

Empowering the Girls: Feminism in *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *Emily Series* by Lucy Maud Montgomery

Rezky Madani

University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom, (rezky.madani.16@aberdeen.ac.uk)

Abstract: — Children’s literature is not always about the simple, domestic life stories that are entertaining for children. Some of it promotes the severe theme, like *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *Emily Series* by Lucy Maud Montgomery which encourages many readers in questioning the idea of womanhood in nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jo in *Little Women* and Emily in *Emily Series* represent women’s determination to escape from common prejudices of women in that period. This study intends to see how these women authors express their idea of femininity in a patriarchal society existed at the time their books are published. Since the books come from different countries; America and Canada, their similarities and differences in representing feminist idea are also worth to investigate.

Both writers seem to agree with Frances B. Cogan’s theory of “The Real Womanhood” that define women as a multitalented creature with feminine and masculine qualities inside them. Women can fulfil their responsibility at home; as good wives, mothers or daughters, and be independent; having their dream, achieve it and contribute to the community as well. The story in *Little Women* and *Emily Series* present that marriage and work are compatible and that everyone should embrace themselves no matter how much society tries to restrict and define the role of women.

Keywords: children’s literature, femininity, feminism, masculinity, womanhood.

1. Introduction

Talking about women, their characteristics, their cultural representation, and their roles in society are only some of the discussions that people have long since debated. Many communities, organisations, and projects have focused on gender equality, where women and men are supposed to have the same opportunities through equal rights in society. This has been the primary goal of the feminist movement. This dissertation, however, discusses feminist ideas in children’s books during the Victorian period. The nineteenth century was a period in which feminism first arose and was acknowledged by society. Concurrently, the mid-nineteenth-century was a golden era for children’s literature, during which countless books for children were published and gained popularity.

The works that will be elaborated on in this dissertation are *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott and the *Emily* series by Lucy Maud Montgomery, which comprises *Emily of New Moon* (1923), *Emily Climbs* (1925), and *Emily’s Quest* (1927). There has been significant feminist criticism about *Little Women*, as the story is extremely popular. I added the *Emily* series because the books tell similar stories of domesticity, in which the heroine tries to break the stereotype of women. However, since the *Emily* series is Canadian and was published in the early twentieth century, the book has certain distinction that are different from *Little Women*. The aim of this dissertation is to observe whether feminist ideas are expressed and represented in *Little Women* and the *Emily* series. I do not wish to imply that the novels are specifically examples of feminism, but rather that they include characteristics, characters, and events that can be interpreted as examples of feminist ideals.

2. Research Structure and Hypothesis

This paper will examine the feminist idea in books for children, *Little Women* and *Emily Series*. *Little Women* was first acknowledged for its family stories aimed at persuading girls to behave well, and face the hardness of life with genuine feeling. However, when notions of feminism are introduced, the story can be reinterpreted as a feminist narrative in which Jo March act as a representative. The *Emily* series, on the other

hand, describes the journey of a future writer from Canada who struggles to gain recognition for herself and her writing within the society. People despised Emily because of her outspoken and rebel attitude that most adults think inappropriate for girl.

Little Women and *Emily* series are not fully a representation of feminism. Rather, there are certain aspects in the books that speak of feminist values. Readers can see the development of the characters; Jo and Emily, from their childhood until being an adult, who are trying to fight the odds of the conventional and stereotype idea of being a female in nineteenth and early twentieth century. The aim of this research is to ascertain how Alcott and Montgomery represent their idea of women's self-liberation in their books for children, through the descriptions of characters and events. With this study, I hope to uncover the similarities and differences pertaining to how Alcott and Montgomery may encourage and influence readers with the feminist aspects of their work. From my analysis, it may be argued that both Alcott and Montgomery appears to be showing readers that marriage and having career concurrently is possible for women. Women do not need to choose between being a mother or achieving their dreams; they can do both, without the roles interfering with one another.

