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## Four Hollywood Film Adaptations of *Little Women*: Identifying Female Subjectivity in Characters, Plots, and Authorship

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Four Hollywood Film Adaptations of *Little Women*: Identifying Female Subjectivity in  
Characters, Plots, and Authorship

by

Haiyu Wang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts  
with a concentration Film Studies  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## ABSTRACT

My thesis examines the expressions of the limits and possibilities of female subjectivity in the four Hollywood film adaptations of *Little Women*, filmed in 1933, 1949, 1994, and 2019 respectively, by combining textual and audience analysis with adaptation theory, feminist film theory, and feminist adaptation theory. In exploring the disparate femininity of female characters, the different representations of plots, and the authorship and changes of structure, I argue that the 1933 and 1949 versions present evidently conservative and patriarchal characteristics in the text, but their female subjectivity can be obtained through the complexity of emotion of the female audience of their eras. And the 1994 and 2019 versions have distinct progressive and feminist representations in their texts, but the 1994 version does not escape a patriarchal ending, while the 2019 version has a great breakthrough at the end. This project considers chronologically how female subjectivity is repressed and displayed in the four adaptations. The presentation of female subjectivity and the predicaments faced by women vary according to the context of their times, the analysis of them is important for the development of female subjectivity in the future film industry as well as the promotion of female self-consciousness in their daily lives.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

My project examines the expression of female subjectivity in four Hollywood film adaptations of *Little Women*, filmed in 1933 (George Cukor), 1949 (Mervyn LeRoy), 1994 (Gillian Armstrong), and 2019 (Greta Gerwig). Through analyses of the changes in the femininity of different female characters, changes in plots, and depictions of male characters, as well as the effect of authorship in the 1994 and 2019 version, I draw a trajectory of these changes and the progressiveness or limitations they embody, and how women take the initiative and voice in it. My project is not only to analyze the interplay between different versions of *Little Women* and the times in which they were created, as has been done in existing research but also to analyze the four film adaptations in the United States from the perspective of women's self-conscious voice and creative initiative, which is significant to the acquisition and reaffirmation of female subjectivity and for women's self-expression of their own stories. Even though women's creative work is limited in different eras, female filmmakers, the depictions of female characters, and the audience can more or less break through the borders and attempt to express their subjectivity by setting up different plots and dialogues and changing the narrative structure of the story. It is necessary to examine the causes of these limitations, but it is equally important

to be able to see how female subjectivity is expressed in the male-dominated film and literary industry and the capitalist patriarchal society.

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* has been very popular all over the world from its first publication to the present day. The work has a strong cultural and literary influence. It has not only been adapted for many films, television dramas, stage plays, musicals, and operas in various countries but also played a role in the ideological struggles for the United States. Besides, Alcott paved the way for many significant female writers to pursue their writing careers. However, Alcott and her *Little Women* have been devalued by academia in a way that is completely at odds with its importance only because it was written by a woman about women's lives. In terms of the novel, as autobiographical literature, some key plots in *Little Women* are inconsistent with the real experiences of the author, Louisa May Alcott. According to chapter two of *Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy*,<sup>1</sup> there are three primary differences. First, the extreme poverty of the Alcotts, is mitigated in the fictional March family. Second, Mr. Alcott was the main cause of the family's poverty and Louisa May Alcott's attitude toward her father, Mr. Alcott, is complex, but Mr. March's convenient absence in the novel is because he was fighting in the Civil War, and the Marches were proud of him. Third, Jo finally married, while Alcott became a literary "spinster". Constrained by the male publisher's demand that the women in the novel either marry or die and the readers' strong demand that Jo and Laurie marry, Alcott had no choice but to compromise on marrying Jo off.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018.



In the 1933 and 1949 versions, the directors, neglect these inconsistencies and marry the attention to story to ideological purpose. Because of the Great Depression, people in the 1930s desired nostalgia, an emotion that had been abandoned in the Roaring Twenties, for “they yearned for an escape to simpler times and wanted to recapture the lost innocence”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the 1933 version was providing moral guidance by emphasizing norms of conduct for women and entertainment to the audience during the Great Depression. The 1949 version reveals consumerism in response to the post-WWII American society in need of an economic revival. And since the audience in 1949 had just experienced the war, the 1949 version weakened the elements of war and poverty in the film and strengthened the romantic relationships between the characters. Similarly, extant research on the 1933 and 1949 versions<sup>3</sup> tends to concern genre and audience more than female voice as expressed by characters.

However, when women become the directors, the aforementioned inconsistencies have been captured, and they make efforts to address and restore the restricted female subjectivity and female authorship in Alcott’s work. Some extant pieces of research on the 1994 and 2019 versions argue that though the latter versions acknowledge their interest in female subjectivity, and they analyze them from a perspective of feminism, they tend to view them as oversimplifications of feminism. But I reassess the presentation of feminism in the 1994 and 2019 versions and argue that the oversimplification of feminism is relevant to the era and when women try to squeeze into the mainstream discourse, the methods are often simple and rough

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> They are “‘A New Movie-Going Public’- 1930s Hollywood and the Emergence of the ‘Family’ Film” written by Noel Brown in 2013 and “Feels like home: *Since You Went Away* and the 1940s family melodrama” written by Chad Newsom in 2017.

because their first priority is to be heard, while the specific content of their views is secondary. Since there is an internal tug-of-war between progressive instincts and the era's prevailing constraints in the novel itself, coupled with the fact that each adaptation has different needs and limitations and/or advances of the times, the gaps between Alcott's life and her writing and female subjectivity in each adaptation are dynamic. I look for female self-consciousness in the complex and more or less constrained environment, which allows female subjectivity to be expressed and seen in a male-dominated industry and patriarchal capitalist society and allows people to see the dilemmas women face when they speak out.

To trace the depiction of femininity in the four Hollywood film adaptations of *Little Women*, the differences in plot and structure between male and female directors, and the relationship between Alcott, Jo, and the female directors, I examine the importance of female subjectivity and female directors telling stories, and the right of women's lives to be seen and valued by the public as well. Filmmakers who determine femininity and what it ultimately looks like in the female characters not only reflects the tendency of women in different generations but also serves as a role model to influence diverse audiences. In the trajectory of female characters' changing femininity, the mutually constructed train between period and femininity become clear. Furthermore, the plot, especially the arrangement of the space (domestic or public) in which the female characters live and their destiny, is also an important aspect of the degree of women's limitation and progress. In the 1933 and 1949 versions, only a few indispensable writing-related scenes show Jo's literary ambitions. However, in the 1994 version, Jo is given more scenes to write, and she also participates in male discussions about public affairs. The core of the 2019

version is Jo's literary ambitions from the beginning to the end. In addition, the 2019 version has a different, open-ended conclusion than all three previous versions, which means Jo's destiny is not tied with marriage. Moreover, the structural changes in the perspective of the storyteller in the 1994 and 2019 versions are a reflection of who holds the discourse, and the intersection of the female director, author, and protagonist as a writer infuses film adaptations of literary works with new life, and a manifestation of the empowerment of women.

Given that the structural adjustments in the 1994 and 2019 versions are a major change regarding the original, my project relies on adaptation theory's critique of fidelity and emphasis on the context that can demonstrate historical change. Feminist film theory permits me to witness female subjectivity even in extremely patriarchal texts and contexts. Further, feminist adaptation theory examines the embodiments of female subjectivity in overlapped authorship. First, historical context works less as an end in itself and more as a mechanism for tracing female voice. Robert Stam argues that "An important set of questions concerning adaptation has to do with context".<sup>4</sup> Not based on fidelity to the novel, my analysis places the four film adaptations in their specific context, which is important for my project because my texts are not only one adaptation, but four adaptations from disparate eras of the same novel. Second, although the female voice is usually perceived to be oppressed in patriarchal texts, this does not mean that female subjectivity is completely buried within these limits. Female subjectivity in patriarchal contexts can be expressed through the female audience's empathy with the bitter experience of

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<sup>4</sup> Stam, Robert. "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation." *Literature and Film*. Eds. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 1-52, p. 41.

female characters. Linda Williams points out that “a similar dialectic inform female spectatorship when a female point of view is genuinely inscribed in the text”.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the female audiences are able to empathize with the four March sisters from their point of view when they watch film adaptations. Third, the importance of adaptation for female filmmakers lies in the importance of authorship for female subjectivity. Shelley Cobb claims that “adaptation is appealing for women filmmakers and that the main point of subversion is the authorial function... the figure of the women author is key for thinking about female authorship as a metaphor for female agency”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, reclaiming authorship is crucial to female subjectivity, and the image of a female writer as well as female directors and screenwriters of adaptations are both embodiments of authorship. I think Jo’s first-person narrative in the 1994 version is one way to present authorship, and the 2019 version changing structure goes further in presenting authorship. The ambiguity of Jo, Alcott, and Gerwig combines the three into one and then intensifies the female agency.

