

Representation of The Impact of Patriarchal Culture on Women in 19th Century through “Little Women” 2019 Movie

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Abstract

Patriarchy is a social system that sustains male superiority in multiple spheres of life and is constructed, preserved, and transmitted across to the generations that follow and grown into a culture. The patriarchal system emerged in America during the colonial era of the 18th century. Little Women (2019) is a film based on Louisa May Alcott's novel of the same title written in 1868. The purpose of this research is to explore how patriarchal culture defined American women's lives in the nineteenth century presented in Little Women (2019) movie. This research used descriptive qualitative method. In order to analyze the data the researchers applied Naomi Wolf's theory of liberal feminism and semiotic theory by Roland Barthes. The result indicated that several scenes in the movie, set during nineteenth century in Concord, Massachusetts, depict the lives of American women under male dominance. The implementation of patriarchal culture in society restricts how women behave in multiple facets of life, including education, marriage, employment, and individual autonomy.

Keywords: Little Women; Patriarchy; Gender Discrimination; Liberal Feminism

1. Introduction

American women were subjected to stringent cultural expectations throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, giving them with a well-defined identity and function within the male-dominated culture (Wyse, 2012). In diverse facets of life, men's and women's roles are distinct. This society system is commonly called patriarchy, a social and intellectual system that holds men to be superior to women (Rawat, 2014). Patriarchy is social structures in which promotes masculine dominance and authority that subjects women to financial dependence, cruelty, domestication, children, property, decision-making, reproduction, sexuality, including spirituality (Amarashti, 2021; Walby, 1990). Nash (2009) defines patriarchy as a structure of interpersonal interaction that emphasises men and women have a socially recognised gender difference. According to Jane (2021), gender is beyond biological sex; additionally it encompasses a series of behaviours, positions, duties, functions, advantages and attitudes that men and women inherit as a result regarding cultural construction or the social context in which they grow. The societal construct that frequently overemphasises gender inequalities, affecting women's participation in society. Unequal behaviour towards one gender, particularly women, is caused by differences in viewpoint, bias, and patriarchal culture that are still entrenched in society.

This condition fuels women's motivation to fight for the rights of those who have been deprived. This movement is generally called feminism. Feminism emerges to destroy the patriarchal understanding so that women do not get mistreatment and unbalance role to achieve the social justice. One type of feminism is liberal feminism. Liberal feminism's principles are based on liberalism, the political concepts that promotes liberties, especially in the political and economic domains (Evans, 2023). Based on Wolf (2002), women are superior individuals who deserve equal dignity and authority as everybody else. Wolf emphasised the importance of women resisting the patriarchal system's repressive circumstances, resulting in the elimination of their access to education, politics, and employment. Wolf (1993) identifies numerous basic concepts of power feminism, including the belief that women have the same value as men, the right to self-determination, the importance of women's experiences equal to that of men, and the right to speak.

Little Women is an American coming-of-age period drama film written and directed by Greta Gerwig released in 2019. It was the seventh movie adaptation of the novel written by Louisa May Alcott with the same title. This film, set in post-war America in the nineteenth century, presents the narrative of the March family, a family of four daughters who live in the Concord area of the United States. Several studies have been undertaken using the Little Women movie as an object to investigate gender issues. Rosalinah et al. (2022) did research to examine the main character's feminism and how family communication influences all of the main character's decisions in this film. The results showed that the main character embodied two varieties of feminism: liberal feminism and Marxist feminism. Women at the time were constrained by the belief that they needed to marry in order to have a decent life, and family plays a significant part in shaping a person's perspective. Dewi and Medina (2020), who investigated feminism in this film, discovered five categories of feminists: liberal feminists, Marxist feminists and socialists, radical libertarian feminists, psychoanalytic feminists, and postmodern feminists. Santi and Rahmi (2019) conducted a subsequent study on the feminist values contained in the film Little Women 2019. Liebertus (2021) takes a feminist perspective to analysing gender inequalities in the film. It demonstrated that women are expected to be feminine, soft, and wedded, yet women can be independent and create a good living without relying on men or marriage.

However, the present study offered a different perspective is looking at how the patriarchal culture that regulated the social order of society in the 19th century affected women's lives. This research specifically used liberal feminism theory by Naomi Wolf to identified the patriarchal culture's impact on women and semiotic theory by Roland Barthes to analyse the meaning of sign system in the movie. Barthes (1967) divided level of meaning into two categories, namely denotation and connotation. Denotation is a value that is possible to observed by looking at the object, whereas connotation is inferred and is linked to the researcher's background and prior knowledge. The connotation has evolved into a myth. Myths are concerns that society is committed on to neutralise idealism.

