

**| RESEARCH ARTICLE****Viewing *Little Women* through Gendered Lenses: Interpretive Differences in a Film Adaptation**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study examined the intricate relationship among gender, literature, and education to determine how gender influenced interpretations of the 2019 film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. Using a qualitative method, this study involved ten purposively selected participants from the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) major in English programs at Mindanao State University-Main Campus, Bataraza Extension (MSU-MCBE), and Palawan State University-Brooke's Point Campus (PSU-BPC). Three primary research instruments were employed to gather data: Focus Group Discussion (FGD), In-Depth Interviews (IDI), and Written Open-Ended Questions. Findings revealed that while participants largely agreed on the film's themes, female participants demonstrated an understanding of the character's struggles with societal expectations and an appreciation for the film's exploration of female agency and individuality. Male participants tended to focus more on the expectations placed on men during that period and on established power structures. When participants with more traditional beliefs viewed the movie through a lens of conformity and traditional expectations, the study also demonstrated the impact of internalized gender prejudice. The study also showed that the participants' judgments were influenced by their educational backgrounds, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds, demonstrating an intricate knowledge of how gender roles are changing. This study showed how literature both reflects and challenges social norms, underscoring the significance of incorporating gender perspectives into literary analysis and instruction.

**| KEYWORDS**

Gender Perspective, Literary Analysis, Gender Roles

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 01 February 2026

**PUBLISHED:** 09 February 2026

**DOI:** [10.32996/ijts.2026.6.2.1](https://doi.org/10.32996/ijts.2026.6.2.1)

**1. Introduction**

Literature played a crucial role in promoting social change and awareness. It served as a mirror reflecting society's life and culture, allowing for an understanding of humanity's history, beliefs, and values (Kardinamary, 2022). Through narrative, literature had the power to bring about positive change by engaging individuals and communities, enabling communication, and fostering social and cultural transformation (Assmann et al., 2023).

In many universities worldwide, the study of literature was an indispensable component of the curriculum, allowing students to create rich contexts, descriptive language, and interesting characters (Van, 2009). The study of specific literary works revealed literature's role as an instrument of social change, providing insights into the continuous process of societal transformation (Sahu, 2022).

This understanding of literature's power to promote social change and awareness was particularly relevant when examining the roles of gender in education and literature. The role of gender in education was evident in the gender differences in academic achievement and performance, which were likely accounted for, at least in part, by gender differences in efficacy, interest, motivation, and gender stereotypes. Furthermore, Chaplin (2013) found that there was a small but significant difference in emotional expression and perception, with females showing greater talent and ability to express emotions than males. Females expressed more powerless emotions while males expressed more powerful emotions. At the classroom level, conscious and unconscious attention to gender, the use of gender-related language, and gender stereotypes in the classroom had academic consequences. As stated, when girls succeeded, it was attributed more to effort, whereas boys' success was attributed to talent or innate ability (Kollmayer et al., 2018).

Gender and literature research shed light on how different genders were depicted in texts, identifying stereotypes, biases, and misconceptions prevalent in literary works. Lewis et al. (2022) highlighted that children's books often contained words that adults perceived as gendered. Through semantic analyses based on co-occurrence data, word clusters related to gender stereotypes, such as feminine emotions and masculine tools, were identified. Hence, analyzing these representations helped challenge and deconstruct harmful gender stereotypes and promote more diverse and inclusive portrayals in literature. Moreover, the teaching of literature went beyond instructing students on literary interpretation and analysis; it also fostered sensitivity, self-awareness, and a broader understanding of the world and its people.

The teaching of literature went beyond instructing students on literary interpretation and analysis; it also fostered sensitivity, self-awareness, and a broader understanding of the world and its people. In this regard, Tantengco (2013) suggested that the school curriculum could serve as a tool for engaging students in understanding gender issues and practices, not only within the school environment but also in their broader social context.

The educational syllabus was commonly viewed as a means of instilling values and socially acceptable behaviors within society (Nizeyimana et al., 2022). Thus, a balanced representation of females and males in ELT textbooks across aspects such as language use, visibility (pictures), occupations, and firstness was crucial. The importance extended beyond the classroom environment to society at large. Such representations had the potential to shape gender roles and perceptions within particular societies. As such, curriculum developers had to consider and address gender issues throughout the curriculum development and implementation process (designing, development, implementation, and evaluation) to create a gender-responsive curriculum (Tantengco, 2013).

Due to gender differences across academic fields, this study aimed to explore gender perceptions in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts. It explored the assumptions the participants held about gender. It examined how the subjects identified with gender expectations in their analysis of literary texts and how that influenced their responses to literature. Therefore, this study aimed to 1) examine how participants (male and female) perceived the literary text, 2) investigate what gender roles were reproduced and/or resisted by the participants, 3) identify the factors influencing the respondents' perceptions in analyzing literary texts, and 4) draw pedagogical implications from the data.

### **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

The underpinning theoretical framework of the study is anchored on Social Constructionism, Reader Response Theory, and Gender Theory, each offering distinct yet interconnected lenses for analyzing participants' responses to literature and the concept of gendered literacy. Social Constructionism posits that knowledge, including gender, is constructed through social interactions and cultural norms (Hruby, 2001, as cited in Brendler, 2014). Drawing on Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, the study examined how classroom discourse and literary texts both reproduce and challenge prevailing gender norms. It emphasizes that gender identity is not innate but learned and enacted, shaping how participants interpret and respond to texts.

Reader Response Theory (Gee, 2005; Rosenblatt, 1995) centers on the reader's experience, asserting that meaning arises from the interplay between the text and the reader's unique social, cultural, and emotional background. This framework allowed the study to explore the diversity of interpretations among participants, particularly how personal experiences and identities influence their engagement with gendered representations in literature (Kim, 2004, as cited in Mart, 2019).

