

Women's Struggle in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women

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Abstract: Little Women is a novel that discusses the lives of women and their struggle for equality. This paper aims to describe the struggle of women to get their rights as seen from the female characters in the story. The researcher uses a liberal feminism approach. To analyze the data, the writer uses the descriptive qualitative method. The research data were taken from the novel Little Women and several journal and article references related to the topic of discussion. The questions raised in this study are 1.) How are female characters depicted in the novel, and 2.) How are they struggling to get their freedom and rights? The results of the analysis show that female characters are described as different characters but show the same thing that they are struggling to get freedom, happiness, and the things they want. To get freedom and happiness, they do different struggles. Like Josephine, for example, besides struggling to get an education, she also shows her talent as a professional writer by publishing her writings. During the civil war in the United States, women's lives were not easy and freedom in the public and domestic spheres was still dominated by men. However, the female characters in this novel are described as independent and determined women who struggle to realize their desires and are equal to men.

Keywords: feminism, women's struggle, women's liberalism, *Little Women*

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Women's issues have long been the object of attention in social life. These problems even today still exist in our daily lives, such as violence, sexual harassment, discrimination, race, gender inequality, economy, or even social class. This is inseparable from the instincts of women who are always portrayed as weak creatures and must be protected. Women sometimes become victims in the socio-cultural environment. Many literary works make women's lives the main focus of the story. Female characters in stories often experience issues such as violence, sexual harassment, discrimination, and economic or social issues. Beauvoir (2010) states that men always try to dominate women through the rules they make so that women become dependent on men and accept men's oppression and lose their freedom. Every human being has rights and freedom over his or her own life without exception. However, in society's perception, women are often seen as weak and dependent on men. Meanwhile, men are labeled as superior to women so men have more power and privileges than women. The women's experience of oppression all the time leads women to struggle against gender inequality. Therefore, they create a movement called feminism. The feminist movement emphasizes women's freedom and access to a public work environment, educational equality, and the need for women to obtain

their rights. The struggle against the oppression of women is an attempt by women to get equal rights in all aspects of life. This struggle is to get their rights: freedom to choose according to their wishes, recognition for their existence, and an opportunity to get equality in various fields. British philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her book titled "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," suggests that the main problem in women's lives is that women cannot struggle to improve themselves because of household tyranny. Women have to stay at home, and household finances depend only on men. Her thoughts in the book became the foundation of modern feminism. The struggle for equality with men is not only at the intellectual level but also at the social level. Feminism is an ideology that opposes culture and political policies that do not benefit women. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, for the sake of equal treatment and rights, men and women must be free from oppressive gender roles. As stated by June Hannam (2007: 22), the word "feminism" can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the power imbalance between the sexes, with the role of women being lower than that of men. Feminism also means awareness of the oppression and exploitation of women that occur within the family, workplace, or society and conscious action against men or women to change conditions normally. This awareness developed and became a movement in Western countries where women began to be exploited harshly. In the end, various struggles carried out by women resulted in feminism being brought by women to Europe (Lubis, 2006: 74-75).

The feminist movement can also be seen in literary works. Women's issues such as inequality, oppression, and objectification are the topics of literary works. One of the literary works that raises women's issues is *Little Women*. Written by an American writer, Louisa May Alcott, this novel was published on September 30, 1868. She was a famous classic writer at that time. Apart from *Little Women*, Alcott also wrote several books such as *Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Little Men* (1871), *Eight Cousins* (1875), *Rose in Bloom* (1876), *Jo's Boys* (1886), and others. The novel *Little Women* describes the struggle of women, particularly in the March family. The time setting in the novel is the period during and after the American Civil War. The main character of the novel is Marmee, the mother of four daughters named Margareth, Josephine, Beth, and Amy. Marmee's husband fought in Washington where the Civil War happened. This war had a bad impact on the March Family, especially in terms of finance. Conditions of war forced many children to work to earn money to survive. To analyze women's struggles, this paper used the perspective of liberal feminism. This perspective talks about fighting for equal rights for women so that women have rights as human beings and can choose what they want and do.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on *Little Women* was conducted by Cinda Amalia Rahman (2018). In her article titled "The Struggle of Victorian Women in the Novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott," She discusses the value of women's struggles and several aspects, namely struggles in the aspects of family, education, and the public work environment in the novel. He uses a qualitative descriptive method and a gynocriticism approach. The second research was conducted by Agustin Dwi Ratnaningrum (2009) in her article entitled "The Effect of Civil War On Families in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*: Sociological Approach". He explained the influence of the Civil War in the novel with a sociological approach. This study describes

