

GROOMING OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JANE AUSTEN AND LOUISA MAY ALCOTT'S CLASSICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses and compares the novels, Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice and Louisa May Alcott's Little Women in exploring the grooming aspects of young female adolescent girls and the related family dynamics in nineteenth century England and America. Grooming differs across borders and cultures, but the ultimate goal of grooming is to be, as John Locke asserts is to be useful persons to themselves and the society on attaining freedom and individuality in adulthood. This paper is multi-disciplinary in approach to the grooming patterns in the two novels drawing reference to parenting styles, family communication patterns and John Locke's socio-political theories. The impact of the family dynamics in grooming adolescent girls is mapped in reference to Maslow's Theory of motivation. In addition, the historical and social environments of aristocratic England and democratic America in Victorian era are significant in studying the upbringing, education and nurturing of the female protagonists on their journey to adulthood.

KEYWORDS: Grooming, Family dynamics, Pride and Prejudice, Little Women, Victorian Era

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INTRODUCTION

George Bernard Shaw writes, "Remember always that the only readable part of an autobiography is the writer's childhood and adolescence. Adult lives are all the same." (Shaw, Bernard 320) The works of Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott incorporate semi-autobiographical elements of the writers and cover the maiden years of their white knights that are the icons of morals and virtues in a changing social order while asserting their individuality and autonomy. The young girls in the Victorian Era were disadvantaged in having access to formal education in the gender-based society and were dependent on their parents or governesses for their limited education on domestic and social accomplishments. Parents, members of their family circles and the community were responsible for moulding their daughters into good wives and mothers. The industrial revolution broadened the personal aspirations of adolescent girls which were in conflict with the expectations of family, community and society.

The nineteenth-century aristocracy and democracy in England and America played a pivotal role in Austen and Alcott respectively. Their novels are experiences of family and society that affect the grooming and learning of their female protagonists during their maiden years. In Victorian England and America, the family values, principles and traditions that formed an integral part of grooming teenage daughters started declining with modernism and consumerism caused by the Industrial Revolution. The historical, political and social changes caused by religious enlightenment,

Napoleonic Wars and the Civil War transformed the physical, emotional and psychological lives of the young girls in their struggle to create an identity in the existing patriarchy.

Paternalism was the overriding principle governing societies in the nineteenth century before the feminist waves of change that initiated in America. Although paternalism was an ancient doctrine in the pre-capitalist agrarian society, it persisted with the modernization of the nineteenth century. Besides families, the church had a dominant role in the socialization of children, especially young girls that adapted them to society.

In Victorian England, obedience rather than self-improvement and independence was of utmost importance for the fairer sex. Austen opposed this view in her novels persuading her readers of the Era to inculcate habits of reading as a form of self-education. Austen did not rebel against the social patterns of her times and did not get involved in any organized feminist movement; however, she voiced her dislike for gender-based discrimination by crafting empowered heroines in her novels who could be role models to the young women of her times without defying the social obligation of marriage. Although a spinster Austen's heroines are emotionally dependent on their companions for self-education and ultimate happiness.

Nineteenth-century America was marked by a heightened sense of individualism and self-interest in response to America's twenty years of freedom from Britain. The heightened spirit of exploring the vast wilderness, west of their former colonies triggered a rugged individualism that replaced community-oriented thinking. This era also witnessed waves of immigration, the nightmare of the Civil War, the American Revolution, industrialization and modernization that altered the American economy and culture.

Ralph Waldo Emerson transformed the ruggedness of individualism into refinement and wilderness to Nature through his Transcendentalist philosophy. Emerson initiated a new generation of American writers divorced from European influence who later advocated women's rights and the anti-slavery movement in America. Alcott was greatly influenced by Emerson and her female protagonists are representatives of the middle-class or the working classes who experience individualism and autonomy in the ruggedness of nature in democratic America.

