



Negotiating Independence: Jo March's Character Arc and the Challenge Against Nineteenth-Century Social Expectations in *Little Women* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Jo March in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) challenges and destabilizes traditional nineteenth-century gender roles through her resistance to societal expectations. It specifically analyzes the internal and external conflicts Jo encounters as she navigates her aspiration to become a writer amid prevailing social pressures. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the research investigates how the film depicts Jo's ongoing struggle against restrictive gender norms. Data for this study consist of primary and secondary sources. The primary data are drawn directly from the film *Little Women* (2019), while secondary data include previous scholarly research, academic articles, and relevant online sources. The findings reveal two central conclusions. First, Jo defies conventional gender expectations by rejecting marriage, resisting conventional beauty standards, and persistently pursuing a professional writing career, thereby constructing an autonomous gender identity. Second, Jo actively resists both her internal desires and the external societal demands placed upon her, highlighting the complex negotiation between personal ambition and nineteenth-century gender ideology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human life that is newly born on this earth is likened to a white and clean empty canvas, how we live, that's how we fill the empty canvas. Looking at human life from a literary point of view will certainly produce a lot of genres, themes, and also if it is made into a novel, it may spend a lifetime to write it, including the personal struggle of an individual or group or the voices of a marginalised rebellion. Literature as mentioned by Pickering and Hooper (1981) is a place that is used to express and pour a story and life experience. Literary works serve as manifestations of each author's vision and records of cultural events in the past (Yudith, et al., 2023)

Little Women is one of the literary works that brings in the issue of feminism and it's also a novel about maturity by Louisa May Alcott, a nineteenth-century novel. *Little Women* (2019), which was adapted into a movie by Greta Gerwig in 2019. Greta Gerwig, an American director and screenwriter born in 1983, is known for her works that focus on gender dynamics and women's experiences, such as in the films *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Barbie* (2023). In the adaptation of *Little Women* 2019, Gerwig revives the story of Jo March, a young woman who defied the nineteenth-century gender norms that required women to marry and abandon personal ambitions, by portraying Jo as a radical character who fights for gender equality through her aspirations as a writer (Gerwig, 2019).

To analyse the problem in this thesis, the writer analyzes this research using the performative gender theory developed by Judith Butler. Butler (1990) said that gender is not innate, but formed through repetitive performance actions carried out in the community. However, this performative action can also be a means of resistance to norms in society if the behavior acts outside the applicable norms. In this research, the writer uses Butler's theory to analyze how the resistance behaviors are performed by Jo March in the film *Little Women* (2019), as well as how the writer describes how Jo fights her internal and external conflicts.

The main purpose of the writer conducting this research is to analyze and find out how Jo March overcomes her internal and external conflicts. How did she choose to pursue her personal aspirations or whether she had to meet the expectations of society in the nineteenth century through a feminist lens. The writer hopes that the research can enrich the research that theoretically researches on feminism and the writer hopes that this research can inspire women to pursue their ideals with unlimited scope.

2. METHOD

This research was carried out using procedures and principles of the qualitative research methods. Data was collected by watching the film multiple times and highlighting important scenes. These were analyzed using the descriptive analysis methods to examine internal and external conflicts that Jo faced in *Little Women* (2019).

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The writer uses a descriptive method so that the writer is able to decipher the facts of the film scene, so that the scenes are able to answer the problem.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This research analyzes the internal and external conflicts that happened to Jo March in the film *Little Women* (2019). Based on the five scenes chosen to answer the second problem formulation question, the research results show that Jo faces internal and external conflicts that are quite different due to the pressure of the surrounding community and her personal ambition to become a writer.

Extract 1. Jo March is a fiercely ambitious and independent young woman whose dream of becoming a writer places her at odds with the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity, resulting in profound internal and external conflicts. In a conversation with Amy, Jo expresses her desire to “create something new” as a writer, to which Amy responds, “But Jo, you’re a girl. Girls don’t do that” (Gerwig, 2019, 00:25:00-00:27:00). This exchange highlights Jo’s external conflict with the societal norm that confined women to domestic roles, as Amy’s remark reflects the pervasive belief that professional ambitions were inappropriate for women. The nineteenth-century “cult of domesticity” idealized women as homemakers, leaving little room for intellectual pursuits like writing, which were male-dominated. Internally, Jo struggles with the fear that her goals may be unattainable, yet her persistence is a performative act of resistance, aligning with Butler’s concept of disrupting gendered scripts (Butler, 1990).

