

**Characterization and Comparison of Female Characters in Louisa
May Alcott's *Little Women***

Dissertation

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By

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Declaration

I, hereby, declare that the dissertation titled, “Characterization and Comparison of Female Characters in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A. Honours in English is based on my original research conducted under the supervision of Dr. Chetana Pokhriyal, and that any work conducted by earlier researchers and referred in this study has been duly acknowledged on the relevant pages of the dissertation. I further declare that the work reported in this dissertation has not been submitted either in part or in full for the award of any other degree or diploma of this University or of any other University.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “Characterization and Comparison of Female Characters in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* by Ms. Mansi Dangwal is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Bachelor’s in Arts (English Hons.) under the supervision of Dr. Chetana Pokhriyal, School of Languages, Doon University Dehradun Uttarakhand (India).

This is an original work and the dissertation fulfils the requirements of the regulations of this University and meets the necessary standards for submission. The contents of this dissertation have not been submitted either in part or in full for the award of any degree or diploma in this or any other University.

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Abstract

This study discusses Louisa May Alcott's portrayal of women in her book *Little Women*. The concerns pertaining to women who lead complicated lives are not able to be separated from the image of women in this. There is portrayal of women of nineteenth century through the character of the novel. The setting of this book is borrowed from a tale set in the American Civil War era about a family with four daughters when their father served in the war, their life

took a dramatic transformation and how people from the same background can have different viewpoints in life. Each character tells the truth of the women in the society.

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Chapter One Introduction

In the beginning of the 17th century, American writing was the copy of British writing. American literature was divided in the five major periods: The colonial and early national period (17th century-1830), The Romantic period (1830 -1870), Realism and Naturalism (1870- 1910), The modernist period (1910-1945), The contemporary period (1945- to the present). The history of the country is what shaped the American literature now. More than half a century, America was a mere group of colonies that were scattered. American literature began when initially the European who spoke English settled in the America. When America became The United States, a nation. A lot of changes were going on during that time, industries and science were getting popular as well as people feelings were also changing, the way they think and feel. All of these changes and development helped in molding The Literature of America.

The *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott was written during the Victorian era. In English literature periods are divided accordingly to the era and trend and Victorian age was named for the reign of Queen Victoria. Huge political and social development and reasoning. Romantic theme started disappearing from the novel, imagination was no longer a thing that people wanted to read anymore. The writers also started writing about their daily thoughts and experiences where they express their feelings and society wanted to read such novels only and it was the end of romantic era. The Victorian novels talked about difficulties of lives, expression of feelings, love and etc. It was often considered an era or pessimism and doubt. The American literature also flourished during this time. One of the famous writers was Louisa May Alcott (November 29,1832) in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She got three more sisters and she was the second daughter of her family. Her mother Abigail Alcott was brought in a Boston family and her father Amos Bronson was a self-educated son of a farmer who was a reformer and educator. His father`s teaching kept his family steady and this was the source of income in their family. They were always on the edge of poverty. They moved to Boston near her mother family when

Louisa was only two-year-old. Louisa was like any other teenager girl, moody with quick tongue which made her father angry. Louisa started writing when she was fifteen-year-old and her first story was “sentimental period”. The first published work of her was a poem called “sunlight” which also did appear in Peterson’s magazine in the year 1851.

Her family condition was not good and his father also didn’t get sufficient money so all her sister and her mother worked to earn for their living. She also considered herself as a support system for her family whether be it an emotional and financial way. Her sister Elizabeth who was younger to her died in 1858 because of scarlet fever, Louisa was sad moreover devastated. Anna, who was her elder sister also declared her engagement during that time. Louisa moved to Washington DC, to work as a union army nurse during the American Civil war. For several years she published children’s collection. She was offered editorship of children’s magazine in the Merry’s museum in the year 1867. She wrote *Little Women* in six weeks which was published by Roberts Brothers.

