was quite satisfied, for she folded both hands over his arm, and looked up at him with an expression that plainly showed how happy she would be to walk through life beside him, even though she had no better shelter than the old umbrella, if he carried it. (832)

At this moment, Jo does not show her usual refusal, but accepts the professor's proposal with great emotion and sincerity. Bender argues that Jo accepts him, perhaps, because:

Alcott “seemed to want to marry but never did. It seems likely, however, that she did have at least two different love interests in her life. Perhaps Alcott decided to give Jo what she herself always wanted: marriage and a family. More likely, Alcott felt encouraged by her father, Bronson, and her publisher to compose a novel that would ultimately please the public. (Bender, 9).

Alcott created Jo as a character whose own resistance to marriage was latent, not because Jo was so desperate for a family, a marriage relationship. Alcott herself was, as Bender puts it, a lifelong unmarried person, but she had to write Jo as a "wife" because of the demands of the publisher at the time.

But it was Alcott's particular design to marry Jo to Professor Bhaer, who was old, poor, and not very good at romance, and so Alcott did not want Jo to live like a conventional woman. To show how different Jo was, I think that's why she set up Jo's husband as an old, poor man. She didn't want Jo to marry someone who was both young and rich because she didn't want to conform to the trends of the time, and her Jo was supposed to be a representative of the rebelliousness of the time, so how could Jo end up giving in to the times? So Professor Bhaer comes along, and this is the author's final act of rebellion.

Jo regards Prof. Bhaer, a man 20 years older than her, as a friend and confidant to talk about his work with, and a father who was considerate and caring, like Mr. March in the conversation Jo had with her mother after Amy fell into the water earlier. Jo willingly marries Professor Bhaer and becomes more presentable and good at her job, while willingly doing the chores around the house. This is a conformity, but one that is not absolute, in that Jo still maintains the heart to follow her dreams while quietly catering to the social norms of the time.

Jo inside this book shows the image of a girl who pursues independence and freedom and does not want to be pocketed by boys. If the author makes Jo be like Amy, or like Meg, it will go against the author's original intention; the four sisters of the March family are supposed to be different, and their endings should not be the same either. Every girl is an individual, and we should all learn to be as brave and determined as Jo, with our own sense of responsibility and mission. Jo has awakened a lot of girls in the society, including me, so that we all have the courage to fight and work hard for our own lives.

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