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## Representation of Gender (Women) in Modern Cinema: A Feminist Perspective

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### **Abstract**

Gender is a social construct and is therefore contentious. The discourse on gender and its representation in media has been under alteration since its inception. Media has played a crucial role in the socio-political exploration of gender and its impact on the population. On one hand, it has concretized several stereotypical notions imprinting a limited, specific picture in people's minds but on the other hand, it has also challenged those notions, disillusioning that picture and providing an alternative reality. This paper will examine the role of cinema, especially movies in critiquing the problematic aspect of gender roles and stereotypes, especially in the case of women. It will provide a feminist critique of the stringent gender roles that incarcerate a woman into a specific model, appropriating her actions and denying her agency. This paper will further refer to Harry Bradbeer's movie *Enola Holmes* and Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* and will work on a nineteenth-century Victorian setting, challenging

the patriarchal notions through its 'modern' twenty-first-century feminist approach. It will delve into the cinematic expanse and its projection of an alternative, dismantling the structure of the pre-existing gender roles through its 'modern' characters who will challenge, question and rebel against these repressive structures. The nineteenth-century setting with 'modern' heroines will provide a sharp contrast between the previous and current representation of gender roles, facilitating a proper understanding of the changes and development with time.

**Keywords:** Gender, Women, Cinema, Society, Feminism.

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Judith Butler, in her work, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* defines gender as a social construct and examines the idea of gender performativity. She argues that society has defined the parameters of the "correct" and "incorrect" gender performance, enforcing an individual to adhere to those norms or roles, punishing and rewarding based on how well one can perform those roles. This resulted in the formation of stringent binaries of gender as masculine and feminine, defining the different roles suitable for these two genders in society. These roles included the kind of clothing, use of makeup, mannerism, body posture, behaviour etc. This was a limited approach which was later adapted into the world of cinema. The representation of gender (especially that of women ) in cinema has been under constant alteration since its inception. The multiple waves of feminism have acted as a catalyst in this process, resulting in various spectrums of gender representation. Cinema has played a vital role in the gender discourse, concretizing as well challenging several stereotypes through its complex signs and symbols such as images, music, sounds, words, colours etc .

Initially, the involvement of women in Hollywood films has been relatively small and they were often described as objects of physical beauty. They were and in many cases still are “objectified” as defined by Martha C. Nussbaum. This led to the formation of a specific image of women, incarcerating them within the walls of the problematic standards formed by men, providing a biased and limited aspect of female sexuality. This not just augmented society’s need for fitting women within those standards of beauty but also exacerbated the problem of body image, beauty and self-esteem within females. This was because people blurred the line between reality and mere representations. They started associating representations with real life, struggling to fit in those idealized portrayals. This is how deeply cinema affected the psyche of the audience, ingraining several stereotypes and biases. However, this representation underwent several changes with time, especially because of the multiple waves of feminism, motivating the directors to make films that portrayed women as independent, strong and smart as shown by the characters Enola Holmes in the film *Enola Holmes* (2020) and Jo March in the *Little Women* (2019). These representations not just helped to challenge the gender stereotypes but also provided models of an alternate reality. Both of these movies have a Victorian setting so it’s the post-modern retelling of that age with feminist ideals, particularly “feminist revisions using postmodernist strategies or playful deconstruction” according to Stephens and Geerts (193)

The semiotic analysis by John Fiske uses the theory of The Codes of Television basing his data on two levels, the level of reality and the level of feminist ideology. This can be analyzed from the movies *Enola Holmes* (2020) and *Little Women* (2019). Both of these movies are female-centric with women being the protagonists. Both Enola and Jo March are radical heroines, subverting the gender roles and gender performativity in the Victorian era. By placing characters with post-modern feminist ideals in the 19th century period, the directors tried to deconstruct the rigid concept of gender, providing an alternative for women and thus empowering them. For instance, Enola Holmes, a sixteen years old girl seems to be a misfit in society. She transgresses Victorian mannerisms and gender roles. She denies the stringent binaries of

masculinity and femininity and manifests an androgynous personality. Enola Holmes is seen as “a specimen of one of the feminine ideals that can be found in girl power” as stated by Fritz. (48) She is Sherlock Holmes’s sister but manages to form an identity of her own that is not associated with any male member. This resembles Virginia Woolf’s work *Shakespeare’s Sister* in which she explores the future of Shakespeare’s imaginary sister. The difference lies in its feminist approach with the former having a radical ending whereas the latter has a tragic ending. The director, Harry Bradbeer, represents Enola as an independent, strong, wise and rebellious woman. She rejects the Victorian mannerisms and gender roles. The dresses, gloves, hats and corsets are depicted as tokens of confinement through the character of Enola who rejects them blatantly.

Enola: *“I won’t enjoy being imprisoned in these preposterous clothes.”* (0:13:12 – 0:13:17) Instead of a governess, she’s taught by her mother Eudoria, who makes her read various books such as Shakespeare, Locke, Encyclopedia, Thackeray and Essays of Mary Wollstonecraft. Eudoria also has the book “The Subjection of Women” by John Stuart Mill on feminism which is progressive for her times. She also trains her in chess, tennis, archery and martial arts instead of binding her to societal norms. She is another radical feminist who’s also the source of inspiration to Enola.