Austen and Alcott's novels compare and contrast in the participation and role of the family and community in instructing the minds and governing the actions of their adolescent daughters amidst the similarities and differences in the historical, political and social environments of their countries in nineteenth-century Victorian Era. Hard work and obedience to the husbands were a part of the domestic accomplishments of women expected from the dominance of the patriarchy. Hard work was considered to keep women away from idleness that leads to sin. Austen highlights the superficiality of Victorian England in outwardly and unreasonable judgments of women and high expectations of society when young girls had no access to formal education and neither had society empowered adults to take responsibility of educating the girls in the face of the social changes. As lifestyles changed because of class conflicts and social mobility, adults failed as parents in their responsibilities of guiding the daughters in being agreeable and morally upright.

Alcott describes the active participation of parents in grooming their adolescent daughters in New England faced with challenges of the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution that spread from England yet guided by principles of Transcendentalism and Christian virtues. The Woman's Rights Movements and the demand for the abolition of slavery triggered the need for liberty, freedom and autonomy for all its citizens, men and women which were the foundation of democracy. Women in Austen's England were expected to be passive and subdued to male domination and no desire for the personal ambition that empowers any form of independence. The American historians and political theorists claimed to

encourage individualism and self-esteem for their people over their parent country. The learning and grooming process in Alcott's novels is facilitated through travelling and learning from interesting people in the community or society and their closeness to nature which is a reflection of Alcott's education in her maiden years.

Comparing *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women*

The Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice* and the March family in *Little Women* draw similarities on the family structure. The Bennets with five daughters and the March family with four daughters live in nuclear families in the wilderness of the countryside of England and America respectively. Both the families belong to the middle-class but the March family is facing the crisis of poverty putting the family to hardships and struggles in meeting their physiological needs. The Bennet family may not be privileged to luxuries but are comfortable within the limited resources of Mr Bennet. Austen's heroine Elizabeth and Alcott's Jo are the second eldest daughters in their families. Although not the most beautiful among their sisters the two girls in the Victorian Era are role models for others.

Jo of *Little Women* is exposed to the freedom and liberty of democratic America and Elizabeth, although has the liberty to experience the world is bound by the superficiality of social expectations of society from women. Elizabeth and Jo are not fashionable; Jo is a tomboy and takes pride in her natural self but Elizabeth is often sneered at by the upper-middle class for her simplicity and modest appearance. However, Elizabeth takes pride in being a gentleman's daughter asserting her father's status by virtue of being from the landed gentry. Elizabeth the female protagonist is also the favourite daughter of Mr Bennet. She is introduced as a girl with intelligence, good sense of humour, presence of mind, pleasant disposition, confident and a well-accomplished lady.

The social class hierarchy and class mobility in Victorian England caused by the Industrial Revolution instilled a feeling of anxiety and competition among young girls in marrying a wealthy gentleman as Austen describes in *Pride and Prejudice* although she is an advocate of companionate marriage. Moreover, the English law of entailment would render Mrs Bennet and her daughters homeless in case of Mr Bennet's sudden demise. Alcott's Jo is faced with the challenge of poverty and social insecurity because of the Civil War and must be self-reliant in being responsible towards her family. The prevailing social turmoil affects family dynamics and the purpose of grooming their adolescent daughters. Mr Bennet lives an extravagant life by virtue of his status as a gentleman in Victorian Era and does not shoulder the responsibility of proper education for his daughters; Mr March has the spirit of patriotism for his nation and is serving in the Civil War. Both the protagonists idolize their fathers; Elizabeth is intelligent, high-headed like her father and has pride in her status whereas Alcott's Jo emulates her father in his sense of patriotism and looks forward to being engaged in the Civil War as a nurse. Elizabeth and Jo are groomed within the prevailing social context of the Era although Jo's grooming is unconventional as compared to Elizabeth. Elizabeth is groomed in a society of obedience whereas Jo is groomed in an environment of reason and autonomy based on the Transcendentalist philosophy that gained prominence in the Era. Jo voices her opinion openly and questions the social norms; Eliza also has the same apprehensions about the society she lives in but has to adapt to the rules and codes of conduct as there is no acknowledgement for individuality especially for women in a patriarchal order.

In analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the environment and society the two protagonists are destined to, they emerge as empowered women within the given challenges and limitations of their circumstances. Grooming of the young women and the participation of the family in their education at home, parents play a significant role in equipping the two young girls in being accomplished and enriching their experiences in adapting to the society. Elizabeth is able to

transcend her parents' faulty grooming through her self-education whereas Jo's family is a pillar of strength in her journey to self-actualization. Elizabeth's grooming has been directed to the benefit of the self and Jo has been groomed to think beyond the self in being useful to the community and humankind as part of the larger Universe.

When faced with the crisis of poverty and long separation from Mr March who is out to serve his nation in the Civil War, Mrs March shoulders the complete responsibility of her four daughters in meeting their physiological and emotional needs keeping them motivated and responsible in turn for their duties towards home. Mr March is the patriarchal head of the family both literally and figuratively. His absence is not taken for granted and Mrs March ensures that the girls conform to the family practices and rules. Mrs March takes control of the domestic and public spheres in performing a dual role of both parents, also maintaining strict discipline and obedience to the expectations of Mr March. As a parent, she grooms her children in the Transcendental way with a democratic spirit. The girls are domestically accomplished and learn from their duties, responsibilities, from nature and the environment in which they live. Mrs March has inculcated in her daughters the virtues of hard work, modesty, self-denial, self-reliance and charity.

Locke advises parents to teach their children the virtue of self-denial in order to develop traits of restraint and will power. On providing children with the opportunities to learn from experiences of the outside world Locke charges the parents the responsibility of engaging children in conversations with interesting people as their guests. Alcott's learning would be incomplete without the inputs and information shared by Emerson, Thoreau and other eminent learned family friends.

The Bennet family of *Pride and Prejudice* is financially and socially secured from Mr Bennet's Longbourn Estate; but the Bennet girls are put to hardships and struggles because of the parents' ignorance and insensitivity to the emotional needs and the social environment which hampers the social sensitivity of the daughters putting their grooming and education at doubt in social interactions. Mr Bennet is emotionally divorced from the family and Mrs Bennet is hysterical and subjective in judgment lacking education and reason in grooming her daughters according to the social conventions which are crucial for her daughters' future in finding a suitable gentleman. Mrs Bennet's interest lies only in gossips and marriage of her daughters in securing their lives subsequently. Mr Bennet is metaphorically the patriarchal head of the family and neither commands the respect of his wife or daughters except for Eliza the only person in the family to whom he can relate. Mrs Bennet is neither domestically nor socially accomplished and lacks family values, traditions or practices to ensure cohesiveness within the family. The Bennet parents do not participate in the learning and sharing process of their daughters; they are conventional about the marriage of their daughters but unconventional to their convenience of modernization caused by the Industrial Revolution. Mrs Bennet considers it below their status in the daughters being domestically accomplished.

The parenting styles as a function of grooming practices are significant to the approach of parents in instructing the minds of their maiden daughters and governing their actions in making them agreeable to the family, the community and the society. The Bennet parents represent Diana Baumrind's neglectful or uninvolved parenting style but Mr Bennet is an authoritative parent with Austen's heroine Eliza whom he believes bears a stark resemblance with him. Mrs Bennet is permissive in her parenting style with Lydia the youngest daughter with whom she is overindulgent. The Bennet parents lack consistency in their disposition towards their children posing to be incompetent role models for their daughters. The family exhibits the *laissez-faire* pattern of family communication with no meaningful communication and no expectations

from conformity to family conventions. Austen highlights the impact of modernization and consumerism on the ignorant minds that has a devastating effect on the innocent future of the country.

