Prominent: Journal of English Studies
Vol. 08 No. 02 July 2025
p-ISSN: 2621-024x; e-ISSN: 2621-0258
Website: https://jurnal.umk.ac.id/index.php/Pro

Unveiling Feminist Themes: Simone de Beauvoir's Influence on The Book *Little Women*

Nanda Putri Aeniaska[1], I Gusti Ayu Mahatma Agung[2], I Gusti Ayu Gde Sosiowati[3]
Universitas Udayana, Indonesia
putri.aeniaska@student.unud.ac.id[1], ayu.mahatma@unud.ac.id[2], gag_sosiowati@unud.ac.id[3]

Abstract: This study analyzes Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* through Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist perspective, focusing on how the novel explores the complexity of womanhood, the pursuit of freedom, personal choice, economic independence, and resistance to objectification. The purpose of this research is to understand how each of the March sisters respond to gender expectations in 19th-century society and what their stories reveal about the constraints and possibilities women faced. Using a qualitative method with close reading as the main technique, the analysis draws on de Beauvoir's ideas in *The Second Sex* to interpret the characters' decisions and identities. Jo's rejection of traditional marriage and her commitment to writing reflect the concept of transcendence, while Amy's use of charm and social positioning shows strategic negotiation within social norms. Marmee emphasizes financial and moral independence, and Beth's quiet domestic life highlights the consequences of passive immanence. These different paths show how women attempt to build autonomy within societal limits. The findings suggest that *Little Women* is more than a coming-of-age story; it is also a rich literary space where feminist ideas about identity, agency, and resistance take shape. This study demonstrates how literature can serve as a meaningful tool for understanding gender issues across time.

Keywords: Feminism, Little Women, Simone de Beauvoir

INTRODUCTION

A Novel is a long fictional story that delves into human experiences, typically through complex characters, plot development, and thematic depth. It reflects societal, cultural, and individual reality (Bennett & Royle, 2016). Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is a notable work that follows the journey through the boundaries of 19th-century gender norms. The novel follows the four March sisters - Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy - from childhood to maturity, concentrating on the typical issues women experienced at the time, specifically the conflicts between familial responsibility and personal growth.

This study explores the application of Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theories in the classic novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. De Beauvoir, an influential French existentialist philosopher and feminist, is renowned for her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex,* which critically examines the historical subjugation of women and societal constructions of gender roles. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" is one of her most famous statements, emphasizing that gender is influenced by societal constructs rather than biological determinants. She argues that women are shaped into subordinate roles by cultural norms, education, and societal expectations (de Beauvoir, 2011).

Women are pushed by society into constrained positions such as as mothers and spouses, which keeps them in what she refers to as "immanence", stuck in monotonous, unsatisfying household chores. According to de Beauvoir (2011), "transcendence", the ability for women to follow their own aspirations and goals in the same way that men do, is the key to true freedom.

She questions how women's basic destinies, such as motherhood and marriage are presented as opposed to their actual decisions. She shows how these expectations lead women to turn financially and emotionally dependent on males. She thinks that women should boldly assert their right to self-determination and fight against unjust systems, therefore combining personal bravery with major societal change. Her guiding concept is that women should write their own lives instead of serving as men's story's supporting roles (Labh, 2023).

Numerous studies have investigated women's issues from a feminist perspective. Rosemary & Arianto (2023) used Tiffany K. Wayne's triple roles theory to examine the opposition of women to domestic responsibilities in the book *Little Women*. They draw attention to how Marmee plays the reproductive role of looking after her family and Jo plays the productive role by following a profession in teaching and writing, therefore subverting conventional gender stereotypes. This research mostly covers subjects such as existential freedom, the uncertainty of feminism, and the challenges related to objectification.

The study conducted by Rahma et al. (2025) analyzed feminism in Nancy Springer's *Enola Holmes*, emphasizing the main character's autonomy, self-expression, and education as a means of challenging Victorian gender norms. The study emphasizes Enola's dislike for conventional education and her mother Eudoria's progressive beliefs, which are consistent with liberal feminist principles of individual liberty and equality. The film questions patriarchal norms and promotes women's intellectual and physical agency by analyzing Enola's nontraditional education, bold dress choices, and determination to control her destiny.

