

Contemporary ‘*Little Women*’ and Womanhood Perceptions of Thai Young Women

ภาพยนตร์ร่วมสมัยเรื่อง สีดруณี และการรับรู้ความเป็นผู้หญิงของผู้หญิงไทยวัยเยาว์

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Abstract

This article lent itself to a qualitative analysis of current and popular female characters in the 2019 film adaptation ‘*Little Women*’ and Thai young women¹’s perceptions toward the characteristics of womanhood the characters depicted. This current study was divided into two parts. The first section was the textual analysis to look at how the four main female characters used language both verbal and non-verbal cues to reflect characteristics of womanhood. In the second part, 34 Thai female university students were asked to rate the 15 characteristics of womanhood which emerged from the textual analysis part, on the 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0-3 (not important at all to very important). The findings from the first part exhibited a combination of traditional and contemporary womanhood in each female character. The perceptions of the sample group highlighted preferences toward prevalent characteristics of contemporary womanhood over those of traditional one. Being independent, educated, negotiators; sentimental; and independent were preferred over being dependent, a wife, and a mother in fulfilling a woman’s role in this contemporary time. Such preference tends to underly

¹ WHO defines young people or young adults as individuals of the age range between 10 and 24 years (World Health Organization South-East Asia, n.d.).

women's economic determinism, financial independence and security while highlighting self-expressionism.

Keywords: 'Little Women', womanhood perception, contemporary culture, textual analysis

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ใช้การวิเคราะห์เชิงคุณภาพเพื่อศึกษาตัวละครเอกผู้หญิงทั้ง 4 ที่กำลังได้รับความนิยมในภาคยนตร์ดัดแปลง ปี 2019 เรื่อง สีดรูนี รวมทั้งศึกษาการรับรู้ของผู้หญิงไทยวัยเยาว์ที่มีต่อความเป็นผู้หญิง การศึกษานี้แบ่งออกเป็นสองส่วน ส่วนที่หนึ่งเป็นการวิเคราะห์จากตัวบทเพื่อศึกษาภาษาพูดและท่าทาง ที่ตัวละครเอกผู้หญิงทั้งสี่ ในเรื่องใช้ และสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความเป็นผู้หญิง ในส่วนที่สองนั้น นักศึกษาหญิงชาวไทยจำนวน 34 คนในฐานะกลุ่มตัวอย่าง ทำแบบสอบถามการรับรู้ความเป็นผู้หญิง โดยให้คะแนนลักษณะความเป็นผู้หญิงทั้ง 15 ลักษณะ ซึ่งนำมารวบรวมผลการศึกษาในส่วนที่หนึ่ง ตามมาตราวัดของลิเคริร์ท จากระดับ 0 ไปจนถึงระดับ 3 (ไม่สำคัญ อะไรเลย ถึง สำคัญมาก) ผลการศึกษาในส่วนที่หนึ่งพบว่าภาษาและท่าทางที่ตัวละครเอกผู้หญิงทั้งสี่ใช้นั้น สะท้อนให้เห็นถึงการผสมผสานความเป็นผู้หญิงแบบดั้งเดิมและแบบร่วมสมัย ส่วนการรับรู้ลักษณะความเป็นผู้หญิงทั้ง 15 ลักษณะนั้น กลุ่มตัวอย่างให้ระดับความสำคัญแก่ความเป็นผู้หญิงแบบร่วมสมัยมากกว่าแบบดั้งเดิม โดยมองว่าในยุคร่วมสมัยนี้ การที่ผู้หญิงเป็นนักเจรจาต่อรอง สงสารเห็นใจผู้อื่น และพึงพาตันเองได้นั้น มีความสำคัญมากกว่า การพึงพาคนอื่น การเป็นภรรยา และการเป็นแม่ ถึงแม้ว่าการรับรู้ความเป็นผู้หญิงโดยรวมจะซึ่งไปที่รูปแบบการใช้ อารมณ์ความรู้สึกของผู้หญิง แต่ยังคงซึ้งด้ไปที่การเป็นผู้กำหนดทิศทางการเงินและการพึงพาตันเองได้ด้วย