In contrast, the March family is characterized by an Authoritative parenting style which is supporting, encouraging and empowering for the March girls in raising their self-esteem in spite of tough financial conditions. With high conversation and high conformity to family rules and regulations, the March family is consensual in their patterns of family communication. The family environment is congenial for the physical, emotional and psychological development of the girls promoting the spirit of individualism, autonomy and self-reliance; unlike the conflicts and disputes within the Bennet family lacking mutual respect for each other. The March parents are a catalyst in the learning and personality development of their young girls and stimulate their growth in learning from the environment, experiences and interactions with the community by participating in the act of charity with their mother. Mrs Bennet grants excess freedom to her daughters in attending balls, dances and social events with the purpose of finding a suitable match for themselves, thus limiting their holistic learning and development making her daughters prey to outside influence.

Austen's Eliza and Alcott's Jo are representatives of the society they belong to, but Austen's Elizabeth learns through her intelligence and sharp observation that lays the foundation for her reason and wisdom in being agreeable yet asserting her individuality and autonomy in her marriage of mutual love and respect with Mr Darcy. Alcott's Jo is independent and self-reliant and her marriage is the consequence of her reason and wisdom, not emotions alone.

The grooming of Austen's Eliza and Alcott's Jo March contrast each other which is not just a function of family dynamics alone, but social values, traditions, morals and cultural practices that existed in nineteenth-century England and America. The semi-autobiographical accounts of the two women are reflected with reminiscing touches of their adolescence. Austen's emotional distance with her mother takes the form of ignorant mothers in her novels. Austen's mothers Mrs Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Price in *Mansfield Park* and Mrs Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* are ignorant mothers. On the other hand Alcott's reminiscence of her mother's hard work, sacrifice and endurance take the form of rebellion in her novels where she suggests spinsterhood as an alternative to marriage for her heroines, although she has a happy ending for them. Jo, in *Little Women*, Polly in *Rose in Bloom* and Polly in *An Old-Fashioned Girl* do not consider marriage as their ultimate destination. Austen remains reserved in her feminist voice but advocates the education of her female protagonists.

The Bennet sisters and the March sisters are groomed with a different approach to spinsterhood that distinguishes their approach to social conventions. The distinct attitude to spinsterhood as an alternative to marriage is highlighted in the novel when Jo is convinced about her future in being an old maid, "At twenty-five girls begin to talk about being old-maids but secretly resolve that they never will be. At thirty if sensible, console themselves learning to grow old gracefully."

(394) In Little Women Alcott Advises the Readers and Listeners

Don't laugh at the spinsters, dear girls... Even the sad sour sisters should be kindly dealt with because they have missed the sweetest part of life And looking at them with compassion, not contempt, girls in their bloom should remember that they too may miss the time. That rosy cheeks don't last forever, that silver threads will come in the bonnie brown hair(394)

Mrs Bennet cannot fathom the pain of spinsterhood for her daughters and bear the sufferings of being deemed as an old maid or governess who was at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Girls in Victorian Era married by twenty and a

married one commanded more respect than a single woman. Lydia the youngest daughter brings shame to the family in eloping with Wickham but boasts of being more respectable than her elder sisters when she is married to Wickham with Elizabeth's support because of the respect she earned by her good conduct. Mrs Bennet is hysterical about getting her daughters married and her anxiety fuels unlimited freedom for her daughters.

Although in democratic America an old single maid was not sneered at as much in aristocratic England Alcott's heroines like Austen's, find a suitable companion which ends in a companionate marriage. Austen and Alcott did not want their heroines to endure the emotional and psychological pain of spinsterhood that they undertook; in spite of modernization married women were certainly privileged to respect and status in society.