Focusing on female subjectivities and self-consciousness in the four Hollywood adaptations of *Little Women*, my thesis analyzes the trajectory of changing femininity, features of casting, and different plots, as well as the relationship between Alcott, Jo, and the female directors by using the adaptation theory, feminist film theory, and feminist adaptation theory. It compensates for the neglect of women’s development in existing research; reevaluates and further analyzes the representation of feminism in films. By viewing the four film adaptations as trajectories, the

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<sup>5</sup> Linda Williams, “Something Else Besides a Mother.” *Cinema Journal* 24.1 (1984): 2-27, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley Cobb. *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 15.

picture of the changes in female subjectivity becomes clearer. The presentation of female subjectivity and the predicaments faced by women vary according to the context of their times, the analysis of them is important for the development of female subjectivity in the film industry as well as the promotion of female self-consciousness in their daily lives.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### CHANGES IN THE FEMININITY OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN DIFFERENT ERAS

*Little Women* tells the story about the four girls growing up in the March family. Due to their father Mr. March's participation in the Civil War, the four sisters have their mother's company. In a story where the main characters are female, the features of each girl and the relationship between them become an important part of the story. Because the four film adaptations of *Little Women* span different eras, each version presents differences in the portrayal of Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy. These differences not only reflect the femininity of the disparate eras but also influence the femininity of the era in turn. In this part, I focus on casting, characters' appearance, and their performance. The female characters in the 1933 and 1949 versions are conservative and each embodies some demands of the patriarchal society on women, especially Jo in the 1933 version being domesticated as a little woman by the social norms, and Jo in the 1949 version showing a refusal to grow up due to the suppression of her subjectivity. The female characters in the 1994 and 2019 versions are on the whole progressive, but the 1994 version presents ideal femininity, while it in the 2019 version is more complex and realistic.

The 1933 version of Jo was played by Katharine Hepburn. Hepburn has tousled hair and high cheekbones, and a thin face, which is not the traditional Hollywood look of beauty. She is physically fit, heroic, and exuded a sense of boldness and confidence. Before *Little Women*, she

played a spirited and forward female pilot in *Christopher Strong* (1932) and a Broadway starlet in *Morning Glory* (1933). They were both independent, strong, and courageous female characters. Therefore, Hepburn's appearance, her own personality, and screen image are highly in line with Jo's image of a tomboy. However, the 1933 version does not appreciate Jo's tomboyish characteristics, but instead requires her to shed them as she grows older to become a "little woman". Before Jo goes to New York, she whistles, slides down the banister, makes a loud noise when she goes down the stairs, speaks loudly and in a deep voice, her hair is sometimes messy, and her clothes are plain without many decorative elements. But after Jo goes to New York, she is much more elegant in her demeanor – walks steadily, speaks in a small and soft voice, and her hair is always exquisite with lots of carefully coiffed little curls. The necklines of her dresses become lower and have more lace and engraved patterns, and her cuffs are more fashionable. And since she went to New York, everyone here called her Josephine, and no one called her Jo anymore.

Therefore, the 1933 version tells the coming-of-age story of how Jo is disciplined from an unconventional girl full of masculine qualities to a young lady. And this theme was foreshadowed from the beginning of the film – after Marmee read Mr. March's letter, Jo reflected on herself and said that "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman', and not be rough and wild, and do my duty here at home..."<sup>7</sup> In other words, the femininity required in this era is ladylike, proper, and well-mannered, and even though some boyish behaviors can exist

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<sup>7</sup> George Cukor. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. RKO Pictures, 1933, 00: 17:19 – 00: 17: 29.

during girlhood, they need to be forbidden as a girl grows older. The moral standard requiring women to be submissive was inextricably linked to the Great Depression. As the historian Stephanie Coontz remarks, “Everyone the Depression shifted attention away from social and sexual issues to questions of survival... Governments also used positive measures to shore up male breadwinner marriage”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Depression forced the women’s movement, which had made progress, to give way to survival: “Unlike the 1920s, almost no one saw women’s work in the 1930s as liberating. Few women held prestigious or well-paid jobs”.<sup>9</sup> Faced with a tough hiring environment, and with the meaning of work for women changing from self-development to survival, women were reassigned back to traditional gender roles.

June Allyson played Jo in the 1949 version. “Allyson, who had a girl-next-door image, was known primarily for musical roles in films such as *Two Girls and a Sailor* (1944) and *Good News* (1947)”.<sup>10</sup> Compared to Hepburn’s thin face, Allyson’s face is more rounded and plumper. Similar to their differences in face, Allyson’s Jo is less boyish in personality than Hepburn’s Jo (before she went to New York). When Allyson’s Jo was with her three sisters, she was tomboyish, for example, at the beginning of the film, she jumped the fence twice, whistled, and made a noise when she went downstairs. The act of crossing the fence twice, which is not in the 1933 version, is placed at the beginning of the 1949 version to highlight Jo’s tomboyish traits. This act not only demonstrates her lively and active nature but also that she does not accept failure. When she falls and sees her three sisters laughing at her, she immediately jumped again

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<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Coontz. *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 218-219.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>10</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 92.



the same way and then threw a snowball towards them after she successfully jumped. However, her tomboyish traits are tempered when she is with Laurie – when she went to Laurie’s house for the first time, Laurie helped her take off her coat, and when she went there for the dance, the two did not dance in a very inappropriate manner but seemed to be dancing normally in a different place where no one is around. And her hairstyle and clothes did not change much from the beginning to the end. Although Allyson’s voice is husky, which can be seen as an aspect of a tomboy, her voice did not change.

Based on the above, Jo did not present a sense of growth in the 1949 version, and Allyson “quite naturally captured Jo’s refusal to grow up”.<sup>11</sup> Instead, her literary ambitions were constantly suppressed by Laurie, which means that her spiritual growth was also hindered. Although professor Bhaer approved Jo’s writing talent, the plot is set up too hastily, resulting in the 1949 version overemphasizing the romantic relationship between the two and not showing much of Bhaer’s help to Jo in writing. Therefore, Allyson’s Jo showed more of a moderate, slightly unyielding, but repressed female figure, which is related to the much-needed socio-economic revival after World War II, while the reinforcement of romanticized love scenes and gentle femininity is a product of the male gaze. When Betty Friedan analyzes the “problem that has no name” that occurred among American women in the late 1940s and 1950s, she points out that some people tried to “smooth over with the age-old panaceas: ‘love is their answer’...”.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*, W. W. Norton Company, 2013, p. 12.

By emphasizing the importance of romantic love in women's lives, women gradually centered their lives on men. (The specific analysis of the romantic plots is in chapter three).

In terms of appearance and voice, Winona Ryder, the 1994 version's Jo, is not as much of a tomboy as Hepburn and Allyson. Ryder has big and pure eyes and a round babyface. Before *Little Women*, Ryder played the brave Kim in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), as well as the seemingly innocent but hypocritical May in *The Age of Innocence* (1993). The 1994 version's "hip young cast certainly helped draw in younger audiences. Ryder was at the peak of her popularity".<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, the choice of the cast is due to the market; on the other hand, the director Gillian Armstrong does not intend to put much effort into using external factors to show Jo's tomboyish qualities. Similar to Allyson's Jo, the clothes, hairstyle, and way of speaking of Ryder's Jo did not change much in the film. But unlike Allyson's Jo, the behaviors of Ryder's Jo, when confronted with Laurie, remains the same as hers when confronted with her sisters. Throughout the film, Ryder's Jo is animated, full of emotion, and often brims with energy and vitality. Although not much has changed in terms of external presentation, Jo did grow: the growth of Ryder's Jo is mainly reflected in her inner growth, especially when she is confronted with writing. The 1994 version has scenes of Jo writing appearing six times. In contrast, the 1933 and 1949 versions appear only twice respectively.

Therefore, the tomboyish traits of Ryder's Jo no longer cling to external elements, which is because since the 1990s, Jo's masculine characteristics, which are at odds with the norms of

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 102.

female behavior, have been accepted by most people. As historian Coontz remarks of the era, “It is not surprising that the pace of change in gender roles, marriage behaviors, and sexual values slowed during the 1990s. In many areas, these changes were already nearing saturation point”.<sup>14</sup> That is, people have become accustomed to what might have been unacceptable tomboyish behaviors until the first half of the 20th century. This made it somewhat unnecessary to focus on the demeanor of Jo. Besides, the suppression of female initiative is no longer as pronounced as in the 1933 and 1949 version.

Saoirse Ronan played Jo in the 2019 version. Ronan’s face neither as thin and angular as Hepburn’s, nor as mature and easy-going as Allyson’s nor is it Ryder’s kind of babyface, her face reveals a sense of mystery. Two years before the *Little Women*, Ronan worked with the director Greta Gerwig on *Lady Bird* (2017). In the latter, Ronan played the female lead Christine, who is rebellious, vivid, daring, and conflicted. Similar to the 1994 version, throughout the film, Ronan’s Jo did not change much in terms of external factors. In addition to the fact that social norms are no longer strict for women’s behaviors, it is also because the 2019 version’s Jo does not center on Jo’s growth but focuses on the various female dilemmas that both Jo and her three sisters face. The film begins by showing the plights of each of the four sisters who have grown up. In terms of Jo, she faces the control of the male authority over the publishing industry and the content of stories. As a result, femininity of Ronan’s Jo is a mature, sober, and straightforward

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<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Coontz. *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 265.

woman, but at the same time, she struggles with her innermost desires and the obstacles of reality.

Alcott's novel clearly marks the different temperaments of each sister, which represents four different models of 19th-century womanhood and each of the films follows this lead. The novel describes them in this way – “In spite of her small vanities, Margaret had a sweet and pious nature”.<sup>15</sup> As the oldest sister and with such a nature, Meg accepts the norms, and embraces domesticity and motherhood, marrying for love. Beth is “with shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed”,<sup>16</sup> which makes her look soft and weak. Amy's “small vanities and selfishness were growing nicely”,<sup>17</sup> and she focuses on beauty and feminine attainments. In general, the bottom of the four sisters' personalities in the four film adaptations are consistent. Their personalities in the 1933 and 1949 versions are very close. The 1994 version has some adjustments, making them more positive and progressive. The 2019 version combines the four sisters' personalities with their choices, their own situations, and their sisterhood, which dilutes their differences in personality and reinforces the differences in their own future choices. This allows their sisterhood to be presented in a larger perspective, which means the four of them are not just the March sisters, but also represent four different kinds of women.

