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# Mapping the Shifting Narratives of Feminism in *Little Women, Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*

***A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for a Master's Degree in Literature and Civilisation***

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## Dedications

I dedicate this modest work and my deepest gratitude in honour of the sacrifices made to provide me with the conditions conducive to my success.

In memory of my late father. A man of few words but grand gestures. Your sacrifices never needed speeches; they spoke for themselves. You taught me dignity in effort and pride in silence. Thank you for believing in me without saying it, but by showing it. Now rest.

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To myself, you were on the verge of giving up, you experienced failure, exhaustion, injustice, and the "Are you sure this is right for you?" But you didn’t give up. You started again, and again. You chose yourself, and today, you are here. This diploma is your victory trophy.

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This work is not just a project. It is a triumph. An answer to doubts, rejections, and abandonment. It is a cry of victory, and it silently carries your names.

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the development of female agency and the emergence of feminist voices in children's literature through a comparative study of *Little Women* (1868), *Matilda* (1988), and *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). Although these works have been extensively studied individually, limited research has explored them collectively through a comparative feminist framework that traces the evolution of female agency across different historical and cultural contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how representations of girlhood, gender roles, and empowerment have evolved alongside changing feminist discourses from the nineteenth century to the present day. Drawing on feminist literary theory, children's literature scholarship, and textual analysis, this research explores how narrative strategies and character development reflect shifting cultural understandings of femininity. The analysis focuses on key themes such as identity formation, education, resistance to patriarchal authority, domestic expectations, and intersectionality, demonstrating how children's literature both reflects and shapes social perceptions of gender and girlhood. The findings reveal that representations of female agency in children's literature have become increasingly diverse and inclusive over time. Collectively, the selected texts illustrate the transformation of girlhood from a largely domestic ideal to a multifaceted experience shaped by education, resistance, identity, and cultural belonging. By highlighting the changing representations of female empowerment across distinct historical periods, this study contributes to ongoing discussions of feminism in children's literature and underscores the role of literary texts in fostering more inclusive understandings of girlhood and womanhood.

**Keywords:** Children's literature; Comparative literary analysis; Female agency; Feminist perspectives; Empowerment; Gender representation; Girlhood; Intersectionality.

# ملخص

تتناول هذه الأطروحة تطور الفاعلية النسائية وبروز الأصوات النسوية في أدب الأطفال من خلال دراسة مقارنة لروايات *Little Women* (1868)، و*Matilda* (1988)، و*Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). وعلى الرغم من أن هذه الأعمال قد حظيت بدراسات واسعة بشكل منفصل، فإن الأبحاث التي تناولتها مجتمعة ضمن إطار نسوي مقارن يتتبع تطور الفاعلية النسائية عبر سياقات تاريخية وثقافية مختلفة لا تزال محدودة. ومن هذا المنطلق، تسعى الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف الكيفية التي تطورت بها تمثيلات الطفولة الأنثوية، والأدوار الجندرية، والتمكين، بالتوازي مع تطور الخطابات النسوية منذ القرن التاسع عشر وحتى الوقت الحاضر. استناداً إلى النظرية الأدبية النسوية، ودراسات أدب الأطفال، والتحليل النصي، تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيف تعكس الاستراتيجيات السردية وتطور الشخصيات التحولات الثقافية في فهم الأنوثة. ويركز التحليل على مجموعة من الموضوعات الرئيسة، من بينها بناء الهوية، والتعليم، ومقاومة السلطة الأبوية، والتوقعات المرتبطة بالأدوار المنزلية، والتقاطعية، موضحاً كيف يعكس أدب الأطفال التصورات الاجتماعية المتعلقة بالنوع الاجتماعي والطفولة الأنثوية ويسهم في تشكيلها في الوقت نفسه. وتكشف نتائج الدراسة أن تمثيلات الفاعلية النسائية في أدب الأطفال أصبحت أكثر تنوعاً وشمولاً مع مرور الوقت. وتُظهر النصوص المختارة مجتمعةً التحول الذي شهدته صورة الطفولة الأنثوية من نموذج يرتبط في المقام الأول بالمجال المنزلي إلى تجربة متعددة الأبعاد تتشكل من خلال التعليم، والمقاومة، والهوية، والانتماء الثقافي. ومن خلال تسليط الضوء على التحولات التي طرأت على تمثيل التمكين النسائي عبر فترات تاريخية مختلفة، تسهم هذه الدراسة في إثراء النقاشات المستمرة حول النسوية في أدب الأطفال، وتؤكد الدور الذي تؤديه النصوص الأدبية في تعزيز فهم أكثر شمولاً للطفولة الأنثوية والأنوثة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أدب الأطفال؛ التحليل الأدبي المقارن؛ الفاعلية النسائية؛ المنظورات النسوية؛ التمكين؛ تمثيل النوع الاجتماعي؛ الطفولة الأنثوية؛ التقاطعية.

## Résumé

Ce mémoire examine le développement de l'agentivité féminine et l'émergence des voix féministes dans la littérature de jeunesse à travers une étude comparative de *Little Women* (1868), *Matilda* (1988) et *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014). Bien que ces œuvres aient fait l'objet de nombreuses études individuelles, peu de recherches les ont examinées conjointement dans le cadre d'une approche féministe comparative visant à retracer l'évolution de l'agentivité féminine à travers différents contextes historiques et culturels. Afin de combler cette lacune, la présente étude analyse la manière dont les représentations de la condition des jeunes filles, des rôles de genre et de l'autonomisation ont évolué parallèlement aux transformations des discours féministes du XIXe siècle à nos jours. S'appuyant sur la théorie littéraire féministe, les études de la littérature de jeunesse et l'analyse textuelle, cette recherche examine comment les stratégies narratives et le développement des personnages reflètent l'évolution des conceptions culturelles de la féminité. L'analyse porte sur plusieurs thèmes majeurs, notamment la construction de l'identité, l'éducation, la résistance à l'autorité patriarcale, les attentes domestiques et l'intersectionnalité, démontrant ainsi comment la littérature de jeunesse reflète les perceptions sociales du genre et de la condition des jeunes filles tout en contribuant à leur formation. Les résultats révèlent que les représentations de l'agentivité féminine dans la littérature de jeunesse sont devenues de plus en plus diverses et inclusives au fil du temps. Ensemble, les œuvres étudiées illustrent la transformation de la condition des jeunes filles, passée d'un idéal essentiellement domestique à une expérience multidimensionnelle façonnée par l'éducation, la résistance, l'identité et l'appartenance culturelle. En mettant en lumière l'évolution des représentations de l'autonomisation féminine à travers différentes périodes historiques, cette étude contribue aux débats actuels sur le féminisme dans la littérature de jeunesse et souligne le rôle des textes littéraires dans la promotion d'une compréhension plus inclusive de la condition des jeunes filles et de la féminité.

**Mots-clés :** Littérature de jeunesse ; Analyse littéraire comparative ; Agentivité féminine ; Perspectives féministes ; Autonomisation ; Représentation du genre ; Condition des jeunes filles ; Intersectionnalité.

# Table of Contents

**Dedications**.....i

**Acknowledgements**.....ii

**Abstract**.....iii

**ملخص**.....iv

**Résumé**.....v

**Table of Contents**.....vi

**General Introduction**.....1

**Chapter One: Literature Review**.....9

**Introduction**.....10

**1. 1. Theoretical Framework**.....11

**1. 1. 1. Liberal Feminism: Education and Female Ambition**.....11

**1. 1. 2. Radical Feminism: Patriarchal Structures and Control**.....12

**1. 1. 3. Post Modern Feminism: Performative Gender and Narrative Multiplicity**.....13

**1. 1. 4. Intersectional Feminism: Race, Class, and Representation**.....14

**1. 1. 5. Feminist Children's Literature Criticism**.....15

**1. 1. 6. Michel Foucault's Theory of Disciplinary Power**.....17

**1. 1. 7. Intertextuality and the Evolution of Girlhood**.....19

**1. 2. Changing Visions of Girlhood: Historical and Cultural Perspectives on *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming***.....21

**1. 2. 1. *Little Women* and 19th Century America: Domestic Ideology and Moral Womanhood**.....22

**1. 2. 2. Civil Rights and Black Feminine Identity in *Brown Girl Dreaming***.....23

**1. 2. 3. Britain in the 1980s: Individualism and Institutional Critique in *Matilda*** ..... 24

**1. 3. Literature Review** ..... 26

**1. 3. 1. Feminism and Canon Formation: *Little Women*** ..... 27

**1. 3. 2. Feminist Ideologies and Resistance in *Matilda*** ..... 28

**1. 3. 3. Voice, Memory, and Black Feminist Lineage in *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 29

**Conclusion** ..... 32

**Chapter Two: Thematic and Structural Comparison ..... 34**

**Introduction** ..... 35

**2. 1. Central Themes in the Construction of Girlhood in *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 36

**2. 1. 1. *Little Women*: Gender Roles, Independence, and Moral Growth** ..... 36

**2. 1. 2. *Matilda*: Intellectual Power and Resistance** ..... 37

**2. 1. 3. *Brown Girl Dreaming*: Identity, Voice, and Intersectionality** ..... 38

**2. 1. 4. Comparative Insight: Convergences and Divergences** ..... 40

**2. 2. Characterisation and Narrative Voice** ..... 41

**2. 2. 1. Narrative Construction in *Little Women*** ..... 42

**2. 2. 2. Narrative Perspective in *Matilda*** ..... 43

**2. 2. 3. Autobiographical Voice in *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 44

**2. 2. 4. Comparative Analysis of Narrative Voice** ..... 46

**2. 3. Spatial Symbolism and the Construction of Female Identity in *Little Women, Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 48

**2. 3. 1. Domestic and Social Spaces in *Little Women*** ..... 49

**2. 3. 2. Oppressive Institutions and Liberating spaces in *Matilda*** ..... 50

**2. 3. 3. Memory and Place in *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 52

**2. 3. 4. Comparative Perspective** ..... 54

**2. 4. Cultural/Ideological Reflection** ..... 56

**2. 4. 1. Cultural and Ideological Context in *Little Women*** ..... 56

**2. 4. 2. Ideology, Authority, and Resistance in *Matilda*** ..... 57

**2. 4. 3. Cultural Identity and Historical Ideology in *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 59

**2. 4. 4. Comparative Perspective on Cultural Divergence and Ideological Dimensions** ..... 60

**Conclusion** ..... 61

**Chapter Three: Interpretation and Synthesis ..... 63**

**Introduction** ..... 64

**3. 1. Redefining Girlhood: Comparative Discussion** ..... 65

**3. 1. 1. Negotiated Agency: Girlhood Within Domestic Ideology in *Little Women*** ..... 65

**3. 1. 2. Defiant Intellectualism: Girlhood as Resistance in *Matilda*** ..... 66

**3. 1. 3. Intersectional Identity and Narrative Selfhood in *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 68

**3. 2. Influence, Intertextuality, and Literary Legacy** ..... 69

**3. 2. 1. *Little Women* as a Foundational Text** ..... 69

**3. 2. 2. *Matilda* as a Modern Reinterpretation** ..... 70

**3. 2. 3. *Brown Girl Dreaming* and the Expansion of the Tradition** ..... 71

**3. 3. Evaluation of Findings** ..... 72

**3. 3. 1. Constrained Agency: Negotiating Girlhood in *Little Women*** ..... 72

**3. 3. 2. Empowered Resistance: Reimagining Authority *in Matilda*** ..... 73

**3. 3. 3. Narrative Identity and Cultural Memory in *Brown Girl Dreaming*** ..... 74

**Conclusion** ..... 75

**General Conclusion.....77**

**Works Cited.....83**

# General Introduction

We often perceive children's literature as a simple realm of fairy tales and fantasy. One might be forgiven for thinking of these as nothing more than innocent, superficial tales put together to amuse a young audience. When looking past the entertainment, one can find that children's literature has for some time been an effective means of conveying, and even calling into question, the values of society. It is a potent cultural and educational tool, one that imparts moral lessons to both children and young adults. In fiction, authors can gently acclimate their readers to the more complicated realities of life, moulding their sense of self and what is expected of them in the world from a very early age.

Gender roles are but one of the social issues at the heart of children's narratives. I have a particular interest in this because of my own abiding affection for *Little Women*. As my favourite novel and the first to make me appreciate feminist representation in print, it has maintained a special place for me. Jo March is a case in point; her conflict between what she wants and what society demands is something that still strikes a chord with people today. The way the book handles female independence and ambition was what drew me in to begin with.

That admiration has since led me to other books like *Matilda* or *Brown Girl Dreaming*, where the author puts female empowerment front and centre. While they come from different times and places, the young women in those stories are, in equal measure, at odds with authority and with identity. The more I have read and thought about them, the more I have seen how they chart the course of feminist discourse from the 19th Century right up to now. What started as a personal admiration has, over time, turned into a proper academic study of how feminist voices have evolved in children's literature through the various waves of the movement. As both a devoted reader and researcher, I approach these texts with an awareness of their emotional value and cultural influence, situating this study within feminist literary criticism and children's literature studies.

It has been the custom for centuries that children's literature would put on display the conventional views of what it means to be a man or a woman. In their stories, writers were wont to shore up patriarchal values by giving boys and girls very different parts to play: the male was the picture of independence and courage, the leader, while the female, in keeping with the domestic expectations placed upon her, was made to seem passive and compliant.

All of that started to change as feminist thinking took hold. Authors found themselves reevaluating such depictions and what part they played in shaping gender identity. The aim of feminist discourse in literature is to get at how women and girls are put across in the text, to see if a narrative is upholding or challenging inequality. When it comes to young readers, feminist criticism holds that we ought to offer them something more empowering and varied than the old stereotypes.

Take *Little Women* for example. A product of 19th Century America during the first wave of feminism, the novel is full of the kind of tensions one would find over a woman's education or her duties at home versus her longing for independence. With the March sisters, and Jo in particular, an early look at female agency is pushed against the confines of patriarchy. It is a more complex rendering of girlhood than one might expect, showing the pull between social conformity and one's own ambitions.

The 20th and 21st Centuries have seen a great deal of social and cultural change in feminist discourse, and the way girls and women are depicted in children's literature has grown to match that complexity. This can be witnessed in the second-wave period when authors started to put more of a spotlight on the intellectual and personal strength of their female characters, openly defying old notions of authority. The heroines of the day were written with an independence along with ambition that was a direct impression of the push for gender equality in society at large. Take Matilda: her very intelligence and fortitude allow her to stand up to the kind of oppressive family and institutional forces one might expect.

Then we have more recent works that reflect third-wave thinking, where the convergence of race and gender is front and centre. A case in point is *Brown Girl Dreaming*, which studies the selfhood feeling of belonging of a young African American girl. Put them together and you have a clear picture of how this genre has moved on from simple domestic femininity to something much more empowering as the feminist movement has evolved.

Scholars and critics are well aware of the part children's books play in forming views on gender and social roles. Feminist literary criticism will look at whether a text stays upholding or subverting patriarchal ideas, while there are plenty of studies that delve into the pedagogical side of narratives intended for young readers. Yet for all the scholarship that has been produced on the subject, one would be hard pressed to find many comparative studies that do a systematic job of following the thread of feminist representation through the different waves and eras.