คำสำคัญ: ภาคยนตร์เรื่องสีดรูนี, การรับรู้ความเป็นผู้หญิง, วัฒนธรรมร่วมสมัย, การวิเคราะห์จากตัวบท

Introduction

Since early 19th century Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, the seminal novel about four sisters in Civil War-era Massachusetts have influenced many adaptations of the novel in media productions across the globe. These include film, television, anime, play and opera productions. *Little Women* is recorded as one of the most adapted American literature works, such as its anime version in Japan (e.g., Acocella, 2018; Schwartz, 2019). Among other popular Hollywood films,

Little Women offers more female leads to the audience and this 2019 film adaptation has a female director. The quantities and the frequency of the novel's adapted versions reflect the constant popularity of the novel's media productions, which deserve our attention.

According to Alcott's *Little Women*, the four March sisters were described as Meg, the eldest at 16 years of age, beautiful, maternal, and mild; 15-year-old Jo, bookish and boyish, loud and wild; Beth at 13 years of age, recessive, unswervingly kind, and doomed to die young; and 12-year-old Amy, vain and selfish. Although Marmee March as the mother of the four sisters, and Aunt March as their aunt are considered lead female characters, both are more likely to portray motherhood or be depicted as life coaches and mature women. They are quite static characters. It would be more interesting to look at the four March sisters who portray well-rounded characters in transitions from their childhood to adulthood or from being girls to being women.

There is a social expectation that a woman is supposed to get married. Although Meg in her adulthood gets married, she did so to a man whom she loved, and they worked through their marriage life together. Jo followed her dream in becoming an independent and self-supporting woman. It may be unfortunate for Beth to not be able to enter her adulthood. However, before she passed away, the audience could see that she exercised her strong wills in doing what she determined to accomplish. Amy in her adulthood has reflected as being confident and direct. Although the four sisters' characters may mirror positive characteristics of womanhood, the adaptations of *Little Women* in each era seek to reflect womanhood ideals or perfect images of a woman of that particular time in which the productions are created. Such transitions from childhood to adulthood and the way the novel has been adapted in each era allow us to justify *Little Women* as a good representative of women's portrayal in which it shows how women have been portrayed in a particular point in time.

In 1933, Katharine Hepburn's portrayal of Jo March prioritized her healthy-minded family. The portrayal appears to reflect a traditional vision of women's domesticity which was a perfect image of a woman during the time. In 1949, Elizabeth Taylor's depiction of Amy March featured Taylor as the fashionable youngest March daughter with swaths of eyeliner. Such depiction mirrors the period of American consumerism in which consumer goods, such as cosmetics; Tupperware, were viewed as fulfilling living needs of women's domesticity. In 1994, the female main characters of *Little Women* had their portrayals in relation to the third wave feminism in which women

advocated for their legal rights and cultural space through benefit of education. In 2019, their depictions were in relation to contemporary womanhood as antagonists and self-expressionists which still had their deep roots in family care and good moral. As the four main female characters depicting as more active agents, this recent film adaptation of *Little Women* has received rave reviews from many film critiques and moviegoers, and has been described as the best adaptation in 150 years since the first publication version of the novel (e.g., Breznican, 2019; Schwartz, 2019).

Not only the novel and its media adaptations reflect womanhood of a particular point in time in a culture, they also provide some image constructs for girls and women in that time and place. Since its first publication, *Little Women* has mattered to generation after generation of girls and women (Breznican, 2019). Hall contended, “the mass media are more and more responsible for providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an ‘image’ of the lives, meanings, practices and values can be coherently grasped as a ‘whole’” (1984: 340). Media play a key role in shaping girls and women’s images as well as mirroring how people in a society view girls and women. However, many media especially popular Hollywood films (e.g., *Avengers: Infinity War*; *A Wrinkle In Time*; *Black Panther*; *Blockers*; *Charlie’s Angels*) tend to provide the image of women with less agency or often being manipulated by men more than that with agency (Kunsey, 2018). When the typical portrayals of women are as such, it is plausible that people still perceive women’s images in the way they have been shaped and projected. In Thailand, popular Hollywood films have been well received by the Thai audience members. The Asia Foundation Report (2018) highlighted that younger Thais remain attracted to the American popular culture which involves from Hollywood movies, café culture to fitness fashion by Nike or Adidas. Based on the Report, it could be assumed that the Thai young women’s perceptions could plausibly been shaped toward what have been portrayed in the Hollywood films. When the portrayal is related to that of women, would contemporary Thai young women view themselves the ways the media depict their images—as less agency and being in domesticity or as having full agency and projecting self-expressionism? These idea await investigation in this current study.