When *Little Women* was published Louisa gained a lot of fame as well as money and she sorted out her and her family financial condition. Louisa was an active member in suffrage movement, she also became the first female to vote in Concord in 1879. Her sister May died during the labor and in the same year Louisa also adopted a baby whom she gave a name called Lulu. Louisa’s physical health declined and she published and republished her children’s story collection till her death. Right after the two days of her father’s death, Louisa May Alcott also died in the year 1888, she is also buried with her parents. In this thesis we will discuss about Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. It was published in two volumes in the year 1868 and 1869. The second was originally titled *Good wives* by the publishers. Later on, both of these emotions were issued as single novel in 1880. The novel dealt with March sisters namely: Beth, Meg, Jo and Amy. The background of civil war is also introduced as it has led march into poverty and which is why Mr. March has to stay away from his girls acting as pastor away from his abode. Both the elder sisters Meg and Jo are pushed to work in order to meet the needs of the household.

Meg works as a tutor whereas Jo helps their rich aunt, Mrs. March with her chores. Beth's timid attitude makes her content at home and she was later diagnosed with scarlet fever and dies. Amy with her childlike attitude longs to lead a life of refined English woman. The different personalities of women brought forth excellently by Alcott. The fact that novel still active as the source of material for movies and web series proves that how even after the change in time, we can still relate to the characters of that time.

The novel deals with the concept of women's struggle between family duties and personal growth. Jo, the central figure in the novel is impulsive and gets angered easily and is the one influencer with the bug of writing. The death of Beth is one of the heart touching moments which could be viewed as self-sacrifice. She gives up her life knowing the fact that it had only private, domestic meaning. It is her death that act as an epiphany for Jo who resolves to live her life with more consideration and care for everyone. Amy is often blamed for childhood mistakes of burning Jo's book out of spite, however she is the only character who strives to express her art. Out of all the four sisters, it was Meg who chooses the lifestyle by opting for a life of domesticity after marriage. The endearing tale of family relationships and that stress on importance of paying more attention to the inner spiritual rather than on wealth or appearance is still considered to be one of the finest examples of American literature.

Objective

The objective of this research is to analyze and observe the female characters and to compare them with each other. And for this research I have chosen the *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

Research Methodology

This research is divided into three chapters. Chapter one talks about the introduction of the research, also focusing on background of the American literature, about the author of the book. Chapter one is further divided into one part where first part discusses about the objective of the research. Chapter two is divided into two parts, where part one talks about

characterization and second part talks about the comparison and chapter three is the conclusion of the research.

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Chapter Two Analysis

Characterization

This part of the paper will analyze characters of the female leads named as Jo, Meg, Beth, Amy and Marmee and then will compare them with one another.

Josephine March

Jo is one of the prominent characters in the *Little Women* written by Louisa May Alcott. She is fifteen-year-old whose character is also considered as the reflection of Louisa herself as the novel is also said to be semi-autobiographical in nature. Jo is tall thin, had grey eyes, red hair and was clumsy. She was wild who cannot be tamed by people around her, she was someone who'll put a lot of effort to achieve anything in life. Being the second elder daughter of the family, she used to work as a governess to children of a family friend in New York in order to help her family.

Her character was very local, who does not want to be limited to house only or most likely to be a woman of 19th century. The women of that century had one role in life and that was to marry and please their husband and before that, they would learn weaving, washing cleaning and all that to be a perfect wife of someone. Women we're not allowed to be educated or to go outside and see the world. Louisa clearly ditched the patriarchal notion of the society by presenting Jo's character in the *Little Women*. Jo was totally opposite from the woman of that time she had dreams, passion and courage to accomplish those dreams. She clearly does not fit into the patriarchal gender roles set by the society. She was very much into reading and writing and used to write play which they used to perform in their house. She writes with all her heart and does not find peace until she has completed her writing. She was mostly opposite from the women of that time who were tamed from their childhood to do household chores or to be good wives. She clearly does not fit into the patriarchal gender roles authorized by the society. For that period of time, she was definitely wild rebellious to full fill her dreams.

