

## Denotation and connotation meaning in *Little Women*: a reflection of liberal feminism through verbal and non-verbal signs in a movie

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### ABSTRACT

*This research aims to determine the meaning of denotation and connotation in Little Women (2019) movie. It employed a qualitative approach. Purposive sampling technique was used to select verbal and non-verbal signs containing feminism issues. In analyzing the data, this research applied Barthes' (1986) semiotics and the theory of liberal feminism (Tong and Botts, 2018). The data taken are four scenes in the movie. Based on the analysis, it reveals that the two findings. The denotation reflects the original, actual, or objective meaning of the non- and verbal signs that has been universally agreed upon. Meanwhile the connotation implies the meaning which is not real and is influenced by the reader/viewer's feelings, emotions, and cultural values. The signs' meanings there represent liberal feminism in four fields: workplace, social, domestic, and education fields. In each setting, the girls in the movie are presented to be intelligent, hard-working, strong and sensitive, emphatic, independent, and persistent. With these traits, an individual could be successful in his/her life. Indeed, at the end Jo, as the main protagonist, could realize her dreams.*

**Keywords:** connotation, denotation, signs, semiotics, movie

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### Introduction

Movies have become one of the most effective forms of visual mass communication that can connect communicators and communicants in line with developments in technology and communication. Then, to express ideas, thoughts, opinions, and creative skills at work, movies can be one of the suitable media for moviemakers to connect their abilities which will be communicated through actions, gestures, and dialogue. According to (Petrie & Boggs, 2011) a movie is a work that influences the audience. The reason is that a movie combines technology, music, literature, and drama, which makes a movie a unique art. Thus, through the visualization of the story and sound effects, a movie attracts the audience's attention.

Movies have now touched the daily life of modern civilized society. Therefore, movies have become a part of society. The existence of a movie is currently considered essential and practical. Thus, with the development of movies in the midst of human life, movies have become one of the industries that are in great demand. Public interest in a movie is caused by

the role of the movie as entertainment. Another reason is that movies are a medium for broadening knowledge because movies also convey social issues from everyday life that can add insight to the audience.

Representation of signs and symbols can be found in the movie. The discussion of signs and symbols, along with the interpretation of their use, is the core topic of semiotics. Humans can make several signs when they interact. Then, the signs resulting from an interaction carried out by humans will give specific meanings because semiotics have a strong influence on visual communication. It is in line with Saussure's opinion about semiotics. According to him, the signs that exist in society can be studied through semiotics which he calls semiology. Saussure divides signs into signifier and signified (Sagimin & Priyani, 2018). According to Saussure, everything related to physical existence is called a signifier, while signified is an idea or mental concept (Sebeok, 2001).

Then, Roland Barthes developed a more significant application of semiotics,

namely from linguistics to visual images (Dianiya, 2020). According to him, the study of how meaning is created, not what it is, is semiotics (Barthes, 1999:187). Verbal and non-verbal signs are two forms of sign analysis proposed by Barthes. Barthes defines the first of signification as the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a sign to external reality (Sitanggang, 2020). Then, Barthes uses the 'level of meaning' denotation and connotation in analyzing signs on visual objects. Denotation is the actual meaning that can be seen directly without connecting it with society, culture, or ideology (Bouzida, 2014). Meanwhile, the interactions that occur when signs are connected with feelings or emotions and cultural values are called connotations (Fisk in Wirhayati & Sudrajat, 2019). Barthes' theory is known as the "order of signification" (Fauzan & Sakinah, 2020).

This paper focuses on the feminism in the *Little Women* (2019) movie. This movie highlights the equality in the social field as it happened in the real life during the last few decades (Desmawati, 2018). The first type of feminism is liberal feminism which focuses on eliminating inequalities between women and men in the legal, political, social, workplace, and educational fields (Dewi & Medina, 2020). Moreover, Hastuti et al., (2018) add how women's position in society focuses on equal

## Method

This research was designed by using a qualitative method. Qualitative research prioritizes explanations and descriptions in which the analysis displays information expressed in words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. Therefore, in order to explain and analyze the meaning of denotation and connotation in the *Little Women* (2019) movie more clearly, qualitative research methods is a suitable and appropriate method. The data for this research were verbal and non-verbal signs from scenes in the *Little Women* (2019) movie. This research took a population of all verbal and non-verbal signs in scenes from the movie. In this research, the sampling technique used was purposive sampling because this research only took data from verbal and non-verbal signs in the *Little Women* (2019) movie scene, which contained liberal feminism.