Mrs March of *Little Women* is stable and competent in guiding her daughters by encouraging their participation in happiness and hardships of the family in acquainting them with the practicalities of life and the true essence of bonding and unity. The Bennet sisters, except Elizabeth and her elder sister Jane are marked by superficiality and falsehood influenced by their mother's faulty guidance. Mrs Bennet is incompetent in grooming and governing her daughters as she lacks reason and wisdom. She appreciates Bingley and has a keen interest in him being her son-in-law when she judges him on his wealth and agreeableness on outward appearances, "... so much the man of fashion! So genteel and so easy! - He has always something to say to everybody." (50) Mrs Bennet is led to temptations of money and glamour of the society which makes her contemptuous of others with a feeling of competition.

Austen and Alcott lived in an era where women were judged by accomplishments, social graces and etiquettes, fashion and outwardly appearances. Females in the democratic era did not confine to male conventions but asserted their individuality in being equal with men. Consequently, parents played a significant role in grooming their daughters according to, or against patriarchal domination instilled by the consequences of the Industrial Revolution.

In grooming daughters for the society, while confining to social obligations, Mrs Bennet is short-sighted that restricts the proper personality development of her daughters who neither conform completely to the social norms neither are they domestically accomplished to make good housewives or represent their husband's status. Except for Eliza, the other sisters are not skilled in holding conversations required in social interactions because of their shallow knowledge and ignorance. Austen highlights in pointing to Eliza the importance of reading and self-education as an asset for women even in fulfilling the social obligation of marriage. Eliza's self-awareness and ability to acknowledge her areas of weaknesses enlightens her with reason and wisdom in accepting the follies of her parents in grooming them appropriately that brings a bad reputation to the family.

Mrs March has a vision for her daughters in being responsible citizens of democratic America irrespective of gender. She discourages her daughters into getting into a mercenary temptation in marriage and advises them in developing an individual identity by being self-reliant. For the March sisters, Christmas celebrations are synonymous to charity and kindness for humanity in keeping their temptations of fashion and expectations of gifts away. The Bennet sisters are restricted to balls, dances and social events that provide an opportunity for courtships and competition among eligible girls.

The Bennets are a dysfunctional family with no conformity to rules and discipline. The daughters have modelled the indifference, impulsiveness and disagreeableness of their mother Mrs Bennet except for Eliza who models her father. The March family is adaptive to each other, the community and the society. Mrs March is the idolized mother for whom wealth is not static but character and morals are the foundation of a true individual. Alcott holds the March sisters in high esteem by addressing them as good angels for their act of charity in parting with their share of food during Christmas.

Austen advises her readers to transcend the family and social dynamics through self-education that enables their individuality and self-empowerment. Austen holds her heroine in equal esteem for transcending the ignorance of their mother and the superficiality of the society that is subjective in judgment.

In understanding the broader context of grooming in Victorian England and America it is noteworthy to mention the concept of a gentleman in Austen's England and Alcott's America. It also highlights the respect that a woman could be privileged in the two countries of the authors' origin. Besides gentle birth and wealth, Austen judges the conduct and mannerisms of her male characters in social gatherings. On a visit to Mr Bingley at Hertfordshire, Mr Darcy along with Mr Bingley is introduced to the Bennet sisters at a ball which according to Austen plays a crucial role in courtship. The attitude and behaviour of the two friends at the ball towards the young ladies are contrasting which Jane Austen conveys through the first impressions formed at first sight although, as the novel progresses she convinces the readers to be empathetic towards her male protagonist Mr Darcy. Jane Bennet also is known as Ms Bennet by virtue of being the eldest daughter of the Bennets according to Regency Era customs; she comments about Mr Bingley, a handsome and wealthy friend of Mr Darcy "He is just what young man ought to be..sensible, good-humoured, lively and I never saw such happy manners! so much ease with such perfect breeding." (14) Through Jane's comments, one is convinced of Mr Bingley's gentlemanly aura. At the ball, the conversation between Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy when Mr Darcy comments on being asked to dance with Elizabeth the female protagonist and the second daughter of the Bennets 'She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me.'(11) It is evident from his talks that Mr Darcy is class-conscious, proud and arrogant and Austen satirizes social class by mocking at his disagreeable nature. Austen projects class differences by highlighting Mr Darcy's demeaning attitude towards Elizabeth Bennet, although he falls in love with her later on. Austen is optimistic about the social class of the new middle class, the tradesman, and merchants to which the two friends belong to, but her introduction of Mr Bingley gives her perception of a gentleman as not determined by wealth alone. Austen emphasizes the power and influence of the landed gentry through Mr Bennet. Through her portraits of Mr Bennet, Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy of different birth order and inheritance, Austen highlights social conduct as the key to a gentleman amidst class mobility and social turmoil of the late 18th and early 19th century caused by the Industrial Revolution.