Review of Literature

Feminism and Womanhood in Popular Hollywood Films

When *Little Women* deals with the majority of female lead characters, it is undeniable that the terms feminism and womanhood should be explored. The term ‘feminism’ has first been introduced in 1960 and can be divided into three waves. The popular films during the first-wave feminism (the mid 19th - the early 20th century) which concerned with women’s right to vote involved *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), *The Girl Can’t Help It* (1956) and *Tunnel of Love* (1958). The similar theme of these films highlights domesticity of a woman who married a wealthy, successful husband. Such theme reflects a kind of nostalgia for the dynamic of gender during pre-war America in which to a certain extent women were manipulated or dominated by men. The second-wave feminism (1960s-1970s) referred to women’s liberation movement for equal legal and social rights. The third-wave feminism (the beginning of the 1990s) was the continuation of the second-wave one. It could be mentioned that feminism subscribes to the socio-cultural actions of women. Despite the fact of constant movements for women’s liberation, the trend of popular films during these waves was described as sexploitation films, such as *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964). The films reflect the sexual liberation of women while objectifying women’s bodies for the male gaze. During the 1980 onwards, the term ‘post-feminism’ has gained its popularity after *The New York Times* magazine published “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation” (Bolotin, 1982). The post-feminism is a contemporary form of women’s empowerment, individual choice, independence, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humor and sexual pleasure. It could be mentioned that post-feminism focuses on women as agents who actively involve in domestic and outdoor activities. However, the portrayals of women in the majority of popular films, such as *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013) are still marginalized and objectified (Murphy, 2015).

The term ‘womanhood’ refers to images or representations of women. It could be mentioned that womanhood in each feminist wave and in post feminism portrayed in Hollywood films reflect the spectrum of traditional and contemporary women in which the prominent shade points to typical women’s stereotypes. Such stereotypes suggest that a woman possesses all the qualities that are commonly associated with depictions of traditional women or traditional womanhood. Welter (1976) described the four attributes of traditional womanhood as piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. Through media’s depictions of traditional womanhood, a woman is often portrayed as invisibility; weakness /fragile; vulnerability; emotional; gentleness /

nurturers; passive / agreeable with men's sexual advances; subservient; objectification (e.g., Durham, 1999; Jeanes, 2011; Korobov & Thorne, 2009; Levant et al, 2007; Painter & Ferruci, 2012). When possessing these qualities, it could be viewed that women hold the ideal of 'true womanhood' (Welter, 1976). In contrast, contemporary womanhood offers a new set of woman identities, images or representations, which could be considered as a by-product of post-feminism that breaks a society's traditional norms of being a woman, especially those of the American society. According to Jeanes (2011), "the contemporary western girl as constructed by the media, has deviated somewhat to incorporate a rebellious, independent 'new breed' of girl who knows what she wants and has the means to ruthlessly pursue it" (p. 404). Being a contemporary woman should be viewed as a matter of identity and lifestyle (Painter & Ferruci, 2012), and of having agency or a strong sense of self involving independence and individualism. When comparing a spectrum of traditional and contemporary womanhood, it is more prominent that a greater occupational opportunity and a stronger cultural agency are toward the contemporary end. For Thailand, the contemporary popular media has portrayed Thai women in two extreme strata of Thai society. Thai women have often been depicted as either well educated, successful and high skilled professionals, and single mothers; or being oppressed, victims of prostitution (e.g., Poltecha, 2018; Tantiwiramanond & Pandey, 1987; Wongsupachainimit, 2016). The latter image has still been popularized in the Western films, especially those of Hollywood.

