L.M.Acott and the Female Artistic Dilemma.

Conf. univ. dr. Stefanovici Smaranda

Abstract

During the suffrage movement in America from 1850 to 1920, Louisa May Alcott was one of the American women writers who explored the theme of the fate of the female artist in her fiction. The paper explores how the role of the female artist in conflict with the feminine tradition of domesticity served to shape and define early feminist expression in American literature.

Artistic Rebel and/or Domestic Angel

> *"I went back to my writing, which pays much better, though Mr. F[ields] did say, 'Stick to your teaching; you can't write.' I said, 'I won't teach; and I can write, and I'll prove it"'* (109).

INTRODUCTION

Feminist expression present in the fiction of American women writers during the suffrage period represents a series of similar yet different conflicts between the female's domestic role and the female's self-identity beginning in the early 1860s. The search for the female self was illustrated most dramatically in the exploration of the female artistic dilemma in the work of the American woman writer, Louisa May Alcott.

Although the period between 1850 and 1920 was quite agitated in American history for women, L.M.Alcott is one of the American women writers who explored the role of the female artist in fiction which, whether intentionally or not, presented significant revolutionary views challenging the feminine tradition of domesticity. This

exploration of the role of the female artist in conflict with the feminine tradition of domesticity served to shape and define early feminist expression in American culture.

The role of the female artist in early feminist expression in American literature evolved from the compromise phase between feminine tradition and artistic expression to a self-determination phase in which the feminine tradition is rejected or replaced by the artistic drive and passion of a female protagonist.

This evolution can be examined in the journey of the female artist in the fiction of L.M.Alcott. The artistic journey is explored by examining 4 (four) different phases which define the feminist yearnings dominating Jo's mind. The four phases are:

a) the connection or alienation towards family

b) the artistic isolation to a creative place

c) the recognition of the divided self (wife and mother vs artist)

d) the fate of the female artist, i.e. the compromise of artistic expression for the feminine tradition or viceversa.

Fearing that their novels would be rejected by a large body of readers, both male and female, who felt threatened by the imminent changes in their political and social system, nineteenth century American female authors would not create politically motivated plots or characters. They merely addressed the limitations placed upon their sex artistically to assert their own value of the female identity and purpose over the subordinate role of women at this time in history. Therefore, as David Richter asserts, writers like Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Kate Chopin, and Willa Cather created female characters contrasting between the artistic rebel and the domestic saint that served to expose the limitations placed on women and implicitly on the female artist in a patriarchal setting. These female artists are presented in conflict with their traditional domestic roles.

Louisa May Alcott's Female Artists

The feminist theorist Elaine Showalter argues that Alcott had a "traditional submissive voice as well as a radical subversive one" (*The Awakening Intro ix*) possibly due to her rebellion against her father's idealistic view of women. Bronson

Alcott, her father, had strict transcendentalist views regarding 'feminism'; while offering women "the opportunity to become sublime in their fight for independence", he "denied them the chance to be human" (Saxton 188), especially Louisa. But Louisa refused to conform entirely to the "prescribed patterns of womanliness" (Saxton 261), writing narratives that challenged the feminine ideal prescribed by her father. This is, in fact, what Alcott does with Jo March in *Little Women*: while being aware of the limitations patriarchal influences had on a woman's voice, she ultimately uses a "domestic voice" for her female protagonist that does not change (Tracy 44) the patriarchal domination of the female self.

Louisa's own life was a continuous compromise between the obligations of domestic duties and the independent drive and passion of women. As Saxton states she believed that she deserved success as a writer only "as long as (her) ambition was not for selfish ends but for (her) dear family". (366)

Jo, like L.M.Alcott, learned "to suppress this restrained voice in a façade of domesticity" (Tracy 44). It is in fact a compromise of the female voice within the cult of domesticity which is basically at the origin of the conflict in *Little Women*. This oscillation between the obligations of domestic duties towards her family and the independent drive and passion of women marked the entire life and writing career of L.M.Alcott.

However, L.M.Alcott was a single woman and consequently did not fit the ideal Victorian woman who was defined by her ability to "soothe, comfort, support, and respond to men" (Saxton 220). Thus, she lived the tension between artistic vision and domestic obligation. She expressed her frustration towards the female artistic dilemma in the role of her female protagonist, Jo March.

The Female Artist's Journey

a) Connection or Alienation towards Family

The traditional burden of domestic obligations often hindered artistic ambitions; likewise, visible artistic ambitions often triggered along failure to fulfill domestic duties, creating a sense of alienation between the female artist and her feminine self.

Although L.M.Alcott creates a character who yearns for an independence afforded by her male counterparts, yet resigns herself to the feminine ideal supported by feminine tradition.

In *Little Women*, Alcott presents Josephine March's tomboy urges to illustrate the independent yearnings of this young maturing woman. "I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as Chinaster. It's bad enough to be a girl anyway, when I like boy's games, and work and manners" (7). She longs for the freedom of masculine manners and gets alienated from her traditional lady-like role; she was rapidly "shooting up into a woman and didn't like it" (8).

However, she finally chooses to conform to her father's wishes: "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, a little woman; and not be rough and wild; but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else" (12).

In fact, she never breaks ties with her family. She integrates her artistic ambitions within the confines of her domestic role. She always tries to control her "passion" for writing, fearful she could "do something dreadful that would spoil her life and make her family hate her" (77). That is why her justified anger at Amy's burning one of her stories turns into regret as she witnesses Amy falling into the frozen river, nearly drowning.