3. Analysis

Before explaining the feminist ideas appeared in *Little Women* and *Emily* Series, Francis B. Cogan's theory of "the real womanhood"¹ is essential to reveal as both authors are seems to agree with his theory of womanhood. Cogan's notion of "the real womanhood" refers to an ideal image of women that advocate intelligence, physical fitness, and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and cautious marriage. These ideal offers women a vision of themselves as naturally equivalent (rationally and emotionally) to men. Moreover, Cogan's ideal of women is not a feminist notion in which women are independent and somehow far removed from the notion of femininity, but a combination of two contrasting ideas, i.e., feminine and masculine. He hopes for the "multi-talented" women who 'survived but remained good daughters, good sisters, wives, and mothers because in their own eyes they were important to family and to society...'.² He hopes that his description of real womanhood can change the paradigm of women during the early nineteenth century that presume masculine women as quirky and anti-men.

Connecting feminism and children's literature, Lisa Paul in her article, *Feminism Revisited* (2005) argues that since the first feminist movement arose in nineteenth and early twentieth century, many critics have reinterpreted children's books to analyse the possibility of feminist ideas in it. She quotes Bixler's statement shows that '*The Secret Garden* and *Little Women* turn stories we thought were about the struggle to conform to the social order into stories about women's healing and successful communities of women.'³ Paul's theory of rereading and reinterpreting children's books results the other purposes and messages that authors for children's book, put consciously or subconsciously, in their texts for children.

In order to analyse the representation of womanhood in *Little Women* and *Emily* Series, I will explore the characteristics of girls' power as presented by Jo and Emily; such as the heroines' dominant roles, their determination to dream and be independent, and the similarities and differences between *Little Women* and *Emily* Series.

4. Dominant Main Characters

Jo March and Emily Byrd Starr are strong characters in their individual stories. They demonstrate a variety of girlish character qualities in children's stories centred on domesticity. Jo is a tomboy who loves to play like

¹ Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century* (United States of America: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 4.

² *Ibid*, p. 5.

³ Lisa Paul, 'Feminism Revisited' in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. by Peter Hunt, 2 edn. (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 114-127, (p. 117).

boys and befriend them. She is disappointed about being a girl, since her gender affords many restrictions.

‘I hate to think I’ve got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China-aster. It’s bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boys’ games, and work and manners. I can’t get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it’s worse than ever now, for I’m dying to go and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman.’⁴

Alcott attempts to describe Jo not only as a tomboy-girl, but also as the primary character that applies and conveys moral values in the story. Jo states on one occasion, ‘I don’t mind being a guy, if I’m comfortable’.⁵ Her character represents the spirit of a feminist who fights for freedom of speech and the freedom to express herself, despite of the culture stereotype that ask for a woman to act ladylike. She is an outspoken individual who is sincere towards those she loves. Jo has many unladylike habits such as having a quick temper, using slang words, and winking. She does not like to be called “Miss March”, since it sounds too ladylike, which she believes does not suit her personality. She also does not enjoy dance parties as much as her sisters; Meg and Amy because she is required to look and act elegant in the parties. However, when Jo is older, she tries to be feminine by learning knitting and keeping her temper under control.

Contrarily, Emily, who is an imaginative, sensitive, and outspoken girl from Prince Edward Island, struggles with people’s opinions of her. Since being a child, she enjoyed using her imagination and speaking in a straightforward manner, which annoyed many adults. They believe Emily acts too old for her age and it appears that everyone tries to impose on her acting like a ‘normal’ child. Even when she is an adult, there are still many occasions where the Murray family sneers at her decisions and opinions. Moreover, Emily is aware of her values as an individual. She has a sense of pride and since an early age, she spoke of justice and fairness, which was unusual among girls in her age. She is another heroine who subverts the stereotypical girl by speaking her opinions freely. She does not like a reality in which girls are restricted from doing something they like, simply because it is not ladylike. ‘So many jolly things seem to be unladylike. Sometimes I almost wish my aunts were infidels like Dr Burnley. *He* never bothers whether Ilse is unladylike or not. But no, it would not be good manner[s] to be an infidel. It would not be a New Moon tradishun.’⁶ This indicates that despite her dissatisfaction with the culture of her environment, Emily still adheres to restrictions and obey the rules, as Jo does.