Gender Theory (Connell, 2005) challenges essentialist and normative views of gender, instead conceptualizing it as a set of socially constructed behaviors and roles. Applied in this study, gender theory facilitates a nuanced analysis of how literary texts construct, perform, and contest gender identities, enabling a deeper understanding of gender's complexities within specific social contexts. Together, these frameworks provided a comprehensive lens for understanding how gendered meanings are negotiated in literary contexts and inform pedagogical strategies that foster critical engagement with gender in literature.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Participants of the Study

This study involved ten purposively selected participants from the fourth-year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED) major in English programs at Mindanao State University–Main Campus, Bataraza Extension (MSU-MCBE) and Palawan State University–Brooke's Point Campus (PSU-BPC). The participants included two males and three females from MSU-MCBE, and three males and two females from PSU-BPC.

To ensure a representative and diverse sample, participants met specific criteria related to their academic background, literary knowledge, and personal experience. These included active enrollment in a BSED English program, demonstrated competence in literary theory and textual analysis, and openness to discussing gender perspectives in literature. Recruitment was conducted through coordination with course instructors and departmental communication channels. All participants provided informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. They were also allowed to ask questions and fully understand their participation. Data collection incorporated both oral and written responses.

### 2.2 Instrumentation

The 2019 film Little Women, adapted from Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel of the same name and directed by Greta Gerwig, served as the primary material for analysis. The film presents a coming-of-age story centered on the March sisters Jo, Meg, Beth, and Amy as they navigate life, ambition, love, and identity in Concord, Massachusetts, during the 19th Century. With a runtime of two hours and fifteen minutes, the film was selected for its thematic content and relevance to the study's focus on gender roles, power dynamics, societal norms, and literary interpretation.

Three primary research instruments were employed to gather data: Focus Group Discussion (FGD), In-Depth Interviews (IDI), and Written Open-Ended Questions. Each instrument underwent content and face validation to ensure alignment with the study's objectives and to enhance the reliability of the findings. The FGD facilitated group dialogue, encouraging participants to share interpretations, insights, and reflections collectively. This was followed by individual in-depth interviews that provided a space for more personal and detailed exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. Finally, participants completed written outputs through open-ended essay questions, allowing assessment of their analytical thinking and interpretive skills.

### 2.3 Methods

This qualitative study utilized document and content analysis to investigate gender representation, identity construction, and power dynamics in Louisa May Alcott's Little Women. The research aimed to explore the gender perspectives of the traditional gender roles and societal expectations reflected in the novel's themes and characters. Conducted at Mindanao State University–Main Campus, Bataraza Extension, and Palawan State University–Brooke's Point Campus, the study involved 10 purposively selected 4th-year Bachelor of Secondary Education English majors. Participants were chosen based on strong English proficiency, literature specialization, critical analysis skills, and awareness of gender issues, with an equal gender distribution to capture diverse perspectives.

Data collection employed a multi-method approach: initially, participants engaged in focused group discussions (FGDs) of five, moderated by a facilitator, using five guiding interview questions to stimulate dialogue on gender representation. Following this, six participants were selected for semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) to gain deeper insights into individual views on gender analysis. Lastly, all participants completed written essays responding to open-ended questions, providing a complementary written dimension to the oral data.

Data analysis followed the Framework Method (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), involving five systematic steps of thematic analysis: familiarization with transcripts and recordings, identification of themes aligned with research objectives, coding of relevant data segments, charting codes into thematic categories, and interpretative analysis to develop typologies and explanations grounded in existing literature. This rigorous approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of gender perspectives in the literary text.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

The data collected explored how participants perceived the text based on their gender, identified the gender roles they observed as being reproduced or resisted, understood the factors influencing their perceptions, and ultimately, drew pedagogical implications from the findings.

#### **3.1 Participants' Perceptions of the Select Literary Text**

This analysis explored how the participants, both male and female, interpreted the film's portrayal of gender roles and expectations, societal pressures to conform, the characters' quests for individuality and self-discovery, the complexities of generational differences, and the dynamics of love and relationships. By examining their perspectives, researchers gained insights into how the film resonated with contemporary viewers and how it might have influenced their understanding of gender and societal norms.

##### **3.1.1 Female perception of the select literary texts**

Findings reveal that there are eight (8) themes emerged as female perception of the select literary texts, namely : (1) traditional roles of men and women, (2) rejecting conformity, (3) challenging expectations, (4) rebellion and freedom, (5) embracing individuality, (6) generational differences, (7) male emotions, and (8) choosing dreams over love.

###### **3.1.1.1 Traditional roles of men and women**

The results revealed that female participants highlighted the dominance of traditional gender roles in Little Women, with men depicted as providers and women as homemakers, restricted by societal expectations. Discrimination against women in terms of privileges and opportunities was noted, and while some characters conformed to these roles, others subtly challenged them. This perception aligned with Eagly and Wood's (1999) research on gender socialization, which emphasizes that societal norms dictate behaviors for men and women, leading women to internalize domestic and submissive roles. Dietrich and Quain (2014) further support this by noting that societies historically associated femininity with women and masculinity with men, reinforcing stereotypes and limiting opportunities. Social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) asserts that these behavioral differences stem from the unequal distribution of men and women in societal roles, a pattern that persists even with increased female workforce participation. Thus, participants' interpretations reflected enduring traditional views of gender, shaped by longstanding social structures.