Then, according to Creswell (2014), data collection is a way to collect data to answer

rights or barriers to women's participation in the public sphere, legal, political, and institutional struggles for individual rights in public. Liberal feminism includes everything that campaigns for equal rights for women (Rachman & Safrudi, 2014). In other words, liberal feminists wish to free women from oppressive gender roles (Tong, 2009). The second type is radical feminism which focuses on women's struggles to end the oppression of women based on sex and gender systems (Dewi & Medina, 2020). They also explain Marxist and socialist feminism which highlights women's struggle to demand rights, justice, and abolish the property system. Then, Limerick (2021) adds women-of-color feminism(s) which occurs as a form of discrimination based on race and gender. Another feminism is psychoanalytic feminism which emphasizes the way women act that comes from their souls (Dewi & Medina, 2020). Sundari et al. (2021) define care-focused feminism which discusses the differences that distinguish women from men's souls. They also explain ecofeminism which includes global, postcolonial, and transnational feminism that focuses on human domination over the non-human world or nature. In a patriarchal society, nature and women are seen as objects and preparations worthy of exploitation (Wiyatmi, 2019).

research questions. The steps taken to collect data in this research were: First, finding the data by searching for and finding the *Little Women* (2019) movie. Second, observing the data by watching the *Little Women* (2019) movie many times and understanding the storyline of the movie. Third, categorizing the data using purposive sampling focused only on verbal and non-verbal signs in the *Little Women* (2019) movie scene, which contained liberal feminism.

Then, the data analysis technique used in this research was the qualitative interactive model from Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2019). Three steps were taken: Data Condensation, Data Display, and Drawing and Verifying Conclusions. The data condensation is divided into five. First, selecting. In this step, data were determined by selecting scenes in the *Little Women* (2019) movie containing liberal feminism. Second, focusing. In this step, creating context from the data focused only on verbal and non-verbal signs in the *Little*

*Women* (2019) movie, which contained liberal feminism. Third, simplifying. Data were simplified by creating tables. Tables were made to separate verbal and non-verbal signs. Fourth, abstracting. The data that was collected was analyzed using Barthes' semiotic theory. Fifth, transforming. The collected data was transformed into images and text separately for analysis. Next, display data. The data from this

**Results and Discussions**

There are four scenes chosen as the data to represent the liberal feminism identified in the movie. They appear to have the signs, verbal and non-verbal, evoking a woman strength in handling life problems. As it is argued that liberal feminism has its struggle over six fields, i.e. legal, workplace, social, political, domestic, and education (Tong and Botts, 2018).

**Table 1.1 The Fields of Liberal Feminism**

No.	Fields	n	%
1	Legal	0	0%
2	Workplace	5	33%
3	Social	1	7%
4	Political	0	0%
5	Domestic	7	47%
6	Education	2	13%
<b>Total</b>		15	100%

Among the six fields of liberal feminism, four areas are identified in the movie, i.e. workplace, social, domestic, and education. The most dominant field is the domestics, followed by workplace. The absence of data in the legal and political fields implies that the women characters in the story were not involved in these domains of life. Even, they did not have a talk to others discussing these issues. Women were still very busy handling problems related to their own life.

The dominance of domestic and workplace has proved that the struggles for equality the female characters in the movie had only reached these two areas. They still had to fight for an equal position regarding household issues, competing with the men of their own family like their male siblings, father, and

