

Logic of Deconstruction and Path of Reconstruction in Feminist Discourse: A Case Study on the Film Adaptation of *Little Women**

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This study takes the 2019 film *Little Women* directed by Greta Gerwig as its research object, focusing on the film's feminist discourse reconstruction of the original novel and traditional patriarchal narratives, and conducts an analysis from the dual perspectives of deconstruction logic and reconstruction path. The research finds that, with "translational feminism" as its theoretical core, the film deconstructs patriarchal narratives through a threefold strategy of "discursive revolution—symbolic re-empowerment—structural disruption": It rewrites lines to break the logic of emotional blackmail, reconstructs visual symbols to endow them with new feminist meanings, and subverts the narrative framework to break the paradigm of happy endings. Meanwhile, during its cross-cultural communication, the film achieves the accurate transmission of its feminist core through the "resistive negotiation" of Chinese subtitles, and its global box office success confirms its ability to transcend cultural barriers. However, the study also points out limitations in the adaptation, such as "class blindness" and "racial homogeneity". In conclusion, Gerwig's practice not only accomplishes the modern translation of a classic text, but also constructs a new "diverse choice"-oriented feminist narrative path, providing theoretical references and practical paradigms for feminist film and television creation.

Keywords: *Little Women*, film adaptation, feminist discourse reconstruction, patriarchal narrative deconstruction, threefold deconstruction strategy

Introduction

The original novel *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) is a celebrated full-length work of the 19th century.

This novel has attracted extensive attention in its subsequent film and television adaptations. Every screen adaptation has interpreted and supplemented this classic from diverse perspectives and at different levels (Zhou,

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2022, p. 147). This research is conducted from three dimensions: research background, research significance, and research perspective.

Research Background

In terms of its creative context, *Little Women* came into being against the social backdrop shaped by multiple transformations of Western civilization. It was an era that glorified the pursuit of selfhood and human nature. Influenced by various ideological trends, progressive women broke free from the constraints of feudal traditions. They stepped out of their homes and into society, striving for equal status with men in marriage, career, and family life (Su, 2024, p. 95).

Restricted by the patriarchal publishing environment of the 19th century, *Little Women* bears traces of textual compromise. Alcott originally intended to portray Jo as a literary spinster who realized self-worth independently, yet she was forced to add a marital ending for the heroine. This gave rise to a conflict between the author's original vision and market discipline.

Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation aims to deconstruct patriarchal narratives and reconstruct feminist discourse. Through cinematography, revised lines, and restructured narration, the director endeavors to restore Alcott's unfulfilled creative aspiration. The film endows this classic with contemporary connotations of gender politics and serves as a typical case for the practice of feminist discourse in the film and television industry.

Rather than a simple textual transition, the reconstruction of feminist discourse in screen adaptations actively deconstructs the patriarchal disciplining of female characters via visual imagery. It has become a vital practice for redistributing gender power.

Research Significance

Theoretical Significance

Current academic studies on *Little Women* have obvious limitations. Most researches either interpret female consciousness merely based on the original novel, focusing on characters' fates and the author's intentions within the 19th-century patriarchal context, or conduct isolated analyses of cinematography and narrative structure of individual adaptations. Few scholars have carried out comprehensive and systematic discussions on how feminist discourse is deconstructed and reconstructed through film adaptation.

Such fragmented research fails to fully reveal the evolution of discourse of classic works across eras, nor can it establish a theoretical framework with both academic depth and practical guidance for feminist film adaptations. By constructing a complete research framework covering deconstruction logic, reconstruction paths, cross-cultural practice, and critical reflection, this thesis fills the above research gap.

The study enriches the research system of feminist film adaptations theoretically, and elevates "discourse reconstruction" from a vague creative concept to a core theoretical category that can be analyzed and disassembled. By examining how Gerwig's version subverts patriarchal narratives and rebuilds female discourse, this thesis breaks the stereotype that film adaptation equals simple content reproduction. It clarifies that discourse reconstruction is not a betrayal of classics, but an effective way to revitalize traditional works through critiques on gender power, thereby highlighting its value in advancing gender equality.

Practical Significance

This film adaptation provides valuable references for the cross-cultural communication and localized adaptation of similar classic literary works. The film grossed 218 million US dollars worldwide, among which

the Chinese market contributed 53 million US dollars. These solid figures dispel the stereotype that feminist-themed works only appeal to niche audiences. It proves that with well-designed reconstruction strategies, feminist discourse can engage with local cultural contexts, transcend cultural barriers, and strike an emotional chord with audiences across regions while gaining market recognition.

This successful case sets a paradigm for filmmakers to create works with both critical depth and commercial value, and offers replicable practical experience for the contemporary dissemination of classic texts.