###### **3.1.1.2 Rejecting conformity**

Female participants viewed Jo March as emblematic of rejecting conformity, praising her bravery and persistence in defying societal limitations, especially in her pursuit of a writing career and her willingness to challenge gender norms. This female perception of the theme rejecting conformity reflected on how gender differences are shaped by social and cultural contexts, with women often displaying more complex emotional knowledge (Barrett et al., 2000), which may contribute to their nuanced interpretations of nonconformity. Rudman et al. (2010) highlighted that early exposure to gender stereotypes establishes implicit beliefs about appropriate roles, while feminist theory (de Beauvoir) posits that such roles are socially constructed, not innate. This supported the idea that Jo's rejection of conformity is a learned response to restrictive gender expectations.

###### **3.1.1.3 Challenging expectations**

Female participants' perspectives on Laurie's character were seen as challenging traditional male expectations, prioritising personal fulfilment over societal demands to be a dominant provider. This was interpreted as a positive model for both men and women to question rigid gender roles. This female perspective reflected how an unconventional male figure who rejects traditional masculinity can positively influence females' perception of their roles and identities, as similar to Bram (1984) and Fahs (2007) found that individuals who deviate from traditional family roles or experience non-normative life events (like childlessness or divorce) often hold less traditional gender ideologies and are more open to feminist identities. Eagly and Wood (2012) explained that societal mechanisms reward conformity and penalize deviation, shaping individual skills and personalities. Thus, Laurie's defiance encourages mutual empowerment and the possibility of redefining gender roles for both men and women. This dynamic illustrates how female participants perceive that challenging traditional gender roles through the lens of male-challenging expectations can lead to mutual empowerment for both genders.

###### **3.1.1.4 Rebellion and Freedom**

Laurie's rebellious spirit and desire for exploration were interpreted as representing the theme of rebellion and freedom. Female participants saw his actions as indicative of a longing for self-realization and as supportive of women's empowerment. This aligns with Ocen's (2013) suggestion that alliances with unconventional male figures broaden the scope of rebellion and freedom for women, enabling shared liberation efforts. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued that men who reject traditional masculinity create supportive environments for women to assert their rights and redefine their identities. This collaborative rebellion against

patriarchal norms is seen as a catalyst for women's empowerment, with unconventional masculinity facilitating opportunities for freedom and self-actualization.

### **3.1.1.5 Embracing Individuality**

Jo March's pursuit of her ambitions and her encouragement for her sister to prioritize personal fulfillment over marriage were seen as a powerful representation of individuality and self-discovery. Stoet and Geary (2018) introduced the "gender equality paradox," suggesting that greater societal individualism allows women greater freedom to pursue non-traditional roles. Charles and Grusky (2018) and McRobbie (2009) further argued that empowered, independent women are symbols of progressive femininity, challenging the notion that women must conform to domestic roles. Jo's character thus embodies the struggle for individuality and critiques societal norms that confine women.

### **3.1.1.6 Generational Differences**

The generational gap between Laurie and his grandfather highlighted evolving values: the older generation upheld traditional roles, while the younger generation embraced independence and nonconformity. O'Neill et al. (2021) found that younger men increasingly adopt traits of emotional intimacy and inclusivity, positively influencing women's perceptions of their own roles. This generational shift enables the emergence of new masculinities that resist traditional norms, fostering environments in which women feel empowered to redefine their identities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The contrast between Laurie and his grandfather illustrates the broader societal move toward self-actualization and mutual empowerment across generations.

### **3.1.1.7 Male Emotions**

Female participants offered mixed views on male emotions in Little Women, particularly Laurie's. Some saw male feelings as deep but fleeting, while others highlighted their authenticity and courage in expression, challenging stereotypes. These findings align with those of Gard et al. (2016), which indicates that men often experience intense emotions but may express them differently than women do. While women tend to display emotions more openly, men may prioritize logic and directness in their communication. Thus, this difference in emotional expressivity contributes to the perception that male emotions are complex and multifaceted. Fischer et al. (2018) further supported this notion by demonstrating that women generally excel at perceiving subtle emotional cues, which allows them to navigate the complexities of male emotions more effectively. This heightened sensitivity fosters deeper interpersonal connections, enabling women to understand and interpret male emotional expressions with greater nuance and emotional intelligence. Additionally, Beltz et al. (2024) underscored how women's emotional empathy enhances their understanding of male emotional experiences. Men may exhibit cognitive empathy through understanding emotions from a logical standpoint, whereas women often resonate emotionally with these experiences. Thus, emotional resonance allows women to engage with male emotions in a way that encompasses both understanding and support, further enriching their interpersonal relationships.

### **3.1.1.8 Choosing Dreams over Love**

The theme of choosing dreams over love is illustrated through the perspectives of participants' prioritization of career over romantic relationships and understanding of the importance of personal aspirations. This aligned with research by Malinowski and Horton (2014), which suggests that women often find their dreams of achieving personal goals more meaningful than romantic pursuits. Such aspirations can serve as a pathway to self-actualization, reinforcing the notion that prioritizing career ambitions is a valid and empowering choice for women. Furthermore, Participant 5 introduced a contrasting viewpoint, reflecting a broader theme of women's struggle with societal expectations regarding love and career. The tension between career aspirations and romantic relationships was further explored through the lens of emotional complexity. This struggle is not uncommon; many women face societal pressures that encourage them to prioritize relationships over personal ambitions, as noted in studies (Bursztyn et al., 2017). This assertion is crucial in understanding how women navigate their identities in the face of societal pressures.

## **3.1.2 Male perception of the select literary texts**

Findings reveal that there are eight (8) themes emerged as female perception of the select literary texts, namely : (1) traditional masculinity, (2) rejecting conformity, (3) challenging standard, (4) rebellion and freedom, (5) embracing individuality, (6) protective rôle of family, (7) male emotions, and (8) directness in love.