By observing Jo and Emily’s personalities in *Little Women* and the *Emily* series, we can see that both girls have a straightforward manner in terms of stating their opinions. They demonstrate dominant characteristics despite being girls, Jo through her tomboyishness and Emily via her concept of self, which is a rare trait according to the stereotypical girl, who is required to be feminine and passive.

5. The Courage to Dream

Victorian women had been restricted in terms of expressing themselves. They were shaped by a culture that placed their value in being married and having a stable family. Alcott and Montgomery, with Jo and Emily’s passion for writing, respectively, attempts to subvert this ideal standard of Victorian society. From the start, *Little Women* denotes that Jo is a passionate writer who loves to read and who is writing a play. She has a special book and a special corner in her room where she writes her stories. She becomes absorbed for long periods of time in her own world, spending many hours writing without stopping when she is inspired. Jo has dreamed of being a writer since childhood, as indicated below:

‘I’d have a stable full of Arabian steeds, rooms piled with books, and I’d write out of a magic inkstand, so that my works should be as famous as Laurie’s music. I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, - something heroic or wonderful, - that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead... I think I shall write books, and

⁴ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (United States of America: Puffin Books, 2014), p. 152.

⁵ Ibid, p. 192.

⁶ Lucy Maud Montgomery, *Emily of New Moon* (Great Britain: Virago Press, 2013), p. 217.

get rich and famous; that would suit me, so that is *my* favorite dream.’⁷

Jo knows her purpose and her ability, which helps her to be persistent and to never give up on achieving her dreams. Jo’s other dream is ‘to be independent, and earn the praise of those she loved’.⁸ Her family, fortunately, has faith in her. They encourage her to keep writing and this sees her never doubt herself.

Unlike Jo, Emily, who is also passionate about writing, endure many difficulties in order to be accepted by the people around her. She starts her literary journey by writing a poem and despite receiving negative comments and mockery, she believes in her abilities, and in her dream. ‘Oh, father, I’ve just thought of something nice. When I grow up and write a great novel and make lots of money, I will buy the Disappointed House and finish it. Then it won’t be Disappointed any more’.⁹ Emily writes this in a letter to her father. For Emily, writing is not only something that she likes, but something that is part of her. She cannot help but write, because it is in her blood. For this reason, when Aunt Elizabeth forbids her to write a story, she feels confined. Aunt Elizabeth thinks that writing fiction is bad; that it is a wicked and sinful thing to do. To her, even reading a novel seems like dissociating our soul from God. Later, people who underestimate Emily’s abilities one by one begin to show their support, as Emily gains more recognition for her stories. Eventually, she succeeds in changing people’s judgments about her.

Both Jo and Emily represent a girl’s power. They believe in their dreams and never stop themselves from making an effort on behalf of their passions. Their stories exhibit the difficult work and persistence of girls who dream about being successful and useful individuals within their societies.

6. Idea of Independence

Jo and Emily also represent independence, both economically and ideologically in relationships. Through their careers, Jo and Emily succeed in earning money on their own merits. Their stories provide them with fame and a pleasant life for their families. Following Beth’s death, Jo writes an extremely successful book that helps her family to live comfortably. She pays her family’s debts and is able to spoil her mother with the money she earns. This proves Jo’s independence in terms of obtaining her own finances, something very few Victorian women were able to do. Another statement confirms Jo’s self-reliance. She states, ‘I don’t like favors; they oppress and make me feel like a slave; I’d rather do everything for myself, and be perfectly independent’.¹⁰ She is a reliable child whom her parents can trust. When Beth dies, Jo is the only child that her parents can rely on, since Meg is busy caring for her own family and Amy is in Europe.

Similarly, Emily’s published poems, short stories, and book allow her to repay Aunt Ruth, Uncle Oliver, and Uncle Wallace their money for having provided her with an education. Systematically, as her stories are published, she is able to repay this debt. Even though her uncles and aunt do not want to be repaid, Emily insists on doing so, because she does not want to rely on anyone. She wished to live according to her own efforts in order to prove to her family that she can make a living by writing stories, something they all initially doubt. Aunt Elizabeth eventually accepts Emily’s stories and supports her work alongside the other Murray family members.