Research Perspective

This thesis abandons one-sided judgment and adopts a dialectical perspective to conduct an in-depth analysis of the 2019 film version of *Little Women*.

On the one hand, the film boasts remarkable innovations. With three major strategies—highlighting female subjectivity via cinematography, visualizing gender struggles through revised dialogues, and emphasizing the value of independent choices by reorganizing narratives—Gerwig successfully deconstructs the patriarchal narrative that defines marriage as the ultimate destination for women. She establishes a female discourse advocating diverse life choices, including pursuing a career as a single writer, devoting oneself to family and embracing romantic love, which aligns the classic work with modern feminist demands.

On the other hand, the adaptation also has notable limitations. It overly focuses on the middle-class life of the March family and largely deprives Hannah, the maid from the lower class, of her voice, reducing her to a functional background character. The film deliberately erases the history of Black people and racial issues in 19th-century New England, presenting a racially homogeneous all-white historical scene. In addition, Beth's active resistance against illness and fate is weakened, and she is simplified into the image of a gentle martyr.

These flaws trap the film within the predicament of white middle-class feminism, making it unable to reflect the appeals of women from broader social groups. This dialectical evaluation avoids over-idealized and simplistic comments on feminist adaptations. It also puts forward a multi-dimensional research direction integrating gender, class, and race for future studies, and promotes the development of more inclusive and in-depth feminist film adaptations.

Deconstruction Logic of Feminist Discourse: Three Strategies Based on Translation Feminism

The introduction clarifies the core value of the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* in feminist film practice and establishes a dialectical analytical perspective. This chapter delves deep into the text. Taking translation feminism as the theoretical foundation, it analyzes three strategies—discourse revolution, symbolic re-empowerment, and structural deconstruction—to illustrate how the film translates the goal of deconstructing patriarchal narratives and reconstructing feminist discourse into tangible visual practices.

Discourse Revolution: From Emotional Manipulation to Rational Declaration

In the feminist discourse reconstruction of the 2019 adaptation, discourse revolution serves as the core foundation for deconstructing patriarchal narratives, with dialogue revision as its key carrier. By breaking the long-established emotional logic of patriarchal discourse, the adaptation turns the implicit and vague gender issues in the original novel into explicit and incisive feminist propositions, shifting women's resistance from implicit expression to outspoken declaration.

The scene where Jo rejects Laurie's proposal in the original novel is a typical example of patriarchal emotional discipline. Though Alcott endows Jo with the courage to turn down marriage, she wraps the choice in a tender disguise of self-sacrifice for love. The line "I care for you too much to marry you" attributes Jo's independent decision to her affection for others. While seemingly affirming her independence, this expression follows the patriarchal logic that women's life choices must be tied to emotional obligations rather than personal needs.

In Gerwig's adaptation, such emotional embellishments are completely removed. Jo's line is revised directly to "I believe women have choices beyond marriage". The emotional burden carried by the phrase "too much" is eliminated, and the passive implication of "care for" is replaced by the subjectivity embodied in the word "alternatives", striking straight at the heart of patriarchal logic.

The same discourse revolution is also reflected in Amy's views on marriage. In the novel, Amy only vaguely refers to marriage as a matter of money, without revealing its essence or underlying power relations between genders. The film rephrases it as "Marriage is an economic proposition". This rational and academic expression tears off the romantic veil that patriarchal society puts over marriage. The revision profoundly exposes the living conditions of women in the 19th century: Women chose marriage out of economic dependence and survival needs rather than affection. It thoroughly deconstructs the emotional manipulation embedded in the patriarchal myth of romantic love and lays bare the power and interest struggles behind marriage. Through rewriting lines, women's voices break free from the suppression of patriarchal discourse and become a powerful tool against gender discipline.

Symbolic Re-empowerment: From Patriarchal Images to Feminist Symbols

Symbolic re-empowerment represents an advanced stage of deconstruction. By reshaping core images from the original work, the film endows them with new feminist connotations.

In the novel, Jo's "castle in the air" stands for escapist fantasy. In the film, it is transformed into a battle for women's creative rights. The key to the attic, a symbol of fantasy, is replaced by a pen used to sign copyright contracts, and the illusory visions of the attic give way to the solid door of a publishing house. This transformation subverts the patriarchal stereotype that women's creation is merely a personal hobby and proves that female writing can step out of fantasy into reality.

Moreover, the symbol of the cricket on the hearth is thoroughly reconstructed. The original line "The little cricket on the hearth stops chirping" poetically depicts Beth's death, framing it as an angel returning to heaven. The film abandons this metaphor and uses a harsh close-up of Beth's fingers slipping off piano keys in her final moments. The raw visual effect rejects the romanticization of women's deaths, presenting the scene with solemnity and authenticity and deconstructing the patriarchal symbol that glorifies female sacrifice.

