

REBRANDING LOUISA MAY ALCOTT FOR MODERN TIMES: THE FILM ADAPTATIONS OF LITTLE WOMEN¹

Nataša V. **Ninčetović**, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Priština in Kosovska Mitrovica, natasa.nincetovic@pr.ac.rs

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Abstract: Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) has proved her most enduring and significant novel which has never been out of print since its original publication. This novel is considered a classic of American and world literature. Moreover, *Little Women* has also inspired numerous film and television adaptations. This paper represents a compare-and-contrast analysis of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* (1868-1869) and its film adaptations, specifically the 1933, 1994, and 2019 versions. The research relies on Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam's definitions and meanings of adaptation. According to Hutcheon, adaptation has an overt relationship with its source-text but aims to transform it and turn it into something of its own. Starting from the observation that the film adaptations under discussion use Alcott's *Little Women* as their basis, we offer evidence that their value and novelty is in how they reinterpret the novel and adapt it to their own cultural and historical contexts. Accordingly, the achievement of these adaptations should not be based upon the extent of their fidelity to the original text, but on the directors' ability to create something new, original, and their own out of a timeless classic. As for the three film adaptations under discussion, they all suggest a different reading and contextualising of Alcott's most famous and enduring novel.

Keywords: *Little Women*, film adaptation, Louisa May Alcott, George Cukor, Gillian Armstrong, Greta Gerwig

1. Introduction

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The claim that *Little Women* (1868—1869) is one of the most beloved stories of all time is confirmed not only by the large number of editions of Louisa May Alcott's most famous novel but also by more than a century of adaptations of the book for television, radio, and film. This paper represents a compare-and-contrast analysis of Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women* (1868-1869) and its film adaptations, specifically the 1933, 1994, and 2019 versions. The research relies on Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam's definitions and meanings of adaptation. According to Hutcheon, contemporary culture is saturated with adaptations of all sorts (2). In its essence, adaptation is a retelling of a classic story from a different perspective. Consequently, adaptation has an overt relationship with its source-text, which is its core, but aims to transform it into something its own.

As Hutcheon and Stam have persuasively argued, adaptation is not the same as a replica, fidelity to the original "due to the change of medium is impossible" (Stam 76) and even undesirable, and therefore should not be a criterion when evaluating adaptation. The originary novel is only a basis of an adaptation, "a series of verbal clues that the adapting film text can take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform" (Stam 83). Stam aptly observes that the process of the transposition of the source-text from one medium to another may be depicted as a sort of translation:

The source novel can be seen as a situated utterance produced in one medium and in one historical context, then transformed into another equally situated utterance that is produced in a different context and in a different medium (83).

Moreover, Whelehan contends that insistence on remaining true to the original story in terms of "historical veracity and authenticity of location and costume" (7) may lead to unnecessary wandering and shifting the focus away from the characters and situations, which according to Bazin constitute the essence of the novel (60). The memorable characters "rise above the great novels from which they emanate" (Bazin 60). When filming an adaptation, these characters, along with the situations they found themselves in, are taken and adjusted to a different time, place, and a director's vision.

According to Stam, film adaptation may also be defined as a reading of the originary novel. Drawing on the assumption that the source-text is an open discourse that "can generate a plethora of possible meanings" (76), this critic asserts that adaptations are readings of the novel that are "inevitably partial, personal, and conjectural" (80). A reading of fiction implies imminent and even desirable alterations in the

source-text that increase with the passage of time and change of perspective. These shifts aim at telling something new about a well-known story.

Up to the present moment, there have been seven film adaptations of Alcott's *Little Women*. The sheer number of them supports the claim that it is a universal and timeless story of females growing up and maturing. Accordingly, the argument of this paper goes in line with Smyth's claim that "every generation deserves its own screen version" (8). However, this is not the only reason for Alcott's most famous book's appeal to film directors and producers. Another reason, as Whelehan has convincingly argued, may be that novels whose plots are "deemed more 'lightweight' and digestible are preferred in preference to the more ponderous, complex or heavyweight" (13).

