



# A Contrastive Analysis of the Notion of Marriage in the Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Pre-Islamic Arabic Literature

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## Abstract

The current study aims at contrasting the notion of marriage in the nineteenth-century American literature with that of the pre-Islamic Arabic literature. To conduct the study, the marriage advice given by the mother (Marmee) in Alcott's *Little Women* will be compared with Umama Bint Al-Harith's in the pre-Islamic era to see how women in both literatures view marriage and the status of womanhood in their own cultures. A close reading contrastive analysis will be implemented on both pieces of advice to see how the culture influences the mothers' notion of marriage in both texts. The study concludes that although the notion of marriage is similar in both literatures, it is different due to the cultural effect on women's perception of their status in their cultures of their relationship with men.

**Keywords:** women's status, submission, marriage, mother's advice, domestic sphere, companionship, partnership, obedience

## 1. Introduction

Masarwah (2013) investigates the notion of marriage in the preislamic Arabia, in which the writer claims that Arabs in pre-Islamic era highlights the significance of marriage. Masarwah points out that "a wife was appreciated if she possessed certain traits, among them the following: she should have a civil tongue, refrain from telling slanders and lies, nor be a busybody or of a gloomy disposition, and she should not be unfaithful to her husband" (847). Additionally, the writer emphasized that the Arabs in the pre-Islamic era "viewed marriage as an important institution that secured the status of the family and brought together families that had been hostile to each other" (848). Masarwah claims that the wife in that era showed her spouse her loyalty who will be rewarded with "honorable husband's heart" (849). In short, the writer adds that both husbands and wives were faithful to each other and [this] "fidelity is the most important element for the stability of the conjugal relationship" (849). Furthermore, Shehab (1992) in her book entitled *Women, Islam and Modernity* claims that there was an "absence of legal status for women and their vulnerable social situation" (12).

*Little Women* (1868) is an American novel written by Louisa May Alcott which is considered as "a founding myth of American girlhood...fiction for girls...and a family story" (Watson, 2009, 13). Watson points out that this work is "a powerful nostalgia for uncorrupted domesticity" (13). The whole work depicts girls' journey into the world of womanhood, so it is an example for all American girls "to negotiate the conflicting demands of growing up into women" (Watson 14).

In short, the whole work is "a cultural fantasy of the happy family" (Fetterley, 2009, 23), and it was a realistic novel about family like Alcott's (High, 1986, 48). Baym (2013) in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* claims that this novel is "a semiautobiographical story of [Alcott's] girlhood and young womanhood,... which sanitized some of the misery of the Alcott's poverty, brought together the four ...March sisters and their adored mother in a family portrait that focused on the girls' struggles...into young womanhood" (1248).

In a very distinguished article entitled "*Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*," Fetterley (2009) claims that the mother (Marmee) in *Little Women* is "the model little woman... Her first words are an implicit reproof to the girl's self-centered" (20). Fetterley points out that Marmee is highly occupied with the "self-improvement...and [the] value of renouncing the self and thinking of others" (20). All Marmee's advice to her daughters was to teach them to control themselves "so as to ensure that the self does in fact renounce the self" (20). Additionally, Marmee in her advice to her daughters want to show them "the ideal womanly character" and the proper sphere to her (21).

It should be noted here that the notion of marriage and the domestic sphere should be accepted by women because such acceptance of the domestic sphere "as the best and happiest place may be less a matter of wise choice than of harsh necessity" (Fetterley, 2009, 24). Additionally, Fetterley emphasizes that the interest in marriage in this work is not due to the girls' economic necessity but to their emotional needs and the fear of becoming "old maid." (25). Thus, any woman in the novel having the characteristics of "self-denial, self-control, accommodations, and concern for others" (26) will be rewarded by having a good husband. Finally, Fetterley claims that "it is Marmee who does all the things putatively ascribed to her husband; it is Marmee who always has the right word of comfort, love, and advice" (26).

The idea of woman's submission in *Little women* is not just related to the women; it is related to the men as well. Ken Parille (2009) in the article entitled "'Wake up, and be a man': *Little Women*, Laurie, and the ethics of Submission," claims that the male figure in the novel Laurie is subject to the "ultimate submission to cultural expectations for young men" (31) and is limited in his gender role.

It should be noted that Louisa May Alcott takes the status of her readers into account. Her novel to the female readers reveals "that she simultaneously resisted and revised traditional models of femininity while mediating her readers' desire for conventional female plots" (Wadsworth, 2009, 40). Thus, Alcott does not clash with the American conventions in her time, but she wants to improve the status of American women.