Jo is devoted to her family and love her all sisters unconditionally. She was more connected to Beth who died due to the scarlet fever and she used to fight a lot with Amy for being so stubborn. She was very much connected to her family; she did write some works just to read to her father when he'll come back from the war but when Jo didn't take Amy along with her to a party where Amy wasn't invited and that thing made Amy to burn Jo's work into ashes. Jo felt disheartened after that and promised not to talk to her sister again ever but an accident made her realize that she should have forgiven Amy. After Beth's death Jo felt loneliness and got to understand about herself that her wish to control people choices made her to not love them properly. We also do read about Jo and Laurie who was the grandson of their neighbor and later he become family friends of the family. Later we see that Laurie has feelings for Jo and he also asked her for marriage but she decline his proposal despite the thought that he was handsome, rich, young because for Jo the idea of marriage was not a thing. She knew that after marriage there will be no personal identity for her. She believed that she likes Laurie as a brother and don't as a lover. She wanted to be a writer and really want to financially support her family because they were all poor. All she ever wanted was to be a very famous writer and for that she even tried to write a piece of work for an editor called Mr. Dashwood and after reading her work he asked Jo to change the ending as in which the girl gets married because people read this kind of books where a girl is married and not a spinster forever.

In a letter to her friend called Elizabeth Howell in March 1869 that "Girls right to ask who the little woman will marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman's life," (Alcott 6). But: "I won't marry Jo to Laurie to please anyone." (Alcott 6) She also told that she wanted Joe to be a spinster just like her for life but she declared that publisher that protagonist had to be married in the end of the novel or protagonist otherwise she won't be

able to sale her book Alcott introduced Mr. Friedrich Bhaer for that reason. And the 19th century was a time where society does not accept any spinster. As per the society the woman had only one role and that was to be someone's wife mother and to set aside the idea of being independent or to create any individual identity for themselves. This somehow showed the condition of women when the story was written that they were supposed to get married only. And also, Jo used to work with a different pen name because at that time woman's work was not taken seriously and a great example for this thing would be Mary Ann Evans whose pen name was George Eliot and for the same reason, she chose a male pen name for her work so that her work could be taken seriously by the readers.

When Jo was working as a teacher in New York, she met and Friedrich they became friends. There, Friedrich also worked as a teacher. They would talk about books and life in general. They would talk in depth about literature and philosophy. In this way, they got to know one another better and discovered that they had a lot in common. They would then communicate their feelings to one another. Finally, she gets married to him and after the death of her aunt she opened a boy's school in her aunt mansion which was her dream.

“My favorite literary heroine is Jo March. It is hard to overstate what she meant to a small, plain girl called Jo, who had a hot temper and a burning ambition to be a writer.”

(Rowling 7)

We can all agree that even till today Jo's character is somehow inspiring today's youth and women do will stop readers just find a sense of connection with her as she is strong enough to raise her voice in a man's world young minds wants to be bold, fearless, ambitious, independent like her and wanted to live a life in their own terms.

Margaret or Meg March

Margaret or Meg was the oldest daughter of the March family., She was 16-year-old had large eyes, Brown soft hair and a sweet voice. She is sweet in nature and beautiful towards her

family or we can say she was the exact figure of the 19th century American woman. She was the only girl of March family who remember being the wealthy ones. “It’s so dreadful to be poor!” (Alcott19) and she mourns with her sisters for the lack of material comfort on Christmas Day.

She assisted her mother in caring for her younger sisters in the absence of her father, acting as a type of second parent, and always made an effort to offer sound counsel when necessary. Her concern for her sisters remained a constant, despite the fact that she was occasionally a little pushy and domineering due to her position as the oldest of them and we do see when she asks Jo to act like a girl and not like a tomboyish.

In the novel, we do see that she always criticizes her poor life. And compare it with her rich friends and was jealous of her rich friend’s life and spend her day thinking about it and about their poverty and other’s luxury life. She loved rich society, good clothes, good food. She always wanted to live a Life where she can live in a big house with full of servants. She also secretly wanted to marry a rich man. We also see that she like to go to the parties where her rich friends would invite her and dress her like a proper doll and there, she also drinks champagne but later she realized that she is not that kind of person, she is pure but the people she is trying to impress were shallow. “I don’t like fuss and feathers.” (Alcott51) This taught her a life lesson about the reality of rich people. Later in life she does realize that all material things are not as important as the essence of love is in life.