In terms of relationships, both heroines show similarities by persistently refusing men and declaring their intention to stay single. Even after Laurie, her best friend, proposes to her, Jo refuse him, saying, ‘I don’t believe I shall ever marry; I am happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man’.¹¹ She hates the fact that Meg is married, giving up her freedom to a man. Knowing that John likes her sister disgusts Jo: ‘I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her safe in the family.’¹² She believes that marriage is an end to peace, fun, and happy times. Jo rejects all thoughts about relationships and marriage.

⁷ Alcott, p. 224-25.

⁸ Ibid., p. 246.

⁹ Montgomery, *Emily of New Moon*, p. 253.

¹⁰ Alcott, p. 469.

¹¹ Alcott, p. 578-79.

¹² Ibid., p. 318.

However, when she is old enough and not yet married, she contemplates her life and realises that she is lonely, as indicated below:

‘An old maid, – that’s what I’m to be. A literary spinster, with a pen for a spouse, a family of stories for children, and twenty years hence a morsel of fame, perhaps; when like poor Johnson, I’m old, and can’t enjoy it, – solitary, and can’t share it, independent and don’t need it. Well, I needn’t be a sour saint nor a selfish sinner; and, I dare say, old maids are very comfortable when they get used to it.’¹³

Even though Jo is stubborn about indicating her liberty, she decides to marry Professor Bhaer, a German friend whom she met in New York. ‘She was mortally afraid of being laughed at for surrendering, after her many and vehement declarations of independence’.¹⁴ The reader may feel disappointed about this decision. ‘Many feminist critics have read *Little Women* as subversive, but Jo’s domestication and marriage strike other readers as an unsatisfactory ending for a heroine who seems to promise an alternative to the Victorian domestic ideal’.¹⁵ However, in my opinion, Alcott is right to marry Jo with Professor Bhaer as he respects her and her choice of career without giving a restriction for her to explore her dream. It is also better because Alcott seems to show to the readers that marriage and career are possible for women. Women do not need to give up or choose over being a mother or achieving their dream, they can do both and the roles do not even interfere to each other.

Likewise, Emily eventually marries her childhood friend, Teddy Kent, despite of many misunderstandings and unfortunate events appear before they confess each other feeling. Emily, is first a girl who does not show any interest in relationships with boys. She feels disgusted and angry every time people advise her to have a beau, because she is never interested in having one. In her teenage life, her aunt is worried because she shows no enthusiasm in relation to boys. A young woman like herself is supposed to be married, but Emily focuses more on her education and personal goals. She states, ‘I have made up my mind that I will never marry. I shall be *wedded to my art*’.¹⁶ Emily is very productive in terms of writing during this stage, and sees no reason to get married and let go of her freedom.

Emily despises the idea of marriage, which infers that a woman is owned by her husband. ‘I don’t like the thought of my life belonging to anyone but myself – not *anyone*, even Dean, much as I like him’.¹⁷ This statement indicates how much Emily hates to be dominated by others. She also states, ‘I am not anybody’s “property”, not even in fun. And I *never* will be’.¹⁸ Her stubbornness in refusing a number of men worry Aunt Elizabeth. Everyone thinks that she has very high standards. However, even in the case of respectable gentleman, Emily still rejects them if she does not love them. Thus, Teddy is the only man who is able to successfully approach her.

It is therefore clear that Jo and Emily are independent characters; they are financially independent and represent the notion of women’s liberty. Even when Jo and Emily are married, this does not mean that their self-determination is diminished, as Jo continues to write until she becomes a famous author, and there is no indication that Emily quits writing after she marries Teddy in *Emily’s Quest* (1927).

7. Comparison in *Little Women* and *Emily Series*

After elaborating the similar traits of feminist ideas inside *Little Women* and *Emily Series*, it is important to analyse the differences and other similarities between both books. *Little Women* was published in nineteenth century America and is widely known until now because of its classic domesticity story. *Emily Series*, on the other hand, was published in Canada in early twentieth century. Written by the famous author of *Anna of Green*

¹³ Alcott, p. 695.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 739.

¹⁵ Kathryn Manson Tomasek, ‘A Greater Happiness, Searching for Feminist Utopia in *Little Women*’ in *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination, Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*, ed. by Janice M. Alberghene and Beverly Lyon Clark (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 237-259 (p. 237).