Enola: “She was not an ordinary mother. She didn't teach me to string seashells or practice my embroidery. We did different things. Reading, science, sports, all sorts of exercise, both physical and mental. Mother said we were free to do anything at Ferndell and be Anyone”. (0:01:43- 0:02:13)

Bradbeer brings forth feminist ideas through the mother-daughter relationship which is different from the conventional understanding of such relationships. The absence of male figures till the age of sixteen presents a female-centric world, projecting the idea of non-dependency on men. The way Enola challenges the societal norms are depicted through dialogues, behaviour, costume, setting, and other elements of the film which are considered as ‘signs’ in the study of semiotics. The first sign in the film occurs in the game of scramble in which Enola’s name is spelt

backwards as 'Alone' which is symbolic of a feminist ideology depicting Enola as a strong and independent woman who can determine her future without the dependency on the male members.

Another instance is that of Enola and her lover Tewksbury meeting in front of the council . He asks her to stay but she denies .She's shown as an independent woman who privileges her work over romance. She's not depicted as a stereotypical 'woman in love' who forgets everything for her lover's sake. Another sign is that of the library within the domestic space. During the Victorian era, women were confined within the boundaries of the domestic space and their activities were restricted to household chores . Their education was centred towards making them an "ideal" housewife. On the contrary, Eudoria builds a library in the house to provide intellectual as well as practical knowledge to Enola . She uses education as a means for liberation and independence which is again, a progressive ideology.

There are many instances where Enola transgresses gender roles. Her rejection of Victorian dress and corsets projects her non-conformity towards the patriarchal norms. She is often seen, dressed as a man, fighting and rescuing people. She turns the corset into a means of protection, perverting its real function and thus engages in the "carnavalesque acts of non-conformity and disguise" as suggested by Stephens .(121) She fights against the perpetrators of patriarchy such as the headmistress and her elder brother Mycroft. Enola: "I don't need to go to your ridiculous school" .(0:13:48-0:13:52)

People like the headmistress try to incarcerate her within the clutches of patriarchy. Headmistress :“You are here to be made into young ladies. Act, think, be as we tell you and you'll become acceptable wives” .(01:19:42- 01:19:46) These statements are considered as symbols which indicate that Enola is depicted as an outspoken and decisive woman who holds agency. Here it can be seen that she rejected the school system which taught women to meet social standards. Mycroft tries to subjugate her but she keeps fighting back. He tries to curb her agency and freedom by sending her to an all-girls' school.

Enola: “You want you to be happy, you want me controlled. Because otherwise you think I will affect your standing” .(01:18:03 – 01:18:11) He tries to set Enola within the standards of society. She forms her own identity as a successful detective projecting the idea of an independent existence. Fleger is of the opinion that Enola demonstrates “various stages of *being* and *becoming*” .( 14) She subverts the gender roles by becoming the earning member of the family. Eudoria is the feminist source for Enola who projects strength, independence, intelligence and agency. She inculcates the ideas of female empowerment in Enola’s mind . She is a reformist who fights for the reform bill that will provide political rights to women. The invitation "Women's Suffrage, Votes for Women, Make Your Voices Heard" found by Enola in a warehouse shows the traces of liberal feminism in that period. Women were treated unfairly in politics. The character of Eudoria represents that section of women who protested for their rights. She , along with the other female members of the secret society attacks and rebels against the patriarchs of the society. She is the feminist voice driving Enola towards liberation. Other feminist ideals such as the right to privacy have also been emphasized. Enola restricts her brothers’ entrance into Eudoria’s room .The emphasis on privacy is seen as an attempt to fight against the patriarchal structure that tries to curb a woman’s autonomy.

Another example that encapsulates feminist ideals is Greta Gerwig’s film adaptation, *Little Women* (2019). The movie is about women from a woman’s perspective. It’s female-centric with a Victorian setting but brings forth contemporary values. The cinematography in both movies takes female characters into the spotlight. In the filming of *Little Women*, one can notice that the March family is represented in a soft yellow light in opposition to other families. The usage of soft colours is perhaps an indication of the love and sisterhood among the members. Each female character is different with distinct aspirations . Jo, the protagonist, is an aspiring writer who writes anonymously. She is a ‘tomboy’ who defies gender roles. She often feels alienated as her aspirations don’t fit into the social conventions that confine a woman in the dichotomy of a ‘good’ wife and a mother. Jo is a reflection of Alcott herself, voicing her frustration and dilemma.

Jo: *“Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they’ve got ambition, and talent, as well as just beauty. And I’m so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for.”* (01:42:34 - 01:42:49)

Meg’s idea of a happy life is marriage. Irrespective of their ambitions, all the characters are given importance and none of them are depicted as inferior .