Women's Perceptions of Womanhood in Popular Hollywood Films

Since the films have projected how women have been viewed, to validate the media portrayals of women in each era several scholars (e.g., Durham, 1999; Jeanes, 2011; Levant et al, 2007) have investigated audience perceptions toward the roles of women in films. Based on those scholars' works, Roussell (2013) offered a focus group study to examine young women's perceptions of lead female characters in American media productions. She divided characteristics of womanhood into seven categories and comparing them in the binary of traditional and contemporary womanhood. Table 1 below illustrates seven categories of traditional and contemporary womanhood.

Category	Traditional Womanhood	Contemporary Womanhood
Mental	weak; inferior	educated; egalitarian
Physical	body and attractiveness to accept male gaze	self-emphasis rather than accepting male gaze
Emotional	sentimental; overemotional	determined; strong sense of self
Sexual	agreeable to men's sexual advances	sexually free or forceful
Cultural	childlike; passive; gentle; invisible; dependent	rebellious; independent; individualistic
Occupational	wife; rarely presented as professionals	capitalistic; productive consumer; unmarried working women
Familial	mother; caretaker; nurturer	struggle to love or being mother fully; friendships more important than family

Table 1: Seven categories of traditional and contemporary womanhood (Roussell, 2013)

The similar study on such perceptions seems to be none in the Thai body of research. Many studies in Thai tend to focus the attention to representations of women in several dimensions, such as single woman as the reproduction of patriarchy ideology (Ratchatakorntakoon, 2019). This current study could add to the depth and breadth of the existing knowledge of historical and cultural perspectives of Thai women which appear to mirror women as patients and not agents of circumstances. The study on Thai young women's perceptions toward characteristics of womanhood could possibly shed the light on how contemporary Thai women perceive themselves which could lay a proper ground for future Thai feminism work in relation to agency and self-expressionism².

Research Questions

Based on the review of literature and the validation of media qualitative analyses, this study sought to explore the two research questions (RQ) and formulated the two hypotheses as follows. To investigate current characteristics of womanhood in this contemporary era, RQ1 was formulated as follows:

² The term 'self-expressionism' refers to women's being aware of and responsive to their emotions and the emotions of those around them as well as bringing their perspectives to the table (e.g., Kirstein, 2019).

RQ1: How did the four female main characters in the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* portray characteristics of womanhood?

Hypothesis 1: The four female main characters depicted womanhood following seven categories of traditional and contemporary womanhood described by Roussell (2013).

To explore the Thai young women's perceptions toward the characteristics of womanhood in this contemporary era found in RQ1, RQ2 was set as follows:

RQ2: Based on RQ1, what were Thai young women's perceptions toward the characteristics of womanhood in contemporary time?

Hypothesis 2: The Thai female university students as a sample group of Thai young women in this contemporary time tended to strongly associate womanhood with being independent while disassociating themselves with being dependent.

Methodology

For the first part of the study, the textual analysis was employed to look at how the four main female characters, Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth in the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* used language both verbal and non-verbal cues to reflect characteristics of womanhood. The second part of the study focused on the perceptions of contemporary Thai young women toward the characteristics of womanhood. 34 Thai female university students were asked to rate the 15 characteristics of womanhood on the 4-point Likert scale³, which ranged from 0-3 (Very important to Not important) via google form, an online survey administration platform. The set of characteristics of womanhood included caretaker; dependent; determined; educated; independent; inferior; kind /gentle; mother; negotiator; productive consumer; rebellious; sentimental; strong sense of self; weak; working woman. These 15 characteristics of womanhood which emerged from the first part of the study's data were used in the perception task (see appendix) based on the assumption that the 2019 adaptation of the film reflects the current

³ The 4-point Likert scale, widely known as the 'forced choice method' was selected for the study to force the participants to choose the scale from 0-3 provided since there was no mid-point available. In addition, it was to eliminate the possible misinterpretation of the mid-point.

characteristics of womanhood. Thus, these characteristics are the more important attributes in contemporary time. The stratified random sampling involved the sample group of the college educated Thai female participants whose age were between 20 and 22⁴ based on the assumption that they are the representatives of the Thai contemporary young women who would soon enter their full adulthood or becoming women. They possess the transitions from their girlhood to womanhood just like the four March sisters. Consequently, their womanhood constructs deserve our attention.