Hodgson (2009) claims that *Little Women* is "a straightforward representation of an instantly recognizable, innate 'Americanness' that embodies a universal standard of domesticity (1). Additionally, Azizmohammadi and Kohzadi (2011) highlights the familial relationship in this novel, in which the notion of motherhood was considered "one of the most sacred concepts of human culture...[Marmee] typifies the Victorian concept that women could be the providential antidote for the ills of the world" (2336). Furthermore, Wester (2005) claims that Alcott in *Little Women* wants to reform the American ideas on the family and domesticity, in which she highlights the idea of "domestic feminism—the idea that a reformed family, in which men and women equally participate in domestic matters [which] would lead to a reformed society" (iv). Finally, Daniele (2015) highlights Alcott's writings in the American Civil War, in which women were helping their men in their fight in that war; they were working on reforming their society; and they "left their homes and families to bring domestic values ...to the war" (1).

Finally, this study attempts to explore how Arab women in the pre-Islamic era and American women in the nineteenth century view the notion of marriage and their statuses in their cultures. The study will be based on mothers' advice to their daughters on the importance of marriage and the relationship with men in the family structure.

## 2. Discussion and Analysis of the notion of Marriage in both Texts

In her advice to her daughter before marriage, Umama bint Al-Harith reflects the pre-Islamic notion of marriage from a feminine point of view. This advice from a mother to her daughter is one of the most important evidence on how mothers in that period of time view marriage and the relationship between a husband and a wife. Additionally, the advice here marks the status of women in the pre-Islamic era and the role of female gender in the family.

From the very beginning, Bin Al-Harith pays her daughter's attention to the importance of advice in guiding the daughter to behave wisely with her husband in the family life: "O my daughter, had the advice been left for high courtesy or nobility, I would not have advised you. Rather it is a reminder for the unaware and admonition for the wise" (www. Naseemalsham.com). Thus, the mother emphasizes her daughter's need of mother's guidance and advice before starting a new life with the husband. Here it should be noted that this saying indicates to the close relationship between a mother and a daughter at that time which is one of the characteristics of pre-Islamic period.

The mother in her advice to daughter emphasizes the importance of marriage for females at that time. Bin Al-Harith tells her daughter that "if a woman was to dispense with husbands for the richness of her parents or for her intense need for them, you would be the first to dispense with that, but women were created for men, and for them men were created" (www. Naseemalsham.com). Here the mother highlights the importance of the notion of marriage for the women in the pre-Islamic period because both men and women complement each other in the marriage relationship. The mother considers the daughter's need for marriage more important than her need for her parents or for their wealth. The most important point here is the mother's insistence on the importance of marriage for both men and women because they are created to complement each other.

Additionally, Bint Al-Harith's advice highlights the difference of the domestic life for females in that period. She makes a distinction between the female's life before and after marriage, in which she says "you are about to leave the common surroundings of your upbringing and go to a new home with a companion with whom you are not familiar" (www. Naseemalsham.com). It should be noted here that the mother views the husband as "a companion" to the wife. This means that the mother views marriage as an equal relationship, in which both men and women are considered as equal to each other. Besides, the mother in her advice to her daughter draws her attention to the difference between her life before and after marriage, in which the marriage relationship is a new life to her which is based on the sense of companionship between the wife and the husband.

However, Bin Al-Harith wants her daughter to be more responsible than her husband in the marriage relationship. She wants her daughter to show more obedience to her husband in order to make him obey her: "Be a slave to him, he will be a slave to you" (www. Naseemalsham.com). In other words, the mother here highly stresses the importance of the wife's submission to her husband which will make him appreciate her. It seems clear that Bin Al-Harith highlights the role of the wife's manners and behaviors toward her husband in the success of the relationship. She hints to a very important point about the husband's psychological need for his wife's servitude. Such view does not mean that the mother here understands the wife's submission to her husband as obligatory. On the contrary, she views the wife's submission to her husband as a fruitful thing to her and to him as well. The mother views submission as a necessary step to get the husband's respect to his wife. She also does not clash with the conservative attitude in her own time toward women's submission to men. But she wants it a kind of submission that brings happiness to women.