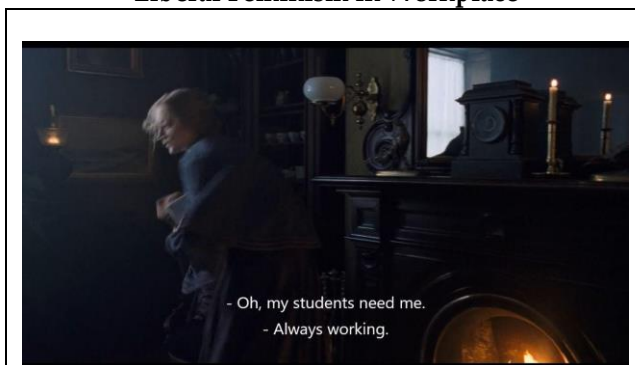
research was displayed using a table that shows the relationship between verbal and non-verbal signs of the *Little Women* (2019) movie. The last, drawing and verifying conclusion. In this step, the researcher can draw conclusions by providing clear information about the research results.

husband. This is also the case in the workplace in which women tried to prove that they could be a professional worker, and even they might be harder in their work to earn the living, compared to men.

***Liberal Feminism in Workplace***

Context: The scene at 00:05:45 shows Jo March in a room of her boarding house in New York. She was rushing to get her scarf and hat while talking with Friedrich Bhaer. Jo March, who was a teacher at her boarding house, is the point of this scene.

**Table 1.2 Verbal and Non-Verbal Signs of Liberal Feminism in Workplace**



**Figure 1.1**

Verbal	Non-Verbal
"Oh, my students need me." "Always working."	1. A young woman 2. Book and paper

*Denotation Meaning:*

In this scene, Jo March was talking to Friedrich Bhaer. She said, "Oh, my students need me," then he replied, "Always working." Their conversation proves that she is indeed a teacher. The book and paper she had was used to take notes her ideas for writing stories. The atmosphere shown in this scene is formal, as it is also evidenced by a black blazer she had. Thus the signs of verbal, their conversation mentioning "the students", and the comments, *always working*, signify directly who she is. She

is a person working with “students”. Meanwhile, her dress, the book, and paper she had with are non-verbal signs indicates more

*Connotation Meaning:*

The young woman here has represented an intelligent figure. Her work as a teacher proves it. A teacher works to improve students’ knowledge, making them more intelligent. Thus, she proves to be an individual who can determine the future of next generation. This implies in her hurry talk to Friedrich, as saying, “Oh, my students need me.” She believed that her presence was very important and was expected by her students. Her existence was important for others. Besides, her haste also tells that she was a professional teacher who cared a lot to the students’ need. This is also evidenced from Meg’s approval that Jo was a great teacher. Meg was his sister, and Jo is the only person in their family who

**Liberal Feminism in Social Field**

Context: The scene at 01:50:24 shows Jo March having a talk with Mr. Laurence in front of her family’s house. Mr. Laurence looked sad in his face. Jo tried to encourage him after the death of Beth March, Jo’s younger sister who was a representing figure for his daughter. The daughter had passed away a long time ago. This is the point of this scene.

*Denotation Meaning:*

Mr. Laurence’s white hair shows his age. He was also wearing a neat black suit. Jo had a gray blazer. The atmosphere there was mourning. This mood is reflected in his sad face. Their dark suits obviously show that they were in a grief. Dark color was always used to represent a deep sadness of death. In this case, it was his condolences to Jo, because Beth was Jo’s sister. Yet, the situation is at a contrary. Laurence’ grief was much worse than the sister’s. Then, it was Jo who should give more sympathy and support to him. The focus on his face functions to show his misery. This is also strengthened by Jo’s emphatic address, “... but you know I’ll be a friend to lean on, if you’ll let me.” It is a woman offering her shoulder to a man.

*Connotation Meaning:*

Jo here represents sensitivity. In this scene, Mr. Laurence looks sad when he gets the news that Beth March has passed away. Mr. Laurence and


that she was a writer. Jo took a hard work to support the needs of her family.

succeeded to be a teacher – a profession which commonly belonged to men. Thus, she has proven her intelligence through her being as a teacher

Friedrich’s comment on her, “Always working,” also reflects another meaning. It tells us that she was a hard worker. In the era, being a worker in a professional field was more common to men. In such his comment is also more common to be heard from a man or a women to their male friends. However, the scene shows that a man was being left alone by a woman going in a rush for a work. Her hardworking is also proved that she had two professions. She was actually a writer, and also taught in her boarding house to earn her living. Thus, the verbal signs here reflect Jo’s being as an intelligent and hardworking woman.

