Little Women’s Rediscovery: An Emerging Women’s Rights Struggle in Pakistan

ABSTRACT

A reflection of Alcott’s time and personal life, Little Women (1868-69) mirrors the contemporary American women’s question in nuanced ways. As a family drama, the novel encapsulates many versions of contemporary women in its depiction of Mrs. March and her four daughters—Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy—and through them explores women’s social, personal, marital, economic, and political constraints. Having had a warm critical reception in its own time, the novel was globally re-accredited in the 1960s for its powerful feminist call. As it has in many other countries, the text has recently gained popularity in Pakistan, where it is enlightening the emerging women’s rights struggle in the country. This study rediscovers the text through the lenses of New Historicism, Historical Reception, and Feminism: why Alcott wrote it; how the public/critics received it; how it contributed a change to the women’s position; and how it could repeat the same role of critiquing patriarchy in Pakistan.

Keywords: Rediscovery, women’s question, late 19th-century, Pakistani-women, feminism

Introduction

The Civil War changed the entire fabric of American society and created new challenges for the nation, especially for women to prove their capabilities, who, throughout the 19th century, grappled with the question of equality (Woloch, 1984, p. 222). At a cost of 8 billion dollars and 600,000 lives, the Civil War put an official end to slavery, but the song of social injustices was still heard across the country (McQuade, 1987, p. 1). Licking its wounds, the young nation seemed to be at peace. The joining of

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* PhD Candidate (American Literature), Area Study Center for Africa, South and North America, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan and English Department, University of California at Berkeley, USA.
"the Union Pacific and Central Pacific rail lines at Promontory Point, Utah in 1869 was a [national victory]," but there were many things wrong with the nation, as Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age* points out (McQuade, 1987, p. 2). McQuade (1987) explains that *The Gilded Age* "connotes vulgarity, boom times, specious glitter, and superficial glow" (p. 4). The exploitative capitalistic approach funneled American wealth into the hands of a few leaders of industry, like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and J.P. Morgan. Political corruption, racial terrorism, laborers’ rights, women’s rights, and child labor were national issues, yet the country was thriving in its industry, infrastructure, military, economy, and educational and literary institutions (McQuade, 1987, p. 1-2).

Around the 1850s, American publishers started developing an interest in a national literature, causing new literary trends to flourish across the country. Like their male counterparts, female writers also made their appearance on the scene despite the traditional notions that "imaginative literature and creative writing could be especially harmful to women by inflaming their imagination and undermining their moral place in the private domain of the home" (Baym, 2012, p.12). A number of magazines at the time advocated for the cause of women's equality, such as Louisa A. Godey’s *The Lady’s Book* (Baym, 2012, p. 11-12). In "The Great Lawsuit" (1843), Margaret Fuller also critiqued women's social, economic, political and literary secondary status in light of the Declaration of Independence and Emersonian Transcendentalism (Baym, 2012, p. 14). Rapid transcontinental settlement and new urban conditions gave birth to transcendentalist, realist, naturalist, regionalist, and feminist forms of writing that spoke to the challenges of the new land (Baym, 2012, p. 3-4).

At a moment when Europe was still at the center of American cultural attention, writers like Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, and Henry James began looking to American experiences and literature as a source of inspiration instead. Although Alcott had exposure to Europe, her approach towards writing was pure American wrapped in American experience. Out of vast array of American experiences, Alcott explored the women’s question from diverse angles, giving first-hand experiences of her contemporary milieu. She authored almost a hundred books whose themes in one way or the other throw light on women's problems, but *Little Women* (1868-69) is considered her magnum opus on the issue. Through its major and minor female characters, the text reflects upon the contemporary women's social, personal, marital, economic and political issues. Having a warm critical reception, the text introduced its creator to the country. The readers accepted the book as an authentic American classic and elevated Alcott to the status of an accredited American writer. In the 1960s, the text reappeared in front of the nation with a new charm.
This rediscovery considers *Little Women*'s phenomenal success through different phases of American experience that how the novel has contributed changing women’s roles in American society. The study also explores how Alcott’s novel might help today’s constrained Pakistani women. Pakistan is a patriarchal society, where many ethnicities live e.g., Sindhi, Balochi, Pashtun, Punjabi, etc. whose patriarchal codes vary for women. The difference lies in the degree of less or more. All entrenched patriarchies which have secondary roles for women. In short, they differ on many social grounds, but, more or less, share the same attitude about the limited role of women in society.

