

Gender Stereotype and Position of Women in the 19th Century America

Jichen Liang

SUIS PUDONG-SANLIN CAMPUS, Shanghai 200000, China

Abstract. This article is about the movie *Little Women* (2019), which is produced by Columbia Pictures, Regency Enterprises and Sony Pictures, and has won many awards such as Young Artist Award and Best Family Motion Picture. This movie is mainly about the main character Jo, a writer that does not want to get married, and her family, Amy, Meg and Beth. It reflects the truth and the society of the 19th Century America, expressing the impacts made by these situations at that time. Therefore, this movie mainly discusses women's position through film production, which brings a positive impact on later films while discussing about women's positions and gender stereotype.

Keywords: Gender stereotype; Position of women; American history; Gender study.

1. Introduction

Little Women is a movie based on the novel *Little Women* written by Louisa May Alcott, talking about the different life of March sisters in the 19th century America, which is the main character Jo's sisters. The four sisters are played by Saoirse Ronan (Jo March), Emma Watson (Meg March), Florence Pugh (Amy March), and Eliza Scanlen (Beth March).

Gender stereotype and position of women are topics that have been discussed for a long time, and are also topics that people bring up a lot these days. In the following sections, gender stereotypes and the status of women reflected in the movie *Little Women* (2019) will be discussed. Role of women, symbolism of women, and the director of this movie will also be included.

To start off, what is gender stereotype? According to research, gender stereotype is usually described as a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristic, or the roles that are ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men. In my own words, gender stereotype is what the society assume people in a particular gender to do, such as men having a lot of muscles to be considered as strong and women marrying good men to be considered as having a good life. It is a deeply ingrained and deep-rooted idea passed down from our parents, and even from great-grandparents that affects a lot of the decisions we make and the different perspectives we choose to see things. In the movie *Little Women* (2019), gender stereotype that occurs in 19th century America, particularly on women, is vividly reflected, not only by lines in the play, but also by images.

So, what makes this movie such a perfect representation of gender stereotype? I think the context of the time was an important factor. *Little Women* was set in the background of 1868, which is right after the time of American Civil War. This war was caused by many reasons, including economy, states' rights vs federal rights, slavery, and election of Abraham Lincoln. People were displaced from their home, and the idea passed down from generation to generation made them think that marriage was the best option to help them settle down during war. Especially for women, at that period of time, most people think that marriage is the only good option for women, they cannot earn money by themselves but only rely on the person they married. This phenomenon and idea have also been reflected by scenes in *Little Women* (2019).

2. Analysis

"No. No one makes their own way. Least of all, a woman. You'll need to marry well."

"But you are not married."

"That's because I'm rich. And I made sure to keep hold of my money."

"So, the only way to be unmarried woman is to be rich?"

"Yes."

“There are precious few ways for women to make money.”

“That’s not true. You could run a cathouse. Or go on the stage. Practically the same thing. Other than that, you’re right. Precious few ways for women.”

This is a conversation between Jo and Aunt March, which is the main character of this movie and an old rich lady that hasn’t got married. As was said earlier in this article, most of women can only rely on their family and can’t earn money by themselves. From some perspective, this conversation also reflects the low social status of women during that period of time as women only have limited ways to earn money on their own. It is worth mentioning that Aunt March said that running a cathouse and going on stage is practically the same thing during this conversation as it reflects that women are usually seen as playthings and men’s possessions but can’t do anything without men. All they have to do is to stay beautiful and shouldn’t have their own minds and thinking, which is pathetic.

Moreover, during the American Civil War, people were in complete horror. For them, everyday is a day of fear, fear for their life, and everyday could be their last day. So, after the period of American Civil War, people need entertainment to help them release the stress during war, which is why things that are serious and truly thought-provoking are not taken seriously. This can be reflected in the scene when Jo sends her writing to the publisher:

“The country just went through a war. People want to be amused, not preached at. Morals don’t sell nowadays. And if the main character’s a girl, make sure she’s married by the end. Or dead. Either way.”

People avoid to look at things that really helps them think deeply but only look at those that can entertain them, which is why most people ignored a cruel social situation - women are less and less appreciated. Not only about their rights and positions, women’s works are treated less seriously, such as their paintings and writings. Just because of their gender, they are no longer considered as intelligent and talented but on the contrary, their efforts will be ignored.

“What women are allowed into the club of geniuses anyway?”

“The Brontes?”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“And who always declares genius?”

“Men, I suppose.”

“Cutting down the competition.”

This is a conversation between Laurie and Amy. Many men at that time belittle Women’s works and ignore their efforts just to raise themselves and gain more status for themselves. As a result, women’s thoughts are no longer seen by the society, their talents then get buried. Just like what Jo said in this movie.