Existing studies often focus individually on texts such as *Little Women* or *Matilda*, emphasising themes of female empowerment, domesticity, or resistance, for instance, Sari (2023) and Putri et Al. (2024) analyse how Jo March resists domestic expectations through a feminist lens *in Little Women*, while Aisyah (2020) focuses on how Matilda's intelligence is a form of resistance and empowerment in Dahl's work. Nevertheless, fewer studies examine how these works together depict the transformation of feminist discourse from the 19$^{th}$ to the present.

There appears to be limited scholarly work that comparatively analyses feminist voices across multiple generations of children's literature and situates them within the framework of first-, second-, and third-wave feminism. This dissertation, therefore, seeks to address that gap by foregrounding the evolution of female agency and feminist representation in selected literary texts for young audiences. Through a comparative literary analysis of *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming*, the study considers how changing historical and cultural

conditions shape literary portrayals of girlhood. In doing so, the dissertation contributes to both feminist literary studies and children's literature scholarship by examining the progression of feminist ideals across literary traditions and generations.

This study aims to fulfil various objectives. Beginning with analysing how *Little Women* portrays female agency and feminist ideals, then comparing its feminist representations to those in contemporary children's literature works such as *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming.* Then examining how feminist discourse in children's literature evolves across historical and cultural settings. And finally contributing to feminist literary studies and children's literature by drawing attention to the importance of early gender representation.

With these objectives in mind, the following research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent does *Little Women* constitute an effective representation of feminist ideals for young readers in comparison to *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*?

2. How has the representation of strong female protagonists evolved throughout various historical, cultural and social contexts within children's literature?

3. In what ways does *Little Women* simultaneously empower and constrain young readers, and how does this compare to the representation of female agency in contemporary children's literary works like *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*?

The following hypotheses are put to the test with a comparative textual analysis, in keeping with the questions posed:

● As a primary text for feminist ideas in children's literature, *Little Women* is an early example of a work that leaves no doubt about its support for female intellectual ambition and individuality. Yet one could argue that, in the light of today's offerings, its view of womanhood is still somewhat hemmed in by the 19th Century's domestic and patriarchal sensibilities.

● One can see a decisive transition in how strong female leads are written in children's books as history and society have changed; the once passive and homebound character has given way to a more independent and varied sense of femininity.

● There is a tension in *Little Women*: it gives young readers a sense of self-empowerment in its depiction of self-expression along with aspiration, but at the same time, it upholds old gender conventions when it comes to matters like marriage and the home. Modern children's literature is far less restrictive in this regard, presenting wider models of what female agency can be.

To get at the heart of how gender and female agency have evolved, this study is grounded in the feminist literary theory of such thinkers as Judith Butler and Elaine Showalter, as well as the children's literature scholarship of Maria Nikolajeva. It has been the position of feminist theorists for some time that literature is a place where gender ideologies are made, unmade and challenged. In the case of children's books, the way girlhood is put on the page frequently reflects what society expects in terms of power, identity and education. The texts we have chosen show us how heroines have had to make their way around social restrictions and authority over the years, which in turn tells us something about the changing face of feminist debate. All in all, these approaches point to the fact that children's literature does more than just hold up a mirror to social attitudes on gender; it has a hand in forming a young reader's own sense of self and what it means to be empowered.

Using a comparative literary analysis, this qualitative study puts the primary text of *Little Women, Matilda, Brown Girl Dreaming* under the microscope. A close reading and textual analysis form the basis of the research as it considers the work's feminist themes, the way characters are developed and the narrative strategies at play. We will be looking in particular at how female agency is put on display, how there is resistance to patriarchal standards, and what the emerging depiction of girlhood tells us.

To pinpoint on the motifs of identity, empowerment, education, domesticity and intersectionality, the study makes use of thematic coding drawn from feminist theory. The aim of this approach is to get at the heart of how these kinds of narratives can both build up and subvert gender expectations in varying cultural and historical settings.

At the same time, the research does not lose sight of the ideological and historical bases of children's literature. It asks how texts meant for young readers serve to shape or mirror the prevailing cultural view on gender. By drawing on secondary sources in the fields of feminism and childhood studies to put the works in context with wider feminist discourse, the dissertation treats children's literature as more than a pastime. Rather, it is viewed as an important cultural vehicle in the making of social identity and gender consciousness.

The dissertation is organised into three chapters. Chapter One explores the historical transformation of gender representation in literature for young readers and reviews the existing scholarship concerning female agency, domestic fiction, and feminist discourse in children's narratives. It presents the literature review and examines the development of children's literature in relation to feminist criticism.

Chapter Two provides a comparative study of *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming* by reviewing their theme matters and narrative patterns. This chapter studies the representation of female agency, resistance, empowerment and identity while highlighting similarities and differences across the selected texts.

Chapter Three offers a deeper interpretation of the findings by synthesising the major feminist themes and perspectives explored throughout the study. This chapters works as an analysis of the way in which feminist thought and gender are put across in a variety of historical and cultural settings, and it assesses what these texts mean for the wider fields of children's literature and feminist literary studies.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative comparative literary approach grounded in feminist literary criticism. Through close textual analysis of *Little Women, Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming,* the research examines the representation of female agency, gender roles, identity formation, and empowerment across different historical and cultural contexts. The analysis draws upon key concepts from feminist theory and children's literature studies to explore how these texts construct and challenge notions of femininity. All references and in-text citations follow the guidelines of Modern Language Association (MLA) style.

Bringing together feminist literary criticism and a comparative reading of the texts aims to show that children's literature can be a very potent place for feminist discourse to be made and remade. In tracing the changes in how women are represented from the 19th Century up to the modern day, the dissertation adds its input to the current debate on identity, empowerment and gender in writing for the young. In the end, this research work attempts to put a spotlight on the lasting importance of feminist voices in the genre and how they have gone about defining female agency and girlhood from one generation to the subsequent others.

# Chapter One:

# Literature Review

## Introduction

Feminist studies have undergone significant transformations across different historical periods, commonly described as the waves of feminism. These developments have profoundly influenced literary representations of women, gender roles, and female agency. Understanding these shifts is essential for examining the evolution of feminist discourse in children's literature and for exploring how literary texts both reflect and challenge dominant gender ideologies.

This chapter establishes the conceptual and theoretical framework that guides the present study. It provides a critical mapping of the major feminist movements and the development of feminist literary criticism, with particular attention to issues of gender representation, identity, empowerment, and agency. It also reviews key scholarly debates within children's literature studies and examines how feminist perspectives have been applied to the analysis of texts written for young readers.

Particular attention is given to the feminist concerns reflected in *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Although these works emerge from different historical and cultural contexts, they collectively illustrate the evolution of feminist thought and the changing representation of girlhood across generations. By situating these texts within relevant feminist frameworks, this chapter lays the theoretical foundation for the comparative analysis undertaken in the subsequent chapters.

Furthermore, the chapter explores selected strands of feminist theory, including Liberal, Radical, Postmodern, and Intersectional Feminism, highlighting their relevance to the study of children's literature. Through this theoretical and critical overview, the chapter provides the necessary analytical tools for examining how female characters negotiate questions of identity, education, resistance, and empowerment within their respective narratives.

## 1. 1. Theoretical Framework

In the realms of women's identity, education, and resistance, feminist literary theories are employed and portrayed in literary works to provide a framework in order to grasp the complexities of various narratives. Applying these theories of children's literature criticism to the study of the literary works *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* will help us examine how girlhood and female selfhood are constructed in children's and young adult fiction. Amid diverse branches of feminist ideologies, including Liberal, Radical, Postmodern, and Intersectional Feminism, this study considers the systems that shape women's experiences throughout various literary texts. It explores how these discourses both reflect and evaluate patriarchal ideologies and how they shape the cultural views of women's potential. This offers multiple perspectives on the portrayals of female characters and how they steer through their journeys to claim their voices and pursue educational paths under the pressure of societal expectations.

### 1. 1. 1. Liberal Feminism: Education and Female Ambition

The feminist movement has expanded both socially and intellectually into a range of branches, each contributing to the exposition of women's oppression and suggesting distinct approaches regarding equality. One of the earliest and most influential approaches is Liberal Feminism, which advocates for women's education and intellectual growth, as well as equality of opportunity. Its origin can be traced back to Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792),* which argues that the societal construction of female inferiority stems from a lack of access to education rather than inherent incapacity.

As Liberal feminism evolved over the centuries, later thinkers such as Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique (1963),* critiqued the societal restrictions imposed on women,

particularly their confinement to domestic roles. Through a literary lens, the principles of liberal feminism can be applied to shed light on female characters and their assertion of intellectual agency. Protagonists like Jo March in *Little Women* showcase these principles by striving for a professional authorship within a male-dominated field and a society that constrains women's roles in public spheres. In a similar vein, *Matilda* Emphasises intellectual superiority by challenging authority figures preaching anti-intellectual attitudes. This way, liberal Feminism offers various lenses through which education serves as a vehicle for empowerment. It challenges the historical exclusion of women from intellectual fields and asserts their right to intellectual creativity and ambition.

### 1. 1. 2. Radical Feminism: Patriarchal Structures and Control

Among many different branches of feminism, radical feminism offers a perspective that underscores the patriarchal roots of inequality between men and women, highlighting the systematic operations of patriarchy as a structural power that governs women's choices and identities. In *Sexual Politics (1970)*, Kate Millett contends that literature often underlines male dominance through several means. One of them is the portrayal of women as "objects of male desire", while attributing them stereotypical roles such as passive, submissive figures (23).

While literature plays an active role in shaping and reinforcing societal power structures, the principles of radical feminism can be found in many literary texts, each exposing the power dynamics that govern women's lives. *Little Women* exposes the 19th-century ideologies that restrict women to domestic roles while channelling female ambition into a more socially acceptable pathway. Furthermore, *Matilda* shows how controlling authority male figures like fathers and educational administrators are a direct representation of institutional patriarchy. In like manner, *Brown Girl Dreaming* showcases how limitations on women's opportunities and representation are generated by racial and gendered systems.

Through this lens, Radical Feminism provides a framework for dissecting power dynamics across various societal contexts, including domestic and educational environments. This perspective enables the study of how patriarchal systems shape individuals' experiences and helps us understand the limitations and challenges they face.

### 1. 1. 3. Post Modern Feminism: Performative Gender and Narrative Multiplicity

As Feminist studies evolve through time, approaches and ideologies become more complex and multifaceted, including postmodern feminism, which challenges traditional feminist ideas and critiques the concept of a universal female experience. It questions the fixed notions of gender and identity while emphasising discourse and performativity. In *Gender Trouble (1990),* Judith Butler envisions gender as a socially conventional display rather than an innate predisposition (Butler 139). This groundbreaking notion offers a new perspective on gender, presenting it as a series of repeated actions and behaviours, including ways of dressing, speaking, and acting, reinforcing the concept of gender as a performance that perpetuates prevailing notions about the subjective reality of men and women.

This offers a highly illuminating perspective on how gender portrayals interfere with established norms. Considering the character of Jo March from *Little Women,* who manifests both feminine and masculine traits, thereby disrupting the rigid binary assumptions of her time and offering a more nuanced perception of gender expression. Similarly, in *Matilda,* the main character's cognitive strength challenges assumptions about childhood submissiveness and the societal expectation of compliance in young girls. Her resistance to these conventions underlines the opportunities provided by dissent and the necessity of intellectual power. By the same token, *Brown Girl Dreaming* presents a riveting representation of identity as a complex and evolving concept. This description focuses on the depiction of selfhood through various

factors, including race and voice, thus emphasising the fundamental versatility and multiplicity of identity. Using these examples is relevant for illustrating literature as an active dismantling of the limitations imposed by social conventions.

Postmodern feminism showcases narrative voice and storytelling as means of restructuring gender norms. The diversity of identities portrayed in these stories illustrates girlhood as a culturally contingent concept rather than a fixed idea. In essence, postmodern feminism emphasises that girlhood is a constantly evolving notion shaped by culture, time and place, and the broader environment. It shifts the focus to how voices are used to understand and shape gender, while acknowledging the fluidity and diversity of identity.

### 1. 1. 4. Intersectional Feminism: Race, Class, and Representation

Women's fight for equality is not represented by a monolithic approach but rather as a complex tapestry that combines race, class and gender. These principles align with the critical framework of Intersectional Feminism. Ascending in contemporary discourse, this framework goes beyond the traditional conventions of feminism by prioritising individual experiences and centring the intersections of diverse social demographics. It was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989), through which she argued that gender is best understood in relation to race, class and parallel forms of marginalisation (Crenshaw 140). Drawing on this discourse, a distinct branch of feminist thought emerged, known as Black Feminism. Through the significant contribution of Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought (1990),* challenges the notion of single-axis oppression by highlighting the interconnections among social hierarchies and providing a better understanding of their power dynamics. Collins argued that oppressive systems like racism, sexism and classism are interconnected and mutually strengthening one another.

The intersectional approach draws attention to individuals' experiences, showcasing how different aspects of their identity are objects of multiple forms of discrimination. In *Brown Girl Dreaming,* Woodson's narrative highlights how race and gender intertwine to shape one's experience, particularly within the context of girlhood. Employing the concept of intersectionality in this narrative helps us understand how young girls' stories are both represented and left untold within children's literature. It shows how stories have historically excluded certain groups of girls, especially those from Coloured, Indigenous, and other minority backgrounds, challenging readers and writers to reevaluate these gaps, shift the focus to different experiences, and ensure that girlhood is more broadly represented and more inclusive in children's literature. This helps create a more authentic understanding of identity and social dynamics

In essence, this framework values the complexities of young women's lives by highlighting their diverse experiences and acknowledging the various aspects that shape their identity. Emphasising that girlhood does not fall into a single categorisation but is rather represented by the interplay of different social classifications. Thus, women's experiences differ greatly according to their distinct identities and backgrounds.

## 1. 1. 5. Feminist Children's Literature Criticism

Within the sphere of children's literature, a complex interplay of social ideologies lies in this vast landscape of tales and illustrations. Through the lens of feminist literary criticism, children's literature offers a fundamental understanding of how young minds are moulded by the stories they encounter and how such narratives shape the development of their identities and their overall perception of the world. Analysing how children's literary texts both reflect and challenge traditional representations of gender roles and emphasising the importance of

the incorporation of feminist thoughts into works intended for young readers in the formation of a future, equitable, and more inclusive society.

This study expands through feminist children's literature scholarship, building upon critical texts to dissect the complexities of power dynamics, gender roles and identity in children's narratives. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty (1997),* Roberta Seelinger Trites offers a critical understanding of how children's literature both enables and restricts young girls through their socialisation into cultural norms. Through her work, she analyses how protagonists mediate power relationships within institutional structures. Lissa Paul's essay *Enigma Variation: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature (1987)* showcases the role of narrative voice and language in the formation of gender ideologies. In a similar vein, Jessica Lynne Campbell's *Feminist Themes in Children's and Young Adult Literature (2016)* provides a foundational understanding of recurring feminist principles, such as female autonomy and identity formation, that are central motifs in feminist children's literature. At last, Maria Nikolajeva tackles the formation of gender ideologies within children's narratives in *Children's Literature Comes of Age (1996),* underscoring subjectivity and reinforcing the examination of both the limitations and the empowerment showcased in children's literary texts.