The primary goal of the research is to figure out the exact definition of women’s equality in the context of the late 19th-century American society upon which the entire study hinges. After defining the phenomenon of female equality, the central focus of the study is established. As noted above, I will consider women’s equality through three theoretical lenses: New Historicism (*Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, 2004), Reader Response (*The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 1978), and Feminism (*The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, 1977). This tripartite design will enable us to offer a comprehensive interpretation. An exploration of the historical context will lay the groundwork for a feminist reading; and the historically attuned feminist reading will inform a consideration of Reader Response. Primarily, New Historicism is needed to position the study in late 19th century. I will examine how the novels and contemporary criticism were influenced by the trends of the society at that time. The study will also explore how the movement toward women’s equality manifested in late 19th-century American society. After that, I will examine late 19th-century’s literary scholarship in order to understand the novel’s receptions in its own time. Following the historical and reader reception sections, I will focus on how the question of women’s equality was addressed at that time. The next step is to examine how these manifestations of the women’s equality movement were reflected in the novel. Finally, I ask how the novel facilitated a social change regarding women’s rights and how the novel could contribute to the women’s rights in Pakistan which is far complex and suppressed. Official surveys, documents, five hundred (500) open ended questioners and Malala Yousafzai’s book and personal interview will be the principal sources to portray the suppression of contemporary women in Pakistan.
Discussion

Louisa May Alcott is an iconic 19th-century American poet and novelist, best known for her novel, *Little Women*. She was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on the 29th of November, 1832. Both Abba Alcott and Branson Alcott expected a baby boy, but Louisa May Alcott was born instead (Anthony, 1938, p. 16). Yet Louisa’s character in some ways fulfilled this expectation of a male child. In her early education at home, she was more interested in playing with boys than girls and often attracted their attention. Louisa fills this autobiographical gap with Laurie (Theodore Laurence) in *Little Women*, who comes to live next door to Marches. Once she was given a doll that did not interest her at all (Anthony, 1938, p. 24-5). Instead, she fancied outdoor activities; her protagonist in *Little Women*, Jo, speaks from a similar affection when she says, "I do not like to doze by the fire, I like adventures, and I am going to find some" (Alcott, 1982, p. 39).

Louisa had an inborn gift for writing that Abba was able to see in her during her childhood. When Louisa wrote her early story, "To Robin," Abba prophesied, "You will grow up a Shakespeare," (Anthony, 1938). Louisa remembered these words for the rest of her life as if they had been spoken by Apollo, and she drew on them within *Little Women* itself, with Beth saying of Jo: "I don't see how you can write and act such splendid things, Jo. You are a regular Shakespeare!" (Alcott, 1982, p. 7). Recognizing her daughter’s talents, Abba regularly pushed her daughter toward writing (Anthony, 1938, p. 38). Alcott’s best-selling, *Little Women: Meg, Beth and Amy* seems to be the production of such a gift colored in Romanticist¹, Transcendentalist², and Regionalist³ modes of thinking. There were two prominent reasons behind writing *Little Women*, whose saga would continue in the shape of *Little Men* and *Jo’s Children* (Anderson, 1992, p. 4). The primary one was the plan that she nurtured for ten years leading up to the writing of her family story under the title of "The Pathetic Family"; the second one was the insistence of Thomas Nile, the editor of *Merry’s

¹ Romanticism was a musical, artistic, literary, and intellectual movement, which originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century, and soon spread to the US.

² According to *Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "Transcendentalism is an American literary, political, and philosophical movement of the early 19th century, centered around Ralph Waldo Emerson [1803-1882]".

³ In the light of *Regionalism and Local Color Bibliography*, "Regionalism is fiction and poetry that focuses on the characters, dialects, customs, topography, and other features particular to a specific region".
“Museum,” a girls’ magazine at Robert Brothers Publishing House in Boston, for a domestic novel on young girls that could compete with “Oliver Optic,” a famous series of boys’ books. Alcott initially told Nile that she knew nothing about girls, that she understood boys better. He had to ask her twice, and she ultimately agreed owing to the economic circumstances of her family.

Alcott (1982) would start the book with poverty: “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents, grumbled Jo” (p. 3). Within six weeks, she had written the first part; and in the same amount of time, she produced the second, which was called Good Wives. The first volume was published in October, 1868, and the second followed in January, 1869. Wounded by the reception of Moods (1864), Alcott said, "In my next book... people shall be as ordinary as possible" (Anthony, 1938, p. 160). She achieved this ordinariness by fictionalizing the people around her. Annie, Lu, Betty and Abbie May Alcott are fictionalized into Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy; Colonel May merges into Colonel Lawrence; Louisa’s boarding house in Boston becomes one in New York; Hillside appears as Marches’ home; Dr. William Rimmer takes shape as Professor Bhaer; Fred and John Pratt slip into Demi and Daisy; Hummals surface as Hummels; and Fred Willis, William Lane, Theodore Parker, Alfred Whitman, and Ladislas Wisniewski combine to give birth to Laurie’s character. In addition to these biographical sketches, Alcott also incorporated John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, her family’s favorite book, into Little Women (Anthony, 1938, p. 161-63).