In the first and second advice, Bint Al-Harith highlights the importance of companionship in the marriage relationship, in which she advises her daughter to be submit to her husband happily with listening to and obeying him because such act will bring happiness to the wife and husband and will please God: "accompany him with contentment, and associate

with him by well-listening and obedience. Verily, there is a relief for the heart in the contentment, and there is a pleasant for the Lord in the well-association" ([www. Naseemalsham.com](http://www.Naseemalsham.com)). Thus, the mother her is highly interested in her own daughter's happiness will happen when she shows her own husband her obedience happily. What is interesting here is the mother's understanding of men's needs from the marriage relationship. She seems very aware of how to please men and to satisfy God. She points out that the happiness of the marriage relationship starts from the side of wife and her understanding of what the husband needs. Also, Bint Al-Harith emphasizes that such submission and obedience to husband is not related to the status of husband as being superior to the wife; she thinks that the relationship should be based on the sense of companionship which places the wife in an equal relationship with the husband. However, the mother seems highly influenced by the conservative traditions of the gender roles in the Arab family, in which the wife should show her husband her obedience in a good manner.

Furthermore, the mother's third and fourth advice to her daughter indicates to the importance of the wife's interest in beauty to her husband. Bin Al-Harith draws her daughter's attention to the significance of woman's beauty to the man: "take care of what he sees and smells. Never let his eyes fall on something ugly... nor let his nose smell anything from you but a pleasant scent. And know that kohl is the best of available beauty, and water is the best of available scents" ([www.naseemalsham.com](http://www.naseemalsham.com)). Again, the mother stresses on how the wife should attract the husband with her beauty and look in order to make him more attached to her and to make sure the success of the marriage relationship. It seems clear that Bin Al-Harith wants her daughter to show her beauty to her husband in a good manner to make him more pleased and to make her daughter more successful in the marriage relationship.

What is surprising in the fifth and sixth advice is that Bint Al-Harith's interest in husband's favorite things, such as having good food and sleeping well: "take care of the time of his food and sleep. Hunger will make him irritable and disturbing his sleep will make him angry" ([www.naseemalsham.com](http://www.naseemalsham.com)). Knowing the husband's need for having food and sleeping is a reflection of being interested in the accurate details in the marriage relationship which might insure the success and continuation of it. The mother seems more experienced in what might disturb the Arab men and women in their marriage. Her insistence on husband's hunger and lack of sleeping does reflect the conservative attitude toward marriage in the Arab culture which places a great importance on the husband's rest and comfort to succeed in the relationship.

Furthermore, the seventh and eighth advice again reflect how women in pre-Islamic era take care of the husband's possessions including his servants and children. The mother advises her daughter to "keep his house and money, and [to] take care of his retinue and children. Keeping his money is out of well-respect, and taking care of his children is out of well-planning" ([www.naseemalsham.com](http://www.naseemalsham.com)). This interest in taking care of husband's children, servants, and money reflects how the women in the pre-Islamic period were interested in protecting his wealth and preserving the family strength because women at that time were required to support their husbands with their management. The reason behind such interest lies in the wives' seeking for gaining the husbands' satisfaction and appreciation which is a marker of their success in the marriage relationship.

The ninth and tenth advice reveals how women in the pre-Islamic era were highly careful about the continuation of the marriage relationship. Bin Al-Harith advises her daughter saying:

Neither divulge his secrets nor ignore his instructions. If you disclose his secrets, you will never be safe from his treachery, and if you defy his directions, he will hold malice against you. Moreover, do not appear elated when you find him disheartened, and do not let him find you depressed when he is rapturous, for the first is a sign of negligence, and the second is of disturbing. The more you will respect him, the more he will honor you. The more you will obey him, the better he will accompany you. Know that you will not get what you want until you prefer his contentment over your contentment and his desire over your desire in what you love and what you hate, and Allah [God] will facilitate good for you. I leave you to [the protection] of Allah ([www.naseemalsham.com](http://www.naseemalsham.com)).

Commenting on the previous quotation, it is noticed that the mother clearly shows the need of showing submission and obedience to the husband in that period, in which Arab woman should keep her husband's secrets, share with him his joyful moments, be sad with him when he is sad, and please him. Additionally, the mother's warnings to her daughter to avoid making her husband hate her is due to the Arab women's desire to preserve the marriage relationship away from disturbing issues. We notice in the previous quotation that Arab women in that period put the husband's satisfaction over the wife's. They think that the wife's way to live happily with her husband lies in her submission and obedience to him. This explains to us the status of Arab women in the pre-Islamic era which is the submission to her husband.