Examining existential feminism in the movie *Bombshell*, Lestari et al. (2023) show how female characters oppose objectification as "the other" via job agency, intellectual rebellion, and group action against systematic misogyny. Inspired by *Simone de Beauvoir*'s The Second Sex, the study notes three kinds of oppression—gendered power imbalances, violence, and sexual harassment. They underline how *Bombshell* questions patriarchal systems by portraying women's resistance as both individual and structural, much as this study analyzes the March sisters contrasting to patriarchal norms.

Wilany's (2017) feminist analysis of Nawal El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* explores the protagonist Firdaus's experience of extreme patriarchal oppression and her unconventional resistance through both passivity and violence. The research focuses on how Firdaus, who has endured social injustice all of her life, reclaims her agency through extreme means, totally rejecting social standards and accepting her execution as a last act of defiance that serves as her ultimate declaration of liberation. As an example of how feminist resistance can take on different forms depending on cultural and historical contexts, this is in contrast to the feminist resistance portrayed in *Little Women*, where Jo March's rejection of traditional marriage and her pursuit of a writing career represent a more socially integrated form of rebellion that operates within existing systems while still challenging their constraints. These two stories' contrast highlights the fundamental conflict within feminism between a complete rejection of patriarchal structures and practical attempts to change them from the inside out.

Ni'mah & Karima (2022) conducted a feminism analysis in the movie *Birds of Prey* by Cathy Yan to examine how Harley Quinn, after separating from the Joker's influence, portrays female emancipation. The writers highlight Harley's journey from emotional dependence to independence, following her fight for survival, her disobedience of patriarchal norms, and her eventual development of female unity. The study specifically emphasizes key events as acts of resistance that reshape her identity outside of male dominance, such as Harley's symbolic destruction of the Ace Chemicals factory and her association with the Birds of Prey. This story of self-realization and group empowerment is consistent with fundamental feminist theoretical frameworks, showing how liberty can be achieved via both individual defiance and group

resiliency. Therefore, by presenting liberation, the study frames *Birds of Prey* as a modern feminist work that challenges conventional gender norms.

While previous studies have analyzed *women's issues* using feminist theories, this study fills a gap by applying Simone de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy from *The Second Sex* to examine the complex portrayal of womanhood, freedom, and conformity in *Little Women*. The novelty of this research lies in its feminist reading of the March sisters' choices as both affirmations and critiques of gendered expectations in 19th-century America. Examining *Little Women* through the lens of de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy exposes various themes, including the complexities of women, social and economic autonomy, the pursuit of individual choices, and resistance to objectification. This article uses relevant quotes from the novel to highlight the resonance of de Beauvoir's theories within the March sisters' narratives, particularly Jo's defiance of traditional gender norms, Marmee's perspective on financial stability, and the other characters' collective journey towards autonomy and personal fulfillment.

The interaction of de Beauvoir's philosophical principles with the plot of "Little Women" broadens our knowledge of the characters and the societal context in which they navigate these issues. The novel showcases how female characters assert their right to education, self-expression, and the freedom to choose their life paths, thereby resisting the confines of domesticity (Ekasanti & Hernawati, 2019). This perspective aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's critique of marriage and domestic roles as mechanisms that limit women's transcendence and autonomy (Rognlie, 2023).

The aim of this study is to examine *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott through the feminist existentialist lens of Simone de Beauvoir, particularly as developed in *The Second Sex*. This study focuses on how the novel portrays the complexity of womanhood, existential freedom, personal choice, and resistance to objectification. Through the lives of the March sisters, especially Jo's creative defiance, Marmee's views on financial independence, and the family's navigation of societal gender roles, this article investigates how *Little Women* affirms or challenges de Beauvoir's concepts of autonomy, identity formation, and transcendence.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method used for this analysis was qualitative (Creswell, 2007) Qualitative research, as defined by Creswell, focuses on exploring phenomena through interpretive, descriptive techniques to understand meanings, experiences, or social contexts. This technique is consistent with the study's purpose of analyzing literary themes and their connection with feminist philosophy. The novel was chosen specifically for its complex depiction of the March sisters' individual experiences, which provides a multifaceted lens through which to explore Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory. Reading the text on an online platform increased accessibility, allowing for a thorough examination of the entire work and the systematic identification of portions relevant to de Beauvoir's framework.