In everything she does she has the example of her mother, Mrs. March, whose perspective is that "to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman" (95). She manages to control her "passion" by practicing the virtues of feminine ideals (patience, love, and respect) supported by both her mother and father: "to be beautiful, accomplished and good" (95).

Although much influenced by her mother's domestic aspirations and although she recognizes that family is more important than individual artistic drives she combines the two when she sells her hair to provide the money for her mother to visit their sick father.

Nevertheless, Jo resigns to these feminine ideals by creating an independent female spirit that surrenders to her family obligations.

b) The Isolated Retreat or Creative Place

The female artist discovers artistic retreats, creative spaces, which are separate from the formal boundaries of home. In Jo's case, she retreats to her "garret" upstairs, which serves to isolate her from her traditional feminine duties. This is the place where she reads and writes. Her artistic space (the garret) not only made her happy because it fed her artistic imagination but it also helped her to support her family. Thus, through writing she fulfilled both her artistic and domestic drives.

She aspires to be a writer for financial independence, for herself as well as her family: "I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous; that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream" (140). This dream makes her go to New York where she starts writing 'sensational' stories. After receiving her first $100, she proceeds to write additional stories to pay the butcher's bill, the new carpets, groceries, and gowns needed by her family. Although her parents advise her to write from her heart, her practical spirit makes her realize that her sensational themes are for a buying public. With her heroine, Alcott recognizes that artistic space, ideals, and integrity are sometimes compromised by the physical needs of family: "… to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved …" (153) fulfilled her artistic yearnings.

c) Recognition of a Divided Self

In this phase, the artist becomes torn between artistic and sexual drives on the one hand, and domestic obligations associated with the feminine tradition of marriage and motherhood, on the other hand.

While Jo ignores feminine manners and protocol, it is at Mrs. Gardiner's party that she meets her neighbor and soul-mate Laurence. There is a conflict between Jo's tomboy manner and her bidding female sexuality. Although she tells Laurie first about her first publication before telling her family, although he respects her artistic drive, Jo sees him as a threat to fulfill both her domestic obligations and artistic drives. Fulfillment of her artistic yearnings meant for Jo to support herself and her family while maintaining her independence from marriage. That is why she wishes her older sister Meg marry her dearest friend Laurie. After Meg's marriage to Mr. Brooke, Laurie predicts that "Jo will go next"; but she defies any such fate stating she is

destined to be an old maid in order to care for her family needs. It is only after Beth's death and Meg and Amy's secured marriages that she admits her desire for marriage. Her artistic talents, thus, enabled her to support her family successfully, and provided her the financial means to marry, as well. The success of her writing career makes Jo's marriage possible while Meg tells her that "marriage is an excellent thing" (418). Alcott, through Jo, approved of marriage to be the ideal compromise for a writer.

d) The Fate of the Female Artist

Each female artist, Jo included, struggles with her "divided self", i.e. external domestic life vs individual artistic identity. Without a strong artistic center in a woman's existence, her individual identity deteriorates and the domestic life either dominates or destroys the potential for artistic growth and expression.

Paradoxically, both self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment met with success in *Little Women*. In Alcott's *Little Women,* Jo was convinced that giving up her own hopes would be cheered by her family. Writing a novel that would please her parents is the ultimate self-sacrifice, and in the case of Alcott, self-fulfillment.

Jo calls herself "a literary spinster" before the prospect of marriage with Professor Bhaer becomes evident. She calls "her pen as her spouse" and "a family of stories for children" which models Alcott's own career as a writer (424).

But unlike Alcott, Jo gets married to Mr Bhaer. Although Jo finally marries Professor Bhaer she will not accept a traditional patriarchal relationship. She establishes a home for disobedient boys that she always felt comfortable with her tomboy nature. She yearns to share and "help earn the home" (462) as she plans both of their futures. By establishing a home for naughty boys, Jo takes the upper hand in determining the arrangements and destiny of her marriage.

Thus Alcott destines her heroine to a life of service in marriage and motherhood as she herself felt destined to serve as a writer for her family's needs. The challenging solution Alcott finds is practical and realistic for that time. Her writing career is supplemented by a career in marriage caring for wild, neglected boys that she always felt very comfortable with given her tomboy nature.

Jo's getting married is Alcott's acknowledgement of the domestic fate as the primary role afforded women in her time period. However, Jo is not silenced in her domestic role, but becomes the leader in her marriage, enthusiastically dedicating her life to the service of others. For in 1868, this was the ultimate goal of the female artist; the nurturing role of motherhood within the "façade of domesticity" (Tracy 44).

Conclusion

At the end of Jo's artistic journey, we might say she favored the cult of domesticity over artistic ambition. In that time period of suffrage (1860-1920) Alcott anticipated a New Womanhood that explored the limitations and aspirations of all women using the vehicle of the artistic quest. For even now, modern American literature is forever indebted to the artistic vision of L. M. Alcott. Through L.M.Alcott and other female writers, such as Kate Chopin, E.Suart Phelps and Willa Cather, who explored the female artistic dilemma, early feminist expression in American literature was born. Nevertheless, Alcott's position (and Jo's position in *Little Women*, implicitly) towards the female artistic dilemma, as we aimed to prove in this paper, remains open-ended and ambiguous: she was an artistic rebel and/or a domestic angel.

Works Cited

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