Or is it more likely that the novel has been chosen precisely because of its "malleability" (Hooper 421), that is, ambivalence and unresolved tensions that permeate it and offer a wide range of possible interpretations? To this day, a heated debate continues between two opposing circles of critics who write about *Little Women*. Does the book promote conventional femininity or rebellion and progressive ideas? Is Marmee the prototype of a sentimental mother who inculcates the principles of self-denial and self-sacrifice into her daughters, or is she a latent feminist? As it turns out, there is a clash between the book's overt messages, which had to conform to the publisher's requirements to see the light of the day, and its hidden and covert implications. It is precisely this ambiguity that allows *Little Women* to be adjusted to various viewpoints and needs of different eras. The novel's latent complexity permits directors to find and focus on the aspect of the story that reflects the value system they consider valuable, amidst the abundance of possible readings it offers.

2. The 1933, 1994, and 2019 film adaptations of *Little Women*

2.1. The 1933 film adaptation (George Cukor)

Alcott's *Little Women* is based upon John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a religious allegory with which nineteenth-century readers were very familiar. Alcott's novel is, among other things, about learning to be a good Christian, although the emphasis is not on doctrines or strict religious rules or principles, but on living one's faith and putting it into practice. Whereas references to Bunyan's allegory abound in the novel, these references are minimised or literally non-existent in the film adaptations of *Little Women* since Bunyan's popularity declined significantly during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Therefore, all the film versions "reject or ignore the view of life that is at the center

of the novel" (Marchalonis 257). Even in the 1933 film adaptation of Alcott's most enduring novel, whose script is closest to the original story, the reference to Bunyan is brief and passing (Mackey 164). As Mackey aptly observes, the framing concept of George Cukor's film reflects a shift from an unfamiliar one (Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*) to that of the Civil War, which has already been "coded for visual representation" (164). Consequently, the Civil War imagery and references are much more frequent and recognisable than in the original story.

In addition, whereas the novel highlights the imperfect natures of the March sisters and their thorny paths of maturing and mastering themselves, the focus of the film adaptations is on themes relevant to the context of their time. In Cukor's film, for example, not much attention is paid to Jo and Amy's respective paths in conquering their flaws, that is, anger and selfishness. Interestingly, the film does deal in some detail with Beth's attempt to overcome her excessive shyness and Meg's victory over envy and materialistic desires, manifested in her conscious rejection of her aunt's fortune in favor of a love marriage to the honest but poor Mr. Brooke. As it turns out, Beth's timidity and Meg's rejection of materialistic aspirations were more appealing to the 1930s audience than Jo's ambition and Amy's selfishness.

Moreover, the occasional bickering and conflicts between the sisters are mitigated, especially between Jo and Amy. In the original *Little Women*, home is a place of character formation and adoption of moral principles, but the path to establishing a balance between the individual needs of the girls and family coherence is thorny. This tension is very much present and not fully resolved in the novel. On the other hand, the 1933 film tones down this conflict. For example, the most famous scene from the book, when Amy nearly drowns after Jo finds out she has burnt her stories, is completely cut from the film. The reason is quite obvious – the film's emphasis on family coherence and solidarity which set out to inspire hope during the hazardous times of the Great Depression. Consequently, the film is devoid of suspense due to its lack of conflicts and clashes. The sisters are represented as unrealistically good, submissive, and perfect human beings who easily put up with all the problems and obstacles that come their way. As the sisters' characters are portrayed as more or less flawless from the very beginning, there is no insight into their maturation, that is, their transformation from childish, selfish, and immature girls into adults capable of overcoming personal differences and disagreements. Whereas Alcott strives to present each of the March sisters' individual coming-of-age stories equally, the film focuses on Jo, but only on her rebellion against conventional womanhood, without seriously

considering her anger and aspiration toward becoming a professional writer.

