

Towards a Coherent Society: Family Warmth and Psychological Peace in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*

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Abstract The main aim of this paper is to reveal the feelings of family warmth and psychological peace in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Besides, the paper seeks to indicate how strong ties and sincere love among the members of the family lead to the cohesion and stability of society. The novel tells the story of four sisters who are part of a poor but loving family. With their father off to war, the four sisters have only their mother left to encourage them to be the best version of themselves at all times. As they go through love and loss, they truly do learn to become "little women." Love, warmth, and psychological peace prevailing in the four sisters' family not only help them achieve success in life but also make their family, the central unit of society, stable and coherent.

Key words Alcott; family, *Little Women*; society

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Introduction

Throughout ages, the family has been seen as the cornerstone of society. In pre-modern and modern societies, it has been regarded as the most fundamental unit of social organization. Accordingly, the family plays an essential role in social cohesion. In other words, we can reasonably expect the cohesiveness and stability of a society that depends on the unity and strength of its most basic unit, the

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family. If members of the one family love each other, help each other, encourage each other, and if their life is characterized by family warmth and psychological peace, this will positively be reflected on society itself and will of course make it coherent and stable, simply because society is a group of single families. That's why governmental and non-governmental organizations in different parts of the world stress the importance of the role played by the family in the cohesion of society. In recent decades, this role has been considered to be even more necessary and more urgent due to the increasingly divergent and often conflicting values and practices that characterize life nowadays. Accordingly, studying family warmth and psychological peace in Luisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is of great importance as it offers a positive example of the stable family whose solidarity contributes to the cohesion and stability of society in general.

In "The Family as the Fundamental Unit of Society," Allan Carlson highlights "the natural and proper place of the family as the fundamental unit of society" (28). Sumita Chudhuri, in "Social Development and the Family," describes the family as "a near sacred community with its own particular rituals and practices," pointing out how the family "always thinks of its own well-being, looks after the old and aged, and is the fundamental unit of human society" (1). In "The Role of Families in Social and Economic Empowerment of Individuals," Zitha Mokomane states, "Stable functional families ... contribute to youth social empowerment by providing many of the factors that protect young people from engaging in risky sexual behaviour, drug use and abuse, delinquency, and other anti-social behaviours" (3).

Drawing on the present literature, the researcher has found that most of the studies dealing with the idea of how the cohesion of family contributes to the general cohesion of society rarely provide examples of coherent families and how the members of such consistent families stand as good examples for the other members of society. Through her study of Luisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, the researcher has discovered that the novel offers an example of the stable family in which the four sisters enjoy family warmth and psychological peace, a feeling that strongly pushes them to challenge difficulties, achieve their dreams, and become successful people who can add to their society and make it coherent and prosperous.

Luisa May Alcott

An influential American writer, Luisa May Alcott was born in 1832 and died in 1888. Alcott was lucky to grow up among the great intellectuals and thinkers of the day, such as Henry David Thoreau, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Alcott was deservedly an eminent novelist.

Among her famous novels are *Will's Wonder Book* (1870), *An Old Fashioned Girl* (1870), *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873), *Beginning Again, Being a Continuation of Work* (1875), *Eight Cousins or The Aunt-Hill* (1875), *Rose in Bloom: A Sequel to Eight Cousins* (1876), *Under the Lilacs* (1878), *Jack and Jill: A Village Story* (1880), and *Proverb Stories* (1882). She also wrote well-known short story collections for children such as *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1872–1882), *Lulu's Library* (1886–1889), *Flower Fables* (1849), *On Picket Duty, and Other Tales* (1864), *Morning-Glories and Other Stories* (1867), *The Candy Country* (1885), *A Garland for Girls* (1888), and *The Brownie and the Princess* (2004).

