



**WOMEN INDEPENDENCE  
IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S *LITTLE WOMEN***

Intan<sup>1</sup>, Yohanes Tuaderu<sup>2</sup>  
Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Prayoga<sup>1,2</sup>  
[tanintan97@gmail.com](mailto:tanintan97@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [john@stba-prayoga.ac.id](mailto:john@stba-prayoga.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the independence of women based on the novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. The novel tells a life story of four female teenagers in the March Family with Jo March – the main character – who struggles to become an independent woman. The writers are interested in the characterization of Jo who dominates her three other sisters in take the initiative to do things and in deciding the best solution whenever they face problems in the situation of the absence of their father who is still in military duty. By applying feminist existentialism theory postulated by Simone de Beauvoir, the writers analyze the forms of women independence that trigger Jo to be independent from the perspective of objectivity and transcendence. This research is qualitative research from which the data are taken from the novel and other online supporting sources. All the data are interpreted by utilizing descriptive method that views a situation or phenomenon in the novel as something important to be described based on the research problems. In the end of the research, the writers found that the triggers that encourage Jo March to become independent are the limitation of freedom in women life and social rules that demand women to get married with rich men or any men of the established class to improve a family's social class and living standard as well. Besides that, this research also found that the ways that direct women to be independent is obeying mother's advice and guidance. Mother is a woman who always dreams the best future for her children. Jo's mother does this role very well.

**Keywords:** Feminist Existentialism, Objectivity Concept, Transcendence

## I. INTRODUCTION

Independence is a character trait that many people in society admire. Women independence is a phenomenon in society where women try to be independent based on the perspective of freedom. Women's goal to live independently is not to show that women are able to live alone and do not need other people's support. The real goal is to show to the society that they are equal with men to enjoy freedom in all aspects of life. This happens because in real life there are many limitations and restrictions that prevent women from being free to do what they want.

The limitation of women's freedom reflected in the novel *Little Women* is still very relevant with the life of women today. The stereotype of women's weaknesses is one of basic reasons why women have to encounter such kind of situation. Emancipation movement of done by many women in this world, then, should be viewed as a serious effort to live more independent and to be equal with men. Beauvoir (1949:20) stated :

“How can independence be recovered in a state of dependency? What circumstances limit woman's liberty and how can they be overcome? These

are fundamental questions on which I would throw some light. This means that I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty”.

The quotation above voices the real condition of women that in one point they are so dependent on men because of the weaknesses they possess physically, but on the other hand there exists in their mind a vision to be independent and equal with men. The fact that many women idealize liberty more than just happiness through the concept of what-so-called independence and equality then create a dilemma not only for women but also for men who become the subjects blamed as the main cause of this kind of women's suffering. Meanwhile, from the women's point of view, freedom and equality are believed as the principle condition that must be created in order to support them to develop their potentialities, talents, and strengths. Only through freedom and equality, women can express their selfness, creativity and talents to contribute the best they have as individuals.

The writers are interested in discussing this topic because of the issue of women's independence in

society is always one of the hottest issues. The writers even assume that all prohibitions and social rules that lead to the restraint of women have become strong supporting factors that motivate most women to be independent. The struggle of the five women – Jo, her mother, and her three sisters in *Little Women* – proves the truth theorized by Beauvoir in the objectivity concept that all the limitations women have such as physical weaknesses and the consideration that the existence of women is only as a complementary object of men are never be able to prevent women not to strive for their independence – or in a higher level of that struggle: women transcendence. Jo has successfully showed to the society that women deserve to live in freedom, to compete with man in career and education, and to obtain all of their future life ambitions as men do.