the relationship between novels and social reality in American society at that time. The American Civil War had an effect on the family at that time. In this paper, the author uses the views of liberal feminism. Liberalism is the climax of the development of Western society which creates awareness of the importance of human individuality, the liberation of individuals from total submission to groups, and the loosening of the tight grip of custom, law, and authority. In this case, liberalism appears for individual emancipation. Liberalists do not complicate how conciliation will be reached or how prosperous it will be, but they focus more on the process (Martinez & Garcia, 1997: 35). According to Mackie (2003), there is a need for social policies for women to achieve independence without having to sacrifice their reproductive role. Others campaigned for women's suffrage. Thus, Liberal feminism is a view in which women have the right to place their own body autonomy and have full individual rights and freedoms. This school states that freedom and equality are rooted in rationality and separation between private and public. Liberal feminists view the state as an impartial ruler between the interests of different groups. They realize that the country is dominated by men. For most liberal feminists, women tend to be "inside" the state only as citizens, not as policymakers, so in this case there is inequality of women in politics or the state. Also in subsequent developments, the liberal feminist view of "equality" at least has its own influence on the development of "women's influence and equality to carry out political activities such as upholding state justice". According to Naomi Wolf, "Power Feminism" is a solution. Today's women have power in terms of education and income. Women must continue to demand the same rights as men. They should be free to have an opinion and do what they want without depending on men because every individual has the capacity to think and act rationally just like men.

RESEARCH METHOD

In analyzing the data, the researcher used a qualitative descriptive method and a feminist approach in analyzing the data. This method explains how to understand the structure and patterns of data, observing data to understand what phenomena are experienced by research subjects such as behavior, perceptions, motivations, actions, etc. (Meloeng, 2007: 6). The story characters are identified and analyzed using explanations in the form of words. According to Ratna (2013: 34), data collection techniques focus on the perspective of literary texts that reflect the social and life realities of society. There are several steps in the process of collecting data, namely close reading to understand its contents more deeply, highlighting texts in the novel that show forms of women's struggles, making remarks or dialogue notes related to forms of actualization of characters and women, and struggles related to women's liberalism.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Marry Wollstonecraft in her book entitled *A Vindication of The Right of Women* describes women who are locked up at home to take care of the household and do not get the opportunity to work in public. Meanwhile, men are given the freedom to develop themselves as optimally as possible to study, work or do whatever they want. A novel by Emile, namely *On Education* (1762) by Jean Jacques Rousseau contains the differences in education between men and women. It was explained that for men there was more emphasis on scientific matters or social

and humanitarian knowledge. This is because in the future the man will be responsible as the head of the family. While education for women is emphasized more on arts and literature. Jacques said the woman was understanding, caring and motherly. However, the novel was criticized by Marry Wollstonecraft. He offers a way out that women's education must be the same as men's so that women are able to be "themselves" and not just "male objects" (Arivia, 2003: 101). Women are considered to have intellectual intelligence, so if they are given the same opportunities as men in the field of education, they will be able to improve their abilities. The movement for women's emancipation in the United States dates back to the first world war. These movements mostly occur in urban areas. There were many problems in the area during its development period. Tiffany K. Wayne in "Women's Roles in Nineteenth-Century America" explains that in marriage and family life, the perfection of femininity is the wife and mother as the center of the family. Women in the 19th century were indispensable in the home because at that time most American women hoped to marry and have children. Middle-class families began to focus more on their children and spent much of their time raising children and developing skills as efficient housekeepers. Single women who lived at that time actually preferred to receive formal education. Meanwhile, women who had children mostly played a role at home as mothers or housewives, but not a few of them even tried to work in factories to improve their economic life while their husbands were sent off to war in unpredictable times. During the American civil war in the 19th century, women also had to volunteer to care for wounded soldiers. The rest chose to stay at home with their children. When the war ended, most women were expected to resume their traditional household roles at home being wives and mothers.

The Struggle of Female Character

Struggle in Economy

Economic conditions in the 19th century forced women to actively participate in earning a living to support their families. They work according to the skills they have. Most of these women are not highly educated. They can only work as employees or laborers. Josephine was one of those figures who had aspirations in work that were different from other women at that time. From his job, he hopes to be able to generate a more decent salary to meet the needs of himself and his family.

Excerpt 1

"...and he said it was good, and I shall write more and he's going to get the next paid for, and I am so happy, for in time I may be able to support myself and help the girl." (Alcott, 2013: 170)

From the line "and I shall write more and he's going to get the next pay for" we can see that Josephine is struggling to take her rights as a woman in the economic sector. His ability to write stories he used as capital to earn money. He submits his work to publishers in several ways so that his work can be accepted by publishers. Male supremacy is still very strong, making him have to compromise with that. She had to disguise her own name and use a man's name to make it easier for publishers to accept her. However, the struggle is not that easy.