“They have minds and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they’ve got ambition and they’ve got talents, as well as just beauty. And I’m so sick of people saying that love is just all woman is fit for. I’m so sick of it.”

Jo did not want women’s talent to be buried, nor did she want women’s ideas to be spurned or treated with indifference. She believes that all humans are the same, no matter they are women or men, their works and themselves should be treated the same way, she wanted the society to not only look at men’s work. It was not easy to have such thoughts in that environment, perhaps because she loved to read and write, which made her to think on her own but not follow what most people think. She developed an idea of freedom during this time, that is why she said:

“Listen, you’ll find some lovely, accomplished girl who will love you and adore you. She’s gonna make a fine mistress for your fine house, but I wouldn’t. I’m homely, I’m awkward, and I’m odd. And you’d be ashamed of me. And we would quarrel because we can’t help it even now. I’d hate elegant society, you’d hate me scribbling, and we would be unhappy. And we’d wish we hadn’t done it, and everything will be horrid. Teddy, I don’t believe I will ever marry. I’m happy as I am, and I love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up.”

From her perspective, marriage is something that deprives her freedom and liberty and, in some ways, marrying someone has no difference of being captured in a cage. Unlike other women that want to depend their life on marriage, in Jo's opinion, women should rely by themselves and develop their own way but not just depending their life on someone else. But unfortunately, women like Jo at that time will be seen as peculiar and unsocial, which may be why she said "I'm homely, I'm awkward, and I'm odd". Her thought is not approved by people around her, as most people may think that this is just a tale of a tub and believe that she will change her mind as she grows older. Jo and other women like her cannot be heard by people and their thoughts can be easily ignored by the society. In other words, nobody in this society cares about what women think of. This can be proved during this conversation of Jo and Aunt March.

"Your father cared more about educating freemen's children than he did about caring for his own family."

"Yes, but he was right."

"Well, it is possible to be right and foolish."

"Well, I don't think so."

"Well, you are not paid to think."

This conversation suggests that women at that time should not have their own way of thinking and should not express their own mind to others. Even if they did, people will not listen to them and may think that these women are acting weirdly. The society only see women's words as entertainments but will never take their words seriously. No matter how thoughtful these words are, just because of their gender, their thinking will not be respected by people from the second they were born. What causes people to think that way? Perhaps a lot of their thinking is due to the environment. Gender stereotype passed on to people by previous generations makes people believe that women should not have their own thinking. Moreover, as this stereotype is passed on since a long time ago, such ideas are so ingrained in people's minds that it is extremely difficult to change them.

Gender stereotyping, which have been mentioned a lot in this passage, may be a more recent word, but it probably started as early as people were aware of gender. Evidences can be found on the sculpture Venus of Willendorf, which is found in Austria, 1908. It is a female figure that does not have clear facial features and expressions. But if people look down to her body, massive breasts, enormous belly and large hip can be clearly seen. These features all obviously reflects the idea that women are born to reproduce, which is an idea that is driven by gender stereotypes and has been around since ancient times. Women are only seen as reproductive machine for a long time, long enough for many people to forget that women have their own thoughts and way of thinking, and can make important things and achievements just like men. The truth that this opinion still hasn't been completely eliminated in the modern society is sad.

However, some women in the 19th century of America want to marry just because they need to live in this cruel society, they clearly understand the truth that women at that time cannot make their own life and will not live with rights unless they marry a rich man. Therefore, many women are forced to marry a rich man that they don't like just to make their life easier, and this is exactly what Jo's sister Amy thinks of when talking about marriage.

"I understand the queens of society can't get on without money, I've always known I would marry rich. And as a woman, there's no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn a living or to support my family. If I had my own money, which I don't, that money would belong to my husband the moment we get married. If we had children, they would be his, not mine. They would be his property. So don't sit here and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition, because it is. It may not be for you, but it most certainly is for me."

Amy in these lines said that women have to marry rich to get to queen of society, which is quite right at that time when women can't make money by themselves, perhaps her sister Meg is why she determined that women must marry a rich man.

"And I really am very sorry that you've had to do without so many beautiful things... and that you are married to someone who can't give them to you."

This was what John, Meg's husband, said to Meg when she bought a quit expensive fiber, the underclass life with a person that she loves may be what Meg wanted, but certainly is not for Amy. All she wants is to marry a wealthy man and become an ornament to the society, even if she does not like the man she married with.

Indeed, Amy in these lines not only suggested that women can't make their own money, but also said that her children and money will belong to her husband the moment they get married. What causes this? Why do these children that women worked so hard to carry out belong to their husband? The reason is quite obvious, men are always seen as the most important person in the family. Therefore everything, including money, children, and the woman they married are all considered as their belongings. No matter how hard women is to take care of their children, people always tend to think that women are supposed to take care of their family, and it will be their fault if their children did something wrong. However, when their children achieved something, people usually praise men for how well they teach their children. This not only happen in 19th century America, but also in other countries and in modern days.