## **II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Feminist Existentialism Theory by Simone de Beauvoir**

To analyze women independence reflected in *Little Women*, the writers apply Feminism Theory that focuses on Existentialism and Transcendence of Women by

Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir's perspective about existential feminism in the analysis of feminist context are included in the female characters. Women have freedom to break down the values, norms, and societal constructs which restrict their willing to be free and equal. Women also have freedom to choose and to carry out kinds of role and contribution to the society development based on the concept of human existentialism that Beauvoir discusses in her theory. One of the concepts in that theory is about women's struggle for their existence in the public area to oppose the existing previous concept that women are identical to the stereotype of people who live in private area, i.e., a very narrow space of freedom in a very limited chance to express their self. Compared with the experience of women, the wider public area is the possession of men as the arena for men themselves to express their self. What women can do in this case is trying to overcome their limitations – that have been objectified by the existence of men – by doing transcendence.

### **2.2 Objectivity**

In the book that is entitled *The Second Sex*, the first ever explained was who is woman.

Beauvoir explains that woman cannot be explained from the biological view point only. She thinks that woman is a situation – not just a figure of human being. She does not believe in the fate of woman. She argues that the relationship of men and women is so unfair. Man is considered for centuries as Subject, meanwhile Woman is Object and Other. Man is essential, while woman is inessential. Men are active, extending out into the world and into the future, while women are passive, inward, keepers of the home and family. Men create, women maintain. Beauvoir discusses these oppositional dichotomies that cause men tend to be the commander of women. Men give commands to women, and women must do what is commanded by men without objection. While someone being subject, there will be someone who is being objected. In this sense, the concept of objectivity is more towards the objectification of women by men. Based on the facts, Beauvoir sees that women have the duty to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the men's importance. The writers utilize this concept to identify the causes why women – especially those who are told in *Little Woman* – struggle to become independent women.

## 2.3 Transcendence

This research also attempts to look at how Beauvoir's concept of transcendence in *The Second Sex* demonstrated in women life in a world that centers on men. Beauvoir is interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty. She defines transcendence as active, creative, projecting actions of women forward into the future. Women need to work to develop themselves and to show their existence. Intellectual activity brings women to freedom, giving provisions to face patriarchal society which tends to undermine the abilities of women. Beauvoir finds two kinds of the application of transcendence: *thought* and *action*. With *thought*, a woman has the idea of being able to go beyond her limits from the restraint she faces. Meanwhile, with *action*, Beauvoir supports women to be more productive and be able to achieve their dreams for better future. The most obvious action Jo takes as a young woman in *Little Women* is to write. Writing is not only an activity to combine letters into a words, sentences, and paragraphs but more than that, it allows Jo to communicate her ideas, her appreciation on particular impressive

things or experiences, and to express her feelings, emotions, and senses as an independent woman.

### III. RESEARCH METHOD

In conducting this research, the writers apply feminism approach to discuss women's struggle related to social phenomena in society where women are considered as Object and the Other. Feminism approach in literary research is used to solve the problems related to the practice of oppression on women or the objectification of women from women's point of view. Most of the concepts in feminism perspective provide inspirational motivation and enlightenment to support the struggle of women in fighting for their rights in society.

In analyzing the novel *Little Woman*, the writers collected the data through close reading activity that is reading the novel for several times to find the most relevant information related to the research problems. This research is conducted by using qualitative method. As Cresswell (2009) asserts:

Qualitative Procedures "examines different philosophical assumptions; variations in strategies of inquiry; the role of the researcher; and steps in

data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Qualitative research is used in this research to express thoughts and opinions of the writers who interpret the data of the novel to solve problems questioned in this research. Various references such as journals, academic articles on literature, theory books, and some online sources are also used to help the writers to grasp more understanding on the novel and the theory. To describe what they find in this research, the writers employ descriptive method.

### IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This research is divided into two main subject matters; the first is the triggers that encourage women to be independent viewed from the perspective of objectivity concept, and the second is the ways to become independent women according to transcendence concept. Humans are always forced to live independently due to environmental conditions. It also occurs to women who want to live independently because there are many restrictions in society on their freedom of life. Higher education can bring women to be more critical and are able to realize their future ideals.