Extract 2. Jo’s internal conflict is further evident in her conversation with Marmee after rejecting Laurie’s marriage proposal, where she confesses, “I love my liberty too well... But sometimes, I feel so lonely... I don’t know if I’m right to want so much” (Gerwig, 2019, 01:15:00-01:17:30). This moment reveals the emotional cost of defying societal norms, as Jo values her independence but feels the isolation of her unconventional path. The external conflict stems from the expectation that women find fulfillment through marriage, which was often their only means of security. Jo’s refusal risks social stigma and financial instability, highlighting the societal pressure to conform. Marmee’s affirmation “You have a right to your ambitions, Jo.” offers support, but the broader social context underscores the radical nature of Jo’s choice, as Butler notes that nonconformity can lead to social rejection but also creates opportunities for redefining gender identity (Butler, 1990).

Extract 3. Jo’s negotiation with Mr. Dashwood, where she demands to retain her copyright, “If I’m going to sell my heroine into marriage for money, I want to keep my copyright” (Gerwig, 2019, 02:05:00-02:07:30) exemplifies an external conflict with the patriarchal structures of the publishing industry. Mr. Dashwood’s incredulous response, “A woman writer keeping her copyright? That’s unheard of!” reflects the norm that women’s intellectual contributions were undervalued. The social context of limited professional opportunities for women makes Jo’s demand a bold act of defiance. Internally, Jo grapples with compromising her artistic vision, revealing the tension between her ideals and practical realities. This performative act aligns with Butler’s argument that subversive acts can challenge power dynamics (Butler, 1990), as Jo’s insistence critiques gendered barriers in professional spheres (Mutoharoh, 2022).

Extract 4. Jo’s reflection in New York, “I want to write something that matters, but maybe I’m not good enough” (Gerwig, 2019, 00:50:00-00:52:00) further highlights her internal conflict with self-doubt in pursuing a male-dominated profession. The nineteenth-century literary world offered few opportunities for women, and Jo’s fear of inadequacy reflects the internalized pressure to conform to societal expectations. Her persistence, however, is a performative act of resistance, aligning with Butler’s view that non-conformity can transform gender norms

(Butler, 1990). This struggle complements Daulay et al.'s (2021) analysis of Jo's pursuit of intellectual autonomy, emphasizing the personal cost of her ambitions (Daulay et al., 2021).

Extract 5. Jo's discussion with Meg, "Meg, don't you want more than just being a wife?" (Gerwig, 2019, 00:45:00-00:47:00) reveals an external conflict with societal norms embodied by Meg's traditional choices. Meg's response, "Not every woman wants what you want, Jo" highlights the tension between Jo's feminist ideals and the broader expectation that women prioritize marriage. Internally, Jo struggles to accept differing paths for women, reflecting the complexity of her resistance within a patriarchal society. This relational conflict aligns with Butler's concept of dissonance between individual identity and societal expectations, as Jo's nonconformity isolates her but also challenges the gendered scripts of her era (Butler, 1990).

4. CONLUSSION

Researchers conclude that Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation of *Little Women* portrays Jo March's struggle to become a writer as fraught with both internal and external conflicts. Internally, Jo grapples with profound loneliness and self-doubt, poignantly expressed in her confession to Marmee: "I love my freedom too much... But sometimes, I feel very lonely" (Gerwig, 2019). This moment reveals the emotional burden she carries, compounded by societal pressure to conform to the institution of marriage. Externally, Jo encounters resistance from Amy, who views writing as an unconventional pursuit for women, and from Mr. Dashwood, who undermines her ambitions within a male-dominated literary industry. These conflicts are rooted in the rigid gender norms of nineteenth-century society, which idealized pious, obedient women whose primary role was domestic and marital. It is precisely Jo's defiant actions most notably her assertive claim to copyright that generate tension and highlight her resistance to these norms. This portrayal aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that individuals who deviate from or "mismatch" established gender norms create subversive possibilities for transforming societal expectations of gender.

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