

Portrayal Of Self-Sacrifice And Women's Life Within Households In Louisa May Alcott's Little Women And Good Wives

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the portrayal of self-sacrifice within the family in Louisa May Alcott's novels, *Little Women* and *Good Wives*. She explains how the altruistic behavior of a woman affects her personal growth and well-being, and highlights the truth that it only promotes the life of family members. The first two novels in Alcott's beloved novel series, *Little Women* and *Good Wives*, follow the lives of the four March sisters - Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy - as they mature from childhood into womanhood during the American Civil War era, examining themes of love, family, and ambition. In *Little Women*, the lives, relationships, and hardships of the four March sisters during the American Civil War are chronicled. The author's experiences growing up in New England with her three sisters serve as a loose basis for this semi-autobiographical novel. Alcott first puts the March sisters in an all-female atmosphere, and then constantly fetches males such as husbands, father, and friends to describe the prospect of a culture which is neither matriarchal nor patriarchal but egalitarian. *Good Wives* follows the sisters as they negotiate marriage and adulthood. The novel follows the March sisters as they grow from childhood to adulthood, dealing with marriage (Meg), professional obstacles (Jo), family loss (Beth), and artistic goals (Amy). It explores themes of love, responsibility, and personal development as they negotiate life's complexities in a new stage of womanhood.

Keywords: Women, Feminism, Empowerment, Self-Sacrifice, Equality.

Introduction

Louisa May Alcott, a novelist and short story writer, established herself as a prominent nineteenth-century American writer who depicted the lives of American Women during that period through her works. The female characters of her novels play a major role in conveying a valuable message to society. As a feminist, she speaks out for women's liberation and gives more strength to her female characters by portraying them as powerful women in all her novels. Those characters try to empower themselves from being drowned in domestic life, and it emphasizes equality among men and women, and enforces independence from sacrificing their desires, ambition, and happiness in pursuit of peace inside the family, protecting the family from disgrace by honouring the family. Here, Alcott mentions how women sacrifice happiness on their own under the guise of altruism.

Alcott tries to change the perspectives of society on women's duties within the family. The societal norms shape the lives of women, especially the March sisters, from these two novels. She developed her concerns on the burdens of women, and it emphasizes the need for personal growth and independence of a woman in the society. The women characters namely Mrs. March, is the mother, Margaret, is the first-born daughter of the family, Josephine March, is the second eldest daughter, Beth is the third born and the little one is Amy. Their father is the only male in the family and earning member of the March house. The March sisters are helping their father and supporting the family by earning meager amount from doing small jobs. Margaret March works as a nursery governess and the second eldest daughter Josephine March earns by writing stories for magazines. These two characters are strong supporter of their family with financial assistance, and they gave up a lot by sacrificing their own happiness. They always prioritize the needs of others, particularly their family members.

The March sisters consider that their main duty is to take care of the family. To the outside world, it seems like five energetic young women, are ruling the house, and the March daughters have done many splendid things. But in real they need some relaxation for their mind and soul from the daily routine. The March sisters feel exhausted for doing the same household duties again and again every day. Meg's employer, the King family went for three months vacation; unexpectedly, Meg also had the chance to enjoy three months vacation. It gives her immense pleasure. Meg expressed her happiness to her sister Jo, and tells that she will lie on bed and she will do nothing, especially household works. We can understand how the household works made her to feel exhausted. From the words of Meg, Alcott visualizes the burden given by household duties. She said that she had to wake up earlier in the morning and should go for work, and take care of other people's children by leading them to a moral life. So, from that moment she will take rest completely and wants to enjoy for her own wishes till the vacation ends.

Another incident from the *Little Women* novel, it reveals the truth that not only the young girls need some rest and relaxation from the household works, her mother Marmee also needs that. It was observed by the character

Jo, that when her mother was sitting in a comfortable way and reading earlier in the morning made Jo wonder about her mother's activities, because she never seen her mother sitting quietly and reading like this before. In *Good Wives* Mrs. March has been portrayed as a brisk and cheery woman. In *Little Women* also Alcott compared her activeness as busy as a bee and done her household works and other works spontaneously without taking any rests. It made Jo to wonder whether there is some natural disaster like volcanic eruption or earthquake has occurred. Her own mother looks strange to her in a single moment. By looking deeply into novel *Little Women*, we can understand that the women characters especially Marches are spending most of the time in kitchen and the rest of the time in and around the house. They have dedicated themselves wholly only for domestic duties. The Author conveys a deeper message to the readers that every woman in society.