### **3.1.2.1 Traditional Masculinity**

Male participants' 2 responses perceived that men were favoured in the societal hierarchy during that period. He also recognized that men held a dominant position in society, enjoying greater access to ambition, education, and leadership. Moreover, he perceived that traditional masculinity emphasized male power and authority, while women were confined to passive, domestic roles with limited opportunities. He added that, because of the societal norms of the time, a disparity emerged between the

autonomy of male and female characters in the film. Therefore, his response inferred that traditional masculinity emphasized men's patriarchy and authority, while women's potential was often limited and neglected.

Male participant 2's view of a male-dominated hierarchy where men had greater access to ambition, education, and leadership reflected Van Laar et al.'s (2024) findings that men often saw existing power structures as fair, thereby rationalizing inequality and resisting change. Similarly, Kabesa and Berkovich (2024) found that many Israeli male school leaders upheld traditional masculine ideals of strength, control, and the role of breadwinner, echoing hegemonic masculinity. Connor et al. (2021) further supported this, linking traditional masculinity to male dominance and restrictive gender norms. The socialization of men into projecting strength, independence, and power often results in restrictive stereotypes that perpetuate inequality. In essence, Participant 2's response serves as a microcosm of broader societal perceptions of masculinity, as documented in these studies, demonstrating how ingrained beliefs about male dominance contribute to the persistence of gender inequality.

### **3.1.2.2 Rejecting Conformity**

The male participants shared a common view of Jo March as someone who defies societal norms. Male participant 3 noted Jo's rejection of domestic expectations through her writing career, while male participant 5 emphasized Jo's rebellious spirit and resistance to conforming to traditional female roles. Male participant 1 contrasted Jo with more conventional female characters and highlighted Laurie's nonconformity, portraying him as a male who resists traditional masculinity. Therefore, the responses reflect an awareness of gender norms and how characters like Jo and Laurie challenge them.

This interpretation aligned with Al-bakr et al.'s (2017) study, which found that many Saudi male university students viewed changing gender roles positively, seeing it as a sign of modernization and a personal opportunity. While resistance to changing gender roles remains, the study suggests a growing acceptance among men of gender equity, mirroring the participants' recognition of Jo and Laurie's acts of defiance as positive and brave.

### **3.1.2.3 Challenging Standard**

Male participant 5's response emphasized that since Laurie neglected the responsibilities imposed by his grandfather, he defied societal expectations for men. He further highlighted that Laurie was rebellious because he rejected traditional standards of masculinity and did not comply with the expectations of being strong, ambitious, and responsible; instead, he pursued his interests and passions. Therefore, his response suggested that, even though societal standards set for men existed, there was a chance to challenge those norms.

This reflects the idea that societal norms for men, such as strength, ambition, and emotional restraint, can be resisted. His view aligns with Pereira (2024), who found that men who reject dominance, aggression, and emotional suppression are seen as challenging restrictive masculine ideals, often by embracing inclusivity and emotional expression. However, Lacoviello et al. (2021) added nuance, showing that men usually navigate a balance between traditional and progressive masculinity depending on context.

### **3.1.2.4 Rebellion and Freedom**

Male participant 5's response revealed Laurie as a character who demonstrated rebellion and freedom. At the same time, Laurie's grandfather, Mr. Laurence, embodied the traditional role of men, emphasizing wealth and conforming to societal norms. The participant described Laurie as rebellious and rejecting conformity, as he pursued personal freedom and did what he wanted. Therefore, his response implied that there was still recognition of the desire for self-expression and individuality, even within a society that valued tradition and convention, with its norms.

This aligns with the findings of Skipper and Fox (2022), who reported that male participants perceived rebellion and freedom in other men as a direct response to pressures to conform to traditional gender norms. Male rebellion, through emotional expression, non-traditional interests, or disruptive behavior, was seen as a response to restrictive gender norms.

### **3.1.2.5 Embracing Individuality**

The male participants' responses underscored Josephine March, who embraced individuality and defiance of the societal norms set for women. Male participant 1 emphasized that, despite societal pressure for women and a focus on domestic roles, Jo chose to pursue her passion for writing. Male participant 3 reinforced this view, describing Jo as independent and empowered for following her ambition. Therefore, their responses demonstrated that Jo defied conventional expectations for women by embracing her aspirations rather than prescribed roles.

This aligned with Wong and Wang's (2022) findings on the diversity of men's perceptions of masculinity, which demonstrated that while some men value independence, others actively seek emotional connections, highlighting the multifaceted nature of

masculine identity and the potential for individual expression within societal constraints. However, Hentschel et al.'s (2019) research offers a contrasting perspective, indicating that men often perceive women as less agentic than women perceive themselves, suggesting a potential disconnect between men's acknowledgement of women's competence and their perception of women's suitability for leadership roles.

### **3.1.2.6 Protective role of family**

The male participants viewed Mr. Laurence's strictness toward Laurie as rooted in caring, paternalistic intentions. Male participant 2 saw his actions as motivated by concern for Laurie's well-being, while male participant 3 framed them as efforts to secure Laurie's resilience and future success. Male participant 4 emphasized the grandfather's belief that he knew what was best, reinforcing a view of traditional paternal authority. Therefore, the participants viewed the grandfather's actions through the lens of traditional paternal authority, in which the elder's decisions were assumed to be made with the best interests of the younger generation in mind.

This aligned with Dunifon and Bajracharya's (2012) findings that grandfathers are often seen as stricter and more protective than grandmothers due to gendered expectations. Similarly, Mann et al. (2009) found that grandsons often perceive their maternal grandfathers as disciplinarians offering guidance and moral support.