Most of Alcott’s works reflect the actual experiences of her life and struggle but Little Women is considered more autobiographical, which fictionalizes her entire family, childhood, and milieu. As a family drama, Little Women characterizes five versions of the late 19th–century American woman. The four daughters and one mother are in a micro-universe that is later joined to a larger male sphere. The plot revolves around the autobiographical, Jo March, who at the beginning seems quite revolutionary and longs to stay single as well as independent, leads a peaceful and economically independent life after marrying the man who is her ideal image of a husband and establishing her own school. Her character reflects a broader image of contemporary women’s understandings of the institution of marriage and the professional sphere, which were still in the clutches of the Victorian code. While Beth dies of scarlet fever, Meg and Amy also marry the men of their dreams. The novel ends at Marmee's sixtieth birth day, at which point Jo has two sons and Amy a daughter, Beth. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser (1999) in Little Women: A

4 Laurie, short for Theodore Laurence, is the March girls’ wealthy next-door neighbor. He is a high spirited young man about the same age as Jo.
Family Romance divides Little Women into four parts on the basis of eventful turns that mold the plot: “Father and Mother and Each Other” (Chapters 1-13), “The First Romance of the Family” (p. 14-23), “The Romance of Womanhood” (p. 24-36), and “Not a Very Romantic Story” (p. 37-47). Through enduring Marmee, the conventional Meg, revolutionary Jo, musical and angelic Beth, and utilitarian Amy; Little Women offers a refuge to young women where they can seek guidance on how to balance their marital and day-to-day lives with their individuality. Drawing on domestic experiences of her own time, Alcott’s Little Women could be deemed a transitional book from the 19th-century to the 20th. Baym (2012) explains, “More adventurously, the novel explore[s] the question of gender and power, focusing on Jo’s dissatisfaction with the constraints of girlhood and her efforts to become a successful writer” (p. 1735).

Critical Reception

Little Women’s critical reception can be divided between two different ages that are almost one hundred years apart: the novel’s publication in the 1870s, and its rediscovery in the 1970s. The text’s meaning has grown in the intervening century because of its reflection of late 19th-century America, picturing the life of its author through Jo, the protagonist; it still informs many individuals around the globe. This custom of reading Little Women as if it were autobiography is no accident, as the novel was marketed in the nineteenth century in ways that encouraged readers to identify the author with the heroine. Even though Alcott had appealed to her readers’ sense of authenticity by producing the story out of the core realities of her life and continued to do so in Little Men (1871) and Jo’s Children (1886), nobody had predicted the enormous success the book would have. Yet Alcott was more hopeful than the publishing company (Anthony, 1938, p. 167). Within three years of its publication, it had made its author known to every household across the country (Alberghene and Clark, 1999, p. xx). William Anderson states, “Little Women brought so much mail from admirers that Louisa sometimes gave it to May or Anna to answer” (p. 79). Boston was wildly excited about it; Merchants, teachers, common folk, gentlemen, ladies, and children alike praised the book. Unlike Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the book was read impartially across America, reflecting the mood of national unity brought about by the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, with which the novel’s publication coincided (Anthony, 1938: p. 168-9; p. 172-73). Anthony (1938) says, “Louisa May Alcott was everywhere regarded as an American author and Little Women as an American book” (p. 173).
The early reviews of the book were quite favorable. In the October 22, 1868 issue of The Nation, an anonymous reviewer explores Little Women, Part I, in terms of local women's cultural and regional ways of life:

The girls depicted all belong to healthy types, and are drawn with certain cleverness, although there is in the book a lack of what painters call atmosphere—things and people being painted too much in "local colors" and remaining, under all circumstances, somewhat too persistently themselves... . (Stern, 1984, p. 81)

In Arthur's Home Magazine (October 22, 1868), another anonymous reviewer explains the diverse beauty of the characters of the March Sisters, who collectively represent late 19th-century American women:

This is decidedly the best Christmas story, which we have seen for a long time. The heroines (there are four of them) are the 'little women' of the title, ranging from twelve to sixteen years of age, each interesting in her way, and together enacting the most comical sense and achieving most gratifying results....(Stern, 1984, p. 81)