The 1933 version's Meg, Beth, and Amy were played by Frances Dee, Jean Parker, and Joan Bennett. The hair of Dee's Meg is often turned up and she looks mature. She usually dresses and

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<sup>15</sup> Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women*. Signet Classics, 2004. (First published September 30th, 1868), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

styles her hair plainly, but once she attends a dance or plans to meet people, she decorates herself well. As an older sister, she often reminds the tomboyish Jo and affected Amy to behave appropriately. So, she is the most traditional one among the four sisters. The hair of Parker's Beth is fluffy and looks casual. She always speaks softly and often has a slight smile on her face, and even before passing away, she comforted the grieving Jo and tell her not to be afraid. Beth is the embodiment of kindness and virtue. Bennett's Amy has blonde hair with delicate little curls, and unlike Jo and Beth, this Amy's hair has almost no stray hairs visible. Her clothes are also the fanciest among the four sisters. And when speaking to others, her voice is often rhythmic. This Amy shows the image of a pretentious young woman. Briefly, the March family sisters in the 1933 version are only different in character, but they all practice the conventional gender roles.

Janet Leigh, Elizabeth Taylor, and Margaret O'Brien played Meg, Amy, and Beth in the 1949 version. Unlike Dee's Meg, Leigh's Meg had her hair down until she got married, which made her look less mature. But when she spoke to other young sisters, especially to Jo and Amy, the tone is commanding. Since Meg usually asked her young sisters to behave appropriately and not disgrace the March family, this makes Meg an agency for male authority, which is consistent with Dee's Meg. Taylor "played the worldly innocent to the hilt, looking more like a Madame Alexander doll than a real girl".<sup>18</sup> In addition to the appearance, Taylor's Amy has more scenes that emphasize her beauty-loving and affected characteristics. She likes to look in the mirror and sleep with a clip on her nose at night, and she always holds her chin up slightly when she speaks.

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<sup>18</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 93.

Taylor's Amy is similar to Bennett's, except that Taylor's has a little more cuteness in the image. O'Brien's Beth becomes the youngest sister in the 1949 version. She speaks with a firmer tone than Parker's Beth, and she is more animated, which makes her more endearing in addition to kind-hearted. In short, similar to the 1933 version, the femininity presented in the 1949 version is also traditional, except that the personalities of each of the four sisters differ in degree.

In the 1994 version, Meg was played by Trini Alvarado. Alvarado's Meg is no longer to play the role of a moral reminder of restraining her young sisters' words and actions. She completes her growth from aspiring to high society to marrying the poor John in the 1994 version, which, in addition to the romantic element, confronts with her vanity. Alvarado's Meg was given more scenes to show the moment of her growth – Marmee told Meg that “if you feel your value lies in being merely decorative, I fear that someday you might find yourself believing that's all that you really are”,<sup>19</sup> which makes Alvarado's Meg less conservative. Claire Danes' Beth interacts more with Jo and shows more ambition than the quiet and timid Beth in the 1933 and 1949 versions. Before Claire Danes' Beth passed away, she told Jo that “I love being home, but I don't like being left behind”.<sup>20</sup> Thus, this Beth is seemingly fragile, but her mind is strong. Amy in the 1994 version is played by two actresses, the younger Amy is Kirsten Dunst, and the older Amy is Samantha Mathis. Dunst's Amy shows capriciousness and selfishness. She likes to complain, sometimes squabbles with Jo, has lots of facial expressions, and a shrill voice since Dunst was only twelve years old then. But it is also because she is a child that her headstrong and annoying

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<sup>19</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 00:43:45 – 00:43:52.

<sup>20</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 01:35:58 – 01:36:06.

behavior is more acceptable. Mathis's Amy is not as cute as Dunst's, she not only replaced Jo as Aunt March's companion to go to Europe but also married Laurie at the end. Selfishness continues from Amy's childhood into adulthood, and she always knows what she wants – she said to Laurie that “I've always known I would not marry a pauper”.<sup>21</sup> To sum up, in the 1994 version, the interaction and communication between the four sisters have been increased, which makes their images more vivid. Each of them can no longer be described simply by tradition. Meg's confrontation with her vanity, Beth's external softness and internal strength, and Amy's selfishness but determination, show new and disparate femininity in the 1990s.

If the 1994 version makes the life of the four March sisters colorful, then the 2019 version condenses the experiences of different kinds of women into the four sisters. In other words, the March family can be viewed as a small female community in the 2019 version. The female community is still women-centered but goes beyond the stories of each woman separately and emphasizes the relationships and interdependence of women in it. The four March sisters in the 2019 version form an alliance through sisterhood based on their different situations, giving them the strength to support each other in the face of structural gender oppression (such as the relationship between marriage and women faced by Meg and Amy and the male authority in the press faced by Jo). As I mentioned before, the film begins by showing the plights of each of the four sisters who have grown up. Meg in the 1994 version only mentions that she will live in poverty after marrying John but does not present her life after marriage, while Emma Watson's

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 01:28:42.

Meg is often worried about living expenses. The first scene in which Meg appears in the 2019 version is when she is kicking herself for buying an expensive piece of fabric – “Fifty dollars, what was I thinking?”.<sup>22</sup> Watson’s Meg represents a traditional gender role, as in the 2019 version, when Jo told Meg that “you should be an actress, and you should have a life on the stage”, Meg replied to Jo that “just because my dreams are different than yours doesn’t mean they’re unimportant. I want a home, a family, and I’m willing to work and struggle”.<sup>23</sup> Meg’s pursuit of love and family represents the conservative group.

Beth, played by Eliza Scanlen, has a few facial expressions, always quietly observing people around her, and she shows bravery here. Unlike the first three film adaptations, Scanlen’s Beth comes forward and expresses she wants to play the piano after Mr. Lawrence asks, instead of Mr. Lawrence giving the piano to Beth. Although Beth’s bravery is shown here, her timid character is not erased. When she finishes answering Mr. Lawrence, she immediately hides back behind Hannah.<sup>24</sup> In addition, her bravery is reflected in her calmness and consideration in the face of illness and death. When Jo returns to Concord from New York to take care of Beth, Beth says to Jo that “it’s like the tide going out, it goes out slowly, but it can’t be stopped” when Jo is reluctant to face the topic of death<sup>25</sup>. Also, Beth encourages Jo to continue to write – when Beth and Jo are sitting on the beach, she says to Jo that “I love to listen to you read, Jo, but I just love

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<sup>22</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 00: 09:16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:32:05 – 01:32:18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:55:20 – 00:55:50.

<sup>25</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 01:20:58 – 01:21:02.



it even when you read the stories you've written... You have pencil and paper... Write something for me. You're a writer, even before anyone knew or paid you".<sup>26</sup>

Amy is played by Florence Pugh; whose face is not cute and reveals maturity. Thus, in the scenes of playing 7 years ago, Pugh's hairstyle is with bangs, which makes her look younger. Although Pugh's Amy also shows selfishness like the other three Amy, she reflects the helplessness of women's fate and their lack of choice. (Her views on marriage and the analysis of her choice are in chapter three). Like the previous three adaptations, Amy has the most conflicts with Jo. But in the 2019 version, the relationship between Jo and Amy is more realistic. Despite frequent fights, it was Amy who comforted Jo when she cried over her lost hair (in the 1994 version it was Beth who comforted Jo). In addition, when Jo decides to open a school, Amy asks her that "what about writing", and Jo replies that "who will be interested in a story of domestic struggles and joys", and then Amy says that "it doesn't seem important because people don't write about them... Writing them will make them more important".<sup>27</sup> Amy, the ambitious girl, gives Jo the courage to continue writing in her way.

In the 2019 version, there is a sisterhood that presents the progressive, realistic, and conservative situation for women that have emerged in the course of the contemporary feminist movement, and that these various women can be united instead of the women who do not keep up would be excluded from the women's alliance. Even with different views and different life

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 01:09:15 – 01:10:06.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 01:55:23 – 01:55:56.

choices, the distinct women in the small community encourage each other and live together in solidarity.

The disparate femininity presented by the various behaviors and appearances of the female characters is a microcosm of the expectations of women in different times, and the subjectivity of women is suppressed or revealed by whether the changing femininity serves the needs of the patriarchal society or serves women themselves.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### CHANGES IN PLOTS AND MALE CHARACTERS IN THE FOUR ADAPTATIONS

Since the four film adaptations differ in their choices of plots and in the order in which some of the same plots are arranged, the intentions of the different directors are also highlighted in these plot changes. In other words, this leads to the creation of different atmospheres in these adaptations, in which female subjectivity is presented in different ways and which increases over time.

Like the changes in demeanor of Hepburn's Jo as she is tamed from a tomboyish girl to a proper little woman, the 1933 version exhibits this characteristic in its plots as well. All four adaptations select scenes from the March sisters' rehearsals for the drama, but only the 1933 and 2019 versions retain the scene from the formal performance. In their drama in the 1933 version, Jo plays the male characters – Black Hugo and Roderigo. In one act, Jo stands under the window and attempts to save Zara, the heroine played by Amy who is trapped in the castle.<sup>28</sup> The situation here is similar to the next scene in which Jo throws a snowball and then talks to Laurie under the window and asks to visit him.<sup>29</sup> In this scene, Laurie was a little sick, while Jo is vigorous, and she wanted to bring her energy to Laurie. In these two consecutive scenes, although one is a fictional theatrical scene and the other is a real scene, they both have similar

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<sup>28</sup> George Cukor. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. RKO Pictures, 1933, 00:27:48-00:28:25.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:30:27-00:30:52.

compositions and plots, which is Jo plays the role of the rescuer under the window. Usually, the role of the rescuer is played by men, and the plotting of Jo as the rescuer does not conform to the traditional Hollywood narrative of a hero saving a damsel in distress. And the juxtaposition of the fictional dramatic scene with real-life scene reinforces Jo's masculinity, even as the gender roles of Jo and Laurie are swapped according to the traditional conscious. However, this masculinity of Jo disappears in the plots after she goes to New York in the 1933 version.