¹⁶ Louisa Maud Montgomery, *Emily Climbs* (Great Britain: Virago Press, 2013), p. 275.

¹⁷ Montgomery, *Emily Climbs*, p. 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Gables (1908), three books of *Emily* have its own charm that succeed to captivate readers in worldwide with the character of Emily and other people in Prince Edward Island.

Like what I have argued, *Little Women* and *Emily* Series are not fully feminist texts, it also carries other ideas, like in *Little Women*, the idea of harmonious family, love and marriage, and women and femininity are other essentials message that readers can learned. *Emily* Series, however, represents the idea of adaptation in a new environment, and Canadian identity. Other differences are the heroines' definition of home and the environment that surround them. Jo March treats her home as a playhouse in which she can amuse herself through playing and doing chores with her sisters, while Emily Starr considers her house as an escape from the world, where she can get away from people. Their description about home influenced because of the society in their surroundings. Jo's friends are her sisters and the boy next door, Laurie. This situation creates a strong bond among the sisters, where Jo always seems to be welcomed, because her sisters accept her for who she is. Unlike Jo, Emily faces much disapproval from her environment, especially at school. She struggles with being misunderstood and mistreated on account of her personality that people define "odd". The treatment from their surrounding clearly affect Jo and Emily's definition of home as Jo is always happy at home then Emily who regards home as her sanctuary.

Except from the authors who are both female, *Little Women* and *Emily* Series carry several similarities that generate me to analyse both books. Their stories are almost similar to each other, in terms of the heroines' characters and the development of the stories. Jo and Emily both have a passion in writing. They show a persistence and hard work in literature that bring fortune in their adult life. Additionally, Jo and Emily represent imperfect girls, which makes them different from other mainstream perfect/ nice girls heroines. They display good and bad traits in equal measure, showing that childhood is a stage where children do mistake and learn from the experience. They are rebel, outspoken, and different from their peers. Moreover, even though both Jo and Emily's characters are far from the ideal of sweet and delicate girls, once they are adult, they learn and adapt to feminine traits that the society define as womanhood. They both decided to get married with the men they loved. Even though they seems to give their freedom up with marriage, both heroines are still economically independent and being good wives for their husbands. Thus, I argue that *Little Women* and *Emily* Series present that women might be married with someone, but it does not mean that women cannot achieve their dreams and do good in both work and home.

8. Conclusion

Children's literature can also be read with a serious theme, such as feminism. Lisa Paul's argument stresses that by rereading and reinterpret children's books after the feminist movement arose, scholars can identify several traits that showing the idea of feminism in several books for children. With *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and the three books of *Emily* by Lucy Maud Montgomery, readers can portray the way these woman authors represent their ideas in womanhood. Both represents dominant heroines who deliver the power of having a dream and be independent. This view is rare in terms of nineteenth and early twentieth century children's literature who are mostly showing an obedient, sweet, and feminine protagonist. Jo an Emily are surely the opposite. They are a rebel, speak very straightforward regarding their rights and self, independent and reliable.

Several scholars have expressed disappointment at the ways in which Alcott and Montgomery present notions of feminism in their books. Though Jo and Emily have been vividly described as representing a feminist voice, once they are adults and achieve womanhood, they decide to get married. Some critics have viewed this as relinquishing their independence, thereby undermining Jo and Emily's consistency as feminists. Nonetheless, after Jo and Emily are married, neither Alcott nor Montgomery provide any indication that they are confined or less independent as a result. Alcott even describes Jo becoming a famous author in her sequel, *Jo's Boys* (1886).

The representation of feminism in *Little Women* and *Emily* series is that women can work both inside and outside the home. They are responsible for their husbands and children, but also for their community and themselves. Alcott and Montgomery show to the reader, especially those who are in nineteenth and early

twentieth century that women do not have to stay single to be successful, that marriage is compatible with work and that their work do not need to be always limited at home.

9. Acknowledgment

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Little Women and *Emily* Series both talking not only about the domestic sphere of nineteenth and early twentieth century of America and Canada, but also suggests the other options of women roles that was not considered yet for women in those period.”