Moreover, we can imagine after reading the mother's advice to her daughter before marriage how the Arab women in that era were subordinate to their husbands because of the influence of traditions and customs that obliged women in that period to obey their husbands. It is noticed that Bint Al-Harith in her advice to her daughter is careful about what

husbands need from their wives. In other words, she seems aware of the nature of Arab men who favor and prefer the submissive women. The mother is so careful about the gender roles and of the importance of marriage and the domestic life for women at that time her own kingdom. In short, the mother's advice to her daughter is an emphasis on the importance of marriage for Arab women as a safe sphere that should be protected by the wife's behaviors with her husband.

Another important point in discussing the mother's advice is her own view of marriage as a happy kingdom for the wife only if she takes into consideration the superior status of her husband in the family. The women in pre-Islamic period think that the gateway for her happiness in her marriage relationship lies in accepting her submission and obedience to her husband. They could not negotiate their subordinate role in the family because it was forbidden for her to discuss that because of traditions and customs. This is clear in Bint Al-Harith's warnings to her daughter to violate these rules or advice which were nonnegotiable at that time. Also, it seems clear that the mother wants her daughter to accept this submissive role to her husband because the mother herself accepted it when she was a girl. Thus, the mother wants to transfer this submissiveness to her daughter as a safe step to protect her from being tortured by the husband and traditions.

In comparison with Bin Al-Harith's advice to her daughter before marriage, Mrs. March (Marmee) advises her young daughters in Alcott's *Little Women*. Like Bint Al-Harith, Marmee is highly interested in drawing her daughters' attention to the importance of marriage for girls. This reflects why American women in the nineteenth century were highly occupied with the domestic sphere for women and how women should not forget about their supposed gender role in the family as mothers and wives.

From the very beginning, Marmee, like Bint Al-Harith, advises her daughters to view marriage as a partnership between the wife and the husband: "don't neglect husband for children, don't shut him out of the nursery, but teach him how to help in it. His place is there as well as yours, and the children need him. Let him feel that he has a part to do, and he will do it gladly and faithfully, and it will be better for you all" (Alcott 38.27). Here it should be noted that Marmee pays her daughters' attention to making husbands get involved in taking care of children because the marriage relationship viewed from her point as a partnership between the husband and the wife. This is the influence of the American culture on the family structure, in which both men and women are equal in their own responsibilities. However, Marmee's advice reflects how she views the status of husband in the family as an important one. I mean the husband is considered from her point of view as the main figure in the family, but Marmee wants her daughter to deal with this status from an equal point, in which the wife should be able to make him feel that he is a partner in taking care of the family like the wife. All this advice is for the utility for the family which should entertain the fruits of this equal partnership between the husband and wife.

Unlike Bint Al-Harith's advice to her daughter that she should be submissive to her husband without negotiating his role in the family, Marmee's advice to her daughters reflects the huge role of the women in constructing their families. We feel from her advice to her daughters that she wants to tell them that they are leaders in their families who should teach husbands to do their roles rationally with making them accept the women's status as equal to theirs. In other words, Marmee does not want her daughters to accept this domesticity as submissive without negotiating with the husbands how the family should be led. Thus, the difference between Bint Al-Harith's advice and Marmee's is due to the cultural perspective that identifies the status of husbands and wives in the family structure in both the Arab and American cultures.

The shared thread between Bint Al-Harith's and Marmee's is that both highlight women's domesticity and their active role in the family. Because of the influence of Arab culture in the pre-Islamic era, Bint Al-Harith's adopts the woman's submissive role in the family caring for the husband's comfort and interest; whereas Marmee views this domestic sphere for the woman as equal as for the man because of the influence of American culture on the construction of the family. However, it should not be neglected that Bint Al-Harith believes in the companionship between the husband and wife, while Marmee believes in the partnership between both sides.

Furthermore, in her treatment of the status of women in the family structure, it should be noted that Marmee aims at highlighting the sense of partnership between the husband and wife to promote the status of women in the American culture and to orient the American women at that time of their rights to be equally treated with men. However, Marmee keeps adopting the domestic sphere for the woman in the family in order to avoid clashing with the male readers who will never accept the equal rights between men and women. Instead of stating that directly, Marmee asks her daughters to "teach" the husbands to accept this equality in the gender roles.

Again, Marmee's emphasis on domesticity and marriage for her daughter is obvious in her advice to them:

I am not ambitious for a splendid fortune, a fashionable position, or a great name for my girls. If rank and money come with love and virtue, also, I should accept them gratefully, and enjoy your good fortune, but I know, by experience, how much genuine happiness can be had in a plain little house, where the daily bread is earned, and some privations give sweetness to the few pleasures (20.36).