Although she planned to be there to chase her literary ambition, her activities include listening to Professor Bhaer's instructions for her writing, sewing, caring for children, and going to the opera with Professor Bhaer. In other words, there is a dialogue about Jo's writing, but on the one hand, this dialogue comes from Professor Bhaer's refutation of Jo's story though he affirms her talent; on the other hand, after Jo goes to New York, there is not a shot showing her commitment to writing. Instead, the director shows Jo's actions that are closely related to the traditional gender division of labor. Therefore, in terms of plots, we can see Jo is tamed to be a little woman in the 1933 version.

In addition to the de-masculinization of Jo that is reflected in the plots, the 1933 version just sketchily described Jo's literary ambitions. Jo's writing space, the garret, has different meanings in these different film adaptations. In the 1933 version, the garret scene appears 3 times. The first scene shows that Jo just finished a novel, enjoying it, and planning to go to the newspaper to publish it.<sup>30</sup> Jo's garret here is very simple with no surplus furnishings other than the

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<sup>30</sup> George Cukor. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. RKO Pictures, 1933, 00:44:37–00:45:07.

requirements for her, such as a sofa, desk, and table lamp, and in this scene, we can see many books on shelves, which fits Jo's bookish character. The second scene shows Jo crying because of Beth's scarlet fever, and Laurie is there to comfort her.<sup>31</sup> The third one shows Jo waking up (since she has pieces of paper on her lap, it can be assumed that Jo should be writing before she takes a nap) and talking to Laurie, who is already married to Amy at this time.<sup>32</sup> In this dialogue, they finally define their relationship as brother and sister. Although there are many items in the garret in the 1933 version that indirectly reflect Jo's literary ambitions, the action and process of Jo's writing do not occur. Two of the three garret scenes involve an emotional relationship between Jo and Laurie, leading to a conclusion that the garret space in the 1933 version is more of a place for Jo to deal with her relationship with Laurie than a place for Jo to write. Therefore, the setting of the garret in the 1933 version is only a reproduction of the environment for Jo to write, but the director does not use the space to highlight Jo's literary ambition.

It is worth noting that in the 1994 version, the garret was first used as the place for the March sisters to rehearse the drama, and the change continues in the 2019 version. The change in the use of the garret makes this place play three roles: the representative of Jo's writing act; the contents of Jo's writing; and the place where they experimented with reversing gender roles. In terms of the first role, this is the most manifestation of it because it is the place where Jo writes at home. As for the second role, on the one hand, the four sisters performed dramas in this space, which means that it is filled with memories of Jo growing up with her sisters. On the other hand,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 01:02:00–01:04:47.

<sup>32</sup> George Cukor. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. RKO Pictures, 1933, 01:48:25–01:50:49.

in the 1994 version, when Jo begins writing *Little Women* in the garret, the voiceover of Beth, Amy, Meg, Jo, and Laurie appears, telling stories that have happened in the first half of the film. It uses sound to visualize the daily experiences of women's lives and the growth of the sisters. In terms of the third one, in both the 1994 and the 2019 versions, Jo addresses the other sisters here as "gentlemen", and even in the 2019 version, the sisters in the garret dresses in men's clothes, with pipes and bowler hats. In the private space that belongs only to them, the sisters could perform men and behave exaggeratedly without scruple. And with the addition of Laurie, the gender role carried by the garret become fluid. In the 1994 version, Laurie speaks softly after entering the garret, not only in humble words but looking up at the March sisters. In the 2019 version, Laurie and the March sisters are dress similarly. More specifically, in this space, both men and women do not adhere to the norms of traditional gender roles.

If we split Jo's tomboyish traits into tomboy in behavior and in ambition, in each of the four adaptations, Jo's tomboyish behaviors are suppressed by others, such as Mr. March's letter and Aunt March's condemnation and punishment (— Aunt March does not choose her to go to Europe). But Jo's literary ambition is suppressed only in the 1949 version, and the person who suppresses her is her suitor, Laurie. And different from the other three adaptations, the use of the garret in the 1949 version not only externalizes Jo's literary ambitions (this externalization does not aim to show Jo's literary ambitions), but the space of the garret here also represents Jo's discord with Laurie. When the garret scene in the 1949 version first appears, the director gives a close-up first showing Jo's manuscript "The Literary Works of Josephine March", then zooms out and pans to the left, which shows Jo reading her story while being moved by it. In this scene,

what is shown first is not Jo in the act of writing, but a close-up of a completed manuscript, which is a deliberate attempt to show Jo's literary ambitions and then to create conflict between Jo and Laurie. Besides, in this scene, Laurie is in it, though he only appears by name said by Beth. But his name's appearance determines Jo's motivation for climbing out the window afterward because she wishes Laurie "could realize I have not time for his nonsense".<sup>33</sup> The second garret scene shows that Laurie questions Jo's writing career for the second time. When Jo told Laurie that she writes for money (the second garret scene in this version), Laurie says that "I've got plenty of that if you ever need it".<sup>34</sup> In addition to the discord between Jo and Laurie in the garret, when Jo shows Laurie the remuneration of her manuscript, he simply says dismissively— "one dollar?".<sup>35</sup> The above causes "Jo's later refusal of his proposal (in part because he wouldn't like her writing) more plausible",<sup>36</sup> and makes dissimilarities and gender role reversal between Laurie and Jo in the 1949 version the clearest of the four film adaptations. As a woman who was not allowed to have career pursuits or ambitions in that days, the 1-dollar paycheck not only made Jo to subsidize her family, but it was also a source of pride for her as a writer. In contrast, Laurie, as a man whose career and choices were not limited, patently lacked ambition and career aspirations.

The hope for family harmony becomes more pronounced after a period of economic and social disruption brought about by WWII.<sup>37</sup> As Coontz remarks, "A romanticized and idealized

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<sup>33</sup> Mervyn LeRoy. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. MGM Pictures, 1949, 00:52:21–00:55:00.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:10:19.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:57:07.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 97.

<sup>37</sup> Rioux believes that "Its Civil War setting and portrayal of women on the home front, making do while the family patriarch is away at war, made the story relevant in a new way" (p.92). That is, the absence of men due to the war makes women the main

vision of family was a natural reaction to years of disruption”.<sup>38</sup> And the two traits, romantic and idealized, both appear in the 1949 version. In terms of the idealized vision of family, “the end of the war also brought a renewed enthusiasm for marriage, female homemaking, and male breadwinner family”.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the idealized family for the post-war people is a traditional gender-divided family, which explains why Laurie in the 1949 version always disparages Jo’s writing career and works to drive her back to the family (to marry him). In terms of the romanticized vision of family, the aforementioned rationalization of Jo’s rejection of Laurie’s marriage proposal is a manifestation of romanticism, which allows viewers who previously felt sorry for Laurie for not marrying Jo to accept the fact. Furthermore, the relationship between Jo and Professor Bhaer is the most romanticized arrangement in the 1949 version. Rossano Brazzi played Bhaer in the 1949 version, who had dark hair and looks similar to Laurie and Jo’s age. It’s more appropriate to describe him as a gentleman than mature and steady. The young image of Bhaer makes it easier for viewers who have fantasies of romantic love to accept the ending of Jo and the professor’s marriage. Apart from the casting of Bhaer, the orders of the plots in which Jo and the professor go through in New York has changed from the 1933 version, although the contents of the episode are much the same as the 1933 version. In the 1949 version, Jo and Bhaer go to the opera together immediately after the plot in which Jo listens to Bhaer plays the piano and chats, but in the 1933 version, the two plots are separated by the

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parts of families. However, even both are set in the war, there are still differences between the two. The novel mainly presents the moral education of girls, while the 1949 version is devoted to expressing the post-war needs of the country as well as people’s affective needs through female characters.

<sup>38</sup> Stephanie Coontz. *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 222.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.



plots in which Aunt March and Amy visit Jo. The continuity of the romantic scenes resulting from the change in the order of the narrative, which is arranging the plots of the two people's relationship progress together, helps the audience to build up romantic feelings, thus creating a romantic atmosphere.

To sum up, the changes in the plots in the 1949 version form the shaping of a romanticized and idealized family, but the shaping of both characteristics is based on the repression of Jo. The purpose of conveying the traditional gender division of labor is achieved by having Laurie devalue Jo's writing, and the progression of the professor's relationship with Jo is not accomplished through the writing (the interconnection of their inner worlds), but through stringing romantic scenes together. In other words, the writing becomes only a reason for Jo to reject Laurie, but not, in turn, a reason for Jo to choose the professor. Thus, Jo's writing is reduced to a tool of the director to create an atmosphere of the traditional family in the 1949 version.

In that case, female subjectivity as represented by Jo's literary ambitions is always suppressed in the male-dominated film industry, especially in the last century. However, Linda Williams dismisses early feminist film theorists' argument as an easy task that the only way to show the differences of women is to radically destruct narrative pleasure predominating by the male gaze, and she argues that it is better to "discover within these existing modes glimpse of a more 'authentic' (the term itself is indeed problematic) female subjectivity"<sup>40</sup> because it is "not

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<sup>40</sup> Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother." *Cinema Journal* 24.1 (1984): 2-27, p. 6.

only as a means of identifying what pleasure there is for women spectators within the classical narrative cinema but also as a means of developing new representational strategies that will more fully speak to women audience”.<sup>41</sup> In other words, Williams identifies and values the importance of the female audience for the establishment of female subjectivity. In the existing research of film adaptation of *Little Women* (1933), there is an analysis of the female audience, but it merely attempts to analyze the emergence of literary adaptations, including *Little Women*, under the Production Code in the 1930s and declares that during this period, Hollywood re-established itself as a family-oriented, mass-oriented cultural institution to maximize profits. Film scholar Noel Brown points out that “it was particularly significant in its privileging of adult female audience... Women were seen as driving the leisure activities of the ‘nuclear’ family. With the critical and commercial success of *Little Women*, the way was clear for ‘an era of literary films’ ”.<sup>42</sup> That is to say, the success of *Little Women* and its demonstration that the female audience is seen as the primary consumers and that films made for women are for commercial purposes rather than for women themselves. However, to analyze women film spectators of *Little Women* solely from this perspective would be to underestimate the power of women.