Josephine's early writings were unpaid. After going through a long time and effort, finally he was able to get money from his work as a writer. Thus, she can become an independent woman and not depend on men. Not only that, as a woman, Josephine is also able to prove that she has economic value in the family. She is one of March's daughters who believes that a woman can live without a man by her side. He worked as Aunt March's assistant and librarian. From his job, he earns money that he can use to meet his needs and add to the family's finances.

Excerpt 2

“Do you like your school?” asked the boy, changing the subject, after a little pause, during which he started at the fire, and Jo look about her, well pleased. ‘I Don’t go to school, I’m a businessman – girl, I mean. I go to wait on my great aunt, and a dear, cross old soul she is, too,’ answered Jo.” (Alcott, 2013: 54)

From the line above "I'm a businessman -- girl, I mean" we can see there is a struggle from Josephine March, she claims to be a female employee by working for Aunt March. The correction of the word “businessman” to “girl” indicates the character's attempt to gain recognition that women can also become entrepreneurs. Josephine was able to prove that women do not only deserve to stay at home or be housewives but can also do whatever they want.

Excerpt 3

“The training she received at Aunt March was just what she needed and the thought that she was doing something to support herself made her happy.” (Alcott, 2013: 40)

While working she was able to get a salary and knowledge from the books in Aunt March's library, Josephine was able to supplement her family's finances, meet other needs, and improve her literacy. The sentence "she was doing something to support herself made her happy", indicates an effort to express herself and get her rights as a free and happy individual. Josephine with all her ambitions believes that her desires and abilities can be balanced like those of men. Apart from Josephine, Marmee is another female character in the story which also depicts women as independent and free to do what they want. She is the mother of four daughters of the March family. While her husband was away at war, she looked after the house and her four daughters. He is open-minded. Mother figure and hardworking woman. She has two roles: being the head of the household, which means she works to provide for their family, and being the mother to care for her daughters. Not only being a housewife, Marmee is also described as a figure who works in public space. She was recruited to dedicate her energy and skills as a nurse to help wounded military soldiers on the battlefield. What Marmee does also illustrates that women can be free to do what they want without being disturbed by their status as housewives who have to take care of the children and take care of the family.

Struggle in Education

As stated by Fuad Ihsan, (2005: 1), education is an effort to grow and develop physical and

spiritual potential that is brought in accordance with values in society and culture. Thus, efforts are made to instill values and norms in an effort to develop intellectual abilities. In the novel *Little Women*, the March family applies different education to their four children according to their respective passions. As seen in the quote that describes Amy Curtis with her painting talent.

Excerpt 4

“I have ever so many wishes, but the pet one is to be an artist and go to Rome, and do fine pictures and be the best artist in the whole world.” was Amy’s modest desire. (Alcott, 2013: 156)

From the phrase “so many wishes” we can conclude that in the March family, girls are given the freedom to have high hopes and aspirations. In those days, this was not something that was common. Women are usually educated to be wives and housewives in accordance with social values that are still patriarchal. Amy's desire to become an artist or artist is a representation of women's desire to enter the public sphere, a realm that is claimed to belong to men. Not only that, but Amy is also a different image of a 19th-century woman. She is a smart and educated woman. To get that, he had to struggle to compete with men in college. However, traditional values are not completely abandoned. Amy and her aunt who sent her to college realized that women still had to do household chores. Therefore, her aunt also teaches homework and Amy does the chores after finishing her school assignments. The following excerpt demonstrates the discussion:

Excerpt 5

“After these tiresome labors, she must do her lesson, which was a daily trial of every virtue she possessed. Then she was allowed one hour for exercise or play, and didn’t she enjoy it?” (Alcott, 2013: 355)

In the line “she must do her lesson” we can see that Amy struggles in her life in education. She denied society's stigma at that time that women were only able to take care of the housework. He showed that there was an effort that the stigma was not true by proving his success in studying but still doing homework. By continuing his education in college according to his passions, it shows that he is able to develop his potential and his intellectual intelligence. Even though she has to migrate and leave her hometown and family, she has the responsibility and desires within herself to become a smart and talented woman in the art of painting. We can see that Amy struggled especially in education. Her efforts show that women have the same intellectual abilities as men. Amy is one of the brightest and most gifted students in the class, her painting skills have never been learned before in formal school. He always finishes exams so that he becomes a role model in behavior for other students.