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* was originally published in 1868 by the Roberts Brothers. The novel follows the four March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, as they face the obstacles of adolescence, femininity, and personal development during and after the American Civil War. The work addresses themes of identity, gender roles, ambition, and family via the characters' unique personalities and actions. Alcott's portrayal of the sisters' struggles, such as poverty, societal pressures, personal losses, and triumphs like creative fulfilment, marriages, and independence, critiques the limited roles available to women in the 19th century while

celebrating resilience and sisterhood (Alcott, 1868) The research complied with Creswell's qualitative principles, prioritizing thematic analysis and iterative connection with the text. Key topics were pre-identified using de Beauvoir's theories, such as objectification, freedom of choice, social/economic independence, and the ambiguity of womanhood, and snippets were retrieved methodically through repeated readings.

Data collection consisted of close reading and the systematic identification of relevant passages. The book was read using an online version, which made it easier to go through the whole story and find important parts. While reading, parts of the text that related to feminist issues, such as freedom, marriage, personal ambitions, and societal expectations, were highlighted and preserved for future study. These pieces were selected since they complement the feminist concepts from *The Second Sex* written by Simone de Beauvoir.

To structure the analysis, six core concepts from *The Second Sex* were used as thematic categories: (1) the ambiguity of womanhood, (2) existential social and economic independence, (3) freedom and choice, (4) otherness and objectification, (5) marriage as a social contract, and (6) the tension between immanence and transcendence. For each category, excerpts from the novel were coded and interpreted in relation to de Beauvoir's existentialist framework. For instance, Jo's rejection of traditional gender roles was analyzed through the concept of transcendence, while Amy's performative domesticity was examined using the notion of otherness. This systematic thematic reading enabled a critical evaluation of how *Little Women* both challenges and negotiates with patriarchal expectations placed upon women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Simone de Beauvoir, a French existentialist philosopher and feminist, is best known for her groundbreaking work *The Second Sex,* in which she explores the concept of womanhood and the ways in which women have been historically oppressed. Her feminist theory, often associated with existentialist philosophy, delves into the social and cultural construction of gender roles. When applying Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory to *Little Women*, a classic novel by Louisa May Alcott, there are several themes that can be explored:

1.The Ambiguity of Womanhood

"Wouldn't I though? I'd have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled high with books, and I'd write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be as famous as Laurie's music. I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it, and mean to astonish you all someday. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream."

(Alcott, 1868, p. 129)

De Beauvoir defines womanhood as a socially created identity that is frequently determined by how a woman interacts with men rather than who she is in her own right. This creates what she refers to as the "ambiguity of womanhood," in which women are expected to become wives, mothers, and caregivers, with their own objectives and identities viewed as secondary. The character of Jo March in *Little Women* exemplifies this uncertainty, as she openly questions and defies traditional notions of what a woman should be. Jo's ambition to write, make money, and become famous reflects her desire to create her own path. Her writing

displays ambition and imagination, but most significantly, it demonstrates a strong yearning for self-actualization.

Jo wants to accomplish something "splendid," "heroic," and "wonderful" before she "goes into her castle"—a metaphor for settling into traditional domestic life. Jo does not completely reject marriage, but instead prioritizes her independent aspirations and creative dreams. Her notion of womanhood goes beyond simply becoming someone's wife; she wants to be remembered, to have her own name and identity (Rahmawati & Anjany, 2025). Jo's yearning for self-definition beyond typical domestic roles aligns closely with de Beauvoir's arguments about existential freedom and the quest for personal significance. The situation presented in the novel demonstrates de Beauvoir's point: Jo is not content to be designated as someone's daughter, sister, or future wife. She wants to define herself as an individual. Her need for personal significance and self-authorship echoes existential freedom, another major idea in de Beauvoir's feminism (Mahjabin & Haque, 2025).