Despite the mentioned differences from the original novel, it should be noted that Cukor's adaptation "most self-consciously set out to be faithful to Alcott's story" (Kirkham and Warren 83). Its fidelity to the source-text is most obvious in its representation of poverty, the portrayal of Professor Bhaer, and the centrality of Jo's character. The Marches' home is spacious and nicely furnished, but the stains on the sisters' garments (like those on Jo's dress and gloves) and the fact that the sisters exchange clothes support the claim that the family was once well-to-do but fell into financial trouble. The elder daughters work to help the impoverished family, which implies that each individual's offering is important for the welfare of the family and community. Whereas the film's emphasis is on the Marches' home, it still represents the "three sisters returning home from their outside activities" (Kirkham and Warren 84). However, the depiction of working women is not intended to suggest the need for their emancipation, but rather to highlight the need that in difficult times, whether it be the Civil War or the Great Depression, dreams must wait while everyone strives to contribute to survival. Significantly, Cukor's adaptation of *Little Women*, unlike the novel, does not take the sisters' strivings for independence and personal fulfillment seriously but rather treats their artistic aspirations as hobbies with which the sisters fill their leisure time.

Moreover, the film's portrayal of Bhaer's character is most reminiscent of Alcott's of all the adaptations. Jo's chosen one is not as attractive as in the later adaptations and the age difference between them is conspicuous. Similarly to Alcott's Jo, Cukor's Jo is delineated as a paternalistic character who addresses Jo with a patronising "my little friend". Jo holds Bhaer in high esteem and she awaits his critical reading of her stories with both longing and anxiety. Jo is represented as a talented but inexperienced and immature young woman who will benefit from Bhaer's guidance. Consequently, she relinquishes writing sensational stories after Bhaer harshly criticises them. Hence, the 1933 adaptation envisions Professor as Jo's mentor. Jo values Bhaer's opinion because he is "rich in intellectual culture" (Hochman 235). Moreover, he is represented as impoverished, which is testified by Kirk's maid's claim that he is "poor as a churchmouse" (1.24.05.–1.24.07). However, due to the film's need to appeal to a wider audience, the relationship between Jo and Bhaer still has the overtones of a romance. For example, the seemingly belligerent and quarrelsome Jo simply melts in the presence of this scholar with a musical talent. As Kirkham and Warren have convincingly argued, the film adaptations of *Little Women* deliberately

transfer Laurie's musical talent to Bhaer "to pull the text nearer to Hollywood romance" (86), all with the aim of creating a commercially successful movie. However, the variation in Bhaer's character testifies to the inevitable changes that occur as a result of transposing the story from one medium to another. To counterbalance this fluctuation, Cukor's Bhaer is portrayed as nothing else but a socially awkward character. Similarly to the original story, Jo is attracted to the professor not only because of his education and knowledge of high art but also because of his awkwardness. In a similar vein to the original story, Jo is attracted to Bhaer not only because of his learning and knowledge of the arts but also because of his clumsiness, which perfectly matches hers. While the book focuses on Bhaer's lack of knowledge of table manners, in the film, this disregard for etiquette is displayed by Jo, while Bhaer is clumsy primarily in expressing his feelings. Bhaer's awkwardness comes to the fore in an attempt at proposal, which ends in Jo pushing him into "her house to meet the family in a reversal of the groom carrying the bride across the threshold" (Cartmell and Simons 88). If the 1933 adaptation fails to address Jo's anger, her unconventionality is suggested by the fact that she accepts the shy courtship of a poor and clumsy professor instead of the attractive and wealthy Laurie.

Finally, Jo is a central character in Cukor's film, even more than she is in the novel. She is the only March girl who flouts conventions even though her defiance is much softened in comparison to the book. Jo is presented as doing activities associated with men in the 1930s, such as "sliding down banisters, snowballing, shoveling snow, skating, running, and writing" (Kirkham and Warren 86). In addition, Jo is the only sister who takes her artistic talent seriously and strives toward independence. Her family is very proud of her talent and supports her aspirations. However, the 1933 film ends in romance only, whereas Alcott's Jo strikes a balance between her professional strivings and emotional fulfillment by combining work with marriage. Hence, although Cukor's Jo for some time succeeds in stretching out the gender norms, she is eventually tamed.