Results and Discussion

The findings from the textual analysis part support hypothesis 1. The four main female characters depicted womanhood following seven categories of traditional and contemporary womanhood described by Roussell (2013). They involved the categories of mental; physical; emotional; sexual; cultural; occupational; and familial. Interestingly, the findings highlight the co-occurrence of a continuum of traditional and contemporary womanhood depicting through each of the four main female character's dialogues and not as the binary. Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth possess the characteristics of womanhood ranging from tradition to contemporary one which are presented and discussed in detail below.

Example 1 illustrates Meg's wedding day in which Jo was trying to convince Meg to leave the wedding and not to get married. Meg responded as follows.

Example 1

Meg: I want a family and a home and I'm not scared of working and
struggling, but I want to do it with John.

This example shows Meg's strong sense of self, determination, rebellion, independent and portrays her as an active agent who is willing to sacrifice herself as long as she is with John, the man she loves and will marry him. To one extent, it could be possible to view Meg's response

⁴ WHO defines young people as to cover the age range between 10 and 24 years (World Health Organization South-East Asia, n.d.).

to Jo as a walk into a man's control or into a man's financial support. To another extent, however, Meg stated that she wanted to do it with John. That means she wants to work with him and not to depend solely on him. Conversely, example 2 illustrates Meg in another light after her marriage with John and had two children. When Meg went shopping with her old rich friend, Sallie, Meg liked a beautiful grey silk and touched it. However, the silk fabric was 50 dollars which was too much for her to afford. The conversation goes as follows.

Example 2

Sallie: Oh Meg! That would look so lovely on you. I know just the dressmaker to send you to. You'll be the prettiest wife in Concord.

Meg: On no, John needs a new coat for winter and Daisy and Demi need new clothes and –

Sallie: --and his wife needs a new dress.

Meg: (trying to hide her embarrassment) I can't...it's, I just can't.

Sallie: He'll be so pleased with how you look that he'll forget all about the expense.

Meg: I don't suppose it's such an extravagance.

Example 2 exemplifies traditional womanhood through Meg's roles as a wife and a mother who put herself last. However, some characteristics of contemporary womanhood could also be viewed as possible. Despite the fact that Sallie suggested the large amount of expense could be substituted through sexually attractiveness of Meg for her husband's gaze, Meg denied it and insisted not to get the silk fabric. This appears to highlight Meg as an active agent and also a productive consumer. Although we learned through the film that Meg finally bought the silk fabric, she, anyhow, decided to sell it back to Sallie.

Example 3 illustrates the scene when the father of the four March sisters got wounded from the war he served and was hospitalized in Washington. Marmee, the mother, would need

to travel to see her husband. Unfortunately, money seemed to be the important issue that would obstruct the visit to her husband. Instead of borrowing some money from Aunt March, the close relative who was rich, Jo acted upon the circumstance.

Example 3

At just that moment, the door swings open, and Jo rushes in and places money in her mother's hands.

Jo: Will this be enough for the train?

Marmee: Twenty five dollars! That isn't like Aunt March to be so generous.

Jo: I didn't go to Aunt March, couldn't bear to.

Marmee: Where did you get the money?

Jo: I only sold what was my own.

Jo removes her hat, and beneath, all of her beautiful long hair is gone. Now it is just a short, blunt crop. Gasps from everyone and exclamations of "What?/How?/Why did you do it?/Jo!"

Beth: Your hair!

Meg: Oh Jo, how could /you?

Beth: Now your hair is /off.

Amy: Your one beauty!

Hannah: You look like a boy.

Jo: It doesn't affect the fate of the nation, so don't wail.

In this example, Jo shows her determination in selling her hair to get the money for her mother's trip to visit her father at the hospital in Washington. Jo with her very short haircut shocked everyone in the family. However, as a very active agent here in the scene, the haircut is not affecting her at all as she clearly stated at the final utterance. Apart for the strong determination, it could be possible to view Jo as a nurturer and a working woman who provide money for the care of her family members, and by not going to borrow the money from Aunt March.