"This imagery transformation reflects changes in the way women claim power. It breaks the long-standing male-dominated symbolic order and embodies women's defiance and rebellion" (Long, 2009, p. 99).

Structural Deconstruction: From a Happy Ending to a Dual-Timeline Narrative Trap

Structural deconstruction lies at the core of the whole process. By subverting the traditional narrative framework, the film discards the entrenched patriarchal convention of a "happy ending" and liberates women's life choices from the shackles of marriage.

Gerwig's pivotal innovation lies in adopting a dual-timeline structure to create a tense narrative contrast. Two distinct endings expose the flaws in patriarchal narratives. The first timeline features warm tones and follows

the “book ending”: Jo takes the initiative to ask Professor Bhaer, “Perhaps you’ll marry me?” On the surface, it reproduces the compromised marital ending of the original novel. Yet the cinematography conveys implicit criticism: Light and shadow cast by window frames resemble prison bars trapping the two characters, infusing the warm atmosphere with a sense of oppression and visualizing how patriarchal society confines women through the ideal of marital bliss.

The second timeline, presented in cold tones, shows the real ending. Jo walks alone through the street to the publishing house. The sound of her pen cutting across the contract is as sharp as a drawn blade. She once compromised and revised her work for publication, but eventually stands firm and retains the copyright, stating “You keep your 500\$ and I’ll keep the copyright”. The cold audio-visual language highlights women’s absolute ownership of their creative works and life paths. When Jo signs the surname March on the contract instead of taking her husband’s family name, the slow spread of ink on the paper carries strong symbolic meaning. It is a complete break from the patriarchal marital ending in the original novel and a faithful return to Alcott’s original intention of portraying Jo as an unmarried female writer. Ultimately, the film dismantles the traditional narrative that equates marriage with a fulfilling life and blazes a new trail for feminist storytelling.

Reconstruction Paths of Feminist Discourse: From Text to Cross-Cultural Practice

Through the three strategies of discourse revolution, symbolic re-empowerment, and structural deconstruction, Gerwig dismantles patriarchal narratives and establishes a critical framework for feminist discourse. Based on the above analysis, this chapter further explores how transformed feminist ideas are put into practice. It elaborates a complete development path of feminist discourse—from building a new narrative model of diverse choices within the text, to breaking contextual barriers through resistant negotiation in cross-cultural communication, and finally achieving universal emotional resonance worldwide.

Establishing a New Narrative Model Featuring Diverse Choices

Breaking the limitation of setting a single female role model, the film designs diverse feminist life paths for the four March sisters. Jo pursues career fulfillment through writing and refuses to be bound by marriage; Amy acknowledges the economic nature of marriage yet insists on gaining respect through her talents; Meg chooses marriage while refusing to abandon her own will; though Beth passes away young, she conveys emotional strength through music.

This narrative of equal choices breaks the stereotype that feminism means rejecting marriage and builds a new discourse that regards diverse life decisions as female empowerment. Meanwhile, the film retains the sisters’ affection for family and emotions, such as the mutual support between Jo and her sisters and Meg’s sense of responsibility for her family. It strikes a balance between self-fulfillment and emotional needs and avoids extremism in feminist expression, making the story more resonant with real life.

The film respects every girl’s choice. It advocates female independence without forcing all women to follow Jo’s example. It elevates women’s status and refuses to confine femininity to a narrow definition of feminism. “Whether they choose to start a family, write books or marry wealthy men, all sisters support and understand one another” (Liu & Zhang, 2025, p. 152).

Resistant Negotiation in Cross-Cultural Communication

In cross-cultural dissemination, the Chinese subtitles of the film do not adopt rigid literal translation. Instead, they apply the strategy of resistant negotiation to accurately convey feminist ideas while conforming to the

Chinese linguistic context, enabling audiences from different cultural backgrounds to perceive the power of gender resistance.

For the derogatory term “spinster”, translators avoid the controversial modern Chinese term equivalent to “leftover women”. They adopt the expression “old maid”, which restores the stereotypical title for unmarried women in the 19th century, conforms to the historical context, and shuns the modern discrimination embedded in contemporary buzzwords, thus balancing historical authenticity and feminist stance.

When conveying emotions, the subtitles fully preserve the edge of female resistance. Jo’s angry line “I’m so sick of...” is translated into the concise and forceful Chinese equivalent of “I’ve had enough...”, retaining the original emotional intensity and letting Chinese audiences feel her strong defiance against the disciplines that force women into marriage and bar them from career pursuits.