Part I was soon followed by Part II, which elicited more or less the same critical response because the reviewers critiqued it in the light of the previous one. A reviewer in Commonwealth (April 24, 1869), roots Part II's success in Part I:

The first series was one of the most successful ventures to delineate juvenile womanhood ever attempted; there was a charm and attractiveness, a naturalness and grace, about both characters and narratives, that caused the volume to become a prime favorite with everybody. This issue continues the delight—it is the same fascinating tale, extended without weakening, loading the palate without sickishness... (Stern, 1984, p. 82)

In the May 1, 1869 issue of the National Anti-Slavery Standard, a reviewer explores the same subject in Part II and places an absolute trust in Little Women's women to serve humanity through their implications for gender equality: "It is enough to say that the second part fulfills the promise of the first, and one leaves it with the sincere wish that there were to be a third and a fourth part;... ." (Stern, 1984, p. 82). Another anonymous reviewer in Harper's New Monthly Magazine (August 1869), sees the novel in terms of the author's own experiences and struggle: "Autobiographies, if genuine, are generally interesting, and it is shrewdly suspected that Jo's experiences as an author photographs some of Miss Alcott's own literary mistakes and misadventures . . ." (Stern, 1984, p. 83). Despite some minor criticism, Little Women won the praise of contemporary reviewers, which made the novel even more popular, but "did not announce the birth of a masterpiece with any ruffle drums" (Russ, 1984, p. 100).

Like the literary reviewers, literary critics explore different aspects of Little Women. Barret Wendell compares it to Rollo: "Miss Alcott's Little Women does for the 60s what Rollo does for the 40s" (Stern, 1984, p. 84).
In 1927, The New York Times' article, "Little Women Leads Poll: Novel Rated Ahead of Bible for Influence on High School Pupils," commended the book in such a way that it even influenced most contemporary critics and reviewers, paving the way for the book's future glory (Keyser Romance, 199, p. 19). Dorothea Lawrence Mann (1984) details the rising sail of Little Women in her essay, "When the Alcott Books Were New" (p. 85). David A. Randall and John T. Winterich (1984) explore the same phenomenon. They further name the list of the languages Little Women was translated into: "French, German, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Finnish, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Spanish, Polish and Japanese" (p. 86). C. Waller Barret (1984) opines that the book has stood the test of time and would maintain the same standard in the future (p. 89).

Miss Lucile Gulliver praised the book for its direct openness when society favored exaggerated reticence. The considerable fame of the book overshadowed works by Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau. Millions of copies were sold in America; it became impossible to tell the exact number. In England, the novel was even more appreciated and was named one of the world's literary classics. Though some critics found it too simple, its popularity quadrupled in the 20th century, and it had a position equal to Shakespearian plays, making Abba May Alcott's prediction that Louisa would "grow up a Shakespeare" come true (Anthony, 1938, p. 38, 169). The revisiting of Alcott's literary contribution recasts Little Women as a late 19th-century precursor of a 'feminism' that would not take its actual shape until the 1960s, when the book was revisited through the ascendant feminist lens. Madeleine B. Stern "began unearthing Alcott's story-paper fiction in the 1940s and published two volumes of it in the 1970s, which promoted a critical, especially feminist, reappraisal of Alcott" (Keyser, 1999, p. 17). Cornelia Meigs (1984) notes in the introduction to the Centennial Edition of Little Women that the book was highly praised in the 1970s for its realistic approach and the true representation of late 19th-century women (p. 103). Sean O'Faolain (1984) adds to these centennial remarks: "A lot of novels besides Little Women are still read a hundred years after they were written. I doubt that any is read as widely, remembered as fondly, preserved as loyally. . ." (p.105).

Little Women has inspired young women to challenge social restraints related to the question of woman's equality. Jo prefers to be called 'Jo' instead of Josephine, which is so sentimental and feminine, argues Brigid Brophy (1984) in her essay, "Sentimentality and Louisa May Alcott" (p. 93). Lavinia Russ (1984) poses the question why she and other young women love Little Women: "I loved it because Louisa May Alcott was a rebel, with rebels for parents. Not the rebels of destruction—they never threw a brick—but rebels who looked at the world as it was, saw the poverty, the inequality, the ignorance, the fear, and said, 'It is not good
enough’ and went to work to change it” (p. 101). Critics like Leo Lerman (1984) appreciate the book’s feminine optimism and the independent imagination with which the book is imbued. Jo, the tomboy heroine of the novel, occupies readers’ attention from the beginning to the end (p. 113). Patricia Meyer Spacks (1984) highlights more or less the same elements in the novel as Lerman. She further defends Alcott for using masculine ideals, through whose embodiment in Jo, the author ensures freedom and equality against conventional gender norms (114). Sue Standing (1991) augments Spacks and Lerman’s ideas by exploring how the novel awakens young women, stimulating their imagination to challenge every direction of equality related to women’s life (p. 175). Carolyn Heilbrun (1984) discusses that “Little Women appropriates the male model through Jo, without giving up the female person” (p. 144). Elizabeth Langland further explains, Alcott’s heroines do not want to be men in reality; rather, they want men’s freedom to escape their own narrow roles (Maibor, 2004, p. 102).