At the artist's studio where Amy was looking through her paintings and sketches, Laurie, a long-time good friend to the four March sisters and the one whom Amy fell in love with, came to apologize to Amy for his bad behavior at the Paris ball in which Amy invited him. Not only Laurie came an hour late, but also got drunk and were motioned into the ball by two girls. After Laurie made an apology to her, he was trying to cheer Amy up by encouraging her to continue on her artistic works as exemplified in example 4.

Example 4

Amy: I do think that male or female, I'm a middling talent.

Laurie: Middling talent? Then may I ask your last portrait be of me?

Amy laughs

Example 4 clearly suggests Amy's strong sense of self that she has a talent although admitting only possessing half of it. Her statement appears to subscribe to the view of contemporary womanhood. However, through some exchanges, Laurie and Amy talked about the nature of a wedding proposal. When a man proposed to a woman, she would accept the proposal. Amy agreed to that thought but offered some interesting thoughts into the marriage world as illustrated in example 5.

Example 5

Laurie: But you will be, if he goes down properly on one knee?

Amy: Most likely, yes. He's rich, richer than you, even.

Laurie: I understand queens of society can't get on without money. But it does sound odd coming from one of your mother's girls.

Amy: I've always known that I would marry rich. Why should I be ashamed of that?

Laurie: There is nothing to be ashamed of, as long as you love him.

Amy: Well, I believe we have some power over who we love, it isn't something that just happens to a person.

Laurie: I think the poets might disagree.

Amy: Well. I'm not a poet, I'm just a woman. And as a woman I have no way to make money, not enough to earn a living and support my family. Even if I had my own money, which I don't, it would belong to my husband the minute we were married. If we had children they would belong to him not me. They would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition, because it is. It may not be for you but it most certainly is for me.

Example 5 exhibits the intertwine of self and interpersonal relationship. Amy shows her strong sense of self and determination through her dialogue and is realistic about woman's living condition. Although her critiques of the marriage world as an economic proposition allow the viewers to see her as an active agent, her statements reflect the dependency of women on men's financial support. This example subscribes to the view of both traditional and contemporary womanhood.

Example 6 depicts the scene when Beth got very sick one late night, Jo put cold towels on Beth's hot forehead and said the following.

Example 6

Jo: You will get better. Father will get better. And we'll all be together soon.

Beth: We can't stop God's will.

Jo: God hasn't met my will yet. What Jo wills shall be done.

For this example, Jo is once again showing her strong determination and control over her will. On the contrary, Beth is willing to go along with God's will. When a woman following God's will, it could be considered as showing her "true womanhood" (Welter, 1976) by showing two of the traditional good woman's attributes which are piety and submissive. Nonetheless, example 7 portrayed Beth in a contrast light. The scene was at the seashore. Beth was wrapped up and looking at the sea and Jo read George Eliot's "*The Mill On the Floss*."

Example 7

Jo: "What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known and loved because it is known?"

(to Beth)

How great is that?!

Beth: (nods, then) I love to listen to you read, Jo, but I love it even better when you read the stories you've written.

Jo: (self-conscious) I don't have any new stories.

Beth: Why not?

Jo: Haven't written any.

Beth: You have pencil and paper. Sit here and write me something.

Jo: Uhh. I can't, I don't think I can anymore.

Beth: Why?

Jo: It's just, no one even cares to hear my stories anyway.

Beth: Write something for me. You're a writer. Even before anyone knew or paid you. I'm very sick and you must do what I say.

Jo smiles and then lays back.

Beth: Do what Marmee taught us to do. Do it for someone else.

Example 7 exemplifies the transformation of Beth from a very shy, gentle, and quite inferior to the other March sisters to an individual who expressed her want and demand for something. Such explicit expression highlights Beth's intertwine of self and interpersonal relationship with others.

Apart from the dialogues, some non-verbal cues of the four March sisters exhibit some characteristics of traditional womanhood. Example 8 happened at Christmas when Marmee led Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth to the poor Mrs. Hummel's who desperately needed some food and assistance for her little children.

Example 8

Mrs. Hummel: Ach, mein Gott! It is good angels come to us!

Marmee: I'm back! We brought food and blankets and sweaters. And we
brought some medicine. These are my girls!