Excerpt 6

“Her little airs and graces were much admired, so were her accomplishments for besides her drawing, she could play twelve tunes, crochet, and read French without mispronouncing more than two-thirds of the words”. (Alcott, 2013: 43)

From the word “accomplishments” it can be seen that Amy is a woman who has many achievements, especially in the academic field. This illustrates that women also have potential and intellectual intelligence. Her efforts in the field of education are a struggle to develop and increase her potential to become an intelligent woman with extensive knowledge so that she is on par with men. His skills in painting, singing, and speaking French make him a successful artist if he gets lots of opportunities to explore his talents. Apart from Amy, another woman from the March family is also described as an educated female character, Margareth. One of his outstanding talents is his ability to speak French.

Excerpt 7

“You’ve a nice accent, and in time will be a clever reader. I advise you to learn, for German is a valuable accomplishment to teachers.” Said Miss. Kate to Margareth.

From the line “I advise you to learn” we can see Miss Kate telling Margaret that she sees Margaret’s potential when she speaks French. Miss Kate suggested Margareth take education in Germany, by seeing her potential so that it could be improved. Her suggestion shows that at that time women already understood the potential that women have to be independent. Miss Kate is also a representation of women who are independent and able to enter the public space by becoming a teacher. She supports other women, in this case, Margareth, to get their freedom and then achieve their dreams. He hopes Margareth will get a better life by supporting her career in education. By suggesting that they have experience and a license show their struggle so that women become more professional in their work and show their best potential. The freedom of women in obtaining an education is also seen in the third daughter of the March family, Elizabeth March (Beth). He is described as shy, not very talkative, but independent. He is free to choose to study from home, not at school. He also has the freedom to channel his talents and interests. He loved music and was good at playing the piano. Beth spends all day at home, doing homework, keeping the house clean, sightseeing, playing the piano to studying, she does all activities from home.

Excerpt 8

“Beth was too bashful to go to school, it had been tried but she suffered so much that it was given up and she did her lessons at home with her father, even when he went away, and her mother was called to devote her skill and energy to Soldiers’ Aid Societies, Beth went faithfully on by herself, and did the best she could”. (Alcott, 2013: 41)

From the sentence “she did her lessons at home with her father” we can see that Beth doesn’t only do homework, but also studies. This activity shows that in an effort to become a smart woman, she tries to balance skills and intellectual intelligence. Beth walked faithfully alone and did the best she could. In this effort, Josephine and Meg help Beth with reading and writing lessons. Basically, the lessons that had to be learned for women at that time were only basic lessons, namely reading, writing, and arithmetic. Beth with her motherly nature, has many

abilities. Apart from tidying up the house, studying, and sewing, she is also good at playing music. Her musical talent made her an extraordinary girl, giving a different impression from other women of her time. Not many women, especially those from the lower classes, have Beth's skills. This shows the image of women from the lower class who have the ability and freedom to show their talent and desire to remain educated, have musical talent, but also continue to carry out the roles assigned to women at that time, namely doing household chores. The female character in *Little Women* who prioritizes literacy is Aunt March. She is a wealthy widow who is open-minded. Aunt March invites Josephine to live with her in Europe as a personal assistant and librarian in her home. He also offers Amy to live with him and sends her to study Art at university. He struggles to make his nephew successful with his abilities. One of the aspects of happiness that Aunt March wanted Amy to have was finances and success. He wished his kindness to be successful in education and life. Therefore, Aunt March supports Amy in education expenses. She really supports her niece to grow up to be a successful person and a lucky woman, especially in the economic field. Aunt March gave Amy a chance to improve her painting skills. He believes that with Amy's expertise, with proper education, Amy can become an independent woman. Besides helping with education finances, Aunt March also coached Amy on how to balance household chores with education. She was aware of the role and position of women at that time, but she also had to be a smart woman who was able to keep up with men's abilities. Thus, Aunt March is also a representation of an independent woman who is free to do whatever she wants. She realized her wish to turn her nieces into educated and independent women by helping to pay for her niece's education and support her niece's talent.

Struggle in Public Work Environment

The absence of the head of the March family in the family due to the war had a negative impact on the March family, especially in the financial aspect. The situation at that time made the children work to help support the family's financial life. However, the situation at that time was also difficult for women to be accepted to work in public spaces. Women have limited freedom in the workplace. Women from lower-class families spend their days working at home. There are also those who work as laborers in factories with small salaries. The female characters in the *Little Women* novel describe things that are different from most women at that time. The daughters of the March family did not only do household chores, they also worked in the public sphere, which was different from most women at that time, like Margaret for example. She works as a nanny.

