

# Strong Education and Strong Family as the Premise to Sound Grooming in the Novels of Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott

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**Abstract**— *For the young adolescent girls, the home was a model of feminine values, morals and ideals that they imbibed by observing and understanding the separate gender-based roles and responsibilities of their parents. Conformity to social norms distinguished an angelic woman from a fallen woman. In the nineteenth century Victorian Era, child grooming and rearing was different from its predecessors depending on the differences in classes. This paper compares Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility with Louisa May Alcott's Rose in Bloom particularly their female protagonists to highlight the role of family in instructing, guiding and mentoring their children in order to be socially agreeable. In addition, this paper alludes to John Locke's philosophy on the education of children, psychological theories and Maslow's theory of motivation. In the absence of a formal education, parents, siblings and the family circles contributed significantly to the overall development of young maidens.*

**Keywords**— *Nineteenth century, Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, Rose In Bloom, Sense and Sensibility and Victorian Era.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The wave of change that initiated in the eighteenth century shifted the focus of writers on children and the influence of families in grooming their adolescent children, especially girls in developing individuality and ultimate happiness. The socio-political theory propounded by John Locke towards child upbringing and grooming; besides Daniel Defoe's philosophy on the nature of marriage influenced Jane Austen.

These new beliefs gave rise to 'affective individualism' and companionate marriage', which differed from the traditional values of the patriarchal family structure. The transition between the two values systems is depicted in the novels of Jane Austen, whose influence is highlighted in the

grooming of the young adolescent girls. With reference to the American families, Tocqueville praises this new family model based on Locke's philosophy, as "more ultimate and sweeter." (Tocqueville, "Democracy" 561) Louisa May Alcott asserts reason and ultimate freedom for her female protagonists through self-reliance, abiding by Locke's philosophy in the grooming and education of children.

Tocqueville's observation of families in America validates Locke's philosophy by pointing out to the democratic approach of America and American families as opposed to the families of the aristocratic society of the ancient and medieval worlds. He further asserts that democracy involves the interaction among individuals, and hence cannot work simply with fathers, as is the modus operandi with aristocratic society. The aristocratic society is hierarchy based whereas the democratic society equates individuals and family members as equal.

Tocqueville writes, "American women marry only when their reason is exercised and mature, while elsewhere most women begin to exercise their reason and become mature in it, only with marriage". (Tocqueville, "Democracy" 566). For American women, marriage is a symbiotic relationship based on mutualism benefitting both. Political theories of Plato and Aristotle have emphasized the importance of families in grooming their children to become men reasonable and rational individuals in society.

## II. COMPARING SENSE AND SENSIBILITY AND ROSE IN BLOOM

Born of privileged inheritance Marianne Dashwood in Austen's Sense and Sensibility and Rose Campbell in Alcott's *Rose in Bloom* are under the guidance of a single parent; both are devoid of the love, nurturance and guidance of their biological father following their untimely death. Both the girls are faced with the challenge of finding their way in society.

Marianne is under the guidance and influence of her ignorant mother Mrs Dashwood, characteristic of Austen's flawed mothers whom Marianne models in her sensibilities causing her pain and hardships through her adolescence. Like Rose, Marianne is born to a wealthy father from the upper middle class but is rendered destitute along with her mother and two sisters, Elinor and Margaret because of the English tradition and practice of entailment in nineteenth-century England.

Alcott's Rose is an orphan whose responsibility has been shouldered by her uncle Dr Allec, a physician. The grooming of Alcott's Rose in Aunt Hill is not limited to her uncle but the Campbells who live in close proximity within the same neighbourhood. Along with Aunt Plenty, her other aunts, uncles and her seven cousin brothers Rose have befriended her maid Phebe with whom she shares a sisterly bond.

Both Austen and Alcott have emphasized the spirit of sisterhood for women in the Victorian Era. Marianne shares the same bond with her elder sister Elinor whom she later acknowledges as her mentor and guide when she finds herself trapped in the hornet's nest. Rose is not financially a burden on Uncle Allec as he is also the custodian of her fortune that she inherited from her father; whereas Mr Dashwood has failed to secure the future of his wife and four daughters.

With similar circumstances and challenges to overcome, the traditional and cultural practices of nineteenth-century England positions Marianne in a formidable state as compared to her counterpart in America. The Campbells are united as a family and a community that places Rose in an advantageous position whereas Marianne and her family are at the mercy of the little kindness of a distant relative of her mother who assists them in establishing a modest living by themselves.

Rose is brought up in a healthy and congenial environment and her motherly love is compensated by Aunt Plenty the spinster aunt of Uncle Phebe with whom she lives along with Uncle Allec. The environment of equality prevails in Aunt Hill within the Campbell family where Aunt Plenty is respected for her sacrificial role for the family and her maid and friend Phebe Moore is treated as a daughter. Rose is also privileged to her voyage around the world and the finishing school she attends in spite of no formal education. Uncle Allec believes in Locke's philosophy of the superiority of grooming and educating the young minds at home over formal education. Rose is well-turned out and confident and her interaction with her cousin

brothers has given her strength in asserting her individuality in being equal to them.