As a domestic drama, Little Women teaches domestic engineering both socially and psychologically. David H. Watters (1991) claims that the novel is unique in preaching and teaching the individual values of a woman related to the industry of “home” (p. 185). Nina Auerbach (1991) is more direct in her opinion, describing the text as a matriarchal tale that revolves around Mrs. March (p. 8). Susan Laird (19984), a philosopher of education, goes a step further—in naming Little Women a comprehensive philosophy of “home” that hinges on Mrs. Marmee’s education of readers through her daughters about the complex problems associated with the jurisdiction of home. Because these girls are four different souls with different desires, they represent the entirety of late 19th century’s American women (p. 285). Elizabeth Lennox Keyser and Kathryn Manson Tomasek (1999) point out portraits of familial beauty in the book. According to them, Little Women pictures some ideal or real world that is almost perfect in itself and bathed in optimism and love. Such themes have influenced numerous people and families across the globe (p. 83, 237).

Summing up, it could be argued persuasively that Little Women has played a significant role in women’s awakening. Ellen Moers (1984) argues that the text has provided women with a realistic approach towards social reforms (p. 126). Unlike Pride and Prejudice, says Nina Auerbach (19991), its characters are practical and know how to respond to the challenges of life (p. 129). Moving further afield, Aiko Moro-oka (1999) explains that Little Women is genuinely popular in Japan, influencing the domestic lives of women in all walks of life (p. 377). This broad appeal shows that the book has touched most of the known corners of the world, taking its philosophy to ambitious souls everywhere who want to live according to their own designs, just like Louisa May Alcott. Little Women could be termed as the most even-handed reading, covering both sides of the novel’s
depictions of women. Though critics over the years have debated whether Jo is a loser or winner, she has served as a role model for countless readers. Henry James once said, "A classic is not something a work is but something it becomes through an ‘interesting process’" (Gannon, 1999, p. 103). Likewise, *Little Women* has grown into a popular American Classic: for almost one hundred and fifty years, Alcott has been advocating the cause of women’s equality from the pages of *Little Women* through Jo (Anderson, 1992, p. 4). Becoming part of academic scholarship in 1928, it has been translated into many prominent languages of the world and, since then, has never gone out of print, sparking a multi-faceted revolution in its readers’ views of women’s equality around the world (Gannon, 1999, p. 103). So far the novel has spawned two miniseries and three movies, which have served to heighten its popularity (Felder, 2005, p. 49-50).

**Social Constraints**

It could not be denied that women from all spheres of life in the 19th century struggled to liberate themselves from the jurisdiction of “home” and social restraints—giving voice to the cause through the literature they produced, which instilled the idea of equality in their audiences’ minds (Evans, 1989, p. 125). Louisa May Alcott was one of those literary figures who challenged the patriarchal constraints of late 19th-century American society in her personal life and literary writings.

Alcott called *learned ladies* those who adhered to the “Victorian Code” (Anthony, 1938) states, “It was easier for her to shoulder a heroic responsibility than to accept a daily routine of hairpins” (p. 77). Similarly, when Amy scolds Jo for her boyish nature, Meg intervenes:

> Really girls, you are both to be blamed. You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and behave better, Josephine. It did not matter so much when you were a little girl; but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady. (Alcott, 1982, p. 4)

Jo cries,

> I am not! . . . I hate to think I’ve got to grow up. . . . It’s bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys’ games and work and manners! I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy... . (Alcott, 1982, p. 5)

Alcott often dressed and acted like a boy—“She was once known to disguise herself as a male and stand in the road outside her gate talking to one of her sisters. People who passed by in the twilight were properly fooled, as she intended them to be” (Anthony, 1982, p. 59). A similar example is found in *Little Women*, where Jo often plays male parts in plays:

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5 It was a code of strict discipline with specific societal role for women, which was borrowed from the Great Britain.
"No gentlemen were permitted; so Jo played male parts to her heart's content, and took immense satisfaction in a pair of russet-leather boots given her by a friend..." (Alcott, 1982, p. 15).