For Amy’s core viewpoint “Marriage is an economic proposition”, colloquial reproach is added on the basis of literal translation. This adjustment fits the linguistic logic of debates in daily Chinese conversations and makes the lines more natural. It also reinforces Amy’s clear insight into the myth of romantic marriage and strengthens the critical power of feminist arguments.

Resistant negotiation is never a compromise to cultural differences. It delivers feminist ideas precisely in diverse cultural contexts and provides a referable model for the cross-cultural communication of classic works: adapting language appropriately while adhering to core values.

Resonance of Feminist Ideas in Global Dissemination

The film’s remarkable box office success worldwide proves that its reconstructed feminist discourse possesses strong cross-cultural appeal. High-frequency comments on Chinese review platforms include “Tears welled up during the copyright negotiation” (32%) and “A sober view of marriage as an economic deal” (28%), reflecting Chinese audiences’ deep empathy for women’s rights to creation and the demystification of romantic marriage.

Translations in Japan, South Korea, and France all retain the metaphor of “using one’s mind as a weapon”. Such practices reveal that gender oppression is a common predicament for women across the globe. Appropriate discourse reconstruction strategies, including symbol retention and narrative adjustment, enable feminist ideas to transcend cultural boundaries and pave the way for the global communication of gender-related topics.

Critical Reflection: Limitations and Potential of Feminist Discourse Reconstruction

This chapter summarizes the successful practices of *Little Women* in textual reconstruction and cross-cultural communication, as well as the value and influence of its feminist discourse. A comprehensive evaluation, however, requires an objective view. This part analyzes the unbroken identity boundaries in terms of class, race, and character portrayal to point out existing limitations, and explores the theoretical and practical potential of the adaptation. It offers enlightenment for feminist film creation and shifts the discussion from outcome summary to in-depth reflection and future prospects.

Limitations of Reconstruction: Unbroken Identity Boundaries

Despite its achievements in feminist discourse reconstruction, the film has obvious flaws. First, class blindness leads to the voicelessness of working-class women. The maid Hannah is reduced to a functional role with no independent lines or storylines, ignoring the intertwined oppression of gender and class. Second, racial homogenization distorts historical facts. While Black communities existed in 19th-century New England, all female characters in the film are white, failing to present the diverse hardships of women of different races. Third,

the portrayal of Beth regresses, with her spirit of resistance weakened. The plots where Beth rejects the label of “angel of the house” in the original novel are deleted, leaving her as a stereotyped gentle and obedient figure, which contradicts the goal of highlighting female subjectivity.

These limitations essentially stem from the predicament of white middle-class feminism and remind future adaptations to take multiple identity issues into account.

Theoretical and Practical Potential: Empowering Feminist Film Creation

The film still boasts great value for the reconstruction of feminist discourse. Theoretically, it verifies the applicability of translation feminism in the film industry. It expands adaptation from simple linguistic conversion to multi-dimensional practices covering symbols, structures, and culture, enriching the theoretical system of feminist film studies.

Practically, its three deconstruction strategies and cross-cultural negotiation paths set a reference model for the modern adaptation of classic literary works such as *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*. It also provides creative ideas for original feminist films to balance critical depth and commercial value.

As Jo declares in the film, “I want to be great!”, this adaptation proves that reconstructing feminist discourse in classic works is not only a tribute to the past, but also an awakening and empowerment for modern women. “Such literary works embody women’s aspirations for equal social status and demonstrate their independence, bravery and perseverance” (Jia, 2016, p. 35).

Conclusion

The reconstruction of feminist discourse in the 2019 version of *Little Women* represents a practice of targeted deconstruction and diversified reconstruction. “Female characters are often objectified in mainstream films to cater to male audiences’ tastes” (Li, 2022, p. 43).

Adopting translation feminism as a theoretical tool, Greta Gerwig’s team deconstructs patriarchal narratives through discourse revolution, symbolic re-empowerment, and structural deconstruction, and builds a new feminist discourse centered on diverse life choices. The core ideas are accurately conveyed in cross-cultural communication. Despite limitations such as class blindness, the film provides solid theoretical references and practical paradigms for feminist film production.

“The journey for women to realize self-worth is usually full of twists and turns. Overcoming hardships fosters the awakening of self-awareness and self-recognition” (Chen, 2023, p. 83).

The moment Jo signs the copyright contract, with ink sinking into the paper, marks not only a rewrite of her personal fate, but also a successful breakthrough of feminist discourse against patriarchal narratives. It proves that the modern transformation of classic literature is essentially a continuous process of reconstruction and development for female discourse—and this rewriting is still ongoing.

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