2. Existential Social and Economic Independence

"Money is a good and useful thing, Jo, and I hope my girls will never feel the need of it too bitterly, nor be tempted by too much. I should like to know that John was firmly established in some good business, which gave him an income large enough to keep free from debt and make Meg comfortable. I'm not ambitious for a splendid fortune, a fashionable position, or a great name for my girls. If rank and money come with love and virtue, also, I should accept them gratefully, and enjoy your good fortune, but I know, by experience, how much genuine happiness can be had in a plain little house, where the daily bread is earned, and some privations give sweetness to the few pleasures. I am content to see Meg begin humbly, for if I am not mistaken, she will be rich in the possession of a good man's heart, and that is better than a fortune."

(Alcott, 1868, p. 183)

De Beauvoir points out that true freedom for women requires not only the ability to define oneself outside of established categories, but also the ability to support themselves socially and economically. She believes that dependency, particularly financial dependence, maintains women in submissive positions, often relying on men for survival and status. This idea is portrayed in the character of Marmee, the March sisters' mother, who values money, modest living, and honest work. Marmee's perspective is plainly conveyed in her statements to Jo: "*Money is a fine and helpful thing, Jo, and I hope my girls will never feel the need for it too strongly, nor be enticed by too much... I know from experience how much genuine happiness may be found in a simple tiny dwelling, where the daily bread is earned and certain privations sweeten the few pleasures*."

This demonstrates that, while Marmee recognizes the need for financial stability, she cautions against becoming obsessed by greed or drive for wealth alone. Her top priority is not a "splendid fortune" or a "fashionable position," but a life of love, virtue, and hard labor. Her assertion that "some privations give sweetness to the few pleasures" indicates a belief in the importance of working hard and finding satisfaction in simple, earned comforts rather than wealth or status. Marmee's approach closely resembles De Beauvoir's concept of existential independence. She encourages her daughters to stay away from poverty and material excess, instead pursuing a balanced life based on self-sufficiency and meaningful relationships. Her desire for her son-in-law John to be "firmly established in some good business" demonstrates her conviction in economic responsibility—not to rely on inherited riches, but on the dignity of working hard to construct a stable existence.

Marmee's ideology offers a complex perspective of feminist economics that balances independence and caregiving (Smith, 2021). While calling for financial independence "where the daily bread is earned", she also recognizes domestic fulfillment "a good man's heart", rejecting the false contradiction between autonomy and affection that limited Victorian women. Her advice to Meg on John's professional demands exemplifies this balance: she encourages marital partnership while insisting on economic security as a foundation. Her emphasis on modest living "a plain little house" is a hidden obstacle against the capitalist patriarchy of the day. Whereas wealthy families exchanged daughters as marital currency, Marmee redefines prosperity as sustainability rather than accumulation. Earned luxuries' "sweetness" criticizes both the lethargy of the wealthy and the despair of the destitute, offering a radical middle road for women who lack financial agency.

3. Freedom and Choice

"Good name for it. It's very pretty—new thing, isn't it?" "It's as old as the hills. You have seen it on dozens of girls, and you never found out that it was pretty till now—stupid!" "I never saw it on you before, which accounts for the mistake, you see." "None of that, it is forbidden. I'd rather take coffee than compliments just now. No, don't lounge, it makes me nervous."

(Alcott, 1868, p. 537)

Beauvoir argues that women must acknowledge their existential freedom, which involves taking on responsibility for their lives and making choices that align with their desires, aspirations, and individuality. De Beauvoir contests the notion that women ought to exist passively, restricted by societal norms or characterized by their connections to others. In *Little Women*, the concept of freedom and choice is clearly demonstrated through the March sisters, Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy, each making decisions that align with their individual goals and values, irrespective of societal pressures. Jo March exemplifies existential freedom in *Little Women*, as her strong independence and consistent commitment to self-determination confront the strict gender norms of Victorian society, reflecting significant relevance to modern feminist discourse. Her pursuit of a writing career, unconventional for women of her time, and her rejection of traditional femininity demonstrate a young woman's purpose in establishing an identity defined by her intellectual and creative ambitions rather than societal expectations.