The novel *Little Women* has not stopped arousing interest due to the tension between its overt conformity to conventional womanhood and covert proto-feminist progressive messages. This tension is present in Cukor's adaptation, although it is limited to the period of adolescence and the confines of the home. As Blackford convincingly argues, the March home is a place atypical for the Victorian era, "a space of the 'natural' for the girls, a space unencumbered by social codes for the feminine" (38). In their home the sisters have complete and enviable

freedom to be who they are, to work on developing their talents, to disguise themselves as men, perform theatricals for the neighbourhood children, and write in fits of inspiration, deaf and dumb to duties and obligations.

However, life in a matriarchal utopia turns out to be a weak preparation for the harsh realities of the outside world. Once they step out into the cruel outside world, the March sisters soon realise that the world is still unready for female emancipation. Even the most rebellious of them, Jo, somehow gives up on her dreams too easily. This loud girl who loves to compete with men and push boundaries transforms into a meek and docile role model after Beth's death. Jo's resignation becomes final after Bhaer's trenchant criticism of her writing. Jo decides to renounce her personal goals and dedicate herself to her family until better times. This not only goes in line with the film's emphasis on family unity and solidarity but also testifies to the 1930s realities. As Wang astutely observes, during this period, Hollywood represented "a family-oriented, mass-oriented cultural institution to maximize profit" (28). A large audience could not be expected from a film that emphasised feminist themes in an era where the focus was on survival. Therefore, Cukor's version of *Little Women* "trivializes Jo's investment in literature and culture" (Hochman 236), presenting her dedication to writing and rebellion against gender stereotypes as a fleeting phase of growing up.

2.1. The 1994 (Gillian Armstrong) film adaptation of *Little Women*

The framing concept of the 1994 adaptation of *Little Women* is that of the Civil War. The difficult days experienced by American society are portrayed as an incentive to cope and create micro-fortresses within the families that were supposed to empower citizens and prepare them for life in a new, better, and modern America. A significant aspect of this bulwark is the unconventional religion of the Marches, which is present but is not reflected in a nominal observance of religious customs, but in the typically Alcottian mantra that religion should be lived. For example, in the very opening scenes of the film, the Laurence family is shown on their way to Sunday service, while the March sisters prepare to put their Christian generosity into action as they bring their unusually bountiful Christmas breakfast to the large immigrant Hummel family.

It is important to notice the way the sisters decide to forgo their breakfast. In the original story, it is the mother who encourages the girls to be self-sacrificing. The March sisters, with heavy hearts, renounce the pleasures so rarely present in their impoverished family. On the other hand, in Armstrong's version, the girls are represented as unrealistically mature for their age. At just one hint from the housekeeper Hana, they

agree too quickly to give up their treat. Armstrong mildly represents the flaws of girls. Meg's envy of wealthy families and Amy's selfishness are alluded to in passing, but these flaws are portrayed unconvincingly. Furthermore, Amy, who considers herself egocentric, doesn't seem so, as she, as the youngest, quickly agrees with her sisters in deciding to help the Hummels and forgo a dollar (Aunt March's Christmas present) to buy a present for Marmee. The spotlight is on Jo's flaws – anger and craving for violence. For example, although starred by Katherine Hepburn, Cukor's Jo is not rebellious enough since her vexation is not represented. On the other hand, Armstrong focuses on the hazardous path Jo undertakes to learn self-control.

Unlike Cukor's adaptation, which shies away from depicting conflict, here the rift between Jo and Amy, which they successfully overcome, is an outstanding example of how transcending disagreements leads to even greater coherence and empowerment of the family. The power of solidarity, filial love, and harmony is sorely needed in circumstances that are extremely unfavorable for sisters. As implied by the novel, the war and the impracticability of the head of the family demand not-so-small sacrifices from its members. One such immolation is the selling of Jo's hair, which she deeply laments, as witnessed by her secret crying over her "one beauty". The story is entrenched into the harsh realities of the period, showing girls as being forced to harden up prematurely due to the misfortunes that befell them.