### **3.1.2.7 Male Emotions**

The male participants shared a similar understanding that male emotional expression, as seen in Laurie, was multifaceted and rare, making it difficult to express feelings. Male participant 3 highlighted the difficulty of understanding male emotions without personal experience, using Laurie's inquiry about Jo's feelings to illustrate male vulnerability. Male participant 4 recognised the rarity of men expressing romantic emotions, viewing Laurie's openness as both genuine and atypical. Therefore, they recognized Laurie's departure from societal expectations and highlighted that prevalent traditional standards were limiting male emotional expression.

This aligned with McKenzie et al.'s (2018) findings on the diversity of men's patterns of social connectedness and support-seeking behaviors. That challenged the notion of men's social relationships as solely instrumental, demonstrating that while some men prioritized independence, others actively sought emotional support, thus highlighting the complexity of masculine identity and emotional expression. Furthermore, Fischer et al.'s (2018) research, showing lower self-reported emotional intelligence scores among men, suggests a potential self-perception of reduced emotional competence compared to women, which may contribute to the observed societal expectation of emotional restraint in men.

### **3.1.2.8 Directness in Love**

Male participant 5 perceived Laurie's romantic pursuit of Jo as an example of male emotional directness, contrasting it with societal expectations for women to suppress their feelings. He saw Laurie's proposal as sincere and free from external pressure, and noted that Laurie encouraged Jo to express her emotions openly, challenging gendered emotional norms. Therefore, the male participant 5 emphasized a distinction between male straightforwardness and the societal restrictions of specific emotional standards upon women.

This emphasis on contrasting male directness with societal pressures on female emotional conformity aligned with Ho's (2023) view that men's directness in courtship stems from evolutionary and social factors, suggesting that men's roles as initiators in courtship often involve direct and costly behaviors to signal commitment. Similarly, Patrick and Beckenbach (2019) found that men's tendency to convey significant experiences through narratives, rather than direct emotional statements, can be interpreted as a form of straightforwardness.

### **3.1.3 Differences in Female and Male Participants' Perception**

This subsection discusses the differences between female and male participants' analysis and interpretation of the selected text. The gender gap between male and female responses was presented based on their distinct perceptions of the themes surrounding the text.

The analysis of the male and female perception of the text revealed a significant gender difference in interpreting traditional gender roles. While both male and female participants acknowledged existing power dynamics, female participants provided more critical and nuanced readings, emphasizing limitations faced by women and challenging patriarchal norms. In contrast, male participants often viewed the social hierarchy as natural and less problematic. These differing perspectives suggest that gender significantly influences literary interpretation, with women often adopting critical stances and men aligning more closely with dominant cultural narratives (Bortolussi & Dixon, 2010). These interpretive differences extend to reading preferences and

comprehension. Research indicates that females engage more with neutral texts (McGeown, 2015) and excel in knowledge integration and memory retention, which may enhance their critical engagement with literary works. Feminist literary criticism further supports that women tend to scrutinize texts to expose inequalities, while men may unconsciously reinforce traditional norms (Alrashdi, 2021).

Both genders acknowledged Jo's nonconformity, but their interpretations diverged. Female participants focused on her personal journey of defiance and emotional depth, while male participants emphasized the broader societal impact of changing gender roles. This aligns with research showing that women interpret literature through emotional and experiential lenses (Umurova & Halova, 2022; Lin, 2020), while men focus more on structure and broader implications. Linguistic studies also show women use more social and psychological language, while men lean toward object-focused expression (Newman et al., 2008).

Both genders recognized Laurie's nonconformity, though their emphases differed. Women focused on societal transformation and empowerment; men highlighted the potential to redefine masculinity. This mirrors findings showing no significant gender differences in adult reading comprehension (Thums et al., 2021), suggesting that shared recognition of themes does not preclude nuanced interpretive differences. Moreover, social-role theory suggests that gender differences are socially constructed and shaped by societal norms and roles (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Eagly & Wood, 2013). This supports the idea that male participants direct their focus on challenging traditional masculinity as part of their interpretation.

In interpreting nonconformity, women emphasized relational and societal implications, while men focused on individual challenges to traditional masculinity. Gender theory (Linkin, 1993; Bleich, 1986) helps explain these patterns, highlighting how personal context and emotional connection shape reader responses. Female readers often center empowerment and relationships, while male readers may gravitate toward hierarchical structures and systemic change.

Both female and male participants recognized Josephine March's embracing individuality as significant; however, female participants focused on Jo March's internal struggle and personal journey, while male participants emphasized her agency and defiance of societal norms. These differing views reflect how gender can shape perception, as noted by Reilly et al. (2016), suggesting that broader gendered perspectives and societal expectations influence interpretations of literary characters like Jo. Therefore, the interpretation of literary characters, such as those in Little Women, can vary based on gender perspectives.

While both male and female participants recognized the generational gap between Laurie and his grandfather, female participants saw it as a sign of evolving masculinity that benefits all genders, male participants acknowledged the shift but viewed it through the lens of traditional masculinity. These differences reflect broader gender-based perceptions of societal norms, consistent with social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Eagly & Wood, 2013), which posits that gendered interpretations stem from socially constructed roles and expectations. This context can help explain why female and male participants might interpret traditional gender roles differently. This aligns with the observation that the male participants viewed societal changes through the lens of conventional masculinity.

Female and male participants differed in their perceptions of male emotions. Female participants emphasized the range and depth of emotional expression, recognizing both fleeting and genuine emotions. In contrast, male participants focused on the societal pressures that constrain male emotional expression, acknowledging its complexity but also its suppression. These contrasting views align with research showing that women experience emotions more often and with greater intensity than men, which could influence their interpretation of male emotions (Sprecher & Sedikides, 1993). However, according to Levant (2001), traditional masculine norms often restrict men's emotional expression, which may affect how they perceive and discuss male emotions. A study by Yeh et al. (2009) further suggested that due to socialization differences, men and women develop different emotional dispositions that influence their interpretation of emotional experiences.