Unlike Enola Holmes, Little Women provides a different angle of feminism and doesn’t portray marriage as something anti-feminist. Apart from emphasizing women’s empowerment, it also provides a newer perspective that a woman need not act like a man to be taken seriously . It doesn’t project femininity as something one needs to reject to be a “feminist”. The ambitions of all the sisters are appreciated and that’s what separates this film from other movies. In Little Women’s movie, although the story is set in the mid-nineteenth century, the March daughters’ adventures, burdens, and aspirations resonate with the modern era. In the movie, each female character has her own distinctive story. While Meg struggles with marital responsibilities, Amy struggles for achieving artistic excellence and Jo fights to earn recognition as a writer in a space dominated by men. This film is a way of Gerwig’s interpretation of women’s adaptations in this new era. It celebrates women of all forms. This movie also portrays the reversal of gender roles through the character of Jo who is described as “unladylike”. She reveals a non-conformist attitude towards Victorian norms. She is the earning member who takes responsibility for the whole family. She sacrifices her hair to support her mother’s trip, transgressing Victorian beauty ideals. It is observed as a radical act on her part. Gerwig, through the character of Jo, presents an alternate life for women as single, independent individuals, capable of living a life independent of men. This is reflected in her conversation with Aunt March.

Aunt March :*“You mind yourself, dearie, one day you’ll need me and you’ll wish you had behaved better”*

Jo :*“Thank you, Aunt March, for your employment and many kindnesses, but I intend to make my own way in the world.”* Aunt March: *“No one makes their own way, not really, least of all a woman. You’ll need to marry well.”* (0:35:25- 0:35:35)

In Saoirse Ronan's movie, Jo ends up unmarried and childless but a published author while in Alcott's novel, she gets the conventional ending. Alcott later confessed in her interviews that she was forced to change the ending of her novel with the heroine married and with children. The conventional norms barred writers from providing an unconventional ending. Maidenhood was abhorred to such an extent that death was preferred over spinsterhood. Marriage was the ideal state for a woman and this depicts the stringent gender roles that decide the status of a woman in the society based on her association with the male members. In one of the scenes, Jo March and Mr Dashwood are seen negotiating the royalties for Jo's book. Women are portrayed as witty and capable of doing something outside the domestic sphere. The presence of feminist characters like Laurie and Marmee who support Jo and value merit over rank or beauty makes this movie different. Marmee presents a changing worldview embracing radical women who challenge oppressive social norms. This is evident from the way she supports Jo's ambition and her response to gender roles. She is supportive of her daughters. Through the character of Laurie, Gerwig projects an egalitarian approach, smartly portraying the idea that it's not just the concern of one sex but both the sex as a whole. Men like Laurie understand the complexity of gender injustice and this is revealed from his conversation with Amy. He comments how men decide the standards of genius excluding women from the decision making process. The absence of a father figure in both movies makes it even more female-centric, portraying the non-dependency of women on men.

In the end, Jo finds love but the movie, unlike the book, doesn't end with Jo's marriage. Instead, the scene shifts to the publishing house with Jo getting her novel published. Gerwig states "What I was trying to reverse-engineer was this moment that Jo getting her book would make the audience feel like you usually feel when the heroine is chosen by the hero," Gerwig said after a film screening in New York. "I wanted to see if I could create that feeling, but with a girl and her book( *"One more adaption of little women: A personal review"* ). This is a feminist approach because by changing the ending, Gerwig has not only challenged the conventional norms binding a woman to the domestic sphere but has also provided an alternate world for women



as working professionals. It has empowered women by insinuating this idea in the minds of individuals while simultaneously deconstructing the stereotypes regarding gender roles.

Psychoanalytic feminists provide a psychoanalysis, observing the mental pattern of women and how they have internalized the society's perception towards them. They are of the opinion that the basic explanation for how women act comes from within, specifically, from the way they think about themselves. However, this is again rooted in society and its influence on individuals. They claim that gender identity and gender injustice are rooted in a series of experiences of childhood. Roland Barthes in her work "Toys" talks about this internalization during childhood experiences. He gives the example of a doll. "There exist, for instance, dolls which urinate; they have an esophagus, one gives them a bottle, they wet their nappies... This is meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to condition her to her future role as a mother".( 53) These experiences have resulted in normalizing several problematic things such as associating female gender with domesticity and male gender with the external world. It has also resulted in privileging "masculine" over "feminine". Gerwig and Bradbeer are trying to transgress these norms through an androgynous representation, consisting of both feminine and masculine aspects through the character of Jo who's breaking these binaries.

## **Conclusions**

Both movies represent the protagonists who are challenging the construct of gender roles and stringent binaries of masculine and feminine. The representation of gender in cinema is still contentious because if it's challenging gender roles through these characters, some representations are still concretizing it. What does one even mean by the terms "masculine" and "feminine"? Is there a way to decide the parameters for these terms? On what basis shall one make such assumptions? If gender is a social construct and this construct is problematic since it keeps evolving and changing with time, how do we define gender? These are some questions one needs to ponder over. People are becoming more aware with time and gender is a more fluid rather than a concrete concept now, forcing an individual to question the factors that had led to its appropriation based on male and female sex. The representations in cinema have allowed people to closely analyze the internalization of this concept and question its legitimacy.

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### Author's bio-note

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