Beth March are very close because she reminds him of his daughter, who has passed away. Beth March has something in common with her daughter, who is both good at playing the piano. Therefore, Mr. Laurence is very close to Beth March. Jo March, as the sister of Beth March, knows that Mr. Laurence is close with Beth March.

**Table 1.3 Verbal and Non-Verbal Signs of Liberal Feminism in Social Field**

	
<b>Figure 1.2</b>	
<b>Verbal</b>	<b>Non-Verbal</b>
“... but you know I’ll be a friend to lean on, if you’ll let me.”	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A young woman</li> <li>2. An old man</li> </ol>

Thus, Jo March takes the initiative to comfort him because she understands the situation

experienced by Mr. Laurence. In this scene, Jo March says, "... but you know I'll be a friend to lean on, if you'll let me." March family surely had the same grief he felt especially Jo. However, she seemed to be wiser in the situations. Realizing his deep losing, she took a position as his all-time supporter, especially in time when he felt missing over his daughter who used to be represented in Beth figure. Her deed proves her sensitivity to people. This is related to her being as a writer.

The old man represents toughness. The toughness can be seen in the character of Mr. Laurence. Before he receives news of Beth March's death, he experiences deep grief over

**Liberal Feminism in Domestic Field**

Context: The scene at 00:44:04 shows Jo March with her mother, Marmee March, and their housekeeper, Hannah. They were in the house. Jo , who had just returned from New York, was welcome by her family. She gave some money to her mother. This becomes the central in this scene.

**Table 1.4 Verbal and Non-Verbal Signs of Liberal Feminism in Domestic Field**



**Figure 1.3**

Verbal	Non-Verbal
"Take this and find her the best doctor you can."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A young woman</li> <li>2. Two old women</li> </ol>

*Denotation Meaning:*

Marmee March had long brown hair, while Hannah had her white hair tied up. Both looked very happy. Here Jo gave her mother some money after her return from New York. Upon giving the cash, Jo said, "Take this and find her the best doctor you can." This means that the money was to pay a medical treatment. It was Beth, Jo's sister, who should be treated.

the death of his daughter. Therefore, when Beth March dies, she can accept the reality of losing the people he loves. He can let it go with the departure of Beth March, one of the people he loves, because he has the toughness to face the same situation. His toughness is also shown in this scene. When he is standing in the courtyard of the March family's house, he seems hesitant to enter the house. Mr. Laurence feels that he cannot enter the March family's house because Beth March is no longer there, which makes him sad. However, accompanied by Jo March, he shows his toughness by daring to visit the March family's house.

The money was obtained from her job in New York. This made her mother very proud and happy. The scene here involves four different women in a house. They took each own role in a domestic setting, without the presence of any man. Marmee was a strong mother who had proved that she could educate her daughters well. All of them had a good career. Jo came home, bringing herself to be a strong figure. Hannah was a person who also contributed to the family, as she did for her own. Beth was the female who was in a suffer. The women here can solve the difficulties in their life, with no man involvement.

*Connotation Meaning:*

The young woman represents independence. In this scene, Jo said, "Take this and find her the best doctor you can." It indicates that she gives some money to her mother to find the best doctor for her sick sister. Jo March, having two jobs in New York, a writer and a teacher, shows independence from young women. Her words and actions that give her mother money also proves her independence. She worked hard to earn money to support her family on her own. She did not depend on others. Thus, as a young woman, she had shown her strong independence.

The old woman represents affection. Marmee, who always had her love for her family, reflects a mother's love. The affection is proven in this scene. She was very happy and proud to have Jo, coming home. The affection of the old woman is evidenced in her happy expression. Marmee is seen smiling at her daughter in this scene. Thus, it proves that

Marmee March as an old woman, symbolizes a mother's love.

Jo's gift to her family represents the devotion of a child. She raised money from her hard labor in the big city. Her family had been a strong drive, pushing her to work all the time. She always sent the money to her family and

here still brought big money to cure his beloved Sister, Beth. "Take this and find her the best doctor you can." She was a responsible person. Knowing her family's dependence on her, Jo had taken her role very well. She did not think that it was only her, working for the family, though she actually had other siblings.