Alcott's way of life was not conformist enough for the people around her, and they stepped into the role of nagging and overseeing her. Louisa suffered psychologically, but she was determined to prove her principles to them. She said, "I will make a battering-ram of my head and make a way through this rough-and-tumble world" (Anthony, 1938, p. 97). This attitude, too, finds its way into Little Women. Jo again and again steps into men's roles to express her rebellious thoughts against social constraints: "I'm the man of the family now papa is away and I shall provide the slippers... Jo [said], marching up and down with her hands behind her back and her nose in the air" (Alcott, 1982, p. 6, 7).

Also like Jo, Louisa wanted to fight in the Civil War and ruefully noted, "When she went to the station to see the boys off, she wished ever so strongly that she could go with them... I have often longed to see a war and now I have my wish. I long to be a man." (Antony, 1982, p. 116). In the same way, Jo laments, I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy; and it's worse than ever now, for I am dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman! . . . Don't I wish I could go as a drummer, a Vivian—what's its name? or a nurse, so I could be near him and help him. (Alcott, 1982, p. 5, 8)

Domestic Claim

"Louisa revolted against all housework as tyranny and fled it wherever possible" notes Anthony (1938, p. 234). In the days when women were confined to Victorian values and homemaking, Louisa "asserted her independence and acted as a role model for conventional women of her time" (Anderson, 1992, p. 5). Warned by her mother's example, Louisa never accepted that domestic duties were only women's province. Despite these reservations, Alcott sometimes participated in housework, but she was unable to develop an interest in it. She shows this indifference through Beth, who complains in Little Women, "It's naughty to fret; but I do think washing dishes and keeping things tidy is the worst work in the world. It makes me cross; and my hands get soft, I can't practice well at all" (Alcott, 1982, p. 4). Beth yearns for her musical 'work,' which, according to Louisa, is meaningful work that is often interrupted by meaningless 'housework.'

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6 Louisa May Alcott thinks that imposed domestic chores is meaningless work, whereas work that is carried out to build one's career or chase one's dream is meaningful work.
Marital Constraints

Given this disdain for menial household labor, it is unsurprising that Louisa had been in favor of remaining single since her childhood. According to her, a woman could thrive professionally only if she were single, even though she breaks with this dogma in allowing her prominent literary characters to marry. Anna sometimes showed favorable signs to boys’ admiration, but Louisa stuck to her imagination instead. She wanted to comfort her mother and removed marriage from both her conscious and sub-conscious at the age of sixteen, deciding to be a spinster and have a career (Anthony, 1938, p. 93). It is still challenging for critics to prove what Louisa had in mind in making Jo, who is modeled on her own character, marry Professor Bhaer. Anyway, Alcott explores the department of marriage from multiple angles through Meg, Jo and Amy. Each of these sisters, through their own marriages, provide the readers with different pictures and issues related to the institution of marriage in late 19th century. Their pursuit for their ideals and desires also spotlights the degree of contemporary marital restraints on women that women faced in this province.

Economic Constraints

As in other arenas in their fight for equality, women faced severe problems in gaining economic equality. Women were hired, but they often were soon fired, enduring low wages and terrible working conditions. Their path toward progress was barricaded by social constraints. “Home” was thought to be women’s province, where they were required to produce, serve, and raise children. Like other reformers, literary writers noticed the issue and wrote about it in their texts. Despite her antagonism to housework, Louisa May Alcott was a home servant, seamstress, wage-earner, governess, teacher, tutor, traveler and suffragist, rose to literary fame by dint of replicating her own working and life experiences in her writings. Louisa pushes her heroine, Jo through the same teaching and boarding experiences in New York:

To New York, I had a bright idea yesterday, and this is it. You know Mrs. Kirke wrote to you for some respectable young person to teach her children and sew. It’s rather hard to find just the thing, but I think I should suit if I tried. (Alcott, 1982, p. 260)

As well-suited as she was to tutoring, however, Louisa knew her true calling was writing, a trade at which she had been making money since 1852, when she sold her first story, “The Rival Painter” at the age of sixteen (Anthony, 1938, p. 81). Alcott through Jo demonstrates the power of economy in a woman’s life:
She saw that money conferred power; therefore, she resolved to have, not to be used for herself alone, but for those whom she loved more than life. The dream of filling home with comforts, giving Beth everything she wanted, from straw-berries in winter to an organ in her bedroom, going abroad herself, and always having more than enough, so that she might indulge in the luxury of charity, had been for years Jo’s most cherished castle in the air. (Alcott, 1982, p. 273)

Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alcott took on women’s economic dependency, the primary reason for women’s problems. As a working girl, she was always interested in women’s professional lives. Alcott also transforms Jo through ‘work’ to polish her for her future challenges: “She soon became interested in her work, for her emancipated purse grew stout, and the little hoard she was making to take Beth to the mountains next summer grew slowly but surely as the weeks passed” (Alcott, 1982, p. 276).