Through this approach, we gain a deeper understanding of how these narratives are constructed, offering an analytical perspective on the cultural and societal implications highlighted in these stories and showcasing their crucial role in shaping young readers' minds, perceptions, and principles. By analysing key themes and literary devices, this study demonstrates the importance of feminist literary criticism in depicting the complexities inherent in children's literature and their ramifications for children's intellectual development.

## 1. 1. 6. Michel Foucault's Theory of Disciplinary Power

Power is often associated with visible forms of authority and control; however, modern social theorists have demonstrated that it can also operate through subtle mechanisms embedded within everyday institutions. Among the most influential scholars to examine these mechanisms is Michel Foucault, whose work explores the relationship between power, discipline, and social regulation. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault argues that institutions such as schools, families, hospitals, and prisons function as disciplinary structures that shape individual behaviour through surveillance, normalization, and punishment. Rather than relying solely on force, these institutions encourage individuals to internalize social expectations and regulate their own conduct. As a result, Foucault's theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how authority influences the development of identity and agency. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because it helps explain the institutional constraints and forms of resistance experienced by the female protagonists in the selected texts.

According to Foucault, disciplinary power operates through systems that establish norms and monitor behaviour in order to produce compliant individuals (170). Through processes of observation, evaluation, and correction, institutions define acceptable forms of conduct while discouraging actions that challenge established authority. Consequently, power becomes deeply embedded within social structures, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others. Foucault further argues that disciplinary institutions create what he terms "docile bodies," individuals who conform to social expectations through the internalization of authority (136). Therefore, power functions not only through direct coercion but also through subtle practices that shape behaviour and reinforce social order.

This theoretical perspective is particularly useful for analyzing Roald Dahl's *Matilda* (1988), where authority figures repeatedly attempt to suppress the protagonist's intellectual independence. Both the Wormwood household and Crunchem Hall Primary School function as disciplinary institutions that seek to regulate behaviour through intimidation and punishment. Miss Trunchbull's authoritarian rule exemplifies Foucauldian disciplinary power, as fear and humiliation are used to maintain control over students. Practices such as public punishment and the use of the Chokey illustrate how authority operates through mechanisms designed to enforce obedience and discourage resistance. Nevertheless, Matilda challenges these structures through education, critical thinking, and intellectual achievement, demonstrating that agency can emerge even within oppressive environments.

Elements of disciplinary power can also be identified in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). Although the March family offers a supportive domestic environment, the sisters remain subject to nineteenth-century expectations concerning femininity, morality, and domestic responsibility. Their experiences reveal how social norms regulate behaviour and shape the construction of female identity. Similarly, Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) highlights the influence of social and institutional structures on the development of selfhood. Through her reflections on race, education, and family life, Woodson illustrates how broader systems of power contribute to both the limitation and formation of identity. Although these texts portray different social realities, they collectively demonstrate the influence of institutional and cultural forces on girls' experiences.

In conclusion, Foucault's theory of disciplinary power provides an important lens through which the selected texts can be examined. By emphasizing the role of institutions in shaping behaviour and identity, the theory highlights the challenges faced by young female protagonists while also drawing attention to their acts of resistance. Consequently, a

Foucauldian perspective contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between power, agency, and the construction of girlhood in children's literature.

## 1. 1. 7. Intertextuality and the Evolution of Girlhood

Literary texts do not exist in isolation; rather, they engage in continuous dialogue with other texts, ideas, and cultural traditions. This interconnected nature of literature is captured by the concept of intertextuality, a theory that emphasizes the relationships among texts and the ways meaning is produced through those relationships. Developed by Julia Kristeva from the dialogic theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, intertextuality challenges the notion of literary works as entirely independent creations. Instead, it suggests that texts absorb, transform, and respond to earlier texts and cultural discourses. As a result, intertextuality provides a useful framework for examining how literary representations evolve across different historical and cultural contexts. In the present study, this concept supports the comparative analysis of *Little Women* (1868), *Matilda* (1988), and *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) by highlighting both the continuities and transformations in the representation of girlhood and female agency.

Kristeva argues that texts derive meaning through their relationships with other texts and cultural discourses (66). From this perspective, literary works participate in an ongoing conversation that extends across time and space. Similarly, Bakhtin maintains that literary texts engage in continuous dialogue with multiple voices and perspectives within society (276). Consequently, intertextuality allows readers to identify recurring themes, shared concerns, and evolving representations across different literary works. Through this lens, literature can be viewed as a dynamic process in which ideas are continually revisited, revised, and transformed.

The relationship among the selected texts can be understood through this intertextual perspective. Although *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* were written in

different centuries and cultural settings, they share a common concern with girls who challenge social limitations and seek self-definition. Jo March's rejection of conventional gender expectations anticipates later representations of independent and intellectually empowered girls such as Matilda Wormwood. Both characters resist restrictive norms through education, creativity, and personal determination, thereby demonstrating forms of agency that challenge traditional constructions of femininity. These similarities reveal a continuity in literary representations of girls who actively negotiate social expectations.

At the same time, *Brown Girl Dreaming* extends and transforms themes present in the earlier texts. While Jo and Matilda primarily confront gender-based restrictions, Woodson's autobiographical narrative introduces issues of race, cultural identity, and historical marginalization. By incorporating these dimensions, the text broadens discussions of female agency and reflects the influence of contemporary feminist perspectives, particularly intersectional feminism. Thus, the three works collectively illustrate both continuity and change in literary representations of girlhood across different historical and cultural contexts.

Furthermore, all three texts emphasize the transformative power of literacy and storytelling. Jo expresses her aspirations through writing, Matilda discovers empowerment through reading, and Woodson develops her identity through poetry and autobiographical narration. These recurring motifs establish meaningful connections among the texts and demonstrate how literature functions as a vehicle for self-expression, resistance, and empowerment. Such parallels reveal an ongoing literary conversation concerning the role of voice, education, and creativity in shaping female identity and agency.

In conclusion, intertextuality provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationships among the selected works. By examining points of continuity and transformation, it becomes possible to trace the evolution of girlhood and feminist consciousness across

different historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, the concept reinforces the comparative nature of this study and highlights the ways in which successive texts build upon, revise, and expand earlier representations of female agency in children's literature.

## 1. 2. Changing Visions of Girlhood: Historical and Cultural Perspectives on *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Children's literature is often dismissed as a genre of simple narratives; however, it serves as a cultural and societal mirror that both reflects and shapes understandings of girlhood. Classic fairy tales or modern picture books, serve as frameworks that challenge gender norms and exert a significant influence on the socialisation of young readers. *Little Women* (1869), *Matilda* (1988) and *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) discuss the position of women within patriarchal structures. Although these texts have emerged in different historical and cultural contexts, they collectively contribute to evolving feminist frameworks that redefine female identity, showcasing a progressive shift in the depiction of female characters and challenging traditional notions of girlhood.

The selected works offer multiple perspectives on the socio-cultural landscape embedded within their respective historical contexts. The limitations rooted in the social expectations of the Victorian and American Civil War eras provide a complex depiction of female agency in *Little Women*, thereby implying early feminist principles. Dahl's *Matilda* reflects the social dynamics of the late 20th Century while challenging fixed notions of gender roles by empowering its young female protagonist. Finally, Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* explores the theme of racial identity within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, portraying the socio-political dynamics of the 1960s and 1970s, but most importantly, engaging with intersectional feminist discourse by centring the experience of a young girl of colour.

Despite the periodic and cultural differences among these texts, their compelling portrayals of girlhood showcase a progressive shift in the depiction of girls in children's literature. Together, these stories redefine female identity and challenge patriarchal structures. Through the struggles and triumphs of their female protagonists, these texts showcase the power of children's literature to be more inclusive and, most importantly, to empower visions of girlhood for generations to come.

## 1. 2. 1. *Little Women* and 19th Century America: Domestic Ideology and Moral Womanhood

Set during the American Civil War, Alcott's *Little Women* explores the nuanced dynamics of gender roles in the 19th Century by focusing on the ideologies of New England Society. This era, known for its rigid gender norms, restricts women to ideologies of domesticity, piety and submission while claiming marriage as their primary goal, thus limiting female aspiration. However, *Little Women* deconstructs these notions by subtly demonstrating resistance.

Alcott challenges the fixed notions of gender roles through Jo March's character. Her strong inclination to become a writer symbolises an emerging cultural shift that suggests women's ability to pursue intellectual pursuits and aspirations beyond marriage. Her determination embodies a sense of self-independence that disrupts the societal expectations imposed on women of her era. The story navigates between conventionality and resistance, which portray early hints of feminist consciousness in American culture. Jo's journey reflects the challenges women faced at the time as she navigates the tension between her personal aspirations and societal expectations.

*Little Women* acts as a vital illustration of its time, deftly representing the complexities of its gendered social norms. Alcott offers a nuanced critique of the limitations imposed on

women through the character of Jo March, thereby showcasing the emerging feminist notions of the time. The novel's timeless allure lies in its ability to navigate the discourses of tradition and innovation, enabling readers to grasp the shifting dynamics of women's experiences in the 19th Century.

## 1. 2. 2. Civil Rights and Black Feminine Identity in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* serves as a testament to the author's personal journey as a young black girl during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power era. This memoir explores notions of identity formation by centring the experiences of black girlhood, through which Woodson highlights the intersectionality between race and gender. Her narrative, set within a historical context that struggles to recognise equality, acts as a weapon of resistance and creative expression.

While deeply rooted in the turbulence of the Civil Rights Movement, a period during the 1950s and 1960s dedicated to challenging racial segregation and securing equal rights for African Americans, and the Black Power Era, which emerged in the late 1960s emphasised black pride, self-determination and cultural affirmation, Woodson's memoir represents both the legacy of segregation and the fight against it, and in the same vein, emphasises the cultural affirmation of black identity. Profoundly shaping the narrator's childhood in South Carolina and New York, her experience showcases how both race and gender intersect in the shaping of one's identity. This approach, though subtly demonstrated, offers an analytical understanding of the struggles Black girls faced during this era. Woodson used writing as a tool of self-definition by voicing the historical challenges embedded in a lack of reorganisation and inequality.

*Brown Girl Dreaming* proves how narratives can hold power in shaping identity and transmitting cultural values. In this specific historical context (1960s – 1970s), Woodson shows

how Black girlhood is forged in the intersection of race and gender. Her story conveys a powerful message of resilience, fuelled by her unwavering desire to write and express herself.

### 1. 2. 3. Britain in the 1980s: Individualism and Institutional Critique in *Matilda*

Reflecting the 20th-Century British landscape, Roald Dahl's *Matilda* serves as a cultural artefact that employs satire and exaggeration to critique the authoritarian structures of its time. Either within the domestic sphere or the educational system, this narrative focuses on the oppressions inflicted upon young girls in these contexts. The text offers a critical lens through which we can reflect on the societal power dynamics of the time.

While not explicitly stated, the novel's setting and character dynamics reflect the socio-political climate of mid-20$^{th}$ Century Britain. The narrative presents the strict headmistress Miss Trunchbull and the rigid school environment as a reflection of the often-punitive educational systems dominant in that era, showcasing how conformity and obedience were held in higher regard than self-expression. Matilda's academic resistance is portrayed as a form of rebellion against these strict guidelines. Her ability to outsmart the adults in her social environment and rebel against the authoritative system alludes to a broader discourse on societal structures that were established at the time in order to restrict individuals, in particular women and children; thus, the narrative implicitly exposes the struggles for individuals' autonomy during this era and suggests a chance of revolt against these systems of oppression.

*Matilda* subtly presents an insightful analysis of the social structures of its time. Through a satirical approach, the text challenges historically imposed domestic and educational power dynamics. By portraying intellectual freedom and self-autonomy as the source of empowerment, Dahl transcends storytelling and becomes a statement for resistance, showcasing the power of knowledge in the face of oppression.

The evolution of girlhood, as shown in the three texts *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming,* showcases significant cultural shifts in the representation of female aspiration. Initially, the depiction of girlhood in *Little Women* navigates the fine line between resistance and societal expectations, where female ambition and societal expectations hardly coexist. The March sisters reflect the beauty of female solidarity, sorely needed in a time when systemic marginalisation governs women's lives as they navigate their desires within the social restrictions of the 19th Century.

The narrative progresses with the introduction of Brown Girl Dreaming as a symbol of resistance, deeply rooted in the historical struggles over racial identity. Woodson's work reflects on how education and literacy are fundamental tools for self-affirmation and racial recognition, showcasing the transformative power of writing in fostering empowerment. Presenting female solidarity specifically within the Black community as crucial when navigating oppressive systems of the time.

Ultimately, *Matilda* embodies a more explicit form of resistance, through which the character's intellectual strength enables her to control her environment. This narrative demonstrates how such shifts can mark a complete cultural transformation, in which young girls can challenge authority with the power of their imagination and intellect. This progression provides a space for girls to expand their curiosity and in which their sense of autonomy and ambition is celebrated.

Through a feminist lens, this framework demonstrates how texts like *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming* are able to collectively centre intellect in the core of girlhood, which moves beyond the stereotypical depictions of female passivity in order to embrace a future where younger girls are able to be active thinkers and creators and, most importantly, free critics of their societies.

## 1. 3. Literature Review

Researchers' critical scholarly analyses of *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* demonstrate ongoing scholars' concern for how girlhood, child agency, and feminist possibility are constructed in children's literature. Although scholars across varying historical contexts and schools of thought continue to investigate whether these texts support or disrupt common gender norms, all three works were written within a 140-year time frame (Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* was published in 1868; Roald Dahl's *Matilda* was published in 1988; Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* was published in 2014) and provide an extensive record of the evolving representations of girlhood and female power. Furthermore, although these works emerged at different historical and cultural times, each has been considered by feminist researchers as part of their argument that children's literature is used, often ambiguously, in the ideologically based construction of gender. This review will outline some of the most notable research on the three works and discuss recurring themes, methodologies, and debates to illustrate the depth of extant research and the potential for continued comparative feminist research.

The central idea behind the critical feminist analysis of children's literature is that stories for/with children represent an ideology. The way children see themselves (gender), how they see others (social possibilities or expectations), and how they develop an identity (self-image) are all shaped by what they read. As a result, the impact of reading on the development of self-understanding can be both empowering and limiting.

The critical focus on girlhood as a site of the development of an ideology has increased over recent years, in part because there has been growing recognition amongst researchers of the ways in which texts for children negotiate the competing demands of providing an

entertaining narrative while at the same time, conveying lessons regarding morality and reproducing societal norms.

Within this critical context, *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* have emerged as three particularly productive sites of feminist investigation. In each case, it is possible to observe and detect a high degree of visibility, provocation, and contestation, particularly regarding the long-standing tension within feminist thought between female desire and social constraint.