*Liberal Feminism in Education Field*

**Table 1.5 Verbal and Non-Verbal Signs of Liberal Feminism in Education Field**



*Denotation Meaning:*

The scene at 00:07:00 shows Amy March with Aunt March on a horse carriage. The light blue and white dress with a blue coat and feathers on the neck is a neat dress worn by Amy. She looks luxurious because the clothes she wears are also combined with gloves and a small hat of the same color. In this scene, Amy March says, "...all of my painting lessons, of course." It shows her desire to complete her painting course in Paris when her aunt orders her to get engaged to Fred Vaughn. In this scene, she also looks very confident while talking to her aunt about her wishes regarding her painting lessons.

*Connotation Meaning:*

The young woman represents intelligence. The intelligence can be seen in Amy's character, who is good at painting. Her skill in painting can be proven in this scene when she says, "...all of my painting lessons, of course." From what she says in this scene, it has been proven that she was taking painting lessons in Paris. Her aunt deliberately invited her to Paris to hone her painting skills because she had a hobby and talent for painting. Amy is also the only one among the March family who is good at painting. Amy, who took painting

**Figure 1.4**

Verbal	Non-Verbal
"...all of my painting lessons, of course."	1. A young woman 2. Neat clothes

Context: The scene at 00:07:00 in the movie shows Amy March with Aunt March sitting on a horse carriage. The point of this scene is Amy March thought about going home when she received a letter from her family. However, Aunt March forbade it because she wanted her to be officially engaged to Fred Vaughn first.

lessons in Paris, had shown that she had the ability and interest in painting. Thus, she has presented an intelligent as a young woman.

Then, the horse carriage that becomes her vehicle represents luxury. The horse carriage was considered an expensive transportation because, at that time, only the nobility could afford them. The luxury presented in this scene is due to her traveling with her wealthy aunt. She had a dream of becoming a great world painter.

In addition, the attire she worn also emphasizes the luxury. In this scene, Amy March is seen wearing a light blue and white dress with a blue coat and fur around her neck. She also wears gloves and a small light blue hat. The reason is that Amy March is told by her aunt to marry a rich man in order to save her low-income family. Aunt March's actions make Amy March look like a product from her aunt to sell. Therefore, Amy March has to wear neat clothes to look attractive to attract a rich man, Fred Vaughn, as her aunt tells her, to get engaged and marry him.

Thus, from the analysis, it shows that the ideology of liberal feminism is realized into verbal and non-verbal signs interpreted from their connotation and denotation meanings. Verbal and non-verbal signs are devices used by human being to create meaning in physical

and mental concept (Sebeok, 2001). This movie shows that how liberal feminism was acted out in the field of workplace, social life, domestic sector and education.

The result shows that liberal feminism is frequently found in domestic field (47%) which indicates that at that time women try to gain equal right to man from the very basic context. Once they gained their position in domestic area, they can conquer other are such as workplace (33%). The result also displays that workplace is the second place where women fight for their equality. This finding

## Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, the meaning of denotation and connotation is contained in scenes of *Little Women* (2019), which can be seen and used in everyday life. Interpreted from the signs in different settings, four areas of liberal feminism have been found, namely the workplace, social, domestic, and education. Liberal feminism is not found in the legal and political fields. In each setting, the girls in the movie are presented to be intelligent, hard-working, strong and sensitive, emphatic,

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- supports another research (Dewi & Medina, 2020).
- The signs from the scenes selected have indicated four female siblings' struggles in improving the life of their family. They presented them as figures who are intelligent, hard-working, independent, sensitive, and responsible. With these traits, they were determined to be musician, painter, writer, and teacher. Jo's success to be a writer and to have a school for boys and also girls is an obvious message that a woman can do whatever she wants just like a man.
- independent, and persistent. With these traits, an individual could be successful in his/her life. Indeed, at the end Jo, as the main protagonist, could realize her dreams. The movie addresses the struggles of the characters to equalize rights between women and men in the workplace and domestic fields that are found in the movie. Therefore equal rights for women to get freedom and the opportunity to have jobs according to their wishes and skills are shown more. Thus, women have the opportunity to work in the community.
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