#### **4.1 The Triggers of Women Independence**

Human thought can be developed by the influence of his or her environmental conditions. Humans have the right to choose and are responsible for that choice. However, in the case of women, they are usually influenced by other factors in making their life decisions. Even women are not given the opportunity to choose just because they are a woman. The situation has triggered some women to become more aware on the equality to have rights. Many women choose to live independently to express their objection toward the violation of their right to be equal with men and simultaneously to independent as social members. In fact, this is not easy to do because there are so many obstacles that must be overcome. There are so many restrictions and social rules that prevent women to achieve their independence. By employing the objectivity concept of Simone de Beauvoir, the writers find that the position of women that is always considered as weak figures has become a strong trigger for many women to overcome the obstacles and at the same time to win the fight in obtaining the independence.

#### **4.1.1 The Limitation of Freedom in Women Life**

Freedom is one of the most essential right of human beings but society has created some limits of freedom for its members. The limits of freedom are mostly exercised by someone who has power over others who are considered powerless. Women are of the powerless group in society who are usually victimized in the case of freedom expression. This limitation may come from parents, relatives, and husbands who thought that what they do is for the goodness of women. From the social point of view, the public life is a place for men to compete in any kinds of career and to achieve whatever life ambitions they have in mind. Meanwhile, women are identical with private places which restricted them just to stay at home to manage household affairs and to take care of children. Their existence is considered useless and meaningless. From this point of view, society always considers the existence of women as passive objects – not as subject (this is for men). Beauvoir (1949:284) states:

“In woman, on the contrary, there is from the beginning a conflict between her autonomous existence, her objective self, and her 'being-the other'; she is taught that to please she must try to

please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty”

Objectification is a deliberate action done by a certain party in society to treat other human beings as object. In existentialism concept, women are often unconsciously positioned as objects. They are treated like a living doll. They do not have freedom. Beauvoir in Sally Scholz (2008:2) says, “This situation limits a woman’s freedom and determines her life projects. In other words, society keeps women blocked from freedom or transcendence”. Society has created women as weak creatures. Women are seen as “Object or the other” whose opinions and voices do not deserve to be heard. Even women should always be guided in making decision of their own life.

The word “independence” belongs to men. Beauvoir (1949:110) thought that women have a duty to sacrifice themselves to a man. He states: “Women took only a secondary part in public life; and in private life there was demanded of them a fidelity without reciprocity”. Society considers women unable to be independent because their position is only as an

object and the complementary figures for men’s life. The limited freedom of women causes some women aware of their existence although they also face many obstacles to be overcome. Jo expresses her objection toward the obstacle in the quotation below:

By her next speech, Jo deprived herself of several years of pleasure, and received a timely lesson in the art of holding her tongue. ‘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.’ (P.613)

The quotation above shows that Jo is sick of the pressure on women she has to deal with. *They* in the sentence “they oppress and make me feel like a slave” refers to the society - precisely men society – which always limits women’s freedom and their willing to be independent. Jo does not like getting help from other people because she understands that a sincere help does not expect anything in return. Jo prefers to rely on herself without having to be restrained from the others.

Every individual has weaknesses in their life. It is undeniable that women and men also have weaknesses in all areas that they cannot control. However, humans have created groups in society and put

women in a weak and powerless position. Society applies too many rules into women's life, thus it seems like limitations on women's freedom. The all prohibitions and rules in the society force women to struggle to live independently. Women expect their opinions to be recognized and accepted by society. They hope to have the equal rights as men in achieving their good future goals.

#### **4.1.2 Social Rules**

Marriage is a sacred bond between a couple of humans: a man and a woman. They build a commitment to establish a new family. There are two individuals who have different characteristics and personalities as well to share love and live together. In marriage, men become head of the family who regulates all the rules in the household. Meanwhile women, as wives of ne families will follow all rules and treatments of their husbands. According to Beauvoir (1949:160):

“No man would consent to be a woman, but every man wants women to exist. ‘Thanks God for having ‘created woman.’ Nature is good since she has given women to men”.

Beauvoir satirized the society no man will not agree to become a woman but all men are very grateful to God because of the creation of women to men’s companions. Yes, merely as objects who accompany the life of men. In this sense, the existence of women is a destiny for the satisfaction of men. Men enjoy their satisfaction by making women as their objects. This way of thinking creates a stigma in society that marriage is a bond that gives benefit more to men, rather than to women. Men are free to take advantage of the existence of women as objects. Women are complementary figures in men’s life.