### 1. 3. 1. Feminism and Canon Formation: *Little Women*

In the article, "*Feminism and Children's Literature: Fitting Little Women into the American Literary Canon*," P. May explores the placement of *Little Women* within a broader debate surrounding feminism and the formation of the American literary canon. According to May, Alcott's novel has been subject to contradictory readings for many years. On the one hand, the novel has been widely regarded as a central work of American children's literature; however, its portrayal of women and their roles in society have also drawn criticism for its perceived support of domestic ideology. May argues that this ambiguity, in addition to reflecting historical receptions of the novel, indicates tensions inherent in the novel's construction that Alcott had to navigate during a time of significant social and market pressures on authors. As May points out, Alcott wrote this novel with a number of ambitions of her own and understood the marketplace well enough to recognise that novels promoting women's independence would likely be unappealing to many of the middle-class families who would purchase books for their young daughters (20).

Rather than dismissing *Little Women* as a conservative work because of its focus on marriage and morality, May sees Jo March's desire to write as evidence of proto-feminist

interventions that challenged societal restrictions placed upon women. Furthermore, according to May, Jo's determination to earn money from her writing and to resist the social pressure to become simply a wife or mother represents a particularly relevant form of resistance, given that these actions occur within a narrative that ultimately celebrates the virtues of home and family. There is no easy resolution to the contradiction between Jo's ambitions and the apparent support of marriage and moral reform presented throughout much of the novel. Instead, the unresolved nature of this conflict provides the source of ongoing scholarly interest and makes *Little Women* an especially interesting subject for feminist analysis.

May argues that this work can only be interpreted in historical terms; therefore, she demonstrates how the book's authors negotiate the gender restrictions of 19th Century America on women's writing ambitions, while also showing the potential for female writers to achieve their goals through literature (21).

Rather than seeing *Little Women* as an unambiguously "conservative" novel because of its focus on marriage and moral behaviour, May sees Jo March's desire to write novels, which can be interpreted as a key element of proto-feminism, as well as a demonstration of her ability to resist these very social norms. In particular, this approach calls attention to the tension between conformity and resistance, an important area of study for many feminist readers of children's literature. This debate over *Little Women* highlights how the process of creating an American literary canon has been shaped by issues of gender.

### 1. 3. 2. Feminist Ideologies and Resistance in *Matilda*

Studies of *Matilda* are frequently critical, focusing on how feminist resistance is represented by characters such as Matilda and Miss Honey. The article "Representation of Feminism in Roald Dahl's Matilda" (Suwastini et al.) interprets both Matilda and Miss Honey

as examples of women challenging dominant forms of male power in institutions, primarily the family and school.

Both studies indicate that the depiction of Matilda's superior intellect is a significant aspect of disrupting adult authority, primarily that of her father and the authoritarian Miss Trunchbull. Scholars contend that Dahl depicts knowledge as empowerment; therefore, he positions female intellect as a disruptor of oppressive institutions.

According to Shaw and Fard, in their article "*Layers of Womanhood Unfolded: Roald Dahl's Matilda*" situate the novel within the broader feminist movement. In the extended essay at hand, the authors examine the extent to which Matilda embodies late-20th Century feminist goals for education, autonomy, and female agency. Additionally, the authors highlight the symbolic representation of telekinesis as an extension of suppressed female power. The authors interpret the supernatural element as metaphorical resistance to patriarchal containment.

Collectively, these studies position *Matilda* as a text that critiques oppressive systems while offering new visions of girlhood as autonomously intelligent. There are ongoing debates about the extent to which Dahl's satiric exaggerations reinforce stereotypes, even as they attempt to subvert them.

### 1. 3. 3. Voice, Memory, and Black Feminist Lineage in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

The focus of much critical analysis for *Brown Girl Dreaming* is voice, memory, and intersectionality. However, in her Pedagogical Review, K. V. Hinton (Old Dominion University) points out that Woodson's depiction of female experiences and agencies among children is important to consider. Additionally, Hinton states that Woodson's memoir has

educational merit: it offers young readers the opportunity to view storytelling as a means of empowering themselves through self-identification.

In "*Engaging Jacqueline Woodson and Poetic Memory*" by Kiana Nwaobia, published in Black feminist online spaces such as blogs and Medium, this study presents a theoretical approach to analysing Woodson's work while also making it easily accessible. The author of this study frames Woodson's memoir within the broader framework of Black Feminist Thought. She identifies three central themes in Woodson's memoir: collective memory, maternal legacy and community resilience. The author states that Woodson's use of poetry as a structural element is an act of resistance, in that she claims Black girlhood as a worthy centre for literary consideration.

Both studies share commonalities with intersectional feminism by examining how race and gender intersect to shape a narrative voice. Both authors also assert that Woodson's memoir does not simply document the development of an individual; instead, it constructs a community-based, historically specific identity grounded in Black womanhood.

### 1. 3. 4. Mapping the Scholarly Landscape Through a Comparative Lens in *Little Women, Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*

While there have been many scholarly works on children's literature, scholars continue to debate how far-reaching it truly is as an entirely liberating force. For example, some scholars argue that *Little Women* does convey rebelliousness; however, it does so in ways that remain within the bounds of what society deems as acceptable.

Other scholars also contend that *Matilda*'s use of greatly exaggerated villains oversimplifies the complexities of real-world social reality. Additionally, while much scholarship explores aspects of Black girlhood through *Brown Girl Dreaming* and expands our

knowledge base, there remains a call for further comparative research examining connections between race and gender across various time frames.

One of the most significant gaps remaining in the scholarship surrounding these three books (and indeed other similar feminist girlhood literature) lies in the fact that while individual analyses exist through a feminist lens for each book separately, few studies examine them together using a long-term comparative model to document the evolving nature of feminist girlhood from the 19th Century to the 21st Century.

Through these studies of critical literature, there are several thoughts and themes that have come up and been discovered. One may notice the common themes of education and empowerment as the core elements of these works. All of the research studies have interpreted education and the acquisition of literacy as crucial for empowering women. As an example, the authors' use of their own writing (Jo in *Little Women*), girls' intelligence (Matilda in *Matilda*), and the poetic voice of the writer (Woodson in *Brown Girl Dreaming*) all demonstrate how access to language can challenge societal norms.

The researchers also debated whether these works of literature ultimately support patriarchy or resist it. For instance, while May has highlighted in her book the tension between conforming to traditional social expectations (domesticity) and achieving one's ambitions as a woman in *Little Women*, there is much more scholarly analysis and criticism of Dahl's work, which emphasises *Matilda'*s resistance to authority. In addition, Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* extends this dialogue by examining race-based systems of power and other forms of oppression.

There is also a common theme among the researchers regarding "voice". The authors have used different writing styles in their stories. Some examples include Alcott's semi-autobiographical style of writing, Dahl's satire, and Woodson's poetry-memoir. Regardless of

style, all researchers agree that storytelling is itself a space where ideological struggles take place.

However, unlike earlier canonical texts, in this case, *Little Women* in particular, that focused on the experiences of a white middle-class girl, many recent studies of *Brown Girl Dreaming* have demonstrated the need for representation across various cultures and backgrounds. This shift in focus reflects larger trends in feminist and children's literature criticism.

The works under study demonstrate how all three, Little Women, Matilda, and Brown Girl Dreaming, can be read through the lens of a feminist critique and viewed as important feminist contributions to children's literature. Specifically, canonical critics, for instance, Jill P. May's journal article titled "*Feminism and Children's Literature: Fitting "Little Women" into the American Literary Canon*" highlighted domestic ideology; scholars currently analysing Matilda see it as an example of an intellectually rebellious young girl who rejects patriarchal authority; and pedagogy, Black feminism, and reading Woodson critically illustrate both intersectional identities and the definition of one's own narrative.

Each study indicates that girls in children's literature are depicted in ways that reflect the time periods in which they appear; in addition, their depictions reflect ideological perspectives that are constantly changing. By using a comparative feminist framework to integrate these different approaches, this dissertation builds on existing research on feminist critiques of female agency by providing cross-historical comparisons of female agency in children's stories.

## Conclusion

The discussions presented throughout this chapter have highlighted the significance of feminist literary theories in understanding the representation of girlhood, identity, and female

agency in children's literature. By drawing on Liberal, Radical, Postmodern, and Intersectional Feminism, the chapter has demonstrated how feminist perspectives offer valuable insights into the ways literary texts reflect, challenge, and reshape gender expectations.

The examination of *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* within their historical and cultural contexts has revealed a gradual transformation in the portrayal of girls and young women. Despite their differences in period and setting, the three works share a common concern with education, self-expression, and resistance to limiting social norms. Likewise, the literature review has shown that these texts continue to occupy an important place in feminist scholarship while also revealing the need for further comparative studies that explore their connections across time.

Together, these theoretical perspectives, contextual considerations, and critical studies provide a foundation for the present research. Building upon these insights, the following chapter will analyse the selected texts through feminist literary criticism and Reader- Response Theory to examine how they construct female agency and influence readers' understandings of girlhood and empowerment.

# Chapter Two:

## Thematic and Structural Comparison

## Introduction

As literature has historically functioned as a constructive mechanism that both reinforces and challenges notions of identity, particularly those regarding childhood and gender, literary portrayals of young girls have often been shaped by cultural and societal expectations, often promoting ideals of passivity, obedience and domesticity. And yet, over time, some literary works have sought to deconstruct these conventions by showcasing new perspectives on girlhood that centre independence, intellectual drive and self-expression.

Within the framework of children's literature, these representations have undergone significant evolution, reflecting broader social and ideological shifts. 19th Century texts often navigate between themes of conformity and resistance, while contemporary works are more likely to foreground diversity, voice and intersectional identity. In this context, the study of multiple texts spanning diverse historical periods is relevant to understanding girlhood as a continuously redefined concept rather than a fixed notion. With this, the comparative approach plays a crucial role in identifying recurring patterns and meaningful divergences. Placing texts in dialogue with one another will deepen critical insight into the progressive literary constructions of gender identity and female agency.

Adopting a comparative framework for the analysis of *Little Women, Matilda, and Brown Girl Dreaming* showcases three works that, despite differing contexts, share common concerns with the representation of female protagonists and their journeys navigating societal expectations. While exploring major themes such as education, gender stereotypes and female voice/agency, the examination of each text showcases their contribution to the reframed notions of girlhood. Furthermore, taking into consideration the elements that shape these representations, including characterisation, narrative voice, setting, and symbolism, will help us better understand the cultural and ideological contexts in which these stories are embedded.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis of the three works reveals both constancy and transition in the portrayal of girlhood, highlighting how literary texts across different historical contexts engage in a progressive reconceptualization of female agency. Through a comparative lens, this study shows the importance of contextual nuances, structural integrity, and thematic interplay in shaping the female experience in literature.

## 2. 1. Central Themes in the Construction of Girlhood in *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*

### 2. 1. 1. *Little Women*: Gender Roles, Independence, and Moral Growth

Louisa May Alcott's classic *Little Women* has left a significant impact on generations of readers and writers for its poignant portrayal of sisterhood and personal growth. The story explores societal expectations placed upon women in the 19th Century, particularly embodied by its protagonist, Jo March. Through this chapter, we delve into how Alcott uses Jo's journey to demonstrate the inherent conflict between traditional notions of femininity and the emerging desire for female independence, revealing an early feminist consciousness that resonates even in modern-day literature.

The narrative unfolds during a historical period in which a woman's path was predetermined by the values of domesticity and marriage as the expected endpoints of girlhood. Despite these imposed notions, Jo March's character is portrayed as a defiant figure against this backdrop, directly challenging the prevailing ideals of what a woman should be/do through her ambition to become an author and her pursuit of intellectual fulfilment. Her resistance to conventional gender roles can be seen as an early manifestation of feminist thought emerging in the literature of that era, as noted by scholar Elaine Showalter in the Penguin Classics edition of *Little Women* (31).

Ultimately, the novel offers significant importance to education and self-improvement, highlighting them as fundamental aspects of young women's development. As the story shows, the March sisters are consistently encouraged to nurture their minds and develop their moral compasses, suggesting that the early stages of womanhood are a crucial period for identity and autonomy. Although in the story Jo eventually marries Friedrich Bhaer, an act that can be seen as a concession to societal pressure, Alcott's depiction is far more complex. In fact, this union offers a redefined notion of partnership in which Jo's independent spirit is celebrated within the context of marriage, thus presenting a nuanced perspective on the importance of this life choice.

### 2. 1. 2. *Matilda*: Intellectual Power and Resistance

In children's literature, imagination often ventures through tales. In the story of Matilda Wormwood, we picture a young girl with extraordinary intellectual capacity, who serves as a symbol of rebellion against authority. Roald Dahl crafts a narrative that goes beyond storytelling, presenting a profound exploration of a young girl's journey of self-discovery and empowerment, set against the backdrop of adult opposition. The story, at its core, represents a testament to the power of knowledge and a youthful spirit that refuses to be defined by the limitations imposed by societal structures.

The story reveals a young Matilda, neglected by her parents and subjected to the strict rules of Miss Trunchbull at Crunchem Hall Primary School. And yet, despite this hostile environment, her brilliance continues to blossom. Her yearning for knowledge, initially a leisure pursuit, becomes a profound act of defiance. This intellectual defiance is reflected in Matilda's determination to educate herself despite the neglect of her parents. As Dahl notes, Matilda had "taught herself to read" at a remarkably young age (11). As she flips through the pages of her books, Matilda discovers "new worlds" that transcend her reality and is introduce

to “amazing people who lived exciting lives” (16) , through which learning empowers her to question, understand and ultimately resist. This intellectual awakening pushes her to actively engage with the world that surrounds her, a process through which she cultivates her sense of independence and refines her perception. This new perspective allows her to see through the cruelty and pretence of the figures of authority who seek to have control over her.

Many scholars have observed that Dahl’s depiction of Matilda challenges conventional notions of adult authority by portraying a child as an agent of her own destiny. Suwastini et al. argue that Matilda’s sense of perception, capability and self-determination represent a form of feminist resistance, emphasising that this type of representation is seldom found in children’s fiction (195). This contestation of traditional power dynamics places greater emphasis upon the story’s deviation from conventional narrative structures. As witnessed, Matilda’s ultimate fulfilment is far from being linked to romantic connections or societal expectations of marriage; rather, it is found in the profound intellectual recognition nurtured by her cherished relationship with her teacher, Miss Honey.

### 2. 1. 3. *Brown Girl Dreaming*: Identity, Voice, and Intersectionality

Jacqueline Woodson’s *Brown Girl Dreaming* offers a profound exploration of how girlhood intertwines with race, history, and identity. This unique autobiographical text offers a compelling narrative in which a young black girl’s story echoes through the halls of injustice and social inequality, granting a voice to their often-silenced experiences and, at the same time, showing the importance of storytelling in the process of self-discovery and definition. Woodson explicitly connect writing to identity formation when she states “I am born to write this” (247). This declaration highlights storytelling not merely as a creative activity but a means of self-definition and empowerment, allowing the narrator to claim ownership of her voice and experiences. Thus, Woodson emphasises that education is not necessarily a static concept

confined to classroom settings, but rather a dynamic and continuous process of awakening the nuances of knowledge, language acquisition, and the richness of historical and cultural heritage.