Little Women was mainly published in two volumes in 1868 and 1869. The first volume was written quickly over several months “at the request of Alcott’s publisher and greeted with an immediate commercial and critical success,” writes Zhang pointing out how “readers were attracted by the story and demanded to know more about the characters. Therefore, Alcott quickly completed a second volume, which was also a great success. The two volumes were issued in 1880 in a single work entitled *Little Women*” (503). Set in New England in the mid-nineteenth century, the novel takes us into

the lively, combative, and caring atmosphere of the March family parlor. There we are introduced to the four young sisters, each with intriguing personalities, processing an energy specifically their own. We become privy to their dreams and disappointments, their squabbles and collective imagination, the immediate world they learn to maneuver. Each struggling with their lot, but accountable to the expectations placed upon them. (Smith)

Family Warmth and Psychological Peace in *Little Women*

Based on Alcott’s own life, *Little Women* traces the lives of four sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March, depicting their passage from early childhood to mature womanhood. The father is off at war and the mother, Marmee, is the inspiring power that always provides support and encouragement. Meg, the eldest sister, is a responsible and kind person who mothers her younger sisters when their mother is absent. Jo, the second-eldest sister and protagonist of the novel, struggles hard to be a writer. It is worth noting that her character is based on the character of Louisa May Alcott herself. Beth, the third-eldest sister, loves music and finds great happiness in pleasing others. Amy, the youngest sister, dreams to be a successful lady with a high position in society.

Alcott's portrayal of the strains and delights of family life in the novel is distinctive. It has a telling message for young women everywhere. The four sisters do not have much money, but they have family warmth and psychological peace that amazingly endow their life with deep meaning as they gradually change into little women bearing great responsibilities. Alcott's *Little Women* shows how the young woman can find in her family the good model and the honest advice that enable her to choose the right path in her life. Thus, there is a universal lesson to be learned by young women everywhere from the examples offered by the author in this novel. Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy stand as good models for other young women in society, as each of them can distinctively find her own way, can outstandingly achieve what she yearns for, can effectively keep her family coherent and solid, and can positively contribute to the total welfare and stability of her society.

Outstandingly, the mother plays an important role in the lives of the four girls. For the girls, their mother Marmee is the mother and the father at the same time. While Mr. March is away from home during the Civil War, Marmee strives hard "to keep things together with her four temperamental, feuding, loving teenage daughters. Based on Alcott's own mother, she's the foundation of morality and love the March sisters return to in times of trouble" (Lenker). Marvelously, she provides her daughters with all they want, nurturing them with love, compassion, kindness, and peace of mind. Her greatest wish in life is to see her daughters happy and successful. As she states in the novel,

I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good. To be admired, loved, and respected. To have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives. (105)

Throughout her life, she presents the quality of purity, piety, and hard work. She stands as a model for girls to follow in order to be good women in the future. She wonderfully creates an enjoyable atmosphere inside the house, leading her daughters to sing a song every night before they go to bed. As Alcott writes,

At nine they stopped work, and sang, as usual, before they went to bed....and it had become a household custom, for the mother was a born singer. The first sound in the morning was her voice as she went about the house singing like a lark, and the last sound at night was the same cheery sound, for the girls never grew too old for that familiar lullaby. (12)

It is the mother who sets the rules at home for the girls to follow. At the same time, she responds to their needs and requests, encouraging them to depend on themselves and become responsible people. Providing the four girls with an atmosphere characterized with family warmth and psychological peace, the mother opens the gate for her daughters' ambitions and aspirations. Guiding her daughters into success and self-assertion, she tells them:

Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. Now my little pilgrims, suppose you . . . see how far on you can get before Father comes home. (11)

Armed with family support and encouragement, the four girls become ready to begin their journey towards achieving their goals and dreams. Let us start with Margaret or Meg, the eldest sister. From the beginning, Meg is shown to us as a serious girl who resembles her mother in many aspects. She considers herself responsible for her sisters and for their success in life. She never forgets her mother's valuable advice to her and to her younger sisters:

To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience. It is natural to think of it, Meg, right to hope and wait for it, and wise to prepare for it, so that when the happy time comes, you may feel ready for the duties and worthy of the joy. My dear girls, I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, marry rich men merely because they are rich....I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace. (105)