Through the themes of courtship and marriage, Austen has also projected that being socially adept and socially graced is equally important for women and also increases the chances of prospective grooms. Although rejected by Mr Darcy for a dance at the first ball Elizabeth's conduct and behaviour captivate Mr Darcy who falls in love with her. Austen is optimistic about being of noble birth and status associated with being the landed gentry, but she lays emphasis on chivalry for a gentleman and being well accomplished for a lady in identifying an individual to the social class they belong to. On the other hand Lydia, fifteen years old and the youngest of the Bennet sisters is an impulsive, self-centred girl thoroughly spoilt by her mother. Breaking Regency Era rules of conduct she is encouraged by Mrs Bennet to attend balls and social gatherings at the age of fifteen. She elopes with the wicked Wickham put the family reputation at stake not realizing that she has four elder sisters to be married. Although Mr Darcy comes to her rescue and forces Wickham to marry her, the credit goes to Elizabeth because of the love and respect she has earned from Mr Darcy by virtue of her proper conduct.

Alcott emphasizes politeness to women as being a gentleman. Mrs March addresses their neighbour's son Laurie as a gentleman for his acts of kindness, mannerisms and etiquettes respect for women without discriminating, and has no mention of class, wealth or status. Alcott highlights in *Little Women*, " Gentlemen, be courteous to the old maids, no matter

how poor and plain and prim, for the only chivalry worth having is that which is the readiest to pay deference to the old, protect the feeble, and serve womankind, regardless of rank, age or colour.” (394)

On their journey to adulthood, Austen's Eliza and Alcott's Jo experience transient moments of self-actualization in transcending beyond the external environment. Eliza has to overcome the basic needs of Maslow's Hierarchy to be motivated in experiencing self-actualization. The Bennet family does not contribute to a large extent in grooming her for society, rather are responsible for being a hurdle in creating Eliza's low self-esteem by being socially disagreeable. The March family supports Jo in her individuality and learning that empowers her to experience the peaks of self-actualization. The difference in their experiences is encouraged or constrained by the political, social and historical events in nineteenth-century England and America.

CONCLUSIONS

Home is a significant social environment which is crucial to the socialization process of the adolescent girls highlighted in the novels. ‘Charity begins at home’ and the family is responsible for inculcating right habits and virtues while ensuring discipline and adherence to family values, beliefs and traditions. The domestic morality of the mothers and the daughters in the novels of the two women writers mirrors the impact of education and ignorance that shape the character and self-esteem of their growing adolescent girls. Austen and Alcott are in synchronization with John Locke’s *Philosophy on the Education of Children* in acknowledging the critical role of both parents in educating them at home in order that they are groomed in accomplishments, morals and virtues. Alcott’s parents are an example of Authoritative parenting style; Baumrind’s best parenting style whereas Austen’s parents are physically or emotionally divorced from the welfare of their young adolescent daughters in assisting them and providing appropriate guidance and hence the Bennet parents are not representatives of ideal parenting styles. Family Communication patterns differ in the two novels which reflects the influence meaningful conversations have on the young minds in instructing them and governing their actions. The journey to self-actualization and ultimate happiness of the novels’ heroines are a function of the social, political and historical environments that distinguish the two cultures.

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