The dialogue between Jo and her sisters reveals the way she feels about the insincere praise and superficial expectations implemented on women. She rejects the constraints of traditional femininity, deciding for genuine self-expression, even at the risk of being perceived as bold or unfeminine by contemporary standards. Jo's resistance extends beyond mere rebellion; it is a conscious, existential assertion of agency, a declaration that her worth is not contingent upon male approval or adherence to prescribed gender roles. Her indifference to compliments and rejection of ornamental femininity are not simply acts of defiance but manifestations of a deeper philosophical stance: that true freedom lies in the ability to define oneself outside of external validation. This aligns strikingly with existential feminist principles, which argue that women must transcend the "immanence" of socially imposed identities and claim the "transcendence" of self-authored existence. Jo's writing becomes the vehicle for this transcendence, through her stories, she constructs a world where her voice, not society's dictates, holds power. Her ambition to "write books and get rich and famous" is not mere vanity but a radical assertion of creative and economic autonomy, a rejection of the limited destinies available to women in her time (Intan & Tuaderu, 2023).

The March sisters collectively demonstrate various responses to societal constraints, with Jo's journey serving as a significant example of the transformative potential of existential

freedom. While Meg accepts domesticity and Amy navigates femininity for social progress, Jo's trajectory is characterized by a clear rejection of equating womanhood with self-sacrifice and an assumption that marriage represents the apex of a woman's story. By prioritizing writing over marriage, she argues that a woman's life can be influenced by ambition and creativity as significantly as by love and obligation.

Jo's narrative angle goes beyond temporal boundaries, providing a lasting reflection on the quest for self-definition. Her resistance to societal expectations represents not merely a rejection of gender roles but also an affirmation of the existentialist perspective that the meaning of life is created through individual choice. Alcott, through Jo, examines the concept of womanhood, proposing that authenticity rather than conformity represents the highest form of freedom. Jo's character displays a paradox: she embodies the characteristics of her time while simultaneously challenging them, serving as a reminder that the pursuit of selfhood involves both rebellion and discovery.

4. Otherness and Objectification

"Lovely weather so far. I don't know how long it will last, but I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship. Come home, dear, and I'll find your bootjack. I suppose that's what you are rummaging after among my things. Men are so helpless, Mother," said Amy, with a matronly air, which delighted her husband."

(Alcott, 1868, p. 634)

De Beauvoir's concept of "The Other" examines the systemic marginalization of women, who are positioned as secondary to men—not as autonomous individuals but as beings defined by their relation to the male-dominated world. This framework manifests vividly in *Little Women*, where the March sisters navigate societal pressures that seek to confine them to prescribed roles, reducing their identities to mere complements of male existence. Jo's desire to be a thinker and creator and her rejection of being viewed as a "porcelain doll," both highlight a deliberate act of reclaiming her story inside a limited framework. Every narrative she creates reflects her assertion of agency, showing her want to be a "subject" rather than an "object" inside stories ruled by men (Bach, 2023).

Amy's dialogue, though seemingly lighthearted, reveals the subtle ways patriarchal norms infiltrate even progressive relationships (Luo et al., 2024). When she adopts a maternal tone toward her husband, framing men as helpless figures requiring women's guidance, she inadvertently reinforces the very dynamics that position women as perpetual caretakers rather than equals. Her words reflect a societal script that assigns women the labor of emotional and domestic management while denying them full recognition as independent agents. This dynamic exemplifies the objectification De Beauvoir critiques, the reduction of women to functions (wife, mother, nurturer) that serve male needs rather than existing as ends in themselves.

The book does an excellent job of contrasting the different approaches that the sisters take in order to express their autonomy within the context of a patriarchal structure. It is possible that de Beauvoir would refer to Jo's radical rejection of conventional womanhood as a frontal assault on the system of Otherness. Jo's refusal to perform humble femininity, her prioritization of her writing career over courtship rituals, and her vocal disdain for being "treated like a porcelain doll" are all examples of this. Every tale that she publishes is a statement of her right to live as a thinking, generating subject rather than a decorative object. Her creative activity becomes both an economic lifeline and a spiritual rebellion.