Female and male participants offered contrasting views on the interplay between ambition and love, shaped by gender dynamics. Female participants emphasized women's internal struggle to balance personal aspirations with societal expectations, particularly in managing emotions. However, male participants acknowledged societal pressure but focused on men's perceived directness in love and the emotional constraints placed on women. This discussion on the perspectives on gender differences in ambition and love highlighted societal dynamics. According to Dyke and Murphy (2006), women often face internal struggles balancing aspirations with societal expectations, which can impact their emotional expression in love and ambition. Men were perceived as more straightforward in love, with societal pressures influencing their emotional expression differently.

### **3.2 The gender roles reproduced and/or resisted by the participants**

The analysis focused on how the participants interpreted the characters' actions and behaviors in relation to traditional gender expectations of the 19th century. The study examined three key themes related to reproduced gender roles: men as providers

and leaders; women as wives and homemakers; and the societal expectation that men be ambitious and successful. It also explored two key themes related to resisted gender roles: women's intellectual and artistic pursuits and men's rejection of traditional expectations.

### **3.2.1 Reproduced Gender Roles by the Participants**

#### **3.2.1.1 Men as Providers and Leaders**

Participants consistently reproduced the traditional view of men as providers and leaders, particularly through their interpretations of Mr. March's role in "Little Women." Both male and female participants described him as the family's decision-maker and moral guide, reflecting the expectation that men should be dominant, assertive, and responsible for their family's welfare. This aligned with Eagly & Karau's (2002) role congruity theory, which associates agentic traits with male leadership. While recent research (Koenig et al., 2011) noted a growing appreciation of both agentic and communal traits in leaders, participants' responses largely upheld the conventional notion of men as breadwinners and household heads.

#### **3.2.1.2 Women as Wives and Homemakers**

Participants' responses depicted women, especially Meg, as conforming to the roles of wives and homemakers. Female participants emphasized women's nurturing and domestic responsibilities, while male participants highlighted women's dependence on men. This mirrored research by Eagly & Steffen (1984), which found that women are socialized to prioritize domestic roles over personal ambition. The literature further suggested that such stereotypes can hinder women's career advancement (Green & Casell, 1996; Gilbert et al., 2010) and limit their professional aspirations (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987), reinforcing the traditional division of labor.

#### **3.2.1.3 Men should be Ambitious and Successful**

Participants reproduced the expectation that men must be ambitious and successful, with male characters like Laurie depicted as struggling under societal pressure to fulfill these roles. This theme reflected Kimmel's (2008) findings on the expectation for men to be breadwinners and uphold family honor. The responses also highlighted the greater freedom and privilege men have in pursuing ambitions, consistent with Hochschild's (1989) observations. However, participants acknowledged the internal conflict and stress these expectations can cause (Connell, 1995), emphasizing the persistent gendered division of labor and opportunity.

### **3.2.2 Resisted Gender Roles by the Participants**

#### **3.2.2.1 Women's Intellectual and Artistic Pursuits**

The participants' responses emphasized that Josephine March actively resisted traditional gender roles and challenged limitations on women's intellect and individuality. Male participant 2 viewed Jo as empowered and courageous for defying societal constraints. While female participants 2 and 3 highlighted her ambition and boldness, noting her pursuit of writing and symbolic acts, such as cutting her hair, to support her family. Therefore, despite varied emphases, all participants agreed that Jo rejected the notion that a woman's role is limited to domesticity and marriage.

This interpretation, however, requires careful consideration in light of existing research on gender stereotypes. Hentschel et al.'s (2019) study indicated that men tend to perceive women as less agentic than women perceive themselves, suggesting potential misinterpretations of women's behaviors and capabilities. Warner's (2024) article further highlighted the complexities of men's perceptions of women who defy traditional gender roles, noting that such women may be viewed as independent and competent, yet may also be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

#### **3.2.2.2 Men's Rejection of Traditional Expectations**

The participants' responses revealed Laurie as a character who challenged traditional masculinity. Female participant 4 observed that there are societal expectations for men to embody strength, leadership, ambition, and success. However, Laurie's character did not fulfil these roles and chose to prioritize his enjoyment in life. Male participant 4 also noted that Laurie prioritizes leisure and travel in defiance of the societal expectations to be successful, ambitious, and have a strong relationship. Male participant 1 further elaborated that Laurie's actions were contrary to societal expectations of male success, leadership, and family provision. He further elaborated that Laurie was avoidant of traditional gender norms, as he rejected his grandfather's expectations; instead, he pursued his desire for travel, music, and adventure. Therefore, these three participants collectively recognized that Laurie's character actively challenged the societal standards and responsibilities of traditional masculinity.

This interpretation aligned with Rajput and Ekka's (2023) findings that male participants often admire male characters who defy societal expectations and traditional gender roles, potentially identifying with their struggles against societal pressures. However, Rajput and Ekka (2023) also noted potential conflict among male participants when confronted with characters who

reject traditional roles, challenging their ingrained beliefs. Conversely, Bagapor and Papadelos's (2023) research highlighted the persistence of traditional masculine ideals, where men were expected to be the primary family providers, with deviations from this role viewed negatively.

### **3.3 Factors affecting respondents' perceptions of the select literary text**

This section determined the factors that influenced respondents' perceptions of the selected literary text. The research focused on understanding how various aspects, including the following themes : (1) historical context and gender roles, (2) cultural background and upbringing, (3) personal expériences and relatability, (4) societal expectations and contemporary realities, and (5) education and growth.