Society believes that because women are weak and limited beings, the best achievement for women to live happily is getting married to rich men. Beauvoir views women as being cursed as weak and in need of men in life. Therefore, marriage is believed to be a place for women to support the economy even though their lives will be increasingly limited because they have been objectified by men in the household. Beauvoir (1949:414) asserts;

“Economic evolution in woman's situation is in process of upsetting the institution of marriage: Woman is no longer limited



to the reproductive function, which has lost in large part of its character as natural servitude and has come to be regarded as a function to be voluntarily assumed”.

Beauvoir states that getting married was an easy way for women to improve their social status. If women struggle to have a career in public places where the majority of them are filled by men, it will be very difficult, and in the end, most women will lose in the competition with men to occupy important positions in their working places. So, it could be better for women to depend on men (especially rich men) for their lives. Society believes that economic problems of women – even plus their families – can be solved if they get married to rich men although in fact, they will still encounter the practice of objectification and exploitation by their husbands. Newburger in Make (2019:1) asserts, “A woman’s best shot at reaching 1 percent status is not through a high-paying job or advanced education, but rather by marrying a man with good income prospects” This can also be seen from the story of *Little Women*, where women's views about marriage make Jo becomes so worried. It can be seen in the quotation below:

“Not yet. I’ve something to say to you, and I must free my mind at once. Tell me, do you mean to marry this Cook? If you do, not ,y penny of my money ever goes to you. Remember that, and be a sensible girl”, said the old lady impressively (p. 356)

This quotation highlights a conflict between Aunt March and Meg dealing with Meg’s decision to get married to John Brooke whose profession is a cook. In Aunt March’s opinion, the choice of her niece to be the wife of Mr. Brooke is an accident since he is not a rich man. This marriage will only bring her niece to experience a sorrowful future life. Therefore, she insists to prevent Meg not to get married to John Brooke. She threatened her niece will not take part in their marriage - and would not even contribute a dime if the marriage go ahead. She tries to influence Meg's perspective on marriage. Meg and her sisters are raised in a poor family. So, Aunt March persuades Meg to improve her social status by getting married to a rich man – not John Brooke.

#### **4.2 The Way to Become an Independent Woman**

Independent women are people who have abilities and self-confidence to struggle for their better

life without male assistance. They are women who reflect themselves as creative, active, and powerful figures that never give up to achieve their dreams. This assumption is closely related to the concept of Transcendence postulated by Beauvoir. According to Beauvoir in Sally (2008:5) “Transcendence is reaching out into the future, through projects that open up freedom”. Women do transcendence to find a freedom. They deserve to achieve everything they want without fear and restraint from others especially men. Transcendence means an effort for women to find their independent existence to realize a more meaningful and happy life. By gaining freedom, independent women gain complete control over all of their decisions. They can also pursue jobs that match to their skills and competence. There are two ways to reflect the independence of women in transcendence concept. They are *thought* and *action*. *Little Women* this transcendence concept in two ways: First, following mother’s Advice; and Second, deciding to be active and productive woman for better future.

#### **4.2.1 Following Mother’s Advice**

Thoughts are something people have in mind in forms of

opinion, concept, idea, or theory. Beauvoir describes the concept of transcendence in thought is an early form of women's awareness of their existence. Women are aware that labels on themselves are always referred to as “object” or “the others”. This awareness forms opinions and discourses for women to transcend and to be independent. This can bring a beneficial consideration in society about women not to be seen as objects. And many women admit that the one who usually make them aware about their existence is a mother. According to Beauvoir (1949:290-291),

“The mother seems to be endowed with marvellous fairy powers. Many boys regret the lack of such a privilege; if, later on, they steal birds' eggs and trample down young plants, if they destroy life about them in a kind of frenzy, it is in revenge for their inability to bring' forth life; while the little girl takes pleasure in the thought that she will create life one day. But she is deprived of happy freedom, the carefree aspect of childhood; having become precociously a woman, she learns all too soon the limitations this estate imposes upon a human being; she reaches adolescence as an adult, which gives her history a special character”.