Nevertheless, Alcott does not romanticize Jo's journey; the fact that she faces financial difficulties and loneliness reveals the true price of rebellion in the historical context in which she lives. Although she is frequently misunderstood as a conformist, Amy exemplifies the art of smart compliance. The fact that she appears to be playing around with her wifely responsibilities "Men are so helpless, Mother" is actually a planned attempt to negotiate power. The more she is able to grasp the performative qualities of femininity, such as charm, home management, and social diplomacy, the more leverage she will have inside the system. By marrying Laurie, she turns herself from an impoverished relation into the mistress of a large estate, gaining the money and influence that Jo acquires via professional accomplishment. Her marriage to Laurie is not a submission, but rather a hostile takeover of the same institution that is designed to limit her. Amy uses expectations as a weapon, in contrast to Jo, who breaks dreams.

5. Marriage as a Social Contract, Not Destiny

"You have grown up, haven't you, Jo?" said her mother, with a smile, half merry and half melancholy. "Yes, I'm not half as impatient as I was, nor half so raspy, am I? Still, I'm glad I don't have to go and be a lady in a company and sit in a corner holding my tongue, and I don't mean to ever go and be married, though it's the way of the world."

(Alcott, 1868, p. 203)

De Beauvoir's studies under close examination expose marriage as a social institution meant to fit women into predefined roles rather than honor their autonomy. Jo objects fiercely, *"I don't mean to ever go and be married*," because society sees marriage as a natural destiny rather than a decision. She says this in reaction to the prevailing wisdom on marriage. Unlike skepticism about love, her strong awareness of the ways in which conventional marriage may constrain her drives her resistance. Sitting silently and "holding her tongue" captures her anxiety about becoming what de Beauvoir describes as the "relative being," whose life is focused on her spouse's expectations rather than on a goal she has set for herself. Jo's uprising marks the more existential struggle against the eradication of feminine subjectivity. Jo is determined to write her own story even though Victorian society gave wives' roles as supporting characters in male narratives top priority. Her disgust at pretending to be modest and feminine by "being a lady in company" underlines de Beauvoir's perspective that marriage sometimes drives women to compromise their complexity in order to fulfill narrow ideals.

The reply "half merry, half sad" captures the generational conflict between the acceptance of society's standards and the demand for more independence. Even what Marmee said captures this conundrum. Jo's values are reinterpreted and reevaluated even if the final compromise with Professor Bhaer does not compromise them. The most important thing is that she waits to be married until she has already developed her creative voice via writing. This guarantees that the collaboration would emphasize her instead of allowing her to be consumed. This reflects the difference de Beauvoir draws between repressive power systems and cooperation. Jo's marriage is happy since she was most worried about losing her voice, so it is preserved. Since Bhaer considers her intelligence and ambition, she enjoys a bond with him as one of equals instead of one of hierarchy.

"'Nothing more, except that I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man.'"

(Alcott, 1868, p. 508)

This situation shows Jo's continuous resistance to the myth that a woman's life culminates in marriage, a resistance de Beauvoir considers crucial to achieve transcendence. By expressing happiness in her freedom, Jo reclaims the power to define her own existence outside the institution that often traps women in what de Beauvoir calls "immanence," where they are denied full subjectivity and constrained to serving others. Her metaphor for "liberty" strongly parallels Beauvoir's focus on freedom as a vital feature of real womanhood. The statement "any mortal man" also reflects Jo's knowledge that marriage, particularly in its traditional form, sometimes implies the surrender of that independence in service of male power or social acceptability (Ninčetović, 2024). Rather than romanticizing marriage, Jo questions the way it might submerge women's individuality under the pretense of fate. This event, together with her previous rebellion, shows her development not as a sign of giving up but rather as a process of negotiating independence on her own terms.

Ultimately, Alcott uses Jo's arc to expose the paradox of "choice" in constrained systems. The novel acknowledges that even unconventional women must operate within patriarchal frameworks, yet demonstrates how self-awareness can carve paths to partial liberation (Šesnić, 2022). Jo's journey from outright rejection of marriage to negotiating its terms, illustrates de Beauvoir's contention that freedom isn't absolute refusal, but the power to imbue traditions with new meaning while preserving one's essential self.