2. Research Method

In an attempt to figure out how patriarchal culture defined American women's lives in the nineteenth century presented in Little Women (2019) movie, the present

study used descriptive qualitative method. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as a strategy to analysing and comprehending the meaning people or groups attach to a community or human challenge. All the scenes that represent women and contains elements of patriarchal culture in the film *Little Women* (2019) were used as research sample. In order to collect the data, the researchers watched and observed the scene of the film then took documentation. Various types of relevant sources in a form of previous research, journals, movie script, etc. also used to support the data. The researchers employed semiotic data analysis technique by Roland Barthes and Naomi Wolf's theory of liberal feminism to identify the patriarchal culture appears in the movie.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Result

Based on the analysis that has been accomplished, the following information was discovered regarding how patriarchal culture defined American women's lives in the nineteenth century presented in *Little Women* (2019) movie.

3.3.1 *The Impact of Patriarchy in Education*

Dialogue 1.

Marmee	: You are not to attend that school any more.
Jo	: Good, that man has always been an idiot.
Marmee	: Jo will teach you.
Jo	: ME?! I already teach Beth!
Meg	: You're a good teacher.
Mr. Brooke	: Yes, women being taught at home is much more proper, I believe.
Meg	: Only because the schools for women are so poor.
Mr. Brooke	: Indeed, quite right

Denotation: March family comes to Mr. Laurence's house to pick up Amy. She runs to Mr. Laurence's house because her hand is bleeding caused by her teacher. Marmee forbids Amy from going to school again and asks Jo to teach her. Mr Brooke agrees with Marmee.

Connotation: What Mr. What Brooke said indicated what society in that era believed about women and education. Women should not receive education outside the home. Even though he agreed with Meg's words. He did this just to attract Meg's attention. Apart from that, Meg's final dialogue states that there is an inequality in the quality of education for women and men, where for women it is very bad.

Myth: Home is the safest place for women.

3.3.2 *The Impact of Patriarchy in Marriage*

Dialogue 2.

Amy : Well, I'm not poet, I'm just a woman and as a woman, there is no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn living or to support my family.

And if I had my own money, which I don't, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. And if we had children they would be his not mine. They would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't economic proposition because it is. It may not be for you but it most certainly is for me.

Denotation: Laurie visits Amy when she is painting in her workshop. They have conversation. Laurie asks her about her relationship with Fred and her plan of him in the future. Amy says that if Fred propose him, she is certainly would say yes because she always wants to marry rich man.

Connotation: What Amy said emphasises the restricted economic independence and dependence that women suffered at the time. Amy also emphasises that regardless of how she were to obtain her own money, it would eventually belong to her husband upon marriage, confirming the perception that women's economic worth is related to their marital status.

Myth: Women were regarded as the "property" of their husbands, with no authority over their income, possessions, or indeed their own lives.

3.3.3 The Impact of Patriarchy in Employment

Fig 1.



Denotation: The first scene of the film Little Women (2019) begins with Jo visiting the publishing office. The camera perspective as it follows Jo's movement reveals the condition of the room, it emerges that she is the only woman around. The room is full of men. Some is standing and others are sitting with their feet up on the desks, reading, smoking, and talking with their workmate, hardly noticing her appearance.

Connotation: This scenario depicts men's economic and occupational supremacy under the patriarchal system that was established in nineteenth-century society. Women in the United Kingdom and the United States have undergone the notion of distinct spheres during the Victorian Era of the nineteenth century, which was a patriarchal ideology asserting that pursuant to established gender roles, women adhered to the world of domesticity in contrast to men, who were supposed to be engaged in the wider society.

Myth: Patriarchal society believes that work is divided into two categories: men's jobs and women's jobs. In addition, women's social status is lower than men's, therefore they do not deserve respect.

3.3.4 The Impact of Patriarchy in Individual Autonomy

Dialogue 3.

Jo : My students need me.

Friedrich : Always working.

Jo : Money is the end and aim of my mercenary existence

Friedrich : No one gets ink stains like yours just out of a desire for money.

Jo : Well my sister Amy is in paris, and until she marries someone
obscenely wealthy it's up to me to keep up the family afloat.

Dialogue 4.

Aunt March : You mind yourself, dearie. One day you'll need me and you'll
wish you had behaved better.

Jo : Thank you, aunt March for your employment and many
kindnesses, but I intend to make my own way in the world.

Aunt March : No one makes their own way, not really, least of all a woman.
You'll need to marry well.

Denotation: In dialogue 3. Jo, who is writing near a fireplace in her boarding house in New York. She is talking with Friedrich while alerted that her student is waiting. She immediately gathered her books and went to the place where she taught. They kept talking until Jo climbed the stairs. Friedrich commented about how hard work Jo are and Jo told him the reason behind. In dialogue 4. Jo is reading a book for Aunt March in her house. They engage in a conversation. Jo wants to be free to determine her life without male intervention in marriage but Aunt March doesn't agree with her.