Woodson's narrative not only showcases how intellectual development is ultimately linked with the way personal journeys unfold but also highlights the impact of shared experiences within communities. Woodson's personal journey to becoming a writer serves as a central motif in the story. The significance of language and self-expression is further emphasized when Woodson reflects that "the stories of South Carolina already run like rivers through my veins" (12). This connection between storytelling, Memory and heritage demonstrates how personal identity is shaped through both individual experience and collective history. She showcases knowledge acquisition and a reshaped understanding of her characters' realities, while emphasising that experimental learning yields far greater knowledge, challenging the notion that education is solely textbook-based. Woodson demonstrates how personal journeys encompass broader awareness of the world and one's place within it.

*Brown Girl Dreaming,* in its essence, significantly expands conventional understandings of girlhood by unfolding its story during the transformative era of the Civil Rights Movement. This particular contextualization is crucial to the narrative, as it sheds light on the complex interplay between gender and race while exposing the era's socio-political landscape. This challenges readers to recognise how individual identity is shaped by external forces and how this fight for civil rights is directly tied to a quest for recognition and self-liberation, especially for young women of colour.

## 2. 1. 4. Comparative Insight: Convergences and Divergences

Children's literature is a vast landscape that has long served as a mirror of societal values and evolving perspectives, particularly in its portrayals of young women. As these narratives highlight female agency, intellectual growth, and resistance to restrictions imposed on young women, they resonate deeply with young readers by offering powerful models for navigating a complex world. Although many stories centre on these themes, each presents them in its own way, revealing subtle yet impactful shifts in the cultural understanding of feminist children's literature. The comparative study of *Little Women, Matilda,* and *Brown Girl Dreaming* shows that, despite their shared emphasis on female empowerment, each offers a distinct approach to these core ideas, shedding light on the progression of feminist thought in children's literature.

Across the three previously mentioned works, the themes of female agency, intellectualism, and resistance are tackled through distinct yet interlinked lenses, reflecting different historical and social contexts. In *Little Women,* female agency is portrayed through Jo March, who subtly negotiates her desire for independence within the constraints of 19th-Century gender expectations. In this context, agency is manifested through Jo's quiet defiance and her personal choices, particularly in the domestic sphere, thereby breaking down the limitations imposed on women of her time.

By contrast, *Matilda* presents agency as an almost supernatural force; the protagonist's intellectual powers enable her to control her environment and transform her circumstances by challenging the oppressive figures of authority. Similarly, in *Brown Girl Dreaming,* the sense of agency is created within the development of identity and storytelling. Woodson emphasises the power of articulating personal and collective experiences through her own journey of self-

discovery. This demonstrates the power of writing to both reflect on personal experience and serve as a socially conscious act of self-assertion.

These different approaches to agency are closely tied to the way each text has tackled the themes of education and intellectualism. For instance, in *Little Women,* education represents moral and personal development transgressing socially acceptable boundaries. In contrast, in *Matilda,* it serves as a powerful symbol of liberation and resistance against oppression and ignorance. In *Brown Girl Dreaming,* education is directly linked to both cultural and personal identity, enabling the author to navigate the complex historical and geographical separations her community endured and to shape a coherent sense of self.

While all three works engage with resistance to societal norms and oppression, each uses a different method. *Little Women* represents resistance in a quiet, internalised way through the characters' individual choices; conversely, Matilda foregrounds defiance in a more audacious, confrontational way, while *Brown Girl Dreaming* presents it as a nuanced, enduring process rooted in its narrative, which explores memory and the reclamation of voice.

## 2. 2. Characterisation and Narrative Voice

Narrative voice is one of the most influential tools available to authors for telling a story; however, it determines whose perspective will be favoured (i.e., whose interiority will be revealed), what moral framework will be viewed as the correct way to think about an issue, etc. The choices authors make are even more important when considering children's and young adult literature, as their target demographic is generally individuals at this stage in their lives, developing their sense of self. Therefore, in children's and young adult literature, when the central consciousness of the narrative is a girl or young woman, there is no separation between the authorial voice and issues of agency/authority/identity. This section explores how Louisa May Alcott, Roald Dahl, and Jacqueline Woodson have used authorial voice to both express and contest the social expectations surrounding their female protagonists.

## 2. 2. 1. Narrative Construction in *Little Women*

Alcott's novel *"Little Women"* has a third-person narrator who is not only close to the four March sisters but also has the greatest insight into the protagonist with whom she has a deep emotional investment: Jo, the novelist's most complicated and conflicted protagonist. The narrator's focus on the sisters is largely defined by internal focalization; however, the narrative can move easily from one sister to another, reflecting the family dynamics which are central to the novel's portrayal of the idealised domestic unit (Genette 189-190). The decision to use this form is important because it allows Alcott to depict women's identity as being fundamentally relational, situated within a network of responsibility and love toward her family.

However, this voice is far from objective. Rather, it often makes didactic pronouncements, moralising about the perils of self-indulgence and praising the benefits of patience and self-restraint. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser points out that the voice of Louisa May Alcott reflects the complex combination of the writer's own ambition and the requirements of a certain moral rhetoric inherent to domestic fiction intended for the consumption of young females, a work which, in essence, represents an ideological struggle (27–30). This struggle perhaps finds its most interesting embodiment in the image of Jo herself, whose longing for autonomy and professionalism remains an important aspect of the narrative while simultaneously being diverted towards domestication.

It should be noted, however, that what makes the construction of the story by Alcott especially effective is that the didacticism and moralistic tone of the narrative are conveyed mainly through the inner reflection of Jo. This can be noted in her struggle to control her temper. Acknowledging her flaw, Jo confesses "I am angry nearly every day of my life" (90). The reader, therefore, experiences ethical wisdom acquired through such reflection in the same manner as Jo learns it. As Maria Nikolajeva points out in *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in*

*Literature for Young Readers*, such a methodological approach is typical of character-centred children's literature, in which the ethical development of the main character, through whom it is conveyed, evokes an empathic reaction in the intended audience (8-9). Thus, the development of the heroine from a spontaneous and assertive young girl into a disciplined and compassionate woman occurs through her own efforts and therefore takes place within the framework of her inner life.

### 2. 2. 2. Narrative Perspective in *Matilda*

The voice of Dahl's *Matilda* emerges through a series of unique structural elements as a combination of third-person narration, where the tone of the narration combines irony, exaggeration, and dark humour in a way that implicitly equates the narrator's voice with the child's superior vision but still retains the detachment implied in an objective approach. The process can be described using Genette's terms as external focalization with evaluative commentary that corresponds to the voice of the child character. Such a method leads to a situation in which the child's point of view is constantly validated at the expense of ridicule directed against the adult world (198-99). The outcome is a powerful political statement, as it reverses the established power relationship between a child and adults.

The initial paragraphs establish the narrator's ironic tone through a series of increasingly ridiculous events that befall the Wormwoods, recounted with deadpan certainty. According to Mark I. West, the author's satirical storytelling method is rooted in an anti-authority philosophy, in which the narrative relies on comedic exaggerations to illuminate the real horrors and lack of care in adult-child interactions (94–96). In the case of the Wormwoods' refusal to read books, their obsession with television shows, and the lies that Mr. Wormwood says when selling cars, the narrator clearly positions Matilda's parents as being in the wrong,

while Matilda's judgments are presented as morally and intellectually justified; this effect is accomplished through the use of language alone, without any explicit authorial commentary.

Whereas the story's primary antagonists were depicted as arbitrary, aggressive, and intellectually challenged in their dealings with children, Miss Trunchbull takes this representation to a whole new level, transferring this dynamic of adult tyranny into the institutionalised space of a school. According to Jeremy Treglown, the depictions of adult oppressors in Roald Dahl's works are heavily influenced by his childhood experiences, thereby giving the stories a depth that goes beyond mere humour (213–14). Significantly, the narrator's identification with Matilda reaches its highest point whenever Matilda exercises her telekinetic powers, which symbolically represent the cognitive agency she lacks. In his discussion of ideology in children's literature, Peter Hollindale notes that when such a work grants a fictional child character supernatural abilities in direct response to adult oppression, it offers a fantasy of agency that engages with the inherent power imbalances of childhood (10–11). Thus, by voicing Matilda's story, the narrative creates a world in which the child's viewpoint is the only source of truth

## 2. 2. 3. Autobiographical Voice in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* exemplifies a radical difference in storytelling between hers and the works of Alcott and Dahl, as the author relies on a lyrical first-person narration from the main character's perspective, without the interference of any intermediary third-person voice, creating a distinct perspective. This work consists of free poems that represent Woodson's childhood experiences in America, in the southern part of the country, and in Brooklyn. From the story's point of view, this means it does not depend on the traditional logic of storytelling but rather on associative experience and images. This autobiographical voice when Jaqueline reflects "I am not like my sister and brother. / They already have stories inside them". (63). Through this first-person confession, readers gain direct access to her

identity as a storyteller. The passage illustrates how the narrative unfolds through personal reflection and self-discovery, reinforcing the intimate and autobiographical nature off the text.

Indeed, Bishop's concept of literature being "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" becomes relevant to our analysis, as Woodson's novel serves as both a mirror reflecting the reality of African Americans' lives and a window showing others what it was like to live within a segregated world, marked by racial discrimination and striving for belonging (1). In this case, the first-person voice plays an essential role, serving as the means of creating this effect of recognition. Through presenting the child's thoughts and feelings, including her confusion concerning why some water fountains are not accessible to her and her discovery of her own ability to speak well, Woodson creates an opportunity for empathising, which would be impossible to do using a third-person narrative, even if it takes on a sympathising tone. John Stephens argues that an inherent ideology underlies the use of the first-person voice in children's and young adult novels, as it constructs a child's subjective experience independently of adults' intervention and interpretation (67-68).

The fragmented nature of the verse narrative is equally significant. Experiences do not come in an orderly series. However, Woodson's approach recognises this reality by presenting them as a jumble of fragmented moments, sensations, and half-formed memories that slowly piece themselves together into a coherent sense of self. According to literary critic Perry Nodelman, "There is always an important distinction made" when representing childhood in literature, and it is the contrast between the experiencing child and the narrator-child, "now an adult" whose knowledge "is both enriched and limited" (175–76). However, *Brown Girl Dreaming* manages to avoid this distinction. It maintains an awareness of the child's experience while writing about it with the wisdom of an adult, hence providing a multilayered sense of time that accurately represents how one becomes oneself: through experience, accumulated

slowly through storytelling. It becomes apparent that storytelling plays a key role in the development of little Jacqueline, who recognises that her power comes from being able to communicate her experiences, not from superhuman strength. She discovers the importance of words and storytelling in being the centre of her identity, but especially her connection to her family history and cultural heritage, as she states, “I am born in Ohio, but the stories of South Carolina already run like rivers through my veins” (14).

## 2. 2. 4. Comparative Analysis of Narrative Voice

Collectively, all three texts show that narrative voice goes beyond rhetoric; rather, it plays a crucial role in the formation of female subjectivity. In each of the works analysed, the author chooses a narrative style tailored to the nature of the social conditions and the protagonist’s degree of agency. In Alcott’s novel, the narrative voice is omniscient, which provides Jo with sufficient depth and complexity to create a meaningful internal struggle. However, due to the rigid moral code upheld by the narrative voice, this internal struggle is suppressed in favour of a more didactic outcome. For instance, when Jo sells her hair to help her family financially, the narrative reflects on her sacrifice as an admirable act rather than exploring the emotional depth of her conflicting feelings. In the beginning, Jo values her hair as a symbol of her individuality, however the narrator puts emphasis on her self-denial and duty. After cutting her hair, Jo laments “My hair! My one beauty!” (Alcott). Although this remark subtly reflects on her personal loss, the narrative is quick to redirect attention to the nobility of her sacrifice, which therefore reinforces the novel’s didactic message that personal desires are subordinated to familial responsibility. Another example can be seen during Jo’s rejection of Laurie’s marriage proposal. Although Jo holds affection and a sense of concern towards Laurie, the narrator leads the readers to the conclusion that her decision is morally and socially appropriate. Jo states “I can’t love you as you want me to. I’ve tired but I can’t change

the feeling" (Alcott) This confession showcases Jo's honesty, and yet, without dwelling on Jo's emotional uncertainty, the narrative frames the outcome of Jo's decision to not marry Laurrie as a lesson about maturity and proper conduct. This sheds light on the moral significance of choosing marriage based on genuine compatibility rather than affection alone.

Whereas Dahl's use of irony in his third-person narration works distinctly in making Matilda's character more powerful by contrasting her with other characters, his narration does not allow direct access into her thoughts. Because of this, Matilda's intelligence and wisdom can be presented as objective facts rather than being subjective judgments, thus creating an impression of objectivity and authority. Such a technique can be considered clever, for in a novel about a child who lacks power in society, Matilda does not need to persuade anyone of her merit, and the narrative form itself can make this case for her. According to Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977) the history of women's literature often depends on "an outside validating voice" to grant authority to a woman's intellect and creative achievements (13). This observation is relevant in particular to *Matilda*, where Dahl's narration frequently guides the reader's interpretation of the protagonist's actions and abilities. From the opening chapter, the narrator repeatedly emphasises Matilda's intelligence, as he explicitly states that "Matilda was a genius" (Dahl). This leaves little room for the reader's interpretations or questioning about the character's exceptional intellectual capabilities. Authorial interventions like these, push the narrative itself to become the validating voice that confirms Matilda's worth and intelligence.

Woodson, on the other hand, does not require any external corroboration to support her poetry. In this case, the protagonist does not need to seek validation through the narration, as she shapes its essence on her own. For example, in the poem "Stories Come to Me", Jaqueline presents storytelling as an innate part of her identity, she showcases confidence in her creative

abilities without depending on the approval of others. This excerpt provides a radical demonstration of the female narrative power in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, not because of the high degree of assertiveness shown by the protagonist, but because it provides a complete picture in this regard, as Jacqueline's narration leaves no scope for a difference between the narrator and the narrated self.

In this manner, the development of character from the morally supervised self-voice in *Little Women* to the external validation of the rational voice in *Matilda* and the narrative's self-power in *Brown Girl Dreaming* shows the progress made in dealing with female characters in children's literature.

## 2. 3. Spatial Symbolism and the Construction of Female Identity in *Little Women, Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Setting, symbolism and imagery play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of female protagonists in *Little Women, Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming.* Rather than serving as mere backgrounds, the spaces that these characters inhabit are painted as symbolic environments that reflect the core concerns through which these narratives are built upon, from social expectations to personal aspirations and struggles for autonomy, we are able to see these characters in domestic settings (*Little Women*), educational institutions (*Matilda*) and imaginative landscape (*Brown Girl Dreaming*), each of these texts builds a unique framework through which one can navigate female identity and agency. Through the analysis of these spatial and symbolic dimensions, the study reveals how the protagonists challenge the limitations imposed upon them by their distinct societies and how they are able to redefine the possibilities available to young girls.