6. The Tension Between Immanence and Transcendence

"Lovely weather so far. I don't know how long it will last, but I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship. Come home, dear, and I'll find your bootjack. I suppose that's what you are rummaging after among my things. Men are so helpless, Mother,' said Amy, with a matronly air, which delighted her husband."

(Alcott, 1868, p. 634)

De Beauvoir's framework of immanence and transcendence provides a compelling lens through which to examine the March sisters' divergent paths in *Little Women*. Immanence is the state of passive confinement to domestic roles and repetitive caregiving, which stands in sharp contrast to transcendence, which represents active self-determination through creative or intellectual pursuits that project one's identity into the future. Amy's declaration, *"I'm not afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship,"* epitomizes this tension, as her metaphor of nautical mastery suggests a deliberate claim to agency despite her otherwise conventional choices. The storm she references becomes a powerful symbol of the societal and personal upheavals women must navigate, while her resolve to "sail" rather than drift reveals an undercurrent of transcendence beneath her polished exterior, a desire to captain her destiny even within the constraints of marriage.

Yet Amy's simultaneous adoption of a *"matronly air"* toward her husband underscores the paradox at the heart of her character. Her playful chiding of male helplessness *"Men are so helpless, Mother"* reinforces the very immanence De Beauvoir critiques, as it positions Amy as both a participant in and subtle critic of gendered domestic dynamics. This duality reflects the novel's broader exploration of how women negotiate autonomy within systems that reward performative femininity. Where Jo outright rejects such performances, Amy manipulates them with strategic grace, using her social acumen to secure influence while maintaining the

appearance of conformity, a form of pragmatic transcendence that leverages tradition rather than dismantling it.

The sisters collectively map the spectrum between these existential poles. Beth, whose life is circumscribed by illness and domesticity, embodies immanence in its purest form, her quiet martyrdom reflecting the era's idealized "angel in the house" a figure De Beauvoir might argue is celebrated precisely because she demands nothing for herself. Meanwhile, Meg traces a middle path: her initial embrace of wifely duties evolves into a more balanced partnership where she asserts her needs, suggesting that transcendence can be reclaimed incrementally within institutionalized roles. Jo's trajectory remains the most radical, as her writing career and refusal to marry conventionally position her as the novel's primary architect of selfhood, though even her eventual union with Bhaer complicates this reading by demonstrating that transcendence need not preclude love, only coercion.

Ultimately, the novel's narrative resists all-or-nothing thinking, instead presenting womanhood as a contested space where freedom is wrestled from compromise as much as from defiance. The sisters' varied approaches, Beth's silence, Meg's negotiation, Amy's strategic conformity, and Jo's rebellion, collectively disagree with the idea that liberation has a single template. In doing so, *Little Women* anticipates De Beauvoir's strong opinion that true equality lies not in rejecting all traditions, but in having the agency to determine which, if any, serve one's authentic self. The novel's enduring resonance stems from this nuanced portrayal of women crafting meaning within, and sometimes against, the currents of their historical moment.

CONCLUSION

This study shows how *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott brings Simone de Beauvoir's feminist ideas to life through the stories of the March sisters as they face societal expectations placed on women in the 19th century. Through the lens of existential feminism, the novel presents different ways women respond to gender roles and the limits imposed on their choices. Jo March represents the spirit of transcendence by rejecting traditional domestic roles and choosing to build a life centered on creativity and independence (Rahmawati & Anjany, 2025). Amy finds her own way by using femininity strategically to gain social and financial stability, while Marmee emphasizes the importance of moral strength and economic responsibility. Beth, in contrast, becomes a symbol of passive acceptance and the quiet sorrow that can come with it. Instead of offering one clear path to freedom, *Little Women* embraces the complexity of womanhood, showing that every woman's journey involves a balance between resistance and compromise. The novel encourages readers to rethink what it means to become a woman, echoing de Beauvoir's idea that identity is something we shape through choices, courage, and constant self-discovery. In doing so, this research confirms that *Little Women* is more than just a story of growing up; it is also a meaningful contribution to feminist thought that still resonates today. Future studies could apply de Beauvoir's theory to other works of literature to explore how different female characters across time and cultures navigate the challenges of identity and agency.

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