However, the film presents the girls who have to cope and thrive as unnaturally cheerful and enthusiastic to deal with adversity. Although the film does not deny the limitations of nineteenth-century America, particularly in terms of prescribed norms of behavior for women, the March sisters are depicted as completely unencumbered by formalities in behaviour, all thanks to their mother's progressive views. For example, the sisters are shown as unusually active and jolly, taking part in activities such as snowballing. All but Meg are represented as very loud and unruly while playing outside, and they don't hesitate to approach men first. From the very opening scenes of the film, special attention is paid to the sisters' respective artistic talents, which are not presented as hobbies, but as serious activities. All but Meg are shown as determined to seriously pursue developing their creative aspirations.

Armstrong's adaptation reflects the tendency of directors to adjust the vision of *Little Women* to a contemporary context "on the basis of being faithful to what the author would have expressed had they possessed the freedoms to discuss certain subjects" (Whelehan 13). In doing so, the 1994 version elaborates on themes that are veiled in the

original story, topics such as “educational reform, abolition, and women’s suffrage” (Hollinger and Winterhalter 173). This version was directed and produced by women and released in time of the flare-up of the feminist movement. Hence, it reflects the feminist fervor for deconstruction and search for hidden meanings in the original story. For this very reason, Alcott’s story of the March sisters loses its ambiguity and becomes proto-feminist. For example, Marmee, whose influence on daughters is sidelined in Cukor’s adaptation, is assigned a far larger space in the 1994 version. Armstrong’s Marmee is no longer an ambivalent character who advocates a balance between respecting traditional values and keeping pace with the changes that time brings, but an outspoken feminist who raises her daughters by her own standards, not taking into account social norms.

The distinctions between the sisters’ personalities and aspirations are highlighted, but the filial love and family coherence are also emphasised. Striking a balance between self-realisation and adapting to the family’s needs and expectations is not always easy, but the omnipotent and resourceful Marmee is always there to intervene and help girls in overcoming their differences and conflicts. Armstrong’s Marches do not hesitate to show their negative feelings and there are occasional disagreements between them, but, with the assistance of their mother, they succeed in smoothing out their relationships.

Even though Jo is arguably the central character, her story does not overshadow the coming-of-age stories of the other sisters. Unlike Cukor’s adaptation, and inspired by Alcott’s novel, Armstrong’s adaptation is “even-handed in its sympathetic treatment of the four sisters” (Hollander 220). Consequently, all the girls are encouraged to find out who they really are and what they want. Beth wants to remain with her nearest and dearest, Meg dreams of getting married and building a family nest, Amy strives towards marrying richly, and Jo aspires towards becoming a writer. Paradoxically, Laurie is represented as facing the most serious pressure to conform to prescribed gender behaviour and take up an office job, whereas Beth, Jo, and Amy are free to embark on their respective paths of embracing their liberty and exploring their options. Even the grumpy Aunt March, who symbolises social conscience and propriety in the novel, is portrayed as a fairly progressive woman who offers Amy a trip to Europe not to find her a suitable (rich) husband, but to give her the best possible opportunity to develop her talent.

Indeed, portraying Marmee as a strong and self-confident woman who keeps everything under control is a simplistic interpretation of Alcott’s famous cult of Marmee. The emphasis is on the power of female

agency, and it is Marmee's "agency alone that holds the family together and directs the course of events" (Hollinger and Winterhalter 182). Armstrong's Marmee is unreal infallible, without any doubts or internal conflicts, which dehumanises her. She shows no weakness even when she leaves her daughters to fend for themselves and take care of the house, believing that this ordeal is actually an opportunity to demonstrate the beneficial influence of her tutelage. Guided by such a strong and modern mother, the March sisters do not hesitate to speak their minds and stand up for themselves in a male-dominated society.

Significantly, Jo invites Bhaer's assessment of her writing, but she feels like his equal and does not allow his remarks to sway her. In the 1994 version of *Little Women*, Jo "can stand beside him undiminished, as his equal in intellectual artistry and personal integrity" (Hollinger and Winterhalter 189). Their equity and equality are exemplified by the scene when the two of them are shown reciting Whitman's verses side by side. Professor Bhaer undergoes a significant transformation to both Alcott and Armstrong's versions of *Little Women*. He loses his signature clumsiness and is far more sophisticated than Cukor's Bhaer. Moreover, it is the professor who takes the initiative and who proposes Jo. Finally, Bhaer is represented as not only a concerned lover of literature and beauty but also an "enlightened intellectual and incipient feminist" (Hollinger and Winterhalter 189).