From quotation above, Beauvoir highlights that the transcendence of a woman's thought occurs from childhood because of her mother. The biggest influence in a daughter's life is from a mother. In the phrase "The mother seems to be endowed with marvellous fairy powers" show if mother's love and tenderness is a source of power in a family. Beauvoir describes that a daughter's character can be developed by the advice of a mother. A mother is very aware that her life has been objectified by her husband. She had to devote her life to serve her husband and take care of the children. A mother also does not want this to happen to her daughter. Mother told her daughter to transcend her mind to live more freely in the future. Despite having limitations since the daughter's childhood, it is used as a lesson to achieve a freer future. This is also done by Mrs. March as a mother who teaches her daughters to live freely as independent women, as seen through the quotation below:

'Mother didn't say anything about our money, and she won't wish us to give up everything. Let's each buy what we want, and have a little fun. I'm sure we work hard enough to earn it,' cried Jo, examining the heels of her shoes in a gentlemanly manner. (p.6)

The quotation above shows a situation around Christmas celebration when Mrs. March has deep talk with her daughters before sleep. The daughters had talking about their financial problems. They were very jealous of other girls who wore nice clothes to school while they only wore very simple clothes. The daughters are worried about their future, whether they stay poor or can live rich. The sentence "won't wish us to give up everything" show mother told to her daughters to live stronger and never give up with the bad condition they are facing. As women, they also have the opportunity to achieve all their dreams, and live happily as independent women in the future.

The influence of this mother's advice opened Jo March's mind about her future. Although this 15-year-old girl does not have anything yet, she has the courage to dream. The identification of transcendence in thought occurs in Jo. As a woman, she has realized the meaning of her existence that is an existence which shows that women have the same rights as men and therefore deserve to achieve success in their careers. Although Jo March lives in poverty,

this does not reduce her enthusiasm to dream a better future.

#### 4.2.2 Being Active and Productive

The existence of women is often ruled out rather than the existence of men although as human beings they have equal rights. To show their existence, women get in the action of transcendence that is an attempt to turn all thoughts into concrete actions in order to create a better life. Beauvoir in Sally Scholz (2008:2) presents three strategies to help women on their path to transcendence: (1) Women must go to work; (2) Women must pursue and participate in intellectual activity (leading the change for women); (3) Women must strive to transform society into a socialist society that seeking economic justice as a key factor in liberation". Women need to work to develop themselves and show their existence. Intellectual activity brings women to freedom, giving provisions to face society which tends to undermine the abilities of women.

According to Beauvoir (1949:640):

When she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as subject; in connection with the aims she pursues,

with the money and the rights she takes possession of, she makes trial of and senses her responsibility. Many women are aware of these advantages, even among those in very modest positions.

Beauvoir states that transcendence is a movement to liberate oneself from the things that restrict freedom as a woman. Every woman can take this way. Many actions that woman can do everyday to be independent and to go beyond herself as a woman in the public life. For equal rights of women in the eyes of society, women must be more productive in showing their abilities. It is seen as a powerful way for women, because the talents they have will be more influential to the development of recognition of their existence in society. This can be seen from the life of Jo March who does transcendent action by deciding herself to live independently by moving abroad and working as a writer to be more productive. It can be seen through the quotation below:

She excited the suspicions of public librarians by asking for works on poisons. She studied faces in the street, and characters, good, bad, and indifferent, all about her. She delved in the dust of ancient times for facts or fictions so old that they were

as good as new, and introduced herself to folly, sin, and misery, as well as her limited opportunities allowed. She thought she was prospering finely, but unconsciously she was beginning to desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character. She was living in bad society, and imaginary though it was, its influence affected her, for she was feeding heart and fancy on dangerous and unsubstantial food, and was fast brushing the innocent bloom from her nature by a premature acquaintance with the darker side of life, which comes soon enough to all of us. (p.539)