The significance of the audience lies not only in the business, but also in the construction of the meaning of the film itself. Meanwhile, the meaning of films is constructed not only through the film directors, screenwriters, and producers, but also through the audience’s communication. While it is true that the film industry has been dominated by patriarchy and the associated

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Noel Brown, “‘A New Movie-Going Public’- 1930s Hollywood and the Emergence of the ‘Family’ Film” in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 2013, p. 11.

marginalization of women, this does not mean that there is no way to break this ideology. When a female audience is confronted with patriarchal ideologies, they do not merely identify with the texts themselves and feel completely controlled by them or passive in response to them. Due to socio-cultural factors, women's historical and their own experiences also play a role in the constitution of the subjectivity of the female audience. The 1933 version was filmed after the Great Depression and the 1949 version was filmed after World War II. Yet, before the Great Depression and during World War II, women's movements had flourished and women's awareness and awakening of their own ability had occurred. Coontz documents the social transformation: "The idea that men and women should move in separate spheres swiftly collapsed. Between 1900 and the late 1920s the struggle for suffrage became a powerful international movement... Perhaps most shocking was the emergence of a new generation of women more interested in pursuing their personal liberation".<sup>43</sup> There are many layers of potential responsiveness by female viewers with varied affective dimensions. It cannot be denied that some women may relish and enjoy the film simply because it focuses on women characters in different personalities and female domestic life, which makes it easier for them to identify with the film. And even some women may feel comforted by the fact that Jo finds love at the end, which fulfills their fantasies of romance shaped by the long-lasting patriarchal values. At the same time, however, we cannot ignore the fact that some women who had experienced such

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<sup>43</sup> Stephanie Coontz. *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage*, Penguin Books, 2006, p. 197.

progress may reject the 1933 version's Jo who was portrayed as being domesticated by social norms, and pity her transformation into a well-mannered little woman.

Similar things happened during World War II. As historian Coontz observes, "In contrast with the Depression years, the government encouraged paid work for women, married as well as single, during the war years... World War II left a much more positive image of working women. For years afterward women spoke nostalgically about their wartime work experiences, and many sought to rejoin the workforce in the 1950s".<sup>44</sup> In other words, women did not willingly work or go back home simply because of the support of national policies or not. Although the social realities of the postwar time led to a sharp decline in job opportunities for women, this did not mean that women did not yearn for their own past work experience. Thus, when confronted with the 1949 version, not all female viewers would passively accept Laurie's disparaging attitude toward Jo's literary ambitions and believe that Jo should have given up writing. Some may be outraged by this show of condescension or patriarchal constraint.

Despite the diversity and complexity of women's experiences, the women audience had the ability to empathize with the two adaptations' female characters who were repressed and restrained by social norms according to their disparate experiences. Therefore, the way of enriching textual meaning to the reactions of female audience is an element that cannot be ignored in the discovery of female subjectivity in a severe patriarchal film industry in the 1930s and 1940s.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 221-222.

By 1994, *Little Women* received its first film adaptation led by a female director and screenwriter and incorporated contemporary progressive feminist perspectives into the plot. Marmee in the 1994 version could represent feminism most. First, this version eliminates the sense of oppression, submission, and “Father’s moral emissary”<sup>45</sup> embodied in novelistic and previous versions’ representations of Marmee, and instead shapes her as “a powerful symbol of female agency”.<sup>46</sup> The phrase “little women” is used by Marmee in a different circumstance but does not come directly from Mr. March in his letter, which shows a “maternal directive from a strong, self-possessed woman”.<sup>47</sup> In contrast to the forceful presence of Marmee, the 1994 version has the least present role of the father among the four film adaptations. Without his “moral emissary” Marmee, Mr. March is no longer an omnipresent influence from afar as in previous versions. Also, among the four adaptations, only the 1994 version has the father appearing injured, his left arm is bandaged up,<sup>48</sup> which presents a fragile father figure, and it contrasts with the strong Marmee.

Second, Marmee in the 1994 version has a closer and more guiding relationship with the four March sisters. When Laurie is playing in the snow with Jo, Beth, and Amy, Marmee says to John that “it is my opinion that young girls are no different than boys in their need for exertion. Feminine weakness and fainting spells are direct result of our confining young girls to the house bent over their needlework in restrictive corsets”.<sup>49</sup> After Amy comes home from school after

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<sup>45</sup> Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, “A Feminist Romance: Adapting Little Women to the Screen” in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 1999, p. 180.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>48</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 01:01:32.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 00:20:06 – 00:20:16.

being punished by her teacher, Marmee criticizes Amy by saying that “you are more intent upon reshaping your dear little nose than in fashioning your character”.<sup>50</sup> Here Marmee’s opinions are rather close to that of Mary Wollstonecraft, who analyzed the causes of women’s state of degradation and criticized that “the thoughts of women ever hover around their persons, and is it surprising that their persons are reckoned most valuable... Sedentary employments render the majority of women sickly”.<sup>51</sup><sup>52</sup> After Meg feels unhappy at the prom because of some speculation from others, Marmee comforts Meg and Jo, hoping that they will not be satisfied with “being merely decorative”, and says that “your humor, your kindness, and your moral courage. These are the things I cherish so in you”.<sup>53</sup> When Jo rejects Laurie’s proposal and is restless to be told she cannot accompany Aunt March to Europe, Marmee encourages her that “you’re ready to go out and find a good use for your talent... Go and embrace your liberty”.<sup>54</sup>

Third, Marmee in the 1994 version is no longer merely a figure of emotional support and nurturance, but she is also a pragmatic and practical woman. On the one hand, Marmee demonstrates her medical knowledge. One by helping Meg with her sprained ankle<sup>55</sup>, a scene not found in both the 1933 and 1949 versions, and the other is Beth’s first illness — “it is Marmee’s knowledge of nursing care and homeopathic remedies that causes a reversal in Beth’s

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 00:24:25.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, Everyman, 1995, p. 86.

<sup>52</sup> Madeleine B. Stern points out that “Louisa Alcott’s championship of feminist causes was not confined to exercising her own limited right of suffrage. Her library apparently included both Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller” (p.434). As early feminists, the views of Fuller and Wollstonecraft that challenge gender essentialism were rather radical in the 19th century. In the 1960s and 70s, second-wave feminism argued that “Patriarchy, then, relies not so much on the biological differences between men and women as on deep-seated cultural interpretations that give them value and significance” (Susan James). In other words, the differences that are socially and culturally constructed between men and women are far greater than their own biological differences. And the anti-gender essentialist views were more justified in the 1990s.

<sup>53</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 00:43:48 – 00:44:08.

<sup>54</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 01:10:29 – 01:10: 42.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 00:19:07.

condition”.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, in addition to lecturing, Marmee also uses her actions to keep a strict eye on her four daughters’ education. When Marmee knew that Amy’s teacher struck her and told them that “it was as useful to educate a woman as to educate a female cat”<sup>57</sup>, she wrote the teacher a letter to denounce his behavior and inform him that she would withdraw Amy from the school. Therefore, it appears that Marmee guides the four March sisters as a “powerful symbol of female agency”<sup>58</sup> in the 1994 version, a generational sisterhood with her daughters is something that was not valued in the 1933 and 1949 versions.

Yet Hollinger and Winterhalter are critical of the powerful Marmee in the 1994 version as well as the generational sisterhood she conveys. In terms of the former, they believe that “the novel’s Marmee not only never expresses these progressive views, but often combines her somewhat reformist notions with more regressive opinions”.<sup>59</sup> The criticism of the 1994 version’s Marmee by means of inconsistency with the novel is frequent in Hollinger and Winterhalter’s article. But this criticism means that film adaptations are considered as ‘sub-literary’ and ‘parasite’ genre<sup>60</sup> that is inferior to literature, which is unfair to adaptation works. And Stam argues that “An important set of questions concerning adaptation has to do with context”.<sup>61</sup> In other words, rather than focusing on form or the literature, it is worthier to consider the shift from literature to film as an operation and practice of discourse in different

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<sup>56</sup> Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, “A Feminist Romance: Adapting Little Women to the Screen” in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 1999, p. 182.

<sup>57</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 00:24:34.

<sup>58</sup> Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, “A Feminist Romance: Adapting Little Women to the Screen” in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 1999, p. 181.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>60</sup> Stam, Robert. “Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation.” *Literature and Film*. Eds. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. 1-52, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

historical, social, and cultural contexts. Therefore, the 1994 version expresses direct and simple feminist ideas through the portrayal of the robust female agency of Marmee, which reflects contemporary values and political concerns in order to speak to its contemporary audience.

In terms of the generational sisterhood, Hollinger and Winterhalter refer to it as “a romance of sisterhood”, and states that “it does so not through providing a serious consideration of the history of women’s consciousness raising, but through the fantasy of agency it offers”.<sup>62</sup> In other words, they argue that the 1994 version diminishes the complexity of the novel and that it presents feminism as too simple and straightforward. In my opinion, however, the 1994 version had no alternative but to simplify. It is true that women’s film is much more than simply reflecting their lives and experiences, it is more important to be able to stand in women’s shoes and to truly reflect their thoughts, confusions and contradictions, their struggles and compromises, their miseries and hopes, and their ways of being, but when women who have been suppressed for a long time are allowed to direct a story written by a woman and telling the story of women’s growth, that consciousness of redemption and a prominent voice for women is justified at the beginning of the exploration of the new female image.