Excerpt 9

"I'm glad I live in it, then. I don't like my work, but I get a good deal of satisfaction out of it after all, so I won't complain, I only wish I liked teaching as you do" - Margaret. (Alcott, 2013: 254)

From the sentence "I don't like my work" it can be concluded that Margaret (Meg) has to struggle and work harder to survive, she also has to accept the condition of an economically weak country and families from the lower class who have no privileges. Meg has to spend her time every day working and doing her job in a rich family's house. She is a tough woman. Meg's work in public spaces shows that she has the freedom to enter public spaces and derive

economic value from her work. Margareth March is the eldest daughter in the March family. She is one of the independent and hardworking women of the March family. In the midst of civil war conditions, he worked to help his family's financial economy. Margaret worked for the Kings as a governess. Even though she was born a woman, she can prove that they can also make money with their abilities and skills, it shows that they were not the typical American women of that time, who just stayed at home and received money from their husbands or parents.

Excerpt 4

“Meg found a place as a nursery governess and felt rich with her small salary. As she said, she was ‘fond of luxury’, and her chief trouble was poverty. She found it harder to bear than the others because she could remember a time when home was beautiful”. (Alcott, 2013: 39).

The quote above shows that Margaret March cares about economic independence. She struggles to gain economic rights from her job as a personal nurse to King Moffat's children. From his job, he was able to sustain his life and also his family's finances. Considering that it was not easy for women to get jobs in public spaces at that time, her work in public spaces showed her freedom to enter public spaces. Even though the salary he gets from his job is relatively small, this still shows that there are efforts to improve his life for the better, especially in terms of the economy. This shows that women also have the ability and economic value from what they do, and proves that men and women are in the same position because both can earn money. For Meg, poverty is a problem. Being an independent woman will make a woman's life look much better and more valuable, especially if they are bound in marriage. They would not just wait and rely on their husbands to make a living. Meg also has the freedom to express and show off in public. When King Moffat throws a ball, everyone from the upper class is invited. Although not from the upper class, Meg also received an invitation to the event. According to him, it was a good opportunity to show his presence in public and show his freedom as an individual. Inviting Meg to open events and for the upper class as above shows a picture of a woman's freedom in expressing her interests and also expressing herself as an individual in a public space. The daughter of the March family who also enters the public sphere and expresses herself as a professional worker is Josephine. His desire to become a professional writer was finally realized even though at first, he had to use a male pseudonym. However, this shows that women can enter the public space and demonstrate the same abilities as men.

Excerpt 6

"And when I went to get my answer, the man printed it in his paper and noticed the story. It was good practice, he said, and when the beginners improved, anyone would pay, so I let him have the two stories, today this was sent to me" (Alcott, 2013: 170).

From the line “when the beginners improved, anyone would pay” we can see Josephine's efforts to be able to compete with men as professional writers received support from men, in this case, the owners of publishing companies. Her promise to pay for Josephine's writing

proves that women can also get what men get if they can compete. By getting money from her work, it means that Josephine as a woman can enter the public sphere and get economic value from her work. Apart from showing women's efforts to enter the public space that was previously claimed or dominated by men, what Josephine has done also shows her freedom in realizing her desire to become a professional writer and earn money from this work. If previously women were considered lowly and dependent because they had no economic value for the family and could not be independent, then Josephine is an illustration of women's liberalization efforts to be independent, have economic value, and also be free to realize their desires.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the data above, it can be concluded that the struggles of women described in the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott are carried out in various sectors of life, namely the economy, education, and art. The struggle is not only about differences in social class but also gender inequality. The stigma that women depend on men and have no abilities like men are broken in this story. As is the case with the education sector. Amy and Josephine, for example, managed to become educated women, a label that was not easy for women at that time. The same goes for the other female characters in this story. In the economic sector, female figures from the March family are described as women who are able to be financially independent and show their economic value. In an effort to become economically independent, the women in the March family are able to enter the public space that has economic value and makes them able to have their own income and provide for their own life. This can be seen, for example, in the character Josephine who is a professional writer. Although early in her career she seemed to succumb to male supremacy in writing by using male pseudonyms in her work, her success as a paid writer shows that Josephine can compete with men. The courage of the female characters in this novel brought them out of the oppression of women at that time. The liberal feminism perspective used in analyzing the data from *Little Women* shows that what the female characters do in the story depicts the struggle for women's equality in the freedom to do or get what they want. Different feminist perspectives in analyzing the data will provide a more holistic picture of the representation of women in this story. Existentialist feminism or Stuart Hall's representation theory, for example, can be used as a perspective in analyzing data considering that the struggles carried out by female characters in the story are representations of women at that time who wanted to exist in the midst of patriarchal values that were still strong in people's lives. America during the Civil War.

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