The quotation above shows the effort of Jo to be transcendent by having for long time to be active as writer. By writing a book, she can put many thought that she cannot directly show off in public. The limitation of freedom for women is the main idea in Jo's writings. In the sentence: "As well as her limited opportunities allowed" shows that there are too many struggles that women have to go through because they are always labeled with the attribute as weak and powerless creatures. Jo's purpose in her writing is to give moral messages to every reader that women also have the same rights as men. Women are able to have a career in the public area ascribed to

their talents. Women have the right to enjoy freedom in making every decision for their sake. And at the utmost goal, Jo wants to motivate all women to be enthusiastic in realizing their dreams of becoming independent women whose existence is recognized by the society. Here, independent women improve themselves to be more active and creative through their career and contributive activities in public working place. Independent women must be able to prove to the society that their life is not just for men; that their achievements are not only being married to men; and they do not have to dedicate their whole life to manage household affairs. They have the right to have freedom to do whatever they want in their life and at the same time they prove that they can also contribute the best they can to the development of society and human civilization.

## V. CONCLUSION

Women independence deals with every effort done by women to obtain freedom and equality. Women's goal to live independently is not about the show-off of excessive pride and self-confidence that women are able to live alone – without any help of men, but more on the affirmation that women

should be given the same space and rights to enjoy freedom in determining the best thing for their future life and the desire to contribute the same as men do to the progress of society. There are several triggers that encourage women to fight for independence and equality. The first trigger is the limitations of freedom. Society always provides rules and boundaries in every aspect of women's lives especially in the fields of education and career. This seems like a restriction to women in one hand but in the other hand it become a motivation to get the freedom itself. The second trigger is the social rule that getting married to a rich man can change women's social status. All of the assumptions found in this research are in line with Beauvoir's concept on objectivity concept. This concept explains if women are just "objects or other" who always have a second role after men. This is the trigger that encourages independent women to get out from their cage of limitations. Therefore, to overcome these problems, women apply the transcendence idea to break all the limitation to get freedom.

There are two ways to become an independent woman: listening and obeying mother's advices; and being active and productive as a

woman. Mother's good and visionary influence is a form of transcendence in thought. Mother is the first woman who realizes that her life has been objectified by men. She does not want her daughter to experience the same sorrow. So, she asks her daughters to find develop freedom in her life. To realize all these thoughts, women come into action which shows their superior and beneficial talents that deserve to be recognized by society. This action shows that women can be active and productive through careers and other positive activities in public areas just like what men usually do.

By doing all these good things, women are successfully reducing the prejudices in society about women's weaknesses and meaningless existence. Jo – the main character of *Little Woman* - delivers a moral message to every reader of her books that women are also great figures in society and therefore they must be respected and honored as noble creatures who are equal with men.

## REFERENCES

Alcott, Lousia May. (2018). *Little Woman, English classics*.

Indonesia: Gramedia Pustaka  
Utama.

Beauvoir, Simone de. (1949) *The  
Second sex*. London: Jonathan  
Cape Thirty Bedford Square  
Cambridge, University Press. (2008).

*Sally Scholz Traces the Major  
Current of Simone de  
Beauvoir's main work.*  
Retrieved on May 11<sup>th</sup> 2021  
from

[https://philosophynow.org/issue  
s/69/The\\_Second\\_Sex](https://philosophynow.org/issues/69/The_Second_Sex)

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research  
Design-Qualitative,  
Quantitative, and Mixed  
Method Approaches*. Los  
Angeles, CA: Sage Publication  
ltd. retrieved on August 1, 2023  
from [https://ojsadmin,+Journal  
+manager,+Review6.pdf](https://ojsadmin,+Journal+manager,+Review6.pdf)

Newburger, Emma. (2019). *A  
Women's Best Route to the Top  
1 percent is to Marry Rich,  
research Shows*. Retrieved on  
July 06<sup>th</sup> 2020 from  
[https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02  
/21/a-womans-best-route-to-  
the-top-1-percent-is-to-marry-  
rich.html](https://www.cnbc.com/2019/02/21/a-womans-best-route-to-the-top-1-percent-is-to-marry-rich.html)