**Political Constraints**

The women’s suffrage movement was at its peak when Alcott was flying upward towards her literary fame. An ardent supporter of the women’s suffrage movement, Alcott, like other women suffragists, argued that the absence of the right to vote had degraded women, and that they had lost their grace in the workplace and society. She added that without their own voice, women were exploited, paid less, and easily removed, even though they paid the same taxes as their male co-workers (Woloch, 1984, p. 341). Inheriting a reformatory nature from her Puritan ancestors, Louisa May Alcott directly and indirectly served the women’s suffrage movement (Anthony, 1938, p. 262). She was attracted to women’s suffrage when changes were taking place in Boston. Alcott’s passion for the movement was fueled by her frustration that she paid taxes, but was not allowed to vote. She signed a petition with her mother to oppose the injustice. Rejecting traditional domestic roles and asking for equal participation in state and society, she once said, “We do not like the ‘kitchen department’”(Anthony, 1938, p. 264). This passion for the movement is a far cry from the satirical portrayal that appears in *Little Women*. When Jo accompanies Miss Crocker to a lecture on the Pyramids, she notes, "On her left were two matrons, with massive foreheads, and bonnets to match, discussing Women’s Rights and making tatting" (Alcott, 1982, p. 212).

*Little Women* does not counter women’s political problem directly but implicitly. The novel inspire the reader through the discourse of its major and minor character—especially Jo—when they discuss the lines between their duties and rights. Throughout the novel Jo challenges many assumptions and limited roles for women, always favoring equal opportunities. She feels a spark of optimism when she listens to the two
ladies talking about women’s rights. It could not be denied that a grown and revolutionary Jo would not be speaking for women’s rights when she had the opportunity.

**Contemporary Women’s Position in Pakistan**

As mentioned above, the position of women in Pakistan varies ethnicity to ethnicity, but the degree of suppression is more or less the same in terms of their basic rights. Many writers have written about the phenomena, but their scholarship could not gain international significance like *I am Malala: The girl who Stood up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* (2013) by Malala Yousafzai. Yousafzai has attracted the attention and support of an international readership. Keeping in view her international significance and familiarity, this section of the study pictures Pakistani women through Malala Yousafzai’s personal experiences, book, and interview with the author. An official survey and open-ended questionnaires will also pepper the analysis for further authentication.

The story of injustice begins with a Pakistani woman at the time of her birth, which in most cases does not please a family. Contrarily, the birth of a boy is preferred for his masculine roles in the society (Yousafzai, 2013, p. 13, 14, 20, 58). Likewise, girls’ enrollment in school is fairly less than boys; 38 percent girls fail to register at school (PPAF, 2015, p. 10). Lack of education brings lack of awareness. The majority of women, who are uneducated, do not know about their rights and fall prey to strict patriarchal constraints, says Malala Yousafzai. Religious romanticizing and cultural norms limit their freedom of speech and movement (Yousafzai 2013, p. 26). In the same vein, majority of women in Pakistan do not have an active say in their marital consent; neither they could opt for separation if a marriage does not work. Divorce is a social taboo that equally destroys the reputation of a male and female; but unlike a man, the brunt of divorce chases a woman till her last breath. Having all domestic responsibilities, women have limited say in central roles and face domestic violence. Related to women, up to 70 percent of cases reported at the police stations are related to domestic violence triggered by honor issues (PPAF, 2015, p. 24). Having limited job opportunities, the majority of Pakistani women are dependent on their men. Unfortunately, they are commonly deprived of their share in property which the constitution grants them. Malala Yousafzai (2013), like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, believes that Pakistani women

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7 These questionnaires were collected at the country’s top ranked university—Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad—from both male and female students, aged between 18 and 40, who are selected from the different parts of the country through quota system.
exchange their liberty for their economic needs, which abates their importance in men’s eyes (p. 116). Like some other provinces, political participation is also objectionable for the majority of laywomen in Pakistan. The political arena is a masculine department, like ‘home’ is a feminine one. The constitution guarantees them the right to vote, but the society does not allow them to use it. Neither do they have any awareness of their rights. A few seats are reserved for them in the provincial and national assembly. In the majority of places, there is almost negligible female turnout in elections. Yousafzai (2013) grieves over the situation; she thinks women’s active participation in politics bring them closer to awareness and self-confidence (88). With its moderate stance on the balance between patriarchy and matriarchy, *Little Women* could address these issues effectively because the text probes all the above-mentioned areas through its themes and characters. Although not written for contemporary Pakistani women’s issues—in the characters of four sisters and their mother—the novel is reflecting majority of Pakistani women with their social, domestic, marital, economic, and political constraints.