The previous quotation is clear evidence that Marmee is highly occupied with the notion of marriage and the domestic life for her daughters. She puts it over fortune and money because real happiness lies in the domestic sphere. When Marmee says "by experience," she refers to her acceptance of this domestic sphere like all other American women in the nineteenth century. Similarly, Bint Al-Harith thinks that the most suitable place for women is the domestic life. This is due to the conservative traditional life both Bint Al-Harith and Marmee lived in their times. Both mothers in their advice to daughters want to root the importance of marriage and domestic life in their daughters' minds. They want their daughters to accept that and not to negotiate its importance.

Marmee's ambition and hope for a happy family life for her daughters in her advice are similar to Bint Al-Harith's. She clearly expresses her ambition saying:

I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good. To be admired, loved, and respected. To have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send. To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman, and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience. It is natural to think of it, Meg, right to hope and wait for it, and wise to prepare for it, so that when the happy time comes, you may feel ready for the duties and worthy of the joy (9.142).

Commenting on the previous quotation, it is clear that Marmee, like Bint Al-Harith, hopes for her daughters a happy family life. She considers marriage and domestic life as the most important thing for her daughters because it brings them pleasure and happiness. But both Marmee and Bint Al-Harith want this marriage relationship to be successful and to be based on wise judgments. They consider it a kind of responsibility and duty that needs wise preparation. Additionally, both Marmee and Bint Al-Harith connect marriage and the domestic life for their girls with religiosity, in which they think that God favors the domestic life for the girls. However, Marmee seems more liberal than Bint Al-Harith in her ideology about the domestic life. In other words, she wants her daughters to accomplish their dreams and ambitions without forgetting the importance of the domestic life for them. This liberal attitude explains why the author Louisa May Allcot wants to convey a message to her female readers to make a balance between the domestic life and the external or practical life. In other words, she wants to tell readers that it is necessary for females to work hard on accomplishing their hopes and dreams in their work, but the domestic life should not be ignored because it complements the girl's pursuit for a happy life.

Furthermore, it is evident in Marmee's advice to her daughters that she prioritizes love over richness or wealth in the marriage life: "my dear girls, I am ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes because love is wanting" (9.142). Thus, it should be noted here that Marmee, like Bint Al-Harith, considers love as the most essential part in the success of the marriage life. It seems clear here that Marmee is more highly interested in the emotional side of the domestic life than the materialistic one because the materialistic aspect cannot bring happiness for the girls without the emotional one. Similarly, Bint Al-Harith does not care in her advice to her daughter about the importance of man's richness or wealth; she pays her daughter's attention to how make the husband love, respect, and appreciate her. I think that this interest in the emotional side of the marriage relationship hints to the conservative life both Marmee and Bint Al-Harith lived.

Like Bint Al-Harith's advice, Marmee pays her daughters' attention that a marriage relationship "needs infinite patience and forbearance, as well as love" (32.91). She wants to tell them that the girls should distinguish between their treatment of their spouses and their aspiration for freedom in the practical life. In other words, Marmee and Bint Al-Harith differentiates between the requirements of the successful and happy domestic life that requires from the wife to be patient and to love her spouse, and the ordinary life which is full of the aspiration for freedom.

The last point in Marmee's advice to her daughters is her concentration on the need to love God and to put it over all kinds of love in life:

My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning and may be many, but you can overcome and outlive them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one. The more you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom. His love and care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, but may become the source of lifelong peace, happiness, and strength. Believe this heartily, and go to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as freely and confidingly as you come to your mother (8.88).

Thus, it is noted that Marmee's concentration on the importance of the belief in God is due to her belief that in order to live a happy family life, women need to prioritize God's love over all kinds of love in life. Such advice is needed, from Marmee's point of view, to tolerate all the turbulence of the marriage relationship.

### 3. Conclusion

It can be concluded that both the Arabic literature in pre-Islamic era and the nineteenth American literature highlight the importance of marriage and the domestic life for women. Additionally both literatures via the mothers' advice to their daughters reflect the need to preserve a happy family life, in which both men and women can respect and love each other. However, it is noted that both literatures differ in how women should view their statuses in this family life, in which the Arab women in the pre-Islamic era adopt the submissive attitude to their spouses, whereas in the American literature the women should negotiate their status with their spouses based on their belief that the family life should be based on equality and partnership between the wives and husbands. This is due the cultural differences between the cultures, in which the American culture gave women more freedom to negotiate their status and role in the family structure. In short, the mothers' pieces of advice in both literatures reflect the women's interest in having a happy family life and in preserving the conventionality of the domestic sphere for women as a safe place for them.

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