Although the 1994 adaptation does end in romance, marriage is not represented as the sole and ultimate goal of a girl's development. As Gates aptly observes, "it is Jo's [her] singular pursuit of a career that gives her an avenue to grow and learn through ... human experiences". In adhering to the position that women can "have it all", the film proposes that it is time for women to embrace the expanded possibilities for education and employment that modern times offer, not having to renounce their desires for emotional fulfillment. As Hochman has convincingly argued, as "women of the 1930s were generally expected to be wives and mothers, the first movie highlights these ideals, along with romance, marginalising Jo's intellectual interest and her writing" (232). On the other hand, Armstrong's movie, similarly to Alcott's novel, suggests that neither of the two important objectives has to be abandoned – it is possible to combine marriage with work. However, critics such as Cartmell and Simons aptly observe that Armstrong's adaptation, which aims to portray a modern Jo who does not compromise, has actually "succumbed to the dictates of Hollywood by romanticizing and sexualizing Alcott's ending" (89). Moreover, the 1994 version may also be charged with not dealing with the March sisters' married life. Not a single scene gives insight into the sisters'

conjugal trials and tribulations, which are depicted in some detail in the novel. In doing so, Armstrong's adaptation paradoxically implies that marriage is the ultimate endpoint of a woman's life.

2.3. The 2019 film adaptation (Greta Gerwig) of *Little Women*

The screenwriter of the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* is Robin Swicord, who also wrote the script for the 1994 version. Her influence is obvious as it is possible to draw a few parallels between the two versions. For example, they both emphasise the practicality of the Marches' piety. In one of the first scenes, the sisters are shown passing by church on their way to the Hummels. The implication is clear – faith is not reflected in the nominal observance of established practices but in the demonstration of the values that religion advocates in action. Moreover, the framing concept of the film is the Civil War, but the emphasis is more on “women's war work than on men's military service” (Giesberg). Furthermore, Gerwig's Professor Bhaer is diametrically opposite to Alcott's asexual and clumsy middle-aged German intellectual. As in Armstrong's film, the professor is a very handsome man, not a funny match that Alcott had in mind for her heroine. In addition, the Marches are represented as an enlightened family that raises children guided by the ideals of equality, hard work, and constant self-improvement. The sisters' artistic aspirations are taken seriously and all but Meg are shown as very dedicated to developing their talents. Finally, Marmee is envisioned as extremely supportive of her daughters' endeavours to find their own ways. And that is where the similarity between the two versions ends.

The vision of the 2019 version is far more honest, ambiguous, and complex than the two previous versions. As J. E. Smyth notices, the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* is “radically, unashamedly different from other film and television versions” (13). Unlike Cukor and Armstrong's adaptation, Gerwig's film “rejects the novel's sentimentality” (Kirkham and Warren 81). Moreover, the 2019 version is the only adaptation that does not open on Christmas Eve. This adaptation stands out for its playing with the timelines, for its approach to feminist issues, and for its honest portrayal of interpersonal relationships.

In Gerwig's *Little Women*, special attention is paid to the thorough portrayal of all four sisters, who are depicted as individuals with unique combinations of virtues and flaws, specific dreams and goals. Their distinctive personalities are combined with the shared values and beliefs of the Marches. Still, sisterhood is not idealised, as in Armstrong's adaptation. Both moments of harmony and moments of discord are

depicted, with particular emphasis on the rivalry between Jo and Amy. As in the original story, Amy and Jo are presented as strong, headstrong, and independent women determined to take command of their own lives, each in their own unique way. Their means are not the same, but the goal certainly is. Both equally want not only to fend for themselves, but also to help their families, Amy with a rich marriage, and Jo with royalties from writing. Hence, the two of them are “more alike than they care to admit” (Chang).