We also see her interest towards John brooks who was a tutor of Laurie. Though she always wanted to marry a rich man but after meeting him she put those desire on the rest and focus on being true to herself and to really fall in love with someone. John also likes her and did ask Her hand for marriage from her parents but they told him to wait for some years because she was young that time. Even her aunt Mrs. March warned her that if she’ll marry that poor guy then she won’t get any hesitant from her and will expel Meg from her wealth but Meg does not care about that and told her aunt that she’ll marry to whomever she wants to. Later,

especially when she married John, she learnt to put up with being impoverished and to sincerely appreciate her blessings as well as the truly great attributes of people. late she did get married to him and later they had two twins. She was the only sister who gets in life exactly opposite of what she dreamt of that was to marry rich and to have a comfortable life but instead she married an orphan with whom she didn't get a lavish life but she made her peace with her circumstances.

Beth March

Beth was the third daughter of the March's, she was a thirteen-year-old girl with rosy skin, smooth hair, and bright eyes. She was also quiet and mellow, Little Tranquility was the nickname her father gave her, and it was a perfect fit for her because she always seemed to exist in a blissful world of her, and only stepping outside to interact with the few people she trusted and loved. She was also interested in music and loved to play piano and later her neighbor also allowed her to play his late granddaughter's piano and consider her like his own granddaughter.

Jo and Beth are good friends; both extroverted Jo and reserved Beth have antisocial inclinations. Both of them do not want to live in a society where women are compelled to follow socially prescribed norms of behaviour. Beth's social anxiety is so severe that her mother Marmee lets her study at home rather than the neighborhood school. Beth always strives to find the positive whereas her sisters are prone to moaning. She is content with what she has and does not demand more. She serves as the family's unifying force in many ways, and she always takes Marmee's moral guidance to heart. Beth always puts others before herself, in contrast to her sisters, who can be a little self-centered at times. Beth has a strong sense of morality and a great deal of empathy, despite her seeming shyness and timidity. She has this sever fear of socializing with others. And she also likes to be in her home which was her comfort zone. She was the true example of angelic figure who is naive, always helps others and does not demand anything in return.

In the novel we do see that her helping nature caused her a serious disease. She was helping and taking care of the Hummel, a German family who were very poor. Some of the family members of the family had the scarlet fever which also infected Beth and made her ill which eventually caused her demise.

Beth's character is also said to be inspired by Alcott's younger sister. "Beth has a quiet, dignified death, a fictional death," (Cheever 9) Alcott biographer Susan Cheever writes, according to *The Paris Review*.

Although young Lizzie Alcott was a graceful, quiet woman, she was not so lucky. A 22-year-old whose disease had wasted her body so that she looked like a middle-aged woman, she lashed out at her family and her fate with an anger that she had never before expressed. (Cheever 10)

Moreover, the common American at the time didn't mind coming from humble beginnings and didn't seek titles/labels or other superficial economic trappings. They believed that what they received relied on how hard they worked, and they only desired what they deserved. Beth does also represent the same kind of people where they only want what they deserve and nothing else. They believe in simple living where they don't bother about other's leisure and are happy in what they have.

Amy March

Amy was the youngest daughter of the March family. She was like a normal Snow Maiden, with blue eyes and shoulder-length blond curly hair, was pale and thin, was a spoiled little brat, and immature in her childhood. Still maintains herself as a young woman who cares about her manner. She loves to paint and want to be known as a famous artist by her childhood. Still does attend the nearby school to her house where she mostly focused on getting famous or popular than actually learning about her studies.

She and Jo had the same kind of temperament and when Jo refused to take her along with Meg and her then due to her anger issues, she burned down some scripts written by Jo which she was going to show her father when he was going to come back from the war. Though she realized from her mistake but still she was the most hated sibling in the novel by the readers for being such a spoiled one.

Her character did gradually improve throughout the novel at a point she was considered as a flower of the house for her is going behavior with everyone while growing up she did realize that she cannot make a living out of following just her art and that thought somewhere made her a realistic and in order to be financially stable and to help her family out she tried to adopt the basic vocabulary and the manners of the rich woman. She was ambitious and pragmatic too Who wanted to achieve things with a practical view rather than doing unnecessary hard work and also learn how to act as per people around her, which really helped her as her aunty Mrs. March choose her to take her along with herself to Europe trip and there her aunt did find a rich suitor for her to marry. Amy believes in marriage being economic proposition and did understand that being a woman would be hard to earn money so she decided to marry a rich man.