#### **3.3.1 Historical Context and Gender Roles**

The participants demonstrated a nuanced understanding of how historical context and gender roles shaped their perceptions of the characters in Little Women. Male participants 3 and 5 analyzed character actions through the lens of 19th-century societal expectations, noting the contrast between the limitations women faced then and the freedoms available today. They emphasized the evolution of gender roles. In contrast, female participants 3 and 4 focused on the struggles characters faced with societal pressures. They recognized Jo's resistance to traditional norms and empathized with characters like Meg and Beth, who conformed to these roles. Participants acknowledged progress in gender roles but noted that some traditional expectations, especially regarding domestic responsibilities and male superiority, persisted.

The participants' responses were related to Williams' (2024) research on the historical and ongoing systemic gender discrimination and patriarchal oppression limiting women's rights and freedoms, leading to inequality in areas like education, employment, and reproductive rights, and hindering their full participation in society and politics. However, gender roles in English literature had evolved, fostering broader cultural developments towards inclusion and acceptance of different gender identity presentations (Hooda, 2018). Moreover, Rajput and Ekka (2023) noted that researchers could gain valuable insights into the complexities of gender norms and the ongoing pursuit of parity and representation in literature and other media by analysing literary works across various historical eras.

#### **3.3.2 Cultural Background and Upbringing**

The participants' responses highlighted how their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences shaped their interpretations of Little Women, particularly regarding gender roles and family dynamics. Male participant 3 related the film's depiction of structured family expectations to his cultural tradition, where siblings were expected to marry in order. Female participant 4 reflected on the rigid expectations placed on men in her culture, viewing Laurie's emotional openness and defiance of authority as a challenge to traditional masculinity. Male participant 5 connected with the role of Mr. March, noting similarities with his own father's influence on family decisions and cultural expectations around choosing a financially stable partner. Female participant 3 highlighted the ongoing inequality women face, observing that domestic responsibilities and male dominance continue to shape societal roles and personal perceptions.

These interpretations aligned with Lewis (2001), who noted that individual perceptions are shaped by culture, social context, location, and time. Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel (2020) further explained that cultural norms often confine women to domestic roles, limiting their opportunities and reinforcing gender inequality. Torres et al. (2020) added that while motherhood is often idealized, it becomes more complex when women take on additional responsibilities beyond the home.

#### **3.3.3 Personal Experiences and Relatability**

Participants' responses revealed how personal experiences shaped their emotional connection and nuanced understanding of the characters and themes in Little Women. Female participants 1 and 4 related to Laurie's emotional struggles; female participant 1 resonated with his unrequited love, while female participant 4 recognized the universal nature of doubt and growth. Female participant 3, though not explicitly addressing gender expectations, connected with Jo's experiences through her challenges with parental expectations related to her ambitions. Similarly, Male participant 5 identified with Laurie's uncertainty about the future, particularly post-graduation, and emphasized the emotional connection and shared passions between Laurie and Jo.

These responses reflected the core idea of reception theory (Ang, 1995), which posits that media texts acquire meaning through audience interpretation, shaped by their cultural backgrounds and lived experiences. Rosenblatt's (1990) transactional theory further supported this, emphasizing that meaning arises from the dynamic interaction between text and reader, influenced by personal history, emotions, and context. Elinwa (2020) noted that readers construct meaning through their perspectives, memories, and social identities. Garzón and Castañeda-Peña (2015) also highlighted how students' reflections and attitudes contribute to literary interpretation.

However, some studies highlighted the importance of readers' moral evaluation as a key factor in empathizing with the characters.

### **3.3.4 Societal Expectations and Contemporary Realities**

The participants' responses showed that their understanding of societal expectations, both historical and contemporary, influenced how they interpreted the characters and themes in Little Women. Male participant 3 noted that, despite women's increased access to education today, limitations on their independence still exist, parallels he saw reflected in the film's portrayal of female constraints. Female participant 4 acknowledged the shift from traditional domestic roles to encouragement for women to pursue careers, but emphasized that the fight for genuine equality and freedom from outdated norms continues.

These ideas related to the concept of social construction, as suggested by Burr (2015), in which social processes and interactions shape an individual's perception of truth rather than objective observation. This was further reflected in the 2023 ALICE report, which noted that gender roles remain culturally reinforced, boys are often guided toward STEM fields, while girls are encouraged to prioritize family and domestic duties.

### **3.3.5 Education and Growth**

The participant's response highlighted the powerful connection between education and personal development, enabling them to relate deeply to Amy's character arc in Little Women. Female participant 1 recognized Amy's transformation from a self-centered child to a more mature and compassionate young woman, mirroring her journey of growth. Therefore, the participants' responses suggested that her experiences with education and personal growth had equipped her to understand and connect with Amy's development, demonstrating the connection between experiences, education, and the ability to engage with and interpret literary characters.

This aligned with research by the Dutch Institute for Curriculum Development (2015), which found that literature education broadens social and cultural awareness and fosters empathy. Similarly, Liao and Wang (2011) noted literature served as a channel through which students accessed other human experiences, fostering creativity, flexibility, sensitivity, empathy, and compassion towards others.

However, educational content often reinforces gender stereotypes, portraying men as leaders and women as passive or invisible (ALICE report, 2023). An analysis of Grade 10 English textbooks found gender bias in language, illustrations, and representation. Such portrayals shape students' perceptions of gender roles and can perpetuate inequality. Recognizing this, Tantengco (2013) and Nizeyimana et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of a gender-responsive curriculum in addressing biases, supporting diverse student needs, and promoting gender equity. Education, therefore, plays a critical role in shaping attitudes, abilities, and societal values, as confirmed by numerous studies on the effectiveness of educational programs.