## 2. 3. 1. Domestic and Social Spaces in *Little Women*

The Domestic sphere in *Little Women* is far more than a simple backdrop; throughout the novel, it serves as a complex site where gender norms are subtly contested. The 19th-Century domestic ideology is often summarised as the "cult of true womanhood" (Welter), meaning that women are restricted to a single environment: the home. However, through her reimagination of this space, Alcott transforms it into a dynamic area where self-expression, moral development and resistance are centred.

Although the March household undeniably adheres to traditional expectations, through Marmee's embodiment of the ideal maternal figure and the girls' upbringing with values such as domestic responsibility, scholars argue that their environment simultaneously nurtures creativity and intellectualism (Philips and Eiselein 12). This can be particularly interpreted through Jo March's writing ambition, which she often exercises within the confines of the attic. This space symbolises the transformation of a domestic space into a site of artistic production. Similarly, we argue that the domestic sphere can become a training ground for negotiating broader social roles, especially through Meg's navigation of class aspirations and Amy's artistic ambition. As showcased in *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing (1991),* Elaine Showalter notes that women's writing of that period often reclaimed the private sphere as a space of agency rather than mere confinement. This idea is evident in *Little Women* through Jo March's use of the attic as a private space for reading and writing. Despite it being located within a domestic environment, the attic functions as a creative sanctuary where Jo exercises her intellectual freedom and self-expression. As the narrator observes "Jo's busy brain was seldom idle" (Alcott, 151). This description highlights Jo's constant intellectual activity within this private space, showcasing how Alcott transforms the

home from a symbol of domestic limitation into a site of artistic production and personal empowerment.

As the March home fosters solidarity in hardship, the sisters shared experiences, especially during the absence of their father during the war, significantly strengthen their collective identity. Thus, their home becomes a refuge from the external world while simultaneously preparing them for it, subtly reflecting society, where values are tested and redefined.

## 2. 3. 2. Oppressive Institutions and Liberating spaces in *Matilda*

In his novel, Roald Dahl uses symbolism in order to articulate themes of resistance and intellectual autonomy. As it portrays the opposition between oppressive institutions and liberating spaces, the novel externalises the protagonist's internal struggle for recognition and self-determination.

Both the family home and Crunchem Hall Primary School symbolise control and neglect, particularly through Matilda's parents, as her father dismisses her intellectual pursuits and shows clear signs of emotional abuse. On the other hand, Miss Trunchbull represents institutional oppression. This can be exemplified by Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of disciplinary power as authority operating through surveillance, punishment, and fear, in which the school becomes a penitentiary environment in which children are subjected to rigid control, echoing Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Miss Trunchbull governs Crunchem Hall through excessively harsh disciplinary methods which creates an atmosphere of fear that discourages resistance. The use of the Chokey, a narrow, dark cupboard lined with nails and broken glass, demonstrates how authority is maintained through the threat of punishment rather than genuine education (Dahl 103). In one notable incident, Bruce Bogtrotter

is publicly humiliated and forced to eat an entire chocolate cake in front of the whole school, making an example of him as to turn discipline into a spectacle to reinforce obedience (Dahl 125). These practices reflect Foucault's argument that institutions exercise power by regulating bodies and behaviour, and producing compliant subjects through constant monitoring and correction (Foucault 170-94). Consequently, Crunchem Hall functions less as a place of learning than as a mechanism of social control, where conformity is valued above intellectual development.

In contrast, books and the library function as symbols of liberation and self-education, specifically through Matilda's early immersion in literature, which provides her with both intellectual tools and emotional refuge. In *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*, Jack Zipes argues that Dahl's narratives often foreground the transformative power of reading to resist oppressive authority. Therefore, the library becomes a sanctuary where Matilda constructs her own identity and becomes independent of external validation.

While Matilda's telekinesis enriches the novel's symbolic framework, it represents the manifestation of suppressed potential rather than merely being a fantastical element. Her use of intellectual powers to respond to injustice suggests that intellectual and emotional resilience can translate into tangible forms of resistance. In the article "Children's Responses to Heroism in Roald Dahl's *Matilda*", James Pope and Julia Round argue that Dahl uses exaggeration and fantasy to critique real-world systems of power, making the invisible struggles of children visible. Ultimately, the novel affirms the transformative potential of knowledge and inner strength.

## 2. 3. 3. Memory and Place in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, memory and place are employed to explore themes such as identity and historical consciousness. Woodson's poetic structure offers a fluid representation of space, where geography becomes inseparable from personal and collective memory.

In her depiction of the American South, particularly South Carolina, Woodson's narrative is imbued with historical resonance, notably the impact of Jim Crow laws. In *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, historian C. Vann Woodward explains that laws were a system of state and local legislation enacted in the Southern United States after the Reconstruction era that enforced racial segregation and institutionalised discrimination against African Americans. They regulated everyday life by separating Black and White people in schools, public transportation, restaurants, and other public spaces, while also limiting African Americans' political and economic opportunities (7). Growing up during the final years of this system, Woodson experienced the social inequalities and racial division which shaped the social and emotional landscape of her childhood. Consequently, her memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* reflects not only personal memories but also the broader realities of racial injustice in the American South. Throughout her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Bell Hooks describes the South as both a site of familial rootedness and racial oppression, reflecting on how she refers to it as the "homeplace", a space that nurtures identity while existing within broader systems of inequality (42).

In contrast, the North, especially New York, represents movement, change, and the possibility of redefinition, though it is not free from its own challenges. This contrast is reflected in Woodson's recollections of moving between South Carolina and New York. In South Carolina, she emphasizes the comfort of family and traditions, but most importantly the strong sense of belonging, particularly through the memories of her grandparents and extended

family (Woodson 31-35). By contrast, New York is portrayed as a fast-paced urban environment that exposes her to new opportunities and perspectives while also confronting her with unfamiliar social realities (Woodson 176-80). Through these contrasting settings, Woodson demonstrates how identity is shaped by both attachments to place and experiences of change. This duality reflects Bell Hook's conception of the South as both a source of belonging and a site marked by racial and social inequalities (42). Likewise, her depictions of New York's apartment buildings, crowded streets, and urban rhythms symbolize transition and personal growth (Woodson 176–80). In both cases, physical spaces acquire emotional significance, supporting Bachelard's argument that places are shaped by memory and imagination (5).

Imagery plays a crucial role in conveying the differences between these geographical dynamics. This is particularly evident in Woodson's use of sensory details, such as the warmth of Southern landscapes and the urban rhythms of the North, creating a vivid emotional geography. According to Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), spaces are not merely physical but are imbued with intimate meanings shaped by memory and imagination (5). This theoretical perspective is evident in Woodson's work, where places function as repositories of personal history and cultural identity. For example, Woodson frequently evokes the sensory atmosphere of Greenville, South Carolina, through descriptions of gardens, trees, summer heat, and family gatherings (Woodson 30-35). These images transform the Southern landscape into a space associated with memory and belonging.

The text's fragmented, vignette-like structure mirrors the process of memory itself, through which each poem captures a moment, contributing to a larger mosaic of self-understanding. In *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*, Sidonie Smith emphasises that autobiographical narratives often

reconstruct identity through selective recollection (23), a process that is clearly reflected in Woodson's text. This process is evident in the memoir's fragmented structure, where individual poems capture significant moments from Woodson's childhood rather than presenting a continuous chronological narrative. Poems recounting her relationship with her grandparents, her experiences of racial segregation, and her developing passion for writing collectively construct a narrative of self-discovery (Woodson 31–35; 103–08; 245–49). By selecting and revisiting these memories, Woodson reconstructs her identity through the act of remembrance, illustrating the autobiographical process described by Smith (Smith 23).

## 2. 3. 4. Comparative Perspective

Although the three texts employ different strategies to construct and represent space, the comparative analysis reveals that setting, symbolism, and imagery are used to externalise internal struggles, each suited to its genre, context, and audience.

In *Little Women*, symbolism is grounded in domestic realism. The March household reflects broader social structures while simultaneously offering a space for subtle resistance. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), Nancy Armstrong notes that 19th Century domestic fiction often reveals ideological tensions within everyday spaces, making the familiar a site of negotiation rather than stability. This dynamic is evident in *Little Women* through the March sisters' experiences within the domestic sphere. Although the March home is portrayed as a space of affection and moral guidance, it is also a site where the sisters negotiate social expectations concerning gender, class, and personal ambition. .( Jo, in particular, challenges conventional notions of femininity through her desire for independence and a literary career, while Meg struggles to reconcile economic limitations with societal expectations of womanhood (Alcott 27–30; 186–89). These tensions demonstrate how domestic space

functions not merely as a private refuge but as a setting where broader cultural values are contested and redefined.

By contrast, *Matilda* utilises exaggerated, often fantastical symbolism to critique systems of authority. Dahl's use of telekinesis and caricatured antagonists amplifies the conflict between child and institution, for example, Miss Trunchbull embodies authoritarian power through her harsh disciplinary methods and public humiliation of students. The Chokey, a narrow punishment cupboard used to terrorize children, symbolizes the oppressive nature of institutional authority (Dahl 85–87). Similarly, Matilda's telekinetic abilities enable her to challenge this authority directly, most notably when she uses her powers to frighten Miss Trunchbull into leaving the school (Dahl 228–31). Through these fantastical elements, Dahl transforms the struggle between children and adults into a symbolic narrative of empowerment and resistance. Aligning with what Maria Nikolajeva identifies in *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers (2010),* as a key feature of children's literature: the empowerment of young protagonists through imaginative means (59).

Meanwhile, *Brown Girl Dreaming* adopts a lyrical and autobiographical approach, where imagery and memory serve as primary vehicles of meaning. The text's emphasis on lived experience and historical context aligns with contemporary theories of narrative identity, as discussed by Paul Ricoeur in *Oneself as Another (1992),* who argues that storytelling is fundamental to the construction of selfhood. This emphasis is evident in Woodson's recollections of growing up between South Carolina and New York, where personal memories intersect with broader historical realities. Poems describing family gatherings, religious traditions, and experiences of racial segregation illustrate how individual identity is shaped through both personal relationships and collective history (31–35; 103–08). Furthermore, Woodson's reflections on discovering her love of language and storytelling demonstrate the

role of narrative in constructing a coherent sense of self (245–49). In this way, memory becomes a means through which the narrator interprets and gives meaning to her past.

Despite these differences, all three works share a common objective: to render internal experiences visible through external forms. Whether through domestic and academic environments or historical landscapes, each text demonstrates that space is never neutral; it is always imbued with power, meaning, and the potential for transformation.

## 2. 4. Cultural/Ideological Reflection

### 2. 4. 1. Cultural and Ideological Context in *Little Women*

The 19th Century socio-cultural ideologies in America resonate with what is referred to as the "cult of true womanhood", a framework that emphasises values of domesticity, piety and submissiveness, which some would even qualify as ideal feminine traits (Walter, 1996). Although the narrative in *Little Women* appears to reflect these norms, it also showcases certain tensions that complicate and, at times, challenge them.

As a primary example of the implementation of these norms in the narrative, we observe in Marmee's character the embodiment of traditional maternal virtues, which serves as the moral centre of the story, thus highlighting the importance of self-sacrifice and duty. On the other hand, we have characters like Jo March who disrupt these expectations through their ambition to become writers and their resistance to conventional marriage roles. This signals a departure from prescribed gender roles. As discussed in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, women writers of the 19th Century often negotiated their creative ambitions within patriarchal systems, resulting in narratives that both conform to and resist dominant ideologies (Gilbert and Gubar 73). Jo's eventual compromises (i.e., her acceptance of marriage and domestic responsibility)

do not erase her earlier defiance; rather, they illustrate the complexity of navigating societal expectations.

The novel, set during the American Civil War, transcends domestic life to encompass a broader ideological context involving national struggle and moral reform. During this time, the March household becomes a symbol reflecting greater social values such as charity, resilience, and ethical responsibility. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction,* Nancy Armstrong suggests that domestic fiction plays a crucial role in shaping middle-class ideology (12). As *Little Women* participates in this process, it also quietly reshapes it through its nuanced portrayal of female experience. Ultimately, the novel suggests that female agency can be exercised even within restrictive ideological frameworks.

## 2. 4. 2. Ideology, Authority, and Resistance in *Matilda*

With *Matilda,* Roald Dahl provides readers with insights into the state of social institutions in the latter half of the 20th Century, both within the domestic and academic spheres. The novel shows the readers how ideology is at work in the very fabric of authority, with children and their inquisitiveness often put in their place.

This can be seen in Matilda's own home, where it appears to be a sort of anti-intellectualism and materialism in the air. Her parents show no interest in literature or in seeking any knowledge and prioritise superficial matters, a way of life that places little value on what one can learn. This pattern repeats itself even within the hall of her school, only more so. Miss Trunchbull is the picture of an authoritarian. If one were to look at it through the lens of Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, the school environment is all about maintaining order, using punishment and fear as tools. This is evident in several episodes throughout the novel. Miss Trunchbull rules Crunchem Hall through intimidation and excessive punishment,

creating an atmosphere of fear rather than learning. For example, she publicly humiliates Bruce Bogtrotter by forcing him to eat an enormous chocolate cake in front of the entire school as a form of punishment. Similarly, the Chokey serves as a symbol of disciplinary control, threatening children with severe consequences for even minor acts of disobedience. Through these practices, Trunchbull establishes authority by encouraging obedience through fear rather than respect. This would send a message to children to go along with whatever is imposed on them without making too much of a fuss or thinking for themselves.

Nevertheless, Dahl does not just hold up a mirror to these matters; he turns them on their head. Matilda, with her wits and her sense of right and wrong, makes a mockery of adult authority. When she comes out on top in the end, using both her smartness and some telekinetic help, it makes a statement on how one can push back. As Maria Nikolajeva would have it in *Children's Literature comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic* (2016), this is what good children's fiction does: it gives the young ones a voice to put their powers to (12).

From a distinct perspective. Dahl is making a case for education as a form of freedom. Miss Honey, for instance, is the antithesis of Trunchbull. She teaches by being there for her students, with some compassion and a focus on letting them grow. It is a way of showing how one person can change an institution, not just walk away from it.

All in all, *Matilda* is a story that takes apart the status quo and puts forward something better. Between the realism and the odd bit of fantasy, the readers are left with the idea that knowledge and a small amount of willpower can make a difference. This is evident in Matilda's self-education through extensive reading at the public library, despite the neglect of her parents. Likewise, her determination to expose Miss Truchbull's tyranny and help Miss Honey reclaim her inheritance demonstrates how intelligence, courage and perseverance can challenge unjust authority. Through these experienced, Dahl suggests that knowledge and personal resolve can become powerful tools for change.

## 2. 4. 3. Cultural Identity and Historical Ideology in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

In *Brown Girl Dreaming,* Jacqueline Woodson gives us a hard look at how history and ideology put their stamp on who we are. The reader can feel the weight of the Civil Rights era in her writing as she lays out the facts of life in a country driven by racial lines and social inequity.