Gerwig’s version of *Little Women* is redemptive in its portrayal of Amy and Meg. Amy, accused by Laurie of marrying for wealth, responds that marriage is actually an economic proposition in Victorian America. Gerwig presents Amy’s opting for mercenary marriage as a rational compromise given the realities of the era’s gender-constricting options. As Doyle has convincingly argued, the 2019 film implies that by “marrying into wealth Amy forsakes love and therefore personal happiness to support her family, and is therefore presented as nothing short of courageous if not really selfless”. Meg is also given much larger space than in the earlier versions. Significantly, she is represented as possessing acting talent. However, Meg is not interested in pursuing a career. She remains the most conventional sister who longs for the stability of a family home. Interestingly, in Gerwig’s adaptation, Jo proposes Meg to run away from the limitations of conventional womanhood. However, Gerwig’s Meg declines such a proposition, showing herself as a person of integrity capable of defending her position: “Just because my dreams are different from yours, it doesn’t mean they are unimportant” (1.31.51—1.32.12). Furthermore, Meg’s married life is depicted and in general, the originality of the film lies in shifting the focus to the second part of the novel.

Moreover, Gerwig’s Marmee is a far more ambiguous, appealing, complex, and realistic character than Armstrong’s impeccable and fearless one. For one thing, the 2019 Marmee is an unintrusive one. Second, she is not represented as a perfect human being, but as a socially awkward person with her own troubles and flaws. Significantly, Gerwig restores Marmee anger, that Armstrong unfairly “took” from her. Moreover, not only Marmee, Jo, and Aunt March are delineated as furious – virtually all the female characters “share the agony of growing pains and fury against the injustice” (Doyle) of the nineteenth-century American world, specifically its gender-limiting realities. The 2019 adaptation does not suggest, like the overly optimistic 1994 adaptation, that women can defy the whole society. Quite the contrary, the patriarchal world’s indifference and injustice towards women’s desires and needs are emphasised. Gerwig’s film is not a fairy-tale-like

saccharine vision of a matriarchal utopia where dreams come true if you are brave enough to flout the world. Gerwig's film simultaneously strays the furthest from the original and remains faithful to it, most notably in the implication that life is full of compromises. As Giesberg has convincingly argued, the latest adaptation "focuses on all the compromises, big and small, that the girls made as they prepared to live behind their castles in the air".

As in Armstrong's adaptation, the emphasis in Gerwig's film is on writing. However, whereas the 1994 version offers a romanticised vision of the creative process, the 2019 version envisions writing as an artistry that demands both talent and considerable skill, which may be accomplished only with time and constant effort on self-improvement. The new movie rejects the conception of a writer as a genius and focuses on the gradual development of Jo's skills as she embarks on honing them. The significance of writing for a woman author is multifarious. It not only enables her to express herself but also represents a source of income and an outlet for a lack of excitement and challenges within the framework of nineteenth-century America.

However, the most important novelty of Gerwig's film is the way she ends it. In conflating Alcott and Jo, the film offers two possible endings, and it is up to the audience to decide which one is the true one. In one ending, Jo marries Friedrich Bhaer and then opens a coeducational school at Plumfield, a school for both white and black children, a school that gathers the entire extended March family. Another ending shows Jo negotiating her percentage of the royalties with the editor, which evokes Alcott's struggle for copyright.

3. Conclusion

Starting from the observation that the film adaptations under discussion use Alcott's *Little Women* as their basis, we offer evidence that their value and novelty is in how they reinterpret the novel and adapt it to their own cultural and historical contexts. Accordingly, the achievement of these adaptations should not be based upon the extent of their fidelity to the original text, but on the directors' ability to create something new, original, and their own out of a timeless classic. As for the three film adaptations under discussion, they all suggest a different interpretation and contextualisation of *Little Women*. Therefore, the 1933, 1994, and 2019 versions "offer a window into the time they were made" (Roarty). The core coming-of-age story is recognisable in all of them, but their directors change the focus to highlight themes relevant to their respective eras and cultural values.