Meg is always referred to as beauty and when her mother is away from home, she outstandingly manages the household and guides her younger sisters. She is a second mother for them. One of her main goals is to make her sisters grow into little women. An important trait of Meg is that she sometimes attempts to change who she is in order to satisfy others. To help her family, Meg decides to work as a governess for a wealthy family called the Kings. Meg is married to John Brooke, a poor man she loves, and they have two children. Meg finds herself in ordinary life, doing the household and caring for her sisters. She is a simple character whose main aspiration is to keep her family coherent and stable. Alcott has indeed succeeded in

portraying Meg as a truly perfect “little woman.”

Josephine or Jo, the second oldest girl of the March family, is the main character of the novel. She is the heroine of *Little Women*. Her character is based on the character of Louisa May Alcott herself. At the beginning of the novel, she is fifteen years old. The main aim she pursues throughout the book is to be a famous writer, and she does her best to achieve this dream. To help her family, Jo decides to work. When we first meet Jo at the beginning of the book, we find her having a job as a companion for her old, rich Aunt March. However, she loses this job but works later as a governess in New York. Jo is an independent character with a hot temper that sometimes puts her in trouble. She loves her family and is ready to do anything that makes her sisters happy.

At the start of the book, Jo shows full rejection of the idea of marriage because, according to her, marriage will take her away from her beloved sisters. Though very close to her friend and neighbor Theodore Laurie, she refuses to marry him and finally, by the end of the novel, she marries Professor Friedrich Bhaer whom she meets in New York and they have two children. When Jo first meets Professor Bhaer, she has a positive impression of him. This is how she describes him to her mother:

A regular German — rather stout, with brown hair tumbled all over his head, a bushy beard, good nose, the kindest eyes I ever saw, and a splendid big voice that does one’s ears good, after our sharp or slipshod American gabble. His clothes were rusty, his hands were large, and he hadn’t a really handsome feature in his face, except his beautiful teeth, yet I liked him, for he had a fine head, his linen was very nice, and he looked like a gentleman...(370)

Compared to John and Meg’s marriage, Professor Bhaer and Jo’s marriage is more impressive. While John feels proud of his beautiful wife, Professor Bhaer is wholly devoted to Jo, and his love for her never fades even after they get children. Perhaps the most important aspect of Jo’s character is her love for literature and her determination to be a star in the literary world. She adores writing so much that she writes interesting short stories and composes dramatic works for her sisters to perform and enjoy. Thanks to her mother and sisters’ encouragement and thanks to the warmth and the psychological peace provided for her by her family, Jo successfully attains what she has aspired to.

Elizabeth or Beth is the third sister in the March family. She is quiet, kind, gentle, very shy, and fond of music. She is sixteen years old when the story begins.

She is the peacemaker among her sisters. Like Meg, she attempts hard to make other people happy; and similar to Jo, she is keen to keep her family coherent and consistent. She is a main source of compassion, thoughtfulness, warmth, and psychological peace in the family. Different from her other three sisters, Beth is so good, so virtuous, and so ideal that she seems to be unfit to survive in the realistic world depicted for her by Alcott. Developing scarlet fever, Beth remains at home and Jo, her closest sister, stays beside her all time. However, she recovers from her disease but her health begins to fail very badly. Her family begins to realize that Beth will not live much longer and she herself has the feeling that her time with her loved parents and sisters is short.

Despite this heavy burden, Beth is satisfied and keen to leave a mark on the world. She is enthusiastic about helping others and making everyone happy, not only her family but other people as well. To keep the children who go to school and pass the March house happy, Beth knits and sews beautiful things for them. She is really a pure creature who finds happiness in keeping others happy and smiling. However, Beth finally dies, leaving a world that does not suit her angelic nature.