There is no sugar-coating the way systemic racism makes itself known in the day-to-day, not least of all in the shadow of Jim Crow. What can be found in the South is one kind of racial divide; meanwhile, up North, it is another, more underhanded but no less unequal. It is in these moments that the author's sense of self taking form can be witnessed, making a case for what Stuart Hall has put forward in his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990), "Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'." (225), arguing that identity is not something you are born with and done with but something made in the crucible of your surroundings.

Then there is the matter of telling one's own story as an act of pushback. In her verse, Woodson takes back the pen and puts some heft behind the voices that do not usually get to be heard. It could be said it is very much in the vein of Bell Hooks, for whom storytelling is a way to put up a fight against the status quo and make room for oneself. This idea is particularly evident in Woodson's reflections on discovering the power of words and storytelling. In poem such as "How to Listen 4" and "What Everybody Knows Now", the young Jaqueline gradually recognizes writing as a means of self-expression and self-definition. Through her desire to tell stories despite academic struggles, she challenges limiting assumptions about intelligence and ability, demonstrating how storytelling can become a form of empowerment and resistance.

Family and community come into it, too. They are the ones who hold the line on cultural identity when the outside world tries to put you in a box. In those close quarters, the individual

finds some measure of support and belonging, and in doing so, they work out their place in the world rather than just having it handed to them.

Put simply, this is a book that is as personal as it is pointed in its reading of the times. It shows us how we make our way through, and sometimes stand up to, the things that would have us be a certain way.

## 2. 4. 4. Comparative Perspective on Cultural Divergence and Ideological Dimensions

Put *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming* side by side, and a comparative analysis shows that they each have their own way of dealing with the cultural and ideological climate of their time, even as they are linked. The common thread is the young girl at the centre of the story, but they vary in how overtly they test dominant structures. For example, Jo March resists conventional expectations of femininity by perusing her literary ambitions and questioning traditional gender roles. Similarly, Matilda openly confronts oppressive authority figures such as Miss Trunchbull through her intelligence and determination. In contrast, Jaqueline Woodson engages in a quitter form of resistance, reflecting on issues of race, identity and belonging within the context of the American Civil Rights era.

These differences reveal varying approaches to female agency while underscoring a shared commitment to questioning social constraints. *Little Women* is more of a negotiator; it redefines things from within the accepted norms. *Matilda* takes a different tack, using the tools of fantasy and exaggeration to get in authority's face and subvert it. Then there is *Brown Girl Dreaming*, which is grounded in history and offers a more reflective critique of the intersection of personal and collective experience.

One could say these works are proof of what Raymond Williams means by literature putting on display the "structures of feeling" of an era. They chart a course of changing

ideological preoccupations: the gender roles of the 1800s in one case, the institutional power of the 20th Century in another, and the modern-day concerns over race and identity.

In the end, style and context aside, they all make the point that literature can be a means of both challenging and reflecting ideology. In giving voice to the lives of young girls, they provide a counterpoint to the usual narrative and open up new ways of thinking about agency and who we are.

## Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* done through the chapter requires an examination of their major themes: characterisation, narrative voice, symbolism, as well as the setting and ideological dimensions of the three works. The study demonstrates how representations of female agency develop across different historical and cultural contexts. The analysis of the main themes revealed that each text reflects the feminist concerns of its respective period. While the study of characterisation and narrative voice highlighted the importance of perspective in constructing female subjectivity, highlighting that their differing narrative strategies demonstrate the gradual expansion of female voices from constrained domestic expression to more individual and intersectional forms of storytelling. The study also demonstrated how setting, symbolism, and imagery contribute to feminist meaning. Through their various literary devices, the texts articulate different forms of female experience and resistance across time. Finally, the comparative cultural and ideological analysis confirmed that children's literature serves not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of evolving social values and feminist thought.

Overall, this comparative study demonstrates that children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of gender, identity, and empowerment. Through their differing

portrayals of girlhood and resistance, *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* reveal the enduring importance of feminist voices in literary works addressed to young readers. Having compared the three works across key literary and thematic dimensions, the next chapter synthesises these findings and interprets their significance in relation to the evolution of feminist representations in children's literature.

# Chapter Three:
## Interpretation and Synthesis

## Introduction

To further the comparative examination established in the earlier sections, this section provides a more generalised overview of the results, thereby expressing the overall importance of the research project. Despite the individual analyses conducted for each text, this chapter aims to synthesise the similarities and differences among the texts to gain greater insight into girlhood, agency, and feminism in children's literature.

Starting with an analysis that encompasses both the theme and structure discussed in the previous section underscores how these three elements undermine the established stereotype of women as passive subjects. With their focus on intellectual exploration, expression, and defiance, the pieces transform girlhood into an empowering rather than restrictive concept. However, precisely because of these differences influenced by time period, story form, and culture, the diversity of the female experience is underscored.

The analysis then turns to questions of influence, intertextuality, and literary legacy, examining how earlier texts inform and inspire later representations of girlhood. In particular, it considers how foundational works such as *Little Women* continue to resonate in contemporary literature, while more recent texts expand and diversify these representations by incorporating new voices and perspectives. This intertextual dimension underscores the ongoing evolution of feminist discourse within the genre.

Lastly, the results of the comparative analysis are examined, with a focus on the study's methodology and its implications. By comparing and contrasting literary works from different periods, the researcher can trace recurring themes, as well as portrayals that change noticeably. It therefore becomes clear that the world of children's literature is important for renegotiating the concept of girlhood.

## 3. 1. Redefining Girlhood: Comparative Discussion

The portrayal of girlhood in literary works has also changed over time, from a static, dreamlike figure to an active one that enables girls to think for themselves, overcome limitations, and assert their identities. In novels such as *Little Women*, *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*, girlhood is expanded to include intellectual growth and identity formation. While each story offers its own distinct point of view, they share a similar theme: They show how girls cope with societal expectations and defy them.

### 3. 1. 1. Negotiated Agency: Girlhood Within Domestic Ideology in *Little Women*

The representation of girlhood in *Louisa May Alcott's Little Women* reveals the ideological conflicts inherent in 19th Century American society, particularly those concerning gender roles and the conventions of domesticity. On the one hand, the story is set in the confines of domestic life. However, it reinterprets girlhood as a progressive journey toward individual growth and the formation of an independent identity.

For the Marches, the experience of girlhood begins with a curriculum of moral instruction and socialisation, in which Marmee instils in her children's qualities such as modesty, patience, and selflessness. These are the qualities expected of females in accordance with the prevailing culture of the era. However, this structure is subverted by Jo March's rebellious spirit, who rejects traditional femininity in pursuit of becoming a writer. For instance, Jo openly resists conventional gender expectations when she declares "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy" (Alcott 12). Her dissatisfaction with the limitations placed upon girls reveals her desire for independence and self-determination. Thus, Jo's

creative expression turns domesticity into an intellectual activity, reflecting Elaine Showalter's view that female authorship constitutes a crucial step toward autonomy.

Additionally, the novel depicts the girlhood experience as one of negotiation rather than defiance. Whereas Jo resists the societal pressure to conform to the roles assigned to her, her sisters resist in different ways, opting for paths that still embrace societal conventions rather than defy them outright. The desire for social acceptance that drives Meg and the pursuit of artistic success that motivates Amy are examples of alternative routes within the same ideological system. Meg's attraction to a more refined and affluent lifestyle is revealed through her admiration for the comforts and luxuries enjoyed by wealthier families (Alcott 107). Similarly, Amy's ambition is reflected in her aspiration to become a successful artist, expressing her determination to "go to Rome, and do fine pictures, and be the best artist in the whole world" (Alcott 221). These divergent experiences demonstrate the multiplicity inherent in girlhood and suggest that empowerment can be expressed in various identifiable ways.

*Little Women* reinvents the concept of girlhood as a dynamic, multifaceted experience. Rather than defining it as an experience of passivity, it demonstrates how the young girls actively craft their identities, albeit within the boundaries set by patriarchal society.

### 3. 1. 2. Defiant Intellectualism: Girlhood as Resistance in *Matilda*

The struggle for power and personal autonomy broadens the theme of girlhood in Roald Dahl's Matilda. In other words, *Matilda* is a far cry from the negotiation of gender norms seen in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The character in question herself opposes those in charge and refuses to comply with the oppressive systems she encounters.

At first glance, it is evident that Matilda possesses superior intellectual abilities to those of her parents. Their obvious antipathy towards knowledge acquisition creates an unfavourable

environment for nurturing natural curiosity and the urge to learn. On the other hand, Miss Trunchbull's despotic regime at the institution reflects the system's oppressive power. According to Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, both family and educational environments may be perceived as instruments that compel children to obey the norms imposed upon them. Consequently, the issue of girlhood broadens as the novel demonstrates how a young female character challenges the systems of oppression in her environment (228).

By combining intelligence and forceful action, Matilda subverts these norms. Her passionate love for books is not accidental but rather serves as a conscious means of resisting the oppression around her and of building a personality that will withstand any external pressure. From an early age, Matilda demonstrates an exceptional commitment to learning, spending hours reading in the public library despite her parents' indifference to education. As the narrator remakes "The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives" (Dahl 17). Reading therefore becomes a form of empowerment through which Matilda expands her knowledge and develops an independent identity. Her use of telekinesis is another example of her inner strength and confidence, as well as her ability to transform emotions and knowledge into something tangible. When Miss Trunchbull terrorizes the pupils of Crunchem Hall, Matilda employs her extraordinary powers to punish the headmistress and protect Miss Honey. Reflecting on her abilities, the narrator explains that Matilda had discovered "a force that was so strong it could move things" (Dahl 232). Through both intellectual achievement and supernatural powers, Matilda challenges the systems of control imposed upon her and asserts her agency in an environment designed to supress it. In this regard, Matilda differs greatly from Jo, whose opposition is mostly aimed at herself rather than others.

The image of Miss Honey in the book can be regarded as yet another manifestation of a more humane and encouraging form of authority, rather than a controlling one. To sum up,

*Matilda* challenges our perception of young girls by showing how they can resist imposed norms and even fight against society's oppressive structures.

### 3. 1. 3. Intersectional Identity and Narrative Selfhood in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

In her book *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jacqueline Woodson portrays girlhood as an intricate, reflective theme rather than a simplistic depiction of surface-level conflict or interaction, as in *Matilda's* stories or the domestic negotiations in *Little Women*. The central idea is the evolution of an individual's self-awareness through a gradual and internal process. In such a scenario, a girl's understanding of herself is significantly influenced by various historical, social, and cultural factors that shape her identity.

Woodson's work demonstrates the role of the civil rights movement in a girl's development. It reveals the potential influence of systemic discrimination on the most personal aspects of an individual's life. By drawing from her own experiences, she highlights the significance of intersectionality in identity formation as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which implies that the concept of identity should be analysed based on the intersection of factors, including race, gender, and class (1244).

In addition to its thematic focus, the book's poem-like organisation intensifies the internal processes of girlhood. In particular, memory, language, and narration play pivotal roles in shaping an individual's personality. According to Woodson, writing becomes an essential practice for interpreting and articulating one's identity, thereby contributing to the broader culture. As Woodson reflects "Stories are like air to me, I breathe them in and let them out over and over again" (247). Bell Hooks represents the same perspective in her autobiography *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), where she explicitly conceptualises writing as a vital space for political and personal self-recovery during black girlhood (3).

Furthermore, the opposition between the South and the North demonstrates that the very notion of location itself plays a significant role in shaping identity. Every place is imbued with specific cultural meanings and histories that shape the author's understanding of belonging and otherness. Thus, the environment one grows up in becomes an active agent in constructing one's identity.

*Brown Girl Dreaming* represents the experience of growing up as a girl, as a process that involves both self-exploration and intersectionality. It draws attention to the importance of such components of identity formation as voice, memory, and culture.

## 3. 2. Influence, Intertextuality, and Literary Legacy

The representations of girlhood in literature coexist within texts, forming part of the ongoing dialogue surrounding these narratives and are shaped by intertextual relationships. As Julia Kristeva argues, texts are interconnected, continually referencing and transforming one another. This section explores how *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* are not isolated from one another despite their distinct contexts, and how this connection contributes to and reshapes the literary tradition of representing girlhood.

### 3. 2. 1. *Little Women* as a Foundational Text

*Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott is widely regarded as a classic of women's literature, occupying a central position in the literary tradition, particularly for its portrayal of girlhood. Used a foundational text in the study, which establishes key themes of independence, moral development, and female ambition that continue to influence later works.

Characters like Jo March serve as the prototype for the independent female protagonist in literary works. Through her rejection of conventional gender roles as she states "I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy" (Alcott 6), and her pursuit of a literary career, Jo

symbolises a significant departure from earlier representations of passive femininity. Scholars such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that such characters reflect a broader shift in women's writing toward articulating female autonomy.

The novel also emphasises personal growth and moral development, which provides a framework that subsequent texts adapt and reinterpret. Its influence extends beyond its historical context, shaping how girlhood is imagined and represented in later literature. Thus, *Little Women* serves as a cornerstone in the evolution of girlhood narratives, providing both a model and a point of departure for future works.

### 3. 2. 2. *Matilda* as a Modern Reinterpretation

It can be understood that *Matilda*, by Roald Dahl, represents a modern reinterpretation of the themes established in *Little Women*. That can be gathered by paying attention to the novel's emphasis on intellectual independence, which is, in a way, readapted to ideas reflecting contemporary concerns about authority and institutional control.

Matilda's character, similarly to Jo March's, echoes traits of defiance but amplifies them through fantasy and exaggeration. Her telekinetic abilities transform internal strength into visible power, making resistance more immediate and dramatic. As Matilda declares "I'm right and you're wrong" (Dahl 16), her confidence reflects a refusal to submit unquestioningly to adult authority. According to Maria Nikolajeva, children's literature often evolves by reworking earlier narrative patterns to address new cultural contexts, and *Matilda* exemplifies this process.

Additionally, the novel subtly critiques modern institutions such as the family and the school. As they often abuse their power, this plays a crucial role in shaping and, more so,

limiting individuals' potential, particularly young women's. This focus reflects broader societal concerns about authority and the need for reform.

Through this lens, *Matilda* extends and transforms the legacy of *Little Women* by reimagining its themes for a contemporary audience while simultaneously intensifying its critique of power structures.

### 3. 2. 3. *Brown Girl Dreaming* and the Expansion of the Tradition

*Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson significantly expands literary traditions of girlhood narratives. The novel's incorporation of autobiographical and intersectional elements broadens the scope of racial and gender representations and challenges the universality of earlier models.

As the novel takes a markedly different approach to compression from the previously mentioned works, this narrative reflects the influence of Stuart Hall's theory of identity as fluid and socially constructed. While exploring themes of race, history, and memory, Woodson adds new dimensions to the portrayal of girlhood, emphasising the importance of cultural context. Reflecting on her sense of self, Woodson writes "I am born on a Tuesday" (11).

While the text takes a poetic form, which significantly distinguishes it from its predecessors, it offers a fragmented and reflective approach to storytelling. Through this formal innovation, Woodson underscores the multiplicity of experiences that define girlhood, highlighting the limitations of a single, unified narrative.