## **3.4 Pedagogical implications drawn from the data**

The data gleaned from participants' interpretations of the text "Little Women" provided a valuable understanding of gender and literature and offered insights for educators to create a more gender-responsive curriculum and promote deeper comprehension of gender representation in literature.

Given the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes in literature, this study suggested that students can achieve a deeper level of engagement with the text when provided with opportunities to think critically about gender roles. By analyzing participants' responses, key pedagogical implications were drawn for teaching literature.

### **3.4.1 Gender Representation in Literature**

The study highlighted the persistent presence of traditional gender stereotypes in literary texts like "Little Women," echoing Campbell (2010) who found that textbook representations significantly shape students' self-esteem and life choices. Masud (2017) further emphasized the need for more female authors and gender-sensitive content to advance women's status in education.

In selecting diverse texts should have included contemporary works that challenged traditional gender roles and offered more nuanced representations of women and men. Contemporary literature, as discussed by Ladzekpo et al. (2024) and Rajput & Ekka (2023), offers nuanced portrayals that challenge conventional gender norms and encourage students to question societal expectations. Otlowski (2003) underscored the sociolinguistic dimension, showing that language in texts signals gender roles and influences learners' perceptions.

Frisby and Behm-Morawitz's (2019) research demonstrated that progressive authors disrupt stereotypes by featuring diverse, non-binary characters, the study found that authors utilize various techniques, including subverting traditional expectations and featuring diverse and non-binary characters, to disrupt established gender norms. This highlights literature's potential to promote more inclusive and equitable representations of gender. Moreover, Khanna and Singh's (2024) research explored the impact of gender stereotypes in literature on readers' beliefs. The study revealed a correlation between exposure to gender-stereotyped content and the adoption of traditional gender role beliefs and attitudes, suggesting that literary portrayals of gender can reinforce and perpetuate existing societal norms. While Jabeen et al. (2014) stressed the importance of critically analysing illustrations and textual roles to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. For instance, certain occupations might be presented as exclusively male, while domestic tasks are associated with women. Achieving gender balance in textbooks requires more than simply ensuring equal numbers of male and female depictions; it necessitates a critical examination of the roles assigned to each gender in every instance.

### **3.4.2. Gender-Responsive Curriculum**

The study demonstrated how gender bias could be present in seemingly innocuous texts. Educators should have been mindful of implicit bias, provided a balanced representation, and integrated gender-responsive pedagogy. Gender stereotypes, prevalent in various aspects of society, including the school curriculum, underscore the importance of maintaining gender equality in the educational environment to support students' academic success (Chen & Wu, 2021). Murphy (2008) and Craeynest (2015) noted that gender values embedded in curricula and linguistic choices can privilege certain roles, impacting students' academic achievement and identity formation.

Furthermore, Holmes & Meyerhoff (2003) and Yang (2011) advocated for balanced gender representation to ensure that male and female characters are presented in a fair and equitable manner, showcasing their diverse strengths and capabilities. Calingacion (2002) identified the limitations of traditional pedagogies in fostering deep literary engagement. This reliance on traditional methods may have hindered students' ability to fully retain or appreciate the content, as these methods may have been inadequate in conveying, interpreting, and comprehending literary texts. Moreover, teacher attitudes and behaviors can create distinct learning experiences for boys and girls, even within the same classroom and subject (Mutekwe et al., 2013). The school curriculum significantly influences the development of gender identity and related behaviors (Crawford & Unger, 2004). This influence stems from the interaction between the formal and informal aspects of the curriculum and the school's immediate social environment.

To sum it all up, the study revealed that traditional gender stereotypes remain pervasive in literary texts such as "Little Women." Participants demonstrated deeper engagement and comprehension when encouraged to critically analyze gender roles. Key findings indicated that students' interpretations were shaped by the text's gendered representations, underscoring the need for educators to select diverse readings, foster critical analysis, and promote inclusive voices in literature instruction.

## **4. Conclusion**

The study revealed distinct perspectives emerging between male and female participants. Male and female participants engaged with Little Women differently: while both valued personal agency and challenged societal norms, female participants expressed a stronger awareness of systemic inequalities and a greater desire for social change. Participants' interpretations were shaped by factors such as cultural background, education, personal experiences, and societal expectations.

The study underscored the importance of integrating gender-responsive pedagogy into literature education. Literature should reflect diverse, empowered portrayals of all genders, and educators must actively challenge stereotypes through inclusive teaching strategies. Moreover, teachers' ideologies play a critical role in shaping learners' views; thus, continuous professional development is essential to ensure balanced and equitable instruction.

Although limited by its small sample size and focus on a single literary work, the study offers valuable insights. Thus, future researchers should explore how gender intersects with other identities (e.g., race, class, sexuality), examine broader literary texts, and assess how educational materials and teacher ideologies influence gender perceptions. Expanding research across diverse cultural contexts will deepen understanding and support the development of more inclusive and equitable literary education.

Hence, students should be encouraged to critically analyze literary texts, question gender representations, and engage with diverse works by authors of various backgrounds. This fosters self-awareness and promotes a deeper understanding of gender equality and real-world issues. Teachers play a key role in this transformation. They should implement gender-responsive pedagogy by selecting texts that challenge stereotypes, ensuring balanced gender representation, and guiding students in analyzing how gender roles are portrayed, reinforced, or resisted. Incorporating literature by women, LGBTQ+ authors, and

people of color broadens student perspectives. Educators must also engage in ongoing professional development to address implicit biases and adopt inclusive teaching practices.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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