As the marginal and disadvantaged group, women are usually submissive, so when they attempt to enter the mainstream discourse to speak for themselves, it is usually a simple picture of rebellion, which is reflected in the 1994 version is to enhance the strength of Marmee while weakening the strength of the father. In the initial rebellion, there is not much room for women’s

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<sup>62</sup> Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, “A Feminist Romance: Adapting Little Women to the Screen” in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 1999, p. 190.



self-discovery, self-formation, and self-struggle. However, 25 years later, feminine consciousness and feminism are more maturely embodied in the 2019 version, and the plot has become more multilevel and diverse.

As I mentioned in chapter two, the 2019 version is more of a story about the dilemmas different women face than a coming-of-age story. In the female community, in addition to the relationship of the four March sisters analyzed in chapter two, Marmee is also a character that makes up the sisterhood. Unlike a “romance of sisterhood” in the 1994 version, the 2019 version is realistic in its generational sisterhood. Marmee in the 2019 version is still a positive role model for the March sisters but she is not a preacher and an unassailable guide to educate her daughters. In other words, she does not interfere with the March sisters’ growth like the 1994 version does, and she is not a smooth-sailing woman without troubles.

When Meg was invited to a debutante ball, Marmee told her that “just be who you are” and told John that “girls have to go into the world and make up their own minds about things”.<sup>63</sup> This seems like empowering women to have autonomy and make their own choices, but the 2019 version does not enrich Meg’s struggle in the face of choices as much as it does in shaping Jo and Amy and neglects the fact that “personal autonomy depends on certain enabling conditions that are insufficiently present in women’s lives”.<sup>64</sup> Marmee here allows Jo to “go into the world”, but Meg’s choice is limited to whether she would attend a debutante ball, a woman’s activity. In other words, on the one hand, the contradiction between Marmee’s wording and the

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<sup>63</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 00:54:35 – 00:55:00.

<sup>64</sup> Amy R. Baehr, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Liberal Feminism, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-liberal/>, March 4, 2021.

situation that Meg does not actually have many choices makes a fact clearer that even when women have a relatively tolerant small community, the structural oppression in the larger environment “steers women into socially preferred ways of life”,<sup>65</sup> which makes Marmee somewhat impotent and pale. On the other hand, however, the 2019 version’s presentation of Meg’s choices is limited to this, as it only shows how Meg changes from a woman who fears poverty to one who chooses to marry for love but missed how Meg becomes a representative of the traditional women among the four sisters under the influence of the social context and circumstances.

As for Marmee’s time with Jo, she says less and is more of a listener of Jo. She does not instill many explicit practices in her daughters as 1994’ Marmee told Jo to embrace her liberty, but she emphasizes that they should remain true to their nature. After Jo and Amy fell out, Marmee told Jo that “there are some natures too noble to curb, and too lofty to bend”.<sup>66</sup> And when Jo planned to give up writing, Marmee talked about friendship and love with her. She does not say too much to Jo but guides her to consider her situation.<sup>67</sup> As it is, every conversation between Marmee and Jo is equal communication, not a teaching of a powerful elder woman to a young woman. Also, when Jo is troubled by her hot temper, Marmee says to her that “I’m angry nearly every day of my life... I’m not patient by nature, but with nearly 40 years of effort. I’m

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 00:53:05.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 01:40:03 – 01:43:03.

learning to not let it get the better of me”.<sup>68</sup> The dilemmas women face will not diminish with age, and every woman in the small female community has troubles, even Marmee.

In addition to the changes in Marmee’s image, where the 2019 version progresses is in the discussion of the relationship between women, their economic status, and marriage. When Jo says to Aunt March that “I intend to make my own way in the world”, Aunt March replies that “no one makes their own way...least of all a woman. You’ll need to marry well.” And in their communication, Jo recognizes the reality that “the only way to be an unmarried woman is to be rich, but there are precious few ways for women to make money”.<sup>69</sup> The dialogue shows the limited choices and economic dilemmas women face. Employment for women in the 19th century was difficult and options were few, limited to jobs such as housewife, seamstress, and governess, so women generally needed to secure a stable financial source through marriage. In contemporary times, although women have more job options and opportunities and better pay than in the 19th century, women are still structurally oppressed in patriarchal capitalism. Besides, when Amy talked about marriage with Laurie, she said that “I’ve always known I would marry rich, why should I be ashamed of that”, “I just a woman, and as a woman, there is no way for me to make my own money”, and “don’t sit there and tell me that marriage isn’t an economic proposition, because it is”.<sup>70</sup> As a woman from a less affluent family, Amy must make sensible compromises to marry for the money in the face of the reality of her lack of artistic talent and the difficult position of women in a capitalist patriarchal society.

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<sup>68</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 00:52:33 – 00:52:48.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:35:24 – 00:36:03.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:05:34 – 01:06:20.

Although the portrayal of Meg as a conservative figure is somewhat insufficient, Meg, Jo, and Amy in the 2019 version are distinct about what they need and the struggles of their different life experiences are portrayed in more detail, which breaks the feminist vacuum that seems to have left the four March sisters in the 1994 version unencumbered by the patriarchy and makes the 2019 version more realistic. The authenticity reflects the multiple female subjectivities and is in line with the various affective needs of contemporary female audience. Some women may enjoy Meg's abandonment of upper classes and wealth for love and identify with her fondness for running a household with her poor husband. Some may identify with Amy's pragmatic view of marriage and feel upset about the economic disadvantage of women in marriage. Some women may empathize with Amy's candidness and unflinching acknowledgment that economic facts still limit women's opportunities. And some women may be cheerful about Jo achieving her literary ambitions, may empathize with her loneliness as an unorthodox woman and the difficulties Jo encounters in her step-by-step journey to make a success in the publishing.

The choices of different plots and the arrangement of the order of the plots show the disparate era's view of marriage and the negotiation of power between male and female characters. With the gradual shift away from the traditional patriarchal perspective of romantic marriage and the increasing prominence, richness, and vividness of female characters, the subjectivity of women becomes stronger and stronger.

**CHAPTER FOUR:**  
**THE AUTHORSHIP AND CHANGES OF STRUCTURE IN THE 1994 AND 2019**  
**VERSIONS**

The adapters of both the 1994 and 2019 versions are women, and this shift in discourse is reflected not only in the changes of femininity of the various characters and the plots but also in the female filmmaker's grasp of the authorship. As feminist film scholar Shelley Cobb comments, "adaptation is appealing for women filmmakers and that the main point of subversion is in the authorial function... the figure of the women author is key for thinking about female authorship as a metaphor for female agency".<sup>71</sup> In other words, the importance of adaptation for female filmmakers lies in the importance of authorship for female subjectivity. In the 1990s and contemporary contexts, the embodiment of female subjectivity can also be seen in multiple as well as intersecting authorships – Alcott as the novelist, Jo as the writer, and Armstrong/Gerwig as directors/screenwriters. And the use of authorship also provides an explanation for understanding the revelation of the relationship between repressed female desire and sociocultural constraints in the novels implicitly and in the 1933 and 1949 versions.

Rioux points out that "Alcott wrote from her own life, creating the most lifelike book for children that had yet appeared. As a result, she became a celebrity not only as the author of *Little*

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<sup>71</sup> Shelley Cobb. *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 15.

*Women* but also as its protagonist, Jo March”.<sup>72</sup> That is, as a semi-autobiographical novel, it is full of Jo projected by Alcott. At the same time, however, Alcott’s writing of *Little Women* was not a spontaneous act, but rather a response to the publisher’s request to “write a girl’s book”.<sup>73</sup> And “she was realizing her dual dreams of independence and supporting her family”.<sup>74</sup> As for marriage, Alcott would rather “be a free spinster and paddle her own canoe”.<sup>75</sup> Thus, for Alcott, writing *Little Women* was money-driven. That is, some of Jo’s choices and the ending of Jo’s marriage in the novel were not Alcott’s original intention, but rather the result of a utilitarian purpose and helplessness to compromise with the market and the mainstream concept and were fictionalized by Alcott to cater to the female readers and the male-dominated press at that time. Therefore, it can be said that the fates of Alcott and Jo take separate routes after Jo comes to adulthood. From Alcott to the four Hollywood film adaptations, no Jo among them has ever gotten away from being married and a romantic prospect in the 150 years, even in the feminist 1994 and 2019 version. (I offer an analysis of Jo’s ending in the 1994 version as well as the ingeniously conceived 2019 version later.)

The 1994 version by female director Gillian Armstrong, in collaboration with female screenwriter Robin Swicord, first projected some points of Alcott herself onto Jo. In addition to the weakening of Mr. March and the strengthening of Marmee mentioned in chapter three, the 1994 version breaks the third-person perspective of the novel and the 1933 and 1949 versions,

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<sup>72</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 19.

<sup>73</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

making Jo the narrator of the story of the four March sisters through voiceover. Accompanied by music and a snowy outdoor scene, Jo unveils the story of the March family in a short monologue about the family and the background of the story.<sup>76</sup> Jo's second voiceover shows when and what she usually writes – "Late at night, my mind would come alive with voices and stories and friends as dear to me as any in the real world. I gave myself up to it, longing for transformation".<sup>77</sup> Jo's third and fourth voiceover both show the turning points of the March sisters' story, which are Meg's wedding (the first of the four sisters to leave) and Jo's arrival in New York (Jo says goodbye to her childhood), respectively. Thus, Jo's voiceover not only opens the film's narrative, makes clear Jo's love of writing, but also guides the narrative at key points in time. Jo's authorship is given by Alcott at first, but in the film, making Jo the narrator in the film adaptation is the second authorship given to her by Armstrong as well as Swicord. Through the medium of film, Jo could tell her story through her own words. Besides, in both the 1933 and 1949 versions, Jo's final published book was titled *My Beth*, but the 1994 version named Jo's novel *Little Women* for the first time. These practices not only unite the authorship of Alcott, Jo, and the female filmmakers but also weave together fact and fiction, that is, they make a connection between Alcott's biography, the novel, and contemporary values and feminist consciousness.