In the Europe trip she met Lori and he criticized her to marry a man just because he was rich, she told Lauri that she does not feel ashamed to think in a practical way by marrying a rich man so that she can live a good life and can also perform her art too.

Later they both fell in love with each other still knowing the fact that earlier Laurie like Jo but Amy showed Laurie a mirror that he cannot just stuck up on Jo when she has clearly rejected him for her own personal reason. When it came to romance at the time, she was more sensible than Meg since she realized that marrying a wealthy guy would give her a stable life. Later, she decides she won't be content doing that and weds Laurie instead.

Marmee or Mrs. March

Mrs. March or Marmee is the mother of all four March sisters and is fundamentally the ideal mother, she works hard but is never too busy to comfort and guide her girls, she happily participates in charity causes and the war effort, she is the perfect homemaker, a devoted mother, and a woman of strong moral principles. She never loses her temper, she never forgets anything, and she protects her children while yet letting them make errors and come to their own conclusions. In one incident, Jo's rage nearly took the life of Amy, her younger sister. Jo is not willing to pardon Amy for their argument. Jo gives in to her simmering resentment and ignores her sister when Amy follows her to the river to go ice skating, failing to warn Amy of the thin lake covered with ice in the center of the river.

Josephine must deal with the hard truth of what may have occurred since she put her own feelings ahead of her sister's safety even though Amy is saved after falling through the ice. But later her mother advised her to get control over her rage like she did. "Yes, I've learned to check the hasty words that rise to my lips, and when I feel that they mean to break out against my will, I just go away for a minute, and give myself a little shake for being so weak and wicked." (Alcott46) Marmee admits to Jo that she has struggled her entire life to control her own temper. She had assistance from her mother when she was young and later from her husband. The desire to set a good example for her daughters, though, may have been the largest aid. She is shocked to find that her lovely mother, who appears to be the epitome of patience, has battled her anger. Later the oldest, Meg, learns that her family is the subject of rumors. She overhears a woman making a bogus allegation that Mrs. March wants one of her daughters to wed Laurie, the wealthy neighbor boy. Meg raises it with Marmee after becoming annoyed by this useless conversation. When questioned about money and marriage, she offers some sage advice and made recommendations there, as she did with a lot of her other advice. First, there is a warning not to believe what others say and not to be frightened by rumors. There is honor in declining to participate.

Marmee's unusual ideals stand in fascinating contrast to her perfection. Even though their family is not wealthy, she discourages her daughters from getting married for money. She regards hard labor, religion, and steadfast morals as the most significant aspects of life. She feels that the most vulnerable people of society, like the Hummels, an immigrant family, are just as valuable as everyone else. Instead of giving her daughters in marriage to men who will make decisions for them, she makes sure they are all educated and capable of doing so. And for a mother of the nineteenth century, this was undoubtedly highly progressive.

Her moral values which she also taught her daughters does okay an important role in the development of the character of the other four females in the novel.

Comparison

After reading the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott a reader can already fall in love with Jo's character for being bold, ambitious and the courage she has to fulfill her dreams. She does not care about what other things of her and does not let society to measure whether her dreams are valid or not. She does not only dream about being a famous writer but put a lot of potential in being a one too. Jo is compared to each of her sisters individually, and the contrast between her and Meg is particularly striking. The two oldest sisters, Meg and Jo, are only a year apart in age, yet they couldn't be more dissimilar in temperament. Meg is prim and proper, longs for riches and expensive clothes, and has a charming, romantic temperament. Jo, on the other hand, is uncomfortable and tomboyish, who doesn't care at all about money or clothes, and gets into many troubles because she is so direct.

The two elder March girls do, however, share a bond: they both mother one of their younger sisters. Somewhere or not but for Joe only her dreams matter because when Meg told her that she is going to marry Mr. Brooke. Jo told her that that marrying Mr. Brooke will be the worst mistake she could ever make, that she shouldn't marry with anyone. But in reality, that's not what dreams are, it does not have to be of certain standard. At first Meg choose to just marry a rich guy and to fall in love seem stupid but if we see then there is no wrong in wanting love.

Still today women are being charged or criticized for marrying and not working but being a wife doing household work is also a big task so Jo's idea to control on Meg life state a lot of different things about her character. How they have different aims and does retreating the fact that dreams could be different from person to person.