They all set about making the room less wretched, more home-like. Marmee comforts the baby, Meg takes two children into her lap. Amy cleans and straightens, Beth covers the other children with blankets, Jo sets up the food.

Example 8 clearly exhibit the March family and more specifically the four sisters' acts of kindness, caretakers, and nurturers.

The textual analysis led to an accumulation of 15 characteristics of womanhood the four main female characters portrayed in the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* ranging from traditional to contemporary womanhood. They included weak; inferior; sentimental; kind /gentle; wife; mother; caretaker; determined; strong sense of self; educated; productive consumer; working woman; negotiator; independent; and rebellious. All characteristics of womanhood found were in the same vein as found in earlier studies (e.g., Roussell, 2013), except negotiator. This characteristic is interesting. In the film, as Jo wanted to set a deal on her writing with the publisher, she was seen trying to negotiate the best pay for the part she thought she deserved. Since the feminism waves have underlined women as active agents, this characteristic should be included in the list and should be placed under Roussell's occupational category.

The results from the 25 Thai female respondents whose age ranges from 20 to 22 years old were illustrated in figure 1.

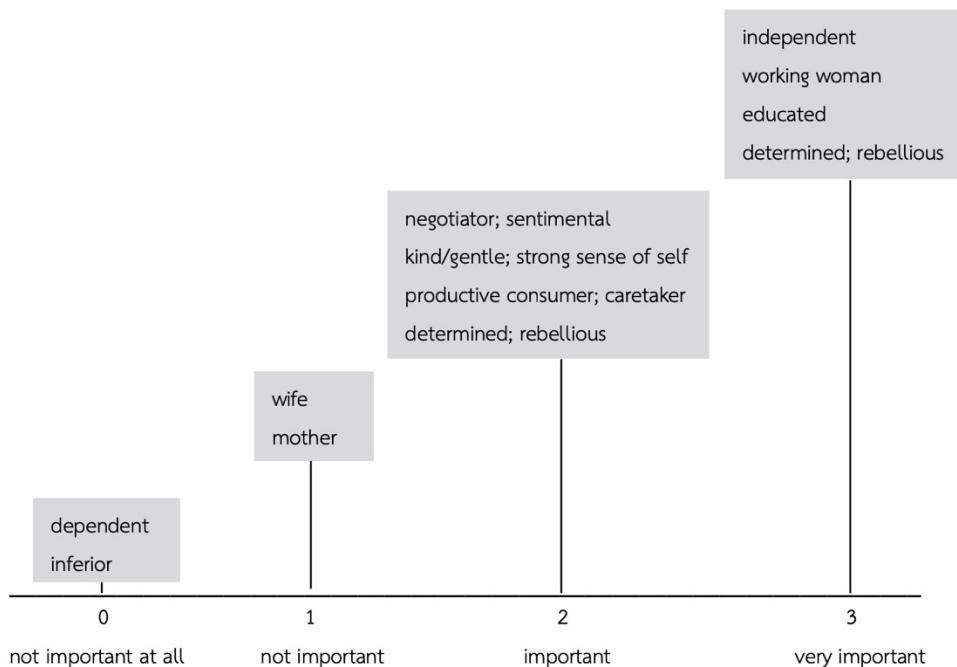


Figure 1: Contemporary Thai women's perceptions toward characteristics of womanhood

Clearly, the 34 Thai female respondents perceived being dependent and inferior as not important at all as a woman. Whereas being independent, a working woman, educated and determined as well as rebellious were viewed as very important. Apart from the two contrastive ends of the spectrum, the respondents rated being a wife and a mother as not important while perceiving negotiator, sentimental, kind / gentle, strong sense of self, productive consumer, caretaker; determined; and rebellious as important. The findings from this part of the study reveal the Thai young women's perceptions toward womanhood or images of being a woman are in the same vein as of those images the four main female characters, Meg, Jo, Amy, and Beth in the 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* portrayed. The similarity in the characters and the perceptions seem to endorse the contemporary womanhood derived from American contemporary ideal women's portrayals.