The death of innocent Beth leaves a deep wound in the March family. It is the saddest event throughout the novel. Yet, the portrayal of the character of Beth, with her innocence and purity, stresses the idea that though beautiful souls leave this our world early, yet their gentle touches and sweet memories stay forever inside our hearts. Though Beth dies early, she achieves something important ; she gives the readers of *Little Women* an example of the enduring person who can adjust to difficult circumstances, can help others and can spread love everywhere till the last moment of life. She can deservedly be called a “little woman.” Even when she is on her deathbed, Beth kindly advises Jo saying to her:

You must take my place, Jo, and be everything to Father and Mother when I'm gone. They will turn to you, don't fail them, and if it's hard to work alone, remember that I don't forget you, and that you'll be happier in doing that than ... seeing the entire world, for love is the only thing that we can carry with us when we go, and it makes the end so easy. (459)

Aged twelve when the narrative starts, Amy is the youngest sister of the March family who is often coddled and referred to as the baby of the family. Usually called the artist of the family, she has a good artistic talent which she develops very well. Furthermore, she has the ability to behave in a good way in society and she greatly feels at ease with herself and with others. Throughout the book, Amy acts as if she

were a perfect lady; this act provides her with a sense of pleasure and satisfaction. Remarkably, Amy finally gets all she dreams of, particularly travelling to Europe and getting the popularity she yearns for. From the beginning, she works hard to achieve her aspirations. When she faces an obstacle, she overcomes it and never laments a loss. This meaning is embodied in her conversation with Laurie:

And what are you going to do with yourself now, if I may ask?' 'Polish up my other talents, and be an ornament to society, if I get the chance.' It was a characteristic speech, and sounded daring, but audacity becomes young people, and Amy's ambition had a good foundation. Laurie smiled, but he liked the spirit with which she took up a new purpose when a long cherished one died, and spent no time lamenting. (444-445)

Though she is portrayed as rather selfish and unwilling to sacrifice anything for others, Amy loves her sisters so much and feels the warm feelings of family ties that make matters very easy for her and help her develop her life in a distinctive way. An important characteristic of Amy is that she knows her aim very accurately and does her best to accomplish it. Alcott portrays her as a decisive 'little woman' who works very hard in order to lead a successful life and attain what she dreams of in life

In Alcott's writings, work is an important aspect. The novelist enthusiastically tells her readers about her female characters who go out of the home and seek enjoyment and contentment in work. In *Little Women*, work is an effective means through which the four girls can achieve happiness, independence, and self-assertion. Throughout the narrative, the March sisters realize that work is valuable and rewarding. During the time of vacation, when the girls are away from work, they become bored and dissatisfied. Their mother advises them to make a balance between work and fun, and she often tells them that work makes them feel happy and keeps their spirits up. Thus, work enables the four sisters to express themselves, assert their abilities to be reliable persons and gives them the chance to help and support their family. Through work, they can also accomplish their ambitions and find an outlet away from the domestic sphere. In this sense, work stands as an important theme not only in *Little Women* but also in many works by Louisa May Alcott whose female characters always

find personal happiness in jobs ranging from governess to philanthropist to artist. Unlike many novels in which a woman works solely to earn a living and is unfulfilled by her work, moreover, Alcott's characters, whether rich or

poor, are inspired to work because they desire independence, achievement, and enrichment. (Lenahan 58)

Conclusion

To conclude, Luisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is an embodiment of how the family can work as a coherent unit that helps its members achieve their personal aspirations and, accordingly, contribute to the total stability and welfare of society. Through providing the four sisters with the feelings of love, warmth, and psychological peace, the March family can successfully guide them into success in life. They can outstandingly weave for themselves a world that is "rich enough to complete itself" (Auerbach 55). The reader clearly traces the distinctive development of the four sisters as they grow into little women who prove to be fit for bearing great responsibilities and find their ways in life in a distinctive manner. Though the departure of Beth has left a sad touch on the house, "*Little Women* brings success and contentment to the surviving members of the March family," Stephanie Foote writes, pointing out that "by the end of the novel, Jo, Amy, and Meg are happily married and are laboring in the fields best suited to the strengths as well as the weaknesses of their personalities" (69).

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