And even though Beth and Jo are so different, Beth and Jo have a particular relationship. Beth, who is reserved and quiet, admires her sister Jo's audacity and talent, while Jo adores Beth for her loving and giving nature. Jo is made to stand out even more by Beth's propensity to disappear into the background. Beth was the sweetest and was a shy girl. For Beth her family and her religious beliefs were everything. She did not want anything specific from her life other than well-being of her family unlike her sister who wants to get certain things from life.

The March sisters' Amy and Jo make the most explosive chemistry. Younger siblings often fight; Amy's affectations annoy Jo, while Amy feels humiliated and abandoned when Jo is condescending and excludes her youngest sister from conversations. It appears that their relationship will never heal after the youngest Amy destroys Jo's novel in retaliation for being abandoned one night. Jo is reminded to put aside her resentment and just love her sister, even if they are quite poles apart, after a hazardous mishap. The contrast between them will remain stark as they get older since Amy loves the man Jo was unable to. Amy was the most realistic one among her sisters, who knows how to be a part of something but not to play hard for that and thus wanted to marry a rich man where she can also follow her passion of painting and not to stress about household chores being done.

Whereas Marmee, is one of the loveliest representations of motherhood. She has a firm but kind hand when guiding and correcting, and she lets her daughters make mistakes so they can grow. She trains her girls to have a strong affection for one another and supports them when their emotions run high. Despite the family's difficult financial situation and her husband's deployment, she brightens her home and generously helps people in need. All the

females in the novel are totally different from one another but if we see then these women showed us the situation of different women of the nineteenth century. Alcott's projection on each woman being so different yet so evident is very interesting

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Chapter Three Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to analyse the deep characterization of female leads in the novel of *Little Women* and then to compare them from one another. The fact that they all are grown up in same environment with same upbringing but their personalities and traits are purely different from each other. This paper also talks about novel being related to author that is Louisa May Alcott one's life. She has portrayed the novel character from real life person which also showed us the glimpse of her own life and can figure out how her life had been.

Her novel has been adapted into movies many times and each adaptation has inspired the youth and still readers read the novel and watch the adaptation with the same joy. This novel also helps to inspire young readers to believe in their dreams and to achieve them no matter what other or society say about it. *Little Women* resembles a didactic novel—a book written with the intention of imparting moral lessons—in this regard. In addition to highlighting various types of heroines, the four March sisters' stories each represent the various choices a woman had in the 1860s: she could stay at home, like Beth; she could marry, like Meg; she could develop into a modern, successful woman, like Amy; or she could struggle to balance her personal and professional lives, like Jo. Each of these women shows us that there is no wrong being a Jo, Meg, Beth Amy, or Marmee as long as you are happy.

Women are still criticized for choosing a dream and vice versa. But dreams do not mean to be just one thing, they are not lesser than anything no matter how different you and your dreams are as long as they are valid to you, they should not seek validation from others.

As per the theory of gynocriticism by Elaine Showalter, it is clear when the novel was written there was the first phase of feminism called the feminine where women writers were focusing on to write as equal to Men's writing. That time female writers used to write under a male pen name so that their work could be considered seriously in the novel also used a male pen name to publish her work which shows the glimpse of first phase of feminine in the work.

Women of today still face a lot of problem whether being a housewife or to be a working woman or by doing anything what makes them happy. Still there is patriarchal

society which wants women to act, in a certain way. Novel was written in the 19th century and still today in 21st century some people are of that same low mentality as before.

Women are still criticized for their choices the way Jo`s dream were irrelevant for the people of that time in the same way present society also don't want women to make their own identity in a man`s world. Characters like Meg are often termed as aimless just because they wanted to be a housewife but if we really dig up to that question do, we really think that being a housewife is that much easy? I guess no! Because being a housewife and to raise kids is as equal as performing a task thus every choice of an individual deserve respect.

This research paper not only talks about the four March sister but it tells us about the situation of women and how they face problems to achieve their dreams. With this research the readers can see other aspects of the characters in the novel rather just focusing on one character and will understand that no character is less important. All character does radiate the truth of the woman despite being so much different from one another.

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