The findings are also in support of hypothesis 2 that Thai young women in this contemporary time tended to strongly associate womanhood with being independent and disassociate with being dependent. The preferences of the respondents are toward contemporary

womanhood in the cultural and occupational categories. This new set of woman identities, images or representations are perceived by the Thai young women over society's traditional norms of being a woman. Such findings were along the same lines as in Painter and Ferruci (2012) and Roussell (2013) that being a contemporary woman, she would exhibit a greater occupational path and a stronger cultural agency as well as a matter of identity and lifestyle, and a strong sense of self involving independence and individualism. The least preferences are toward traditional womanhood in the cultural and mental categories: being dependent and inferior, respectively. Interestingly, the respondents perceived traditional womanhood in the occupational and familial categories: being a wife and a mother, respectively, as not important. It could mean that in this era the respondents felt that getting married or becoming a mother are not important to them. This perception is along the same line as reported in many current media, e.g., *The New York Times* or *The Telegraph*. Despite the increasing number of dating apps, matchmakers, and love advice designed to facilitate romantic connections, many women are opting out of relationships (Sheinbaum, 2020).

The prevalent characteristics of womanhood which include negotiators; sentimental; and independent deserve our attention since they were on the top tier of 'very important' and 'important' characteristics. These three characteristics could reflect the nature of the current Thai society where Thai women are increasingly taking financial responsibilities either of their own or of their family. Thus, becoming a contemporary woman is to have the characteristic of being negotiators as to make a good work deal while being independent. Clearly, these characteristics are similar to those of Jo. Being sentimental appears to be innate in all females or as women's emotional topography (Frevert, 2013). Therefore, although it is quite surprising that the characteristic was selected and seems to be in contrast to being a negotiator and independent, the characteristic tends to naturally associate with women's expressing or causing gentle emotions which have tuned them into having sympathy, mild softness, and compassion. All these emotions enable women to exhibit positive self-expression.

Conclusions

The first part of the current study reveals a combination of traditional and contemporary womanhood in each female character. It is quite clear that during this rapid and disruptive social change, women's changing gender roles could be mirrored in popular films in each era. The 2019 film adaptation *Little Women* is an evidence. The findings could reflect a valid alternative in looking at contemporary women in popular media which the majority is still representing a true womanhood and not a new set of womanhood. However, this could be the reason why the 2019 film adaptation *Little Women* has been well received globally.

On the one hand, the perceptions of contemporary Thai young women toward being a woman in contemporary era are more likely to point to a pre-existing emotional pattern of women as being sentimental which tends to be a nurturing part of other positive emotions and self-expression in women. On the other hand, their perceptions highlight the underlying women's economic determinism as being negotiators for their professional works/ promotions; and being independent. A closer look at the perceptions of young women toward themselves sees 'appropriate aspirations' (Hussein, 2018) of the Thai young women. Appropriate aspiration refers to a concept of human need for optimism. It is to say that life will be easier, more secure, and more comfortable. Such perceptions reflect the appropriate jobs or professional works which allow women to be economically active while being able to take care of their families. In another word, women would be viewed as supportive agency and not supportive helper as in the past.

This study has its limitation. Although the methodologies employed in this current study allow us to answer our RQs, the findings could not be generalized to all media productions portraying women. Furthermore, it could not be as a representative of all women's perceptions toward contemporary womanhood. Further studies should explore more film productions in each era with females as main characters to compare and contrast the media depictions of womanhood. In addition, to gain deeper insights such studies may include the sample group's reasons why they rate the given statements about womanhood the way they do.

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Appendix:

Perception Task

You are a female at the age of _____. (please specify your age in number, such as, 19, 20, etc.)

Read each statement below carefully and rate it on a scale of 0 to 3:

0 = not important at all

1 = not important

2 = important

3 = very important

Being a woman,

_____ I am sentimental.

_____ I am kind or gentle.

_____ I have a strong sense of self.

_____ I am educated.

_____ I am a productive consumer.

_____ I am a mother.

_____ I am a caretaker.

_____ I am a working woman.

_____ I am a wife.

_____ I always need help from other people.

_____ I always feel that a man can do anything but that's not true for a woman.

_____ I am a negotiator.

_____ I can earn my living and live by myself.

_____ When I have a goal, I always get it.

_____ I don't need to do things I don't like.

Thank you