However, Jo's authorship in the 1994 version is not consistently linked with Alcott, as it still does not break away from the pursuit of romantic love. As Cobb claims that "the postfeminist

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<sup>76</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 00:02:54 – 00:03:17.

<sup>77</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 00:06:07 – 00:06:19.

intertwining of Jo's authorship with romance and independence with coupledness are signified by how Bhaer's delivery of the novel is also the novel's delivery of Bhaer to Jo. Authorship has brought her romance and romance has brought her authorship".<sup>78</sup> Yet Cobb simultaneously argues that "their union is not one of equals... Jo's authorial identity is fulfilled before the conclusion of her romantic narrative... Bhaer is a man not beholden to the conventional sexual division of labor",<sup>79</sup> which means that Bhaer is not a traditional masculine figure, and like Mr. March, is a weakened male character. However, I believe that the reason there is a feminist rereading on Bhaer is that his love for Jo closely relates to Jo's writing. (For example, they first meet when he knocked Jo's manuscript off, and he says to Jo that "you know that when first I saw you, I thought 'Ah! She is a writer'".<sup>80</sup> And Bhaer discusses the plot of Jo's novel with her). And Bhaer in the 1994 version is actually not as much weakened as Mr. March. In other words, Bhaer still represents male authority and the relationship between Bhaer and Jo is still traditional romantic love under patriarchy, even erodes Jo's authorship.

First, as in the previous versions, Bhaer remains the guide for Jo's writing, and his mentorship is made more convincing by scenes that he has several literary conversations with Jo. For instance, by saying that "you should be writing from life, from the depths of your soul. There is nothing in here of the woman that I am privilege to know... there is more to you than this if you have the courage to write it",<sup>81</sup> Bhaer becomes the one who encourages Jo to write about

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<sup>78</sup> Shelley Cobb. *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 90.

<sup>79</sup> Shelley Cobb. *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 90.

<sup>80</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 01:13:50.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:31:43 – 01:32:08.



her own life experiences. More specifically, although Jo's act of writing and her literary ambition are supported by Marmee and Beth as I mentioned before, the content of her writing requires Bhaer's guidance and approval, which makes Jo capitulate to the central importance of male authority. And because the 1994 version establishes the two's love with Jo's writing, Jo's adoption of Bhaer's writing advice reflects Jo's dual capitulation to both male authority and romantic love. Second, in the political discussion, Bhaer interrupts other men to help Jo get time to express her view that women should vote. And after Jo finished speaking, the shot shifted to Bhaer staring at Jo.<sup>82</sup> On the one hand, this shot reflects that women's right to speak in public space is not easy to come by, which is a realistic representation of the fact that women would not be listened to without male recognition in the 19th century, but on the other hand, as a progressive woman, the fact that Jo's speech needs Bhaer to provide an opportunity is contradictory to Jo's character. As for the shot gazing at Jo, the male gaze here goes beyond the way in which Laura Mulvey criticizes the presentation of women as sexual objects in order to please the heterosexual male audience. The quite literal gaze of Bhaer looking at Jo embodies the male judgment and scrutiny of women, that is, women are still objects to be viewed by men but in a "progressive" rather than sexual way. Thus, the opinion that "women should vote not because they are angels and men are animals but because we are human beings"<sup>83</sup> expressed by Jo in this scene is reduced to her trait that is appreciated by Bhaer and thus a catalyst for accelerating their romantic love. In this case, the feminist opinion is not meant to emphasize

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<sup>82</sup> Gillian Armstrong. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Columbia Pictures, 1994, 01:19:18 – 01:19:53.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 01:19:26 – 01:19:28.

female subjectivity and entitlement, but rather becomes another expression of catering to men in terms of intellect. In other words, it is men who have the right to declare whether a woman is interesting, attractive, and progressive. Third, in the 1994 version, the richness of the presentation of Jo's life in New York provides Jo and Bhaer with more space, which aids in the romanticization of their relationship and does not seem rushed. In this version, Jo kisses Bhaer for the first time, one while seeing the opera, and another is in the "under the umbrella" scene. Therefore, Alcott and Jo remain separated in the second half of the 1994 version. It does not break out of the rut of focusing on romantic love and good marriage.

The 2019 version, written and directed by Greta Gerwig, uses Jo's writing experience directly as the narrative thread, making the relationship between the novel and Alcott's life closer. In other words, the film is about how *Little Women* is created. It opens with Alcott's remark, "I've had lots of troubles, so I write jolly tales",<sup>84</sup> and then comes the first 15-second scene of the film. Jo, dressed in black, stands in front of the office of a New York publishing house, head bowed and hesitant, with her back in the center of the frame, confined by a rectangle framed by signs representing male-oriented clubs and publications. Finally, Jo walks through the hustle and bustle of men's territory, handing over her manuscript to the male editor, rather raw and nervous, in exchange for \$20 for a large deletion, and being told that "if the main character is a girl, make sure she is married by the end, or dead, either way".<sup>85</sup> The arrangements of female characters' fates mirror that of the four sisters in Alcott's novel – Beth dies, Meg, Jo, and Amy all

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<sup>84</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 00:01:03.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:03:54.

marry. And near the end of the film, Gerwig devotes nearly four minutes to Jo's writing about *Little Women* day and night in the wake of Beth's death. At the end of the film, Jo holds her *Little Women*, again in a 10-second shot, but this time through the window of the editor's office, with a complicated look on her face in front of the camera, which echoes the back of Jo in the opening shot. From the opening shot to the closing shot, the background sound is from the small and noisy human voice to calm piano music; the brightness of the picture is from dark to light; the state of Jo is from nervous and inexperienced to happy, determined, confident, and satisfied; the presentation of Jo is from the behind to the front. The metaphorical transformations indicate not only Jo's personal growth as a female writer but also a woman who is socially effaced finally becomes visible – the ambitious Jo/Alcott has finally left her name in the world of literature.

The narrative of narrowing the gap between Alcott and Jo cannot be separated from the major structural changes made in the 2019 version. This is the only one of the four adaptations with a non-linear narrative. Some people expressed discontent with this. Cassandra Neyenesch in her film review believes that Gerwig's "version of *Little Women* is deft, chronologically remixed, unsentimental, and deeply personal—perhaps even a 21st-century feminist fantasy. But in that sense, it's more like the story of four Greta Gerwigs than of young women living in the 19th century. As such, it's very accomplished. But it's not *Little Women*".<sup>86</sup> That is, the 2019 version is not Alcott's *Little Women*, but Gerwig's. Neyenesch views Gerwig's version as a fracture from Alcott's original. But in my opinion, incorporating current ideas and thoughts in classical stories

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<sup>86</sup> Cassandra Neyenesch, "How Greta Gerwig's '*Little Women*' Misses the Mark" in *Public Books*, February 2020, p. 3.

is what the adaptation is. Gerwig's major change to the structure is a reflection of her subjectivity and authorship as a female director.

As mentioned earlier, while the 1994 version also embodies the combination of Alcott, Jo, and the female filmmakers, this combination, especially that of Alcott and Jo, separates halfway through. Furthermore, although the first-person narrative establishes Jo as the narrator of the story, this narrative is only reflected in Jo's voiceover, and the story is not seen to be told from Jo's point of view in terms of mise-en-scene. Let alone that Jo's voiceover only appears four times in the two-hour film adaptation. Thus, the role of the first-person perspective on the union of Jo, Alcott, and the female filmmakers is limited in the 1994 version. However, the 2019 version makes the intertextual relationship between the three authors explicit and close.

Using Jo's creation of *Little Women* as the thread ensures the union of Jo and Alcott, and the crossover montage from the beginning to the end combines Gerwig with Jo and Alcott tightly. For a story that has existed for over 150 years and has been adapted for films and TV shows many times, the synopsis of *Little Women* is familiar to many viewers. As a relatively modern device, the non-linear narrative not only makes the audience feel fresh to the classic story but also enables them more easily aware of the director's presence as an author. The 2019 version shifted time and space 33 times, with each lasting an average of 3 minutes and 9 seconds, the longest being just 8 minutes and 43 seconds. In addition to expressing Gerwig's authorship in the structure, the crossover montage recombination of different time and space also contributes to emphasize Gerwig's intention in the content. For example, as I mentioned before, the 2019 version intentionally addresses the relationship between marriage and the economic status of

women. Gerwig arranges the following three scenes together – Meg recognizes the hypocrisy of the upper classes at the debutante ball (seven years ago); Meg and John sit in the dark cabin arguing over their poverty (seven years later), and Amy is accused by Laurie that she might be engaged to someone else because of money (seven years later in Paris). Editing the three scenes together strengthens Gerwig’s presentation of the different choices (love or money) women make when facing marriage and the price they have to pay for each choice. In order to reduce the chaos in the non-linear narrative, Gerwig uses warm tones to show the plots seven years ago, and cool tones to show those seven years later. Besides, the warm tones confer the four March sisters a colorful and carefree childhood, while the cool tones suggest the hardship they face as young adults. In short, the frequent use of crossover montage and the director’s use of warm and cold tones in this two-hour and 15-minute film constantly reminds the audience that this is a brand-new *Little Women* that has been carefully choreographed and recreated by the director.