After attending a small party from the neighbor's house March sisters' longs to attend the parties more in order to get relief from the boring household routine life. But they are poor and their family condition did not allow them to do party like that. Even for the last party they have worn their old damaged dresses by altering them as new one. It shows the poverty level of the March family. Here Alcott shows the difference of being independent and forced to be independent. Alcott always emphasizes women's development in their personal life. They should not depend on anyone, rather woman should go to job and earn. Every woman should enjoy freedom in their life. Here the women in March family seem to be independent but their poverty forced them to do jobs only for supporting the family. They never had the opportunity to do the works that are fascinated by them more. Jo is the only one who at first wants to be a writer pursued her career as a writer in a magazine. Except Jo, Beth and Meg work only for living.

Meg remembered those old days while the family was filled with happiness, and they considered those days as happy days. Once, the March family was wealthy and they had enough money before. The reason behind their poverty is due to their father's deeds. Mr. March gave money to his friend to support his friend financially and he saved his friend from an emergency. But his friend never returned the money which he had given for financial assistance, and Mr. March lost his money that gradually reduced his wealth also. To run the family Mr. March joined in an Army and works as a chaplain. But his salary was not sufficient for the family members to run the family. Eventhough, Jo wants to fight like a man in an army like her papa, she never had the opportunity to enter an army rather she turned herself in to a writer. She sacrificed her wishes mainly because of the society. Her family's poverty was one such reason to earn from her writings.

In *Good Wives*, Jo while talking with his friend Laurie, she gradually revealed the society's needs from a girl. When her sister is going to get married, Laurie said to Jo, that she will be the next one to get married after Meg. It looks like a normal conversation but Jo replied that nobody will want her, and love her. Also, she feels that it will be good to be stayed as unmarried women in the family. This statement made by Jo reflects the idea that women should have some qualities to enter a family life. If a girl without those qualities is considered to be ineligible within the domestic sphere in the society's views.

Beth sacrificed a lot for her family. Due to financial struggle Beth works as a caretaker for a poor child in her neighbourhood. That child was suffering from scarlet fever. While taking care of that children Beth also contracted scarlet fever. She recovered from the fever as early but the consequences of that fever lasted for five years. At last, it took her own life in saving the life of a poor child. Here Alcott pitied on Beth's Sacrifice, because Beth as a young girl who works for her family and supports her family with her little earning but she has done nothing for her own sake.

Meg an eldest daughter, was the first one in the family to get married. In the prequel novel of *Good Wives*, Meg was categorized as a traditional Young woman, she desires many things and longs for luxurious things in her life like the woman from aristocratic families desires to be. But it was exactly opposite in the novel *Good Wives*, Margaret March got married to John Brooke a tutor of her Neighbourhood friend Laurie. Here, she transforms herself both mentally and physically from the state of a young girl to a housewife. She started to grow womanlier in character than before, and became wiser in taking care of the household duties like her mother Marmee, but sometimes she lacks the ability to do the works like a model house wife, whom the society calls it as a good housewife. She still has girlish ambitions, but she hides that because of the disappointments she has faced in her marital life. She begins her marriage life in a humble way and expects the more unconditional love from her husband. Mrs. March gave a lecture on housekeeping for Meg's new beginning of marriage life. Mrs. March tells Meg about her friend and the finger bowls for the guest. Her friend satisfied with that. Likewise, Mother advised Meg to be satisfied and happy with what they have in their life.

John Brooke wants his wife to make their home into a paradise; it makes Meg little anxious but she tries harder to keep their home a paradise. Sometimes she feels too tired and exhausted in cooking. But John thought that his wife has an extraordinary ability to do all great things in an excellent manner. This makes John to expect more from his wife's housewifely skills. At some situations it creates a little misunderstanding and arguments between them. Alcott has made a contradiction that John Brooke has missed his shirt button frequently and he

never notices that missed button on his shirt. But it was the duty of his Wife to take care of him and sew his missed buttons again in his shirt. This reveals the careless nature of men in the society and it adds on extra roles to women in their marital life.

The characters John Brooke and Meg reveal the truth that society only focus on women's responsibilities. Here, cooking was considered as the main duty of a woman, when John asks Meg to make some currants jelly for him. This incident creates a deeper misunderstanding between Meg and John. Meg does not know how to do that, but she tried to prepare that for her loving husband. It was a failure, when Meg is in such a great despair, John unexpectedly brought his friend to home for dinner. He hopes that his wife will serve amazing dishes to his friend he asked Meg to prepare dinner, it increased her anger excessively, she shouted at her husband, and nothing was served. It reflects the realities of women in their household, even if a woman feels sad or angry, she needs to be carryout all the household works especially cooking. Here women lack their identity, their only identity is to complete the duties in her family life. But Alcott tries to break those norms and she emphasizes women's growth in their homes and in the society.

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