In this sense, *Brown Girl Dreaming* not only continues the traditional representations of female protagonists established by earlier works but also transforms them, making space for more diverse and inclusive representations of girlhood.

## 3. 3. Evaluation of Findings

Through a comparative analysis of *Little Women,* Matilda, and *Brown Girl Dreaming,* we can see that the construction of girlhood is shaped by a complex interplay among historical context, cultural ideology, and narrative form. While all three texts foreground female agency, they do so in ways that reflect their specific temporal and social conditions. When examining each work individually, we gain a deeper understanding of how representations of girlhood evolve, and it also highlights the shared patterns identified: resistance, identity formation, and self-expression.

### 3. 3. 1. Constrained Agency: Negotiating Girlhood in *Little Women*

The analysis of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* sets the tone for how girlhood is initially constructed. As it presents it as a process of negotiation within the constraints of 19th Century gender ideology, the novel reflects the expectations associated with domestic femininity while simultaneously creating space for subtle forms of resistance and individuality.

Throughout the novel, the March household frames girlhood through moral education and adherence to social norms. We can see how the sisters are encouraged to embody virtues such as humility, patience, and self-sacrifice, all of which reflect the dominant cultural ideals of the time. However, this does not entirely restrict them, as we can observe through the portrayal of Jo, she challenges such expectations by asserting her independence and pursuing her personal ambitions. Her desire to become a writer, for instance, disrupts traditional notions of femininity and aligns with Elaine Showalter's argument that women's writing represents a crucial site of self-expression and resistance.

Moreover, we can observe how the novel advances this narrative by incorporating more illustrations of subtle forms of resistance, particularly in this context, even though they are often internal and mediated. In that sense, we have the characters, rather than openly defying

societal norms, negotiate their positions within them. Meg, for instance, is pursuing social respectability, while Amy's artistic aspirations demonstrate alternative forms of agency that operate within accepted boundaries. This diversity of experiences suggests that girlhood is not a singular or uniform category but a multifaceted process shaped by individual choices and social constraints.

With that, *Little Women* reveals that early representations of girlhood are characterised by subtle resistance and negotiation. Despite being constrained by the ideological limitations of its time, the novel nonetheless lays the groundwork for more explicit forms of female agency in later literature.

### 3. 3. 2. Empowered Resistance: Reimagining Authority *in Matilda*

In Roald Dahl's *Matilda,* we encounter a more explicit and confrontational model of girlhood. This reflects a shift toward modern critiques of authority and institutional power. Unlike the negotiated resistance seen in *Little Women*, *Matilda* foregrounds direct opposition to oppressive structures. By doing so, the novel positions girlhood as a site of empowerment and transformation.

The story exposes how authority is navigated through both the family and the education system. Starting with Matilda's parents, who embody anti-intellectualism, making her feel isolated and, on top of that, neglected in her needs as a child, while Miss Trunchbull, through her strict rules, represents authoritarian control within the school. These environments can be understood through Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where individuals are subjected to systems designed to enforce conformity and obedience.

However, Matilda shows a sort of resistance to these forces through her intellectual capabilities and moral conviction. Her love of reading enables her to construct an identity

independent of her surroundings, while her telekinetic powers symbolise the externalisation of inner strength. Unlike Jo March, who exhibits a more restrained defiance, Matilda embodies a more active and transformative form of resistance, directly challenging the legitimacy of authority figures.

Additionally, Miss Honey's presence in the novel introduces the reader to an alternative model of power grounded in empathy and support. This suggests that authority can be reimagined rather than rejected. Such dual representation reinforces the novel's broader critique of oppressive systems while offering a vision of positive change.

The story of *Matilda* represents a significant evolution in the portrayal of girlhood because it emphasises overt resistance, intellectual empowerment, and the possibility of transforming unjust systems, which, in itself, reflects the changing cultural attitudes of the late 20th Century.

### 3. 3. 3. Narrative Identity and Cultural Memory in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

The representation of girlhood is further developed through an analysis of Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming,* especially in its deep engagement with historical, cultural, and intersectional perspectives. Unlike the external confrontations of *Matilda* or the domestic negotiations of *Little Women*, this story of young Jaqueline emphasises how internal processes can form one's identity and forge self-representation.

Taking into account the context in which the story is narrated, we can reflect on how systemic racism and social change affect individual experience. Woodson's portrayal of girlhood aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, as her identity is shaped by overlapping factors such as race, geography, and history. This perspective challenges the notion that earlier representations of girlhood were universal, emphasising their diversity and complexity.

As the text foregrounds storytelling as a form of resistance, Woodson, through her poetry, constructs a narrative that affirms her identity and gives voice to experiences that have often been marginalised. This particular approach aligns with Bell Hooks's argument that storytelling can serve as a powerful tool for self-definition and cultural critique.

Furthermore, the setting plays a significant role in shaping identity. The contrast between the American South and the North illustrates how different cultural environments influence one's sense of belonging and self-understanding. These spatial dynamics reinforce the idea that girlhood is not only personal but also deeply embedded in broader social contexts.

All in all, *Brown Girl Dreaming* offers a nuanced and intersectional understanding of girlhood by highlighting the importance of memory, culture, and narrative in shaping identity, and by representing a more complex and inclusive vision of female experience.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the study's comparative findings are synthesised, making the case that one cannot speak of a monolithic or static representation of girlhood in works like *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Rather, they are shown to be fluid, changing with the cultural, historical and ideological tides. A good deal of critical and intertextual scrutiny leaves little doubt that girlhood is being redefined as a place for agency, resistance and the kind of intellectual growth that comes with it.

Take Louisa May Alcott, for instance: her analysis reveals girlhood as something to be negotiated under the weight of social and domestic limits. Roald Dahl goes further, giving his characters an overt form of resistance and an imaginative kind of power. Then there is Jacqueline Woodson, who widens the scope altogether by putting intersectional identity and historical consciousness front and centre. In moving from subtle forms of defiance to outright challenge and on to a more reflective self-definition, these three authors display to readers a growing complexity in how the female experience is put to paper. This chapter also made a point of how intertextuality figures in the literary portrayal of girls. The hand of *Little Women*

can be seen in the later works of *Matilda* and *Brown Girl Dreaming*; they take those older narrative models and put their own spin on them to fit new social realities. It is a continuity that speaks to the staying power of feminist themes, even as the variations demonstrate their adaptability.

All of this is to say that a comparative method yields a much more nuanced picture of girlhood in literature. Looking at texts from different eras allows the chance to spot what has stayed the same and what has changed. The evidence here supports the view that literature does more than hold up a mirror to society's values; it has a part in redefining them and proffers its own vision of what it means to belong and be empowered.

# General Conclusion

This research has shown that children's literature is a potent literary field in which feminist voices are represented, negotiated, and transformed, regardless of historical or cultural setting. A comparative look at *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* throughout the dissertation reveals an evolution in how girlhood is depicted: one can trace a shift from the moral discipline and domestic conformity of the past to more intersectional, resistant representations of female identity. In short, feminist discourse in these works is not some fixed or linear concept; it is moulded by shifting views on gender and selfhood as well as by ideological and historical forces.

To set the stage for the analysis, Chapter One lays out the study's theoretical and historical underpinnings, as well as the key feminist approaches that inform it. We see liberal feminism with its focus on a woman's education, ambition and radical feminism unmasking the patriarchal limits on her autonomy. There is also the postmodern view of gender as performative and multiple, as well as the intersectional insistence on the role of race, class and memory in defining female subjectivity. On top of that, criticism of children's literature shows us how writing for the young helps to build an ideology of femininity and agency.

The historical context puts the three chosen texts in their proper social light. For instance, *Little Women* is bound up in the 19th Century American ideal of the domestic sphere with its emphasis on duty and sacrifice. Then there is *Matilda*, which is very much of its time in late 20th Century Britain, with its critique of rigid social order and institutional power. Moreover, in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, the readers find the racial and cultural belonging that comes with the Civil Rights era and Black feminist thought. Taken together, they make clear that any portrayal of girlhood is inextricably linked to the environment that gave rise to it.

A review of the literature has turned up its share of common ground and contention regarding the three texts. One finds that scholars are more likely to read *Little Women* as an early feminist work, one that, in equal measure, empowers and limits female agency through

domestic ideology. The same is true of the criticism levelled at *Matilda*, which, for the most part, dwells on intellectual resistance and a kind of childhood empowerment that defies authoritarianism. As for *Brown Girl Dreaming*, studies tend to foreground voice, autobiographical memory, and intersectional identity as hallmarks of modern feminism. There is also a lack of representation of comparative feminist scholarship across different eras, which makes a case for viewing these three as part of a living literary tradition.

In Chapter Two, it set out to compare them thematically and structurally. The analysis shows that, while each narrative has its own literary and ideological way of expressing it, they all return to the matter of female agency. In *Little Women*, girlhood is a negotiation of moral discipline and the demands of home; Jo March is a complicated character whose very independence and drive run counter to what is expected of a woman, though the story will have you believe in certain domestic values in the end. Matilda's form of empowerment is more open rebellion, her intellect serving to lay bare and subvert any oppressive authority. *Brown Girl Dreaming* is another matter entirely: here, empowerment is found in the telling of one's own story and in cultural identity, with girlhood depicted as a self-discovery informed by race and the weight of history.

A closer structural analysis shows how narrative voice and form are put to work in the service of feminist representation. Take *Little Women*: its omniscient, morally didactic tone is true to the pedagogical bent of 19$^{th}$ Century children's literature, yet there is room for a certain emotional and ideological complexity. With *Matilda*, it is the other way round; here, the author employs satire and exaggeration for humorous effect to drive home a critique of institutional power. Then there is the poetic, autobiographical voice of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, which lends an authority to experiences long marginalised in this genre, making for an intimate reckoning with memory and identity. The study also made clear that imagery and symbolism are not

simply ornamental; they are ideological spaces where one can see cultural values and gender relations being worked out.

The third and final chapter brings these points together to show how the three books in question redefine girlhood throughout literary history. This research work's reading of *Little Women* suggests its status as a foundational feminist work, but one in which girlhood is a matter of negotiation rather than outright freedom. Jo March may challenge restrictive gender norms, but her path is circumscribed by the domestic ideology of her time, even as the novel later breaks new ground for female ambition.

The dissertation argues that *Matilda* is a modernising force in this tradition. Where Jo had to adapt, Matilda's intelligence gives her the narrative clout to stand up to oppression head-on, making intellectual rebellion a kind of empowerment. In much the same way, Jacqueline Woodson uses her autobiographical account in *Brown Girl Dreaming* to push the boundaries of feminist children's literature. By putting Black girlhood and intersectional identity at the fore, she moves beyond the usual white, middle-class fare and shows that to be empowered is to reclaim your voice and your place in the story.

The findings make clear that we can see both continuity and change in the evolution of feminist voices in children's literature. Common threads are running through the three texts regarding female autonomy, selfhood, and resistance to social expectations that one might find restrictive. However, they part ways on what 'empowerment' and 'authority' mean. *Little Women* is making its case for agency within the domestic sphere, *Matilda* defines power through intellectual defiance, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* focuses on cultural memory and an intersectional form of self-representation. Such variations are indicative of the larger historical and social shifts in feminist thinking and the writing that accompanies it.

In another sense, the research puts to rest any notion that children's literature is merely a didactic or simple genre. It is a space of some ideological and cultural weight where issues of identity, race, gender and authority are put to the test. The works in question show that even literature for the young can call dominant norms into question, if only while being bound by the constraints of its time. Feminist children's literature then serves as something of a mirror of society and, at the same time, a tool for changing it.

The research hypothesis proposed in thus study are confirmed. The comparative analysis of the three novels, demonstrates that feminist representation in children's literature have evolved across different historical and cultural contexts. The findings confirm that *Little Women* promotes female ambition while remaining influenced by 19th Century domestic ideologies. They also support the hypothesis that portrayals of female protagonists have become increasingly diverse and autonomous, progressing from domestic negotiation to intellectual empowerment and intersectional self-definition.

The dissertation leaves the door open for other avenues of inquiry. One could do more comparative work on how masculinity and femininity are portrayed in non-Western literary traditions, or examine how today's young adult fiction addresses new feminist questions around migration, disability, sexuality, and the digital world. There is also scope to study the move of these stories from the page to film or television and see how their feminist underpinnings hold up in a different narrative medium.

In the end, this study has made clear that as feminist voices have evolved in children's literature, they have served as a mirror of wider cultural shifts in how we view girlhood and female agency. A side-by-side look at titles such as *Little Women*, *Matilda*, and *Brown Girl Dreaming* reveals in the dissertation that the way feminism is presented has moved on from the limited domestic haggling of old to something far more intersectional and empowering. Taken together, these books are evidence that the genre is more than a pastime or a vehicle for

moral lessons; it is a literary space with the power to alter social consciousness, put authority to the test, and, in doing so, rewrite what it means to be a woman for one generation after another.

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جامعة عين تموشنت بلحاج بوشعيب
كلية الآداب واللغات والعلوم الاجتماعية

# التصريح الشرفي

الخاص بالالتزام بقواعد النزاهة العلمية لانجاز بحث علمي
(القرار رقم 1082 المؤرخ في 27 ديسمبر 2020 الذي يحدد القواعد المتعلقة بالوقاية من السرقة العلمية ومكافحتها)

أنا الممضي أسفله،

الطالب (ة): بن أو سعد فطة

الحامل (ة) لبطاقة التعريف الوطنية رقم: 419001129 الصادرة في تاريخ: 2026/11/02

دائرة: الحاج ولاية عين تموشنت

والمسجل بكلية الآداب و اللغات و العلوم الاجتماعية

قسم: اللغة الإنجليزية ماستر 2

شعبة: اللغة الانجليزية تخصص: الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية

والمكلف بإنجاز مذكرة تخرج لنيل شهادة ماستر أكاديمي، الموسومة بعنوان:
Mapping the Shifting Narratives of Feminism in Little women, Matilda and Brown girl Dreaming

أصرح بشرفي أن ألتزم بمراعاة المعايير العلمية والمنهجية ومعايير الأخلاقية المهنية والنزاهة الأكاديمية المطلوبة في انجاز مذكرة الماستر المذكورة أعلاه.

عن رئيس المجلس الشعبي البلدي
وبتفويض منه
إمضاء السيدة: بداوي فضيلة
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# الترخيص بإيداع مذكرة الماستر

أنا الأستاذ(ة) المشرف(ة):

يحيى فاطيمة .....

على مذكرة التخرج في الماستر والموسومة بـ:

.....

Mapping the Shifting Narratives of Feminism in Little Women, Matilda, and Brown Girl Dreaming.

من انجاز الطالب (بين):

1 Benoussad Fettz .....

2 .....

ميدان: لغات أجنبية .....

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أشهد أن الطالب(بين) قد قام(ا) برفع كل التحفظات المطلوبة من طرف لجنة المناقشة. وبإمكانه(ما) إيداع النسخة الالكترونية المصححة على مستوى المستودع الرقمي لجامعة عين تموشنت.

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