The environment Marianne has witnessed is of abandonment, conflicts, competition within the family circle and deceit that instils feelings of inferiority and self-depreciation in her. Marianne is emotional and models her mother's sensibilities that lead to her impulsiveness and irrationalism. In patriarchal nineteenth-century England, Marianne lacks the emotional and moral support of an adult male and the Dashwood women have to face the discrimination of male patriarchy without the social standing they commanded with Mr Dashwood.

The genuine concern in actions and not words alone that the community and society of nineteenth-century England have for the Dashwood women is limited and the process of decision-making of the future course of action is dependent on male relatives. Alcott's Rose does not experience any discrimination on account of gender or status within the Campbell family in democratic America.

Rose is not inclined to fashion or marriage and even regrets for the fortune she inherits because she equates herself with Phebe and wants to work hard to create her own identity and pave her way in society in asserting her individuality. Rose is empathetic and inclined to philanthropy and charity work. She is an advocate of Woman's Rights, defends Phebe's position in the family and role models Aunt Plenty for her hard work and sense of dedication in being a spinster. Rose feels upset about not being able to be equally useful to the family in being a part of them. Rose's exposure through Uncle's guidance, mentorship and governance of her actions empowers Rose to reason and wisdom which according to Locke is the aim of education. Austen's heroines are handicapped in being self-reliant since the aristocratic society in the nineteenth century did not expect a woman to be concerned of economics left with the choice of marriage. The choice of being a governess or a maid reduced their status besides being alienated in society.

Marianne is bound by the societal norms and being left to her destiny with her family fights to pave her way in society. Marianne's identity and status depend on marrying a wealthy gentleman and if reasonable and rational in her decision-making, of finding happiness in a companionate marriage. Marianne is neither groomed to be self-reliant herself when her mother is dependent on her cousin brother, Mr Middleton. Like Austen's female characters Marianne cannot fathom the thought of spinsterhood as an alternative to marriage especially when experiencing the absence of her

father. Marianne is overwhelmed with the superficiality of the society in proving her status and worth in captivating the deceptive Willoughby. She is bewitched by his physical appearances and false character and has pride in her youth when she rejects the gentlemanly Col Brandon for his genuineness and strength of character. Marianne is blinded by her mother's overindulgence and support and ignores Elinor's advises in her feeling of superiority.

Like Rose, she is not privileged to formal education but also lacks good grooming and guidance at home. Marianne has not been groomed to be socially graceful and accomplished putting her in a disadvantageous position in society becoming an object of judgment for society. Marianne is trapped in paving her way in society by establishing her status through marriage. In discovering and experiencing the society she lacks reason and wisdom in judging people and circumstances. Her world is confined to appearances, money and status highlighting her ignorance. Marianne is emotional and gullible making her a victim of an emotional breakdown and bad reputation.

Austen highlights the insensitivity of the community and society for the condition of the Dashwood women where they are judged by their pre-defined codes of conduct. The Campbell family is closely united and has pride in each other; Rose is equally proud of her cousin brothers whom she holds in high esteem. The family is bound by the spirit of co-operation, brotherhood and unity. Rose's cousins are protective of her and have genuine concern in each other's well-being.

Rose is candid about Charlie overcoming his bad habits and vices and enables his self-realization. Moreover, Rose is not controlled by her emotions; rather she puts forth her boldness in confronting the patriarchal views of her cousins. Rose wants to model Uncle Allec in being a doctor like him but she willingly offers the opportunity to her cousin Mac who models Uncle Allec too.

Mrs Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* is ignorant, overindulgent and trusts her daughters blindly making her a model of negligent parenting style for which she has to face the consequences of Marianne's follies in society. Marianne's priority is her relationships in society rather than her family and prone to peer pressure; she is competitive and like her mother is over-confident in society. She under-estimates her family although she realizes her mistakes and is hurt emotionally.

Uncle Allec is an authoritative father and supports Rose's decisions with constant guidance and maintaining a close observation. He is protective about her and in

experiencing the world; he does not restrict her freedom but constrains it by encouraging confiding her experiences within frequent intervals. He is pro-active in warning her of the consequences as he cannot bear the burden in his heart if she fails in her judgment of people or be hurt in the process. Rose is positively encouraged to conform to family rules and regulations and respect the traditions and cultures through meaningful conversations and interactions with the Campbell family.

Uncle Allec shares family time with his aunt, Aunt Plenty and Rose during meals conforming to their traditions and sharing information within the family. Uncle Allec is consensual in his patterns of family communication ensuring consensus among family matters. Aunt Plenty takes important decisions on family matters and the household by virtue of being the eldest in the family.

Mrs Dashwood neither educates her daughters on family beliefs, values and culture and neither did she expect any conformity to family norms. Mrs Dashwood does not invest time with her daughters in meaningful conversations or guiding them and motivating them in the absence of their father. Although she is supportive of their actions and decisions she lacks wisdom in guiding them to reason and rationalism. Mrs Dashwood characterizes the laissez-faire pattern of family communication which leads to conflicts between personal interests and social interests. The faulty parenting style and the patterns of family communication complemented with Mrs Dashwood's ignorance have a negative impact on the grooming of Marianne to sense. However, Marianne is fortunate that Elinor takes on the paternal role after their father's death that comes to her rescue in paving her path to realization.

As a fatherly figure, Elinor is authoritative in her parenting style