In fact, even if most women do get a job nowadays, they sometimes are also paid less then men for doing the exact same job. They work as long and as hard as men but still can't get the same wage. This can be due to the reason that once women get pregnant, they will have to leave their work to take care of themselves and stay healthy before they give birth to their children. Some of women do not even get back to their work just because they have to take care of their children after giving birth to them. In fact, people expect women to take care of children after giving birth to them but not men, most people think that taking care of their children is what women should do, and forget how hard it is to raise their children. They tend to care more about how much a man did to his family, and praise him for earning enough for his family.

Moreover, the low position of women at that period of time is embodied since they are young.

"Yes, women bring taught at home is more proper, I believe."

"Only because schools for women are poor."

"Indeed. Quite right."

Families in the 19th century America usually only send boys to school but not girls, people believe that there is no need for girls to be educated as what they only need to do is to stay behind their husband and take care of their family, which is why schools for women are usually poor at that time. As less and less women are being educated, their social status can get lower and lower as they are uneducated and ignorant. But the reason for this phenomenon is not women at all, and people should not blame them for not being educated.

In addition, the low position and social status of women at that time is not only reflected by them relying on men, but also by them not being able to make their own decisions and control their own life.

"Frankly, I don't see why she didn't marry the neighbor."

"Well, because the neighbor marries her sister."

"So, who does she marry?"

"No one. She doesn't marry either of them."

"No. No! No, no, that won't work at all."

"She says the whole book she doesn't want to marry."

"Who cares? Girls want to see women married, not consistent."

"No, it isn't the right ending."

"The right ending is the one that sells. Trust me. If you decide to end your delightful book with your heroine a spinster, no one will buy it. It won't be worth printing."

This is a conversation between Jo and the publisher, and it clearly reflects that she can't even make the decision of how her own book is going to end, and it also reflects that people expect women to be married. And even if that person said the whole book that she doesn't want to get married, everyone still suppose that she is going to change her mind at the end of the book. Which is not what Jo wants to see. She has her own thinking.

“He volunteered for the Union Army. And I wanted to go fight with him. I can’t get over my disappointment in being a girl.”

“I’d rather be a free spinster and paddle my own canoe.”

Jo’s mind is way different than people around her, she doesn’t want to get married but only want to live her own life by writing, which is what most women at that time don’t want to do. However, from my point of view, this thought unique and totally fine. The opinion that women should be independent which Jo expressed during this movie is what people need to learn. Women can be self-governed. And this is exactly what the director of *Little Women* (2019) wants to express.

Greta Gerwig, the director of this movie, is also an actress and director. She played *Jackie* (2016) and *20th century women* (2016), which are all about women.

At the Women in Entertainment Summit in 2017, she said “I want to produce women’s films, because I think women want to see films made by people who know what they’re talking about, what the experience is.”

The fact is that she did this movie *Little Women* (2019) successfully by expressing what she wants by the characters in this movie. Every line of these characters makes the movie more vivid.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, gender stereotype acting on women and the position of women in 19th century America are reflected to the audiences vividly in this movie, which made impacts on the audiences and the society’s opinion about women in the 19th Century America. Identically, not only this movie, there are also movies produced in different time period expressing the position of women through the scene, one of the examples can be *Swept Away* (2002), which is about a socialite being trapped on a Mediterranean island with a communist sailor. This movie reflects the dramatic decline in the status of women and the negative impact on their rights and interests when their economic level declines.

“Women was born to serve man.”

“Will you just listen to man.”

These lines in the movie reflects the bad attitude of man towards women as he subconsciously expects women to serve him as if this is their jobs, even when the woman have done nothing to him. He thinks that men are supposed to gain more respect and have higher social status than women, which shows the low position of women in the society at that time. This is true with some men in many countries, especially in the past few decades.

As a result, although women at that time don’t have much freedom and ability to live their own life, their ability to live and earn money on their own is getting better and better during these days.

References

- [1] Information on: <https://www.biography.com/actor/greta-gerwig>.
- [2] Information on: [https://www.thoughtco.com/top-causes-of-the-civil-war-104532 #: ~: text= What% 20 Were%20the%20Top%204%20Causes%20of%20the, %206%20The%20Election%20of%20Abraham% 20 Lincoln. % 20](https://www.thoughtco.com/top-causes-of-the-civil-war-104532#:~:text=What%20Were%20the%20Top%204%20Causes%20of%20the,%206%20The%20Election%20of%20Abraham%20Lincoln.%20).
- [3] Information on: www.ohchr.org/en/women/gender-stereotyping.
- [4] Information on: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Venus-of-Willendorf>.