The scene in the 2019 version that best exemplifies the union of Alcott, Jo, and Gerwig is the “under the umbrella” scene and the associated scene that discussion between Jo and the publisher about the end of the novel and royalties. Alcott once said that “I won’t marry Jo to Laurie to please any one”.<sup>87</sup> And she complains about readers who want to know whom the March sisters would marry and said that “as if that was the only end and aim of a woman’s life”.<sup>88</sup> However, Alcott eventually surrenders to the market and the publisher and marries Jo to Bhaer, an unkempt, unattractive, and poor German professor with a “fine head”.<sup>89</sup> If Alcott’s eventual

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<sup>87</sup> Anne Boyd Rioux, *Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, W. W. Norton Company, 2018, p. 15.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>89</sup> Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women*. Signet Classics, 2004. (First published September 30th, 1868), p. 483.

marriage of Jo to Bhaer is her compromise and mockery of readers and publishers, then the 2019 version's combination of "under the umbrella" scene with the bargaining between Jo and the publisher as well as the high romanticization of "under the umbrella" scene is Gerwig's compromise and mockery of both previous and modern audience and the film market, and it is also Gerwig's way of narrowing the distance between Alcott and Jo. Even 150 years later, Gerwig still cannot definitely refuse to marry Jo off. This is a reluctant and passive choice of Gerwig as a film director limited by the market and capital, which is similar to the limitations that Alcott faced before.

In the cool tone, Jo confidently shares an equal perspective with the male editor (in the opening scene, Jo stands warily in conversation with the editor), and offers the idea that she is unwilling to marry Jo off. When Jo said that "I suppose marriage has always been an economic proposition. Even in fiction", the editor replies that "it is romance". And Jo continues that "it is mercenary".<sup>90</sup> After this scene, in the warm tone, Jo gets off the wagon to find Bhaer. The music here is lively and gorgeous, and Ronan gives her most exaggerated performance in the entire film. Her facial expressions are pretentious, and she speaks in a frivolous tone. Besides, Amy and Meg acted with extraordinary excitement and shot that "Go! Go! Kiss him, Ms. March!". As bystanders, they were in line with the audience's perspective. In this scene, Amy and Meg could be seen as the audience and publisher that Alcott and Gerwig want to mock.<sup>91</sup> After concluding the negotiation about the ending of Jo, the scene returns to a cool tone. In the bargaining over

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<sup>90</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 02:03:26 – 02:03:35.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 02:03:37.

royalties, Jo weighs in favor of negotiation by reaffirming the ending of her heroine, and she said that “if I’m going to sell my heroine into marriage for money, I might as well get some of it”.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the sequence of these scenes not only confirms Jo’s earlier statement that “marriage has always been an economic proposition, even in fiction. It is mercenary” but also is a rebellion against traditional romantic love through the open ending presented by the non-linear narrative.

It is worth mentioning that in the 2019 version, the plot of Jo rejecting Laurie’s proposal gives the audience reason to believe that the open ending is more inclined to Jo not getting married in the film. Looking back to the 1994 version, Jo rejects Laurie on the grounds that their personalities are incompatible, and they cannot avoid quarreling, and that Laurie likes the elegant society, which Jo loathes. In the 2019 version, however, in addition to pointing out the problem of their personality and disagreeable hobbies as in previous versions, Jo goes further and points out to Laurie that “Teddy, I don’t believe I will ever marry. I am happy as I am. And I love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up”.<sup>93</sup> However, Laurie counters by arguing that “I think you’ll find someone, and love them, and you will live and die for them because that’s your way, and you will”.<sup>94</sup> The 2019 version makes clear the reason why Jo does not want to marry (which is different from the 1933 and 1949 versions in which Jo simply says that “I don’t think I will ever marry”), that is, Jo believes that marriage is a shackle for her. Laurie, however, believes that Jo will get married and even envisions the way Jo loves others. If the first 3 versions were based on the premise that both Jo and Laurie would get married, only for Jo to refuse because

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 02:06:02 – 02:06:06.

<sup>93</sup> Greta Gerwig. *Little Women* [Film on streaming media]. Sony Pictures Entertainment, 2019, 01:39:03 - 01: 39:10.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 01:39:12 - 01:39:18.

she thought it was inappropriate with Laurie, but the 2019 version does not base on this premise. In other words, the 2019 version portrays Jo's refusal to marry Laurie as a conflict of different attitudes towards marriage, rather than a conflict of choosing whom to marry, which makes the balance of this open ending inclines towards the interpretation that Jo does not get married.

In the 2019 version, as Alcott, Jo, and Gerwig become one, having wrested the power of discourse and the narrative from the male directors who hold the gaze among the Hollywood films of the early 20th century, Gerwig, after digging into the real history of publication in the Alcott's era, imaginatively and vividly recreates the reality of the scene when Alcott faced the publisher's request to revise the ending, while also revealing the real historical dilemma of women writers in the 1860s. Judy Simons in her film review states that "it is Gerwig's reading of Alcott's life-writing plus her other stories and sketches that give this coming-of-age narrative its rich texture".<sup>95</sup> That is, there are parallels between Gerwig's personal career experience of going from an actress to a successful director and Alcott's of going from an unknown writer to a successful author. I agree with this point since the rich texture stems not only from a female coming-of-age story that most women can reflect themselves on different female characters in the story but from Gerwig's similar authorship to Alcott's. In addition to the rich feelings such as joys and sorrows of growing up as a young girl, more importantly, Gerwig is more empathetic to Alcott as an author. On the one hand, the integration of triple authorship in the 2019 version suggests a reference to the reality of female creators today. 150 years after the publication of

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<sup>95</sup> Judy Simons, "The Afterlives of Louisa May Alcott: Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*" in *Adaptation*, June 2020, p. 279.



Alcott's novel, women's desire to make literary work a lifelong career, to reject marriage, and to take full control of their work and their lives without male domination, has not yet become a reality. Copyright, ownership, the complex entanglement of women with money and marriage remains strikingly consistent with the core issue facing contemporary female creators. On the other hand, Gerwig uses Jo's figure of the female author, given by Alcott, and the medium of film adaptation to transform the union of Alcott, Jo, and Gerwig into a larger female agency, given by the female authorship. It awakens the self-effaced value orientation and creative initiative that have long been under a repressive structure, which is the embodiment of contemporary female filmmakers' strategies.

Although the 1994 version does not combine Jo and Alcott throughout, its first-person narrative perspective and the non-linear narrative of the 2019 version are a breakthrough in the way of storytelling of *Little Women*. It brings about the overlap of multiple authors in reality and fiction, and thus creating a powerful female agency, which means that female subjectivity both inside and outside the film can be reflected in this female authorship/ agency.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### CONCLUSION

My thesis explores how the female voice becomes more self-conscious about the limits and possibilities of female subjectivities in the four Hollywood film adaptations of *Little Women* by doing a chronological analysis of femininity of female characters, plots and male characters, and the film structure as well as authorship. Both the 1933 and 1949 versions have little room for female subjectivity in characterization and plotting, and both Jo are portrayed in terms of the constraints and discipline imposed on women by the patriarchal society. However, according to Linda Williams, by demonstrating the importance of the audience to the construction of the meaning of films, the complex and multi-layered emotions possessed by large amounts of female audience reassert the female subjectivity for the 1933 and 1949 versions of *Little Women*.

Both 1994 and 2019 versions embody feminist qualities in their portrayal of female characters and plotting. The former constructs a fantasy of an ideal feminist community for the four March sisters and audience by depicting the powerful presence of Marmee. However, Hollinger and Winterhalter criticized the 1994 version for its over-simplistic presentation of feminism and for some of the plot changes that were inconsistent with the original. On the one hand, the simplistic and straightforward feminism is related to the fact that women have taken over the reins from male directors for the first time in terms of *Little Women*. And on the other

hand, according to Robert Stam, the evaluation of a film adaptation based on fidelity is unfair to the adaptation. The 2019 version presents a more realistic female community of diverse and mutually supportive women by providing the four March sisters with four different situations but not just different personalities. Despite the warmth of this female community, the four young sisters have their own dilemmas, which are also faced by different kinds of women in the real world today. And Marmee, as an elder woman, also has troubles, which dissolves her image as sacred and flawless in the 1994 version and makes the generational sisterhood more actual. Yet, because the 2019 version focuses much on the realistic Amy and progressive Jo, it neglects to care for the formation of Meg's conservatism.

Besides, in terms of the structure of the two films, they both capture the qualities of a film adaptation with a female author as both the novel and protagonist in the novel, integrating the female filmmakers with Jo and Alcott to strengthen the female agency by the united authorship – the 1994 version is narrated in Jo's first-person perspective through voiceover, while the 2019 version resorts to a non-linear narrative. But as Shelley Cobb notes, "like many contemporary postfeminist romances of the 1990s, the narrative conclusion for a woman's heritage film heroine requires signs of both independence and traditional romance",<sup>96</sup> the 1994 version still does not escape the conservative ending. In contrast, the 2019 version shows Gerwig's projection of Alcott with an open ending, that is, both are under the pressure from capitalist patriarchy and therefore cannot fully follow their inner thoughts to arrange the fate of their characters. In this

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<sup>96</sup> Shelley Cobb. *Adaptation, Authorship, and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 88.

respect, Gerwig's expression of the plight of female creators by authorship also makes the 2019 version realistic.

Film adaptation must be placed in their specific context to research and analyze. By analyzing the four Hollywood film adaptations of *Little Women* that span the 20th and 21st centuries and are directed through a shift from male directors to female directors, my project identifies the relationship between the female subjectivity they present and their respective times. It allows us to consider images of female characters in films in the future, the power of women in the film industry, the complicated way in which the meaning of a film that constituted by the audience, and the dilemmas women still face in both daily life and the process of creating.

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