Connotation: Due to the unequal payment and limited job options offered to women to earn money, marrying a rich man is the only way to get a better life and elevate her and her family's social status. If a woman wants high social status, then she must marry a rich man. A patriarchal system that differentiates work based on gender limits women from dreaming of having a good life through their own struggles. What Aunt March said was that women cannot plan their lives without marriage because patriarchy controls everything women do.

Myth: These two dialogue illustrates that a decade ago, people believes that women really needed men to support their lives. Women also can not decide their life according to their will.

Dialogue 5.

Jo : Those are just stories, of course, but I'm working on a novel.

Friedrich : And your novel, it will be like this?

Jo : Yes... so far anyway.

Friedrich : With plots like this, duels and killing?

Jo : It sells.

Friedrich : Why don't you sign your real name?

Jo : My mother wouldn't like it, it's too, gory for her.

Denotation: In the boarding house drawing room, Friedrich reads Jo's handwritten stories. He asks the plot and theme of her novel and why she uses a nickname. Then, she explains the reason.

Connotation: Women's rights to express opinions are limited by a pile of labels attached to them. Society be like, women should be like this and shouldn't be like that. Jo's reason to use nickname in her novel because her mother wouldn't like if she knew her daughter wrote gore stories indicated her action doesn't represent women image that patriarchy society developed. Women are gentle and graceful individuals, how can they have such cruel imaginations?

Myth: Women must be pure, feminim, polite, and soft.

3.2 Discussion

Patriarchy is a term refers to an ideology, system, and culture that embraced by a group of society that defined the way they act. However, patriarchy disadvantages women in many ways. This social system, prioritizing men over women making men have a power to bridle and opress in diverse parts of life such as political, education, sexuality, economy, etc. Under the patriarchal culture, women are confined by regulations that disregard their equal opportunities to perform roles in society. Corresponding the opinion of Amarashti (2021) and Walby (1990), the result indicated that some scenes in the Little Women 2019 film contain denotative and connotative meanings which represent four areas of women's life, namely education, marriage, employment and individual autonomy which are affected by patriarchal culture.

The impact of patriarchy on women in obtaining education appears on the conversation between Marmee, Jo, Meg and Mr. Brooke. It represents the society's belief at that time that the safest place for women is their home and it is not important for women to obtain education outside the home.

The dialogue that occurs between Amy and Laurie when Laurie visited Amy who was painting in her workshop in Paris which appears in the film represents the impact of patriarchy on women in marriage. During the nineteenth century, the majority of governments adopted the British common law system of "coverature," in which women's rights were legally "covered" by their husbands and their rights were absorbed into his. This offered the development of the idea of "chattel marriages," a system where most women were regarded as the "property" of their husbands, with no authority over their income, possessions, or indeed their own lives. During that period, women were not permitted to sign agreements, sit on committees, or contribute to equal opportunities in societal affairs.

Meanwhile, the impact of patriarchy on work is shown through a description of the condition of the room when Jo visits the publishing office. Old custom holds that women can only be housewives who undertake household tasks such as cooking, sweeping, washing, and caring for her husband and children. At that time, politicians, businessmen, and officeworkers are kind of occupations for man.

Lastly is the impact of patriarchy experienced by women on individual autonomy. The dialogues between Jo and Friederich as well as Jo and Aunt March illustrate that American women in the 19th century did not have many choices. In line with Rosalinah et al. (2022), women cannot make decision of their own life, they need to marry to have power. They live for marriage and giving birth. Aunt March's opinion is a reflection of women's thinking at that time. Besides that, patryarchal society expects them with so many stigmas on their shoulders about the way they should be act is in line with the finding of Liebertus' (2021) research. In result, women cannot expresses themselves.

The most visible aspect of a patriarchal society is that all institutions have unwritten or expressed rules in place that result in men having a distinct advantage. This means that male superiority is reinforced persistently, from traditions, attitudes, and rituals to formal institutions like governments and laws. Women's only responsibility is to blindly follow these institutions.

4. Conclusion

According to the results above, it can be concluded that several scenes from 2019 film *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig as previously explained, represent how the patriarchal system shaped women's lives in the American colonial era, where society believed that men were superior to women and women lived for men. Male dominance influences aspects of women's lives as depicted in the film *Little Women*, namely the impact of patriarchy in education, the impact of patriarchy in marriage, the impact of patriarchy in employment, and the impact of patriarchy in individual autonomy. In education, school for men is better than for women. Society also see that it is not important for women to pursue education. Men also have wider employment opportunities while women are limited to domestic works, women do not have the autonomy of their own self, and women are considered to need marriage to support themselves. In life, women cannot own assets because everything belongs to their husbands, and the ideal woman according to society is to be a wife and mother.

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