The most obvious difference in all three versions to the novel is that of the framing device. Whereas Alcott's *Little Women* is based upon John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the film adaptations use The American Civil War as their structural framework. Also, Professor Bhaer undergoes a significant transformation as time goes by, all due to the need for films to be commercially successful. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Cukor's Bhaer is closest to the original idea of the professor as a clumsy and patronising paternalistic figure who serves as Jo's mentor. In Armstrong and Gerwig's adaptations, Bear becomes more attractive, and socially sophisticated, and becomes an equal to Jo. However, to make the professor a more appealing character, he is given Laurie's original musical talent in all the adaptations.

Significantly, family togetherness and solidarity are emphasised in both Cukor and Armstrong's versions of *Little Women*. However, there is one notable difference between the two film's visions of family coherence as a pillar of society and the basis for proper character development. In the 1933 version, family harmony is a goal in itself, while in the 1994 adaptation, family stability is a prerequisite for encouraging independence and empowering women. While Cukor's family consonance acts as an extended arm of society in maintaining the status quo, that same harmony, not to say a matriarchal utopia, should produce brave and strong women capable of changing the world. The film is perhaps overly optimistic in suggesting that girls like the Marches could defy society in the nineteenth century. On their path to self-creation, all but Beth experience success, facing no significant obstacles along the way. Of these three adaptations, the most ambiguous and in that sense the only one faithful to the source-text is the 2019 adaptation. While the 1994 version focuses on the coming of age of all the March sisters, Gerwig's film is more honest in implying that their actualisation is significantly limited by the gender stereotypes that prevailed in Victorian America.

Moreover, the new film of *Little Women* restores to Marmee her ambivalence and her anger. This is a significant innovation compared to the previous two movies, which oversimplify Marmee's complex figure, reducing it to "either as a domestic goddess (Cukor) or as a prototype feminist (Armstrong) (Cartmell and Simons" (85). Another important novelty is Gerwig's film's emphasis on the conjugal lives of the March sisters. The last, but certainly not the least important departure from earlier versions of *Little Women* is its ambiguous ending. In conflating Jo with Alcott, Gerwig suggests two possible endings, a romantic one (which evokes earlier films) and an ending that presents Jo (Alcott) as a woman who has achieved her independence and become the author of

a book she stands behind with all her being. It is up to the audience to decide which ending is the true one.

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REBRENDRANJE LUIZE MEJ OLKOT ZA MODERNA VREMENA: FILMSKE ADAPTACIJE MALIH ŽENA

Male žene (1868-1869) je najdugovečniji i najznačajniji roman Luize Mej Olkot koji nikada nije prestao da se štampa od objavljivanja. Ovaj roman se smatra klasikom američke i svetske književnosti. Pored toga, *Male žene* su inspirisale brojne filmske i televizijske adaptacije. Ovaj rad predstavlja uporednu i kontrastivnu analizu romana i njegovih filmskih adaptacija, sa naročitim naglaskom na verzije iz 1933., 1994. i 2019. Rad se oslanja na definicije i značenja adaptacije Linde Hačn i Roberta Stama. Prema Hačn, adaptacija ima otvoreni odnos sa svojim izvorom koji ima za cilj da transformiše i pretvori u nešto svoje. Polazeći od zapažanja da adaptacije o kojima rad diskutuje koriste roman Olkotove kao svoju osnovu, rad nudi dokaz da je vrednost i originalnost ovih adaptacija u tome kako reinterpretiraju roman i prilagođavaju ga svojim kulturnim i istorijskim kontekstima. Prema tome, značaj ovih adaptacija na treba zasnivati na domenu njihove vernosti originalnom tekstu, već na umešnosti reditelja da stvore nešto novo, originalno i svoje od vanvremenskog klasika. Kada su u pitanju pomenute tri adaptacije, sve one sugerišu različito

čitanje i kontekstualizaciju najdugovečnijeg i najpoznatijeg romana Luize Mej Olkot.

Ključne reči: *Male žene*, filmska adaptacija, Luiza Mej Olkot, Džordž Kjukor, Žilijan Armstrong, Greta Gervig