A few local women writers in Pakistan have also picked on the "woman question" in some ways. Ishrat Afreen (1956-) is an Urdu poet and women's rights activist, who is considered one of the five most influential and emerging voices in contemporary Urdu Literature. These days her works are found in English, Japanese, Sanskrit and Urdu. Tehmina Durrani (1953-) is an activist—on women and children's rights—feminist, and author. *My Feudal Lord*, is her magnum opus, which describes her abusive and traumatic experience in her first marriage. Kishwar Naheed (1940-) is an Urdu poet, who questions women's position in her poetry. She has received several awards including Sitara-e-Imtiaz for her literary contribution. Fahmida Riaz (1946-) is a poet, human rights activist and feminist. Like Kate Chopin (1850-1904), she is accused of using erotic and sensory expressions in her poetry, which is taboo for women writers in Pakistan. Hajra Masroor (1930-2012) was a Pakistani, who argues for women's rights. In her writings, she voices for women's equal social, political, legal, and economic rights.

**Conclusion**

Being a social documentary of its time and an autobiographical account of its creator’s life, *Little Women* provides a profound insight into late 19th-century American women’s issues. After its warm reception across the American experience and evolving social/literary movements, the text has effectively delivered its message. Speaking to women’s issues unswervingly, *Little Women* colors many kinds of contemporary women through four March sisters—especially Jo—and their mother, Marmee March. Mostly
through Jo, the novel comments directly/indirectly upon women’s rights and outlines many areas where women had limited opportunities. Besides spotlighting the issues, the text also directs the young women how to fight them. From the silent pages of *Little Women*, Jo inspires womankind across time, society, class, etc. to fight for their equality in all walks of life. With its non-radical approach, the text has the potential to address the women’s issues in Pakistan more effectively. The novel openly reflects upon social, familial, marital, economic, and political constraints, which are fairly common in a patriarchal society like Pakistan. So its proliferation could trigger a powerful call for women’s rights in Pakistan, whose women have suffered a great deal under these entrenched patriarchal codes. Their plight is now an internationally known phenomenon, which has given birth to an icon like Malala Yousafzai. In Malala’s personal interview with the author, she herself acknowledged the presence of patriarchal constraints on women in Pakistani society and showed determination to fight against them until her last breath. In sum, as an American classic, *Little Women* could speak across ages, nations, and cultures to awaken the 21st-century’s Pakistani woman to her basic social, personal, marital, economic and political rights through its universal call for women’s equality.
References


Yousafzai, Malala (23 August 2015) *Personal (Telephone) Interview.*
A major global women’s rights treaty was ratified by the majority of the world’s nations a few decades ago. Yet, despite many successes in empowering women, numerous issues still exist in all areas of life, ranging from the cultural, political to the economic. For example, women often work more than men, yet are paid less; gender discrimination affects girls and women throughout their lifetime; and women and girls are often the ones that suffer the most poverty. Reading this report about the United Nations’ Women’s Treaty and how a variety of countries have lodged reservations to various provisions, more, women received the same rights as men in terms of minimum wage standards and paid holiday leave. They were also paid maternity leave and given access to health and safety protection at work. It’s no surprise that in just seven years (from 1923 to 1930) the number of women to enter the employment in the USSR rose from 423,200 to 885,000. Women in collective farms is a great power. Joseph Stalin. V. Svarog. Women were granted equal political rights too. During the 1920s, around 600 Soviets (officially the main power institutions in the country) had female chairmen. The radical success for Women Rights Struggle in Pakistan. See more. Jutt Randhawa. Women's Rights Association(WRA) is celebrating International women's day. The International Women's Day 2019 campaign theme of #BalanceforBetter is a call-to-action for driving gender balance across the world. How will you help make a difference? Women's Rights Association Pakistan. 1 February 2019. Women's Rights Association Pakistan. 10 December 2018. Women's Rights Association is celebrating "Human Rights Day" with the collaboration of Social welfare Department and Violence Against Women Center(V.A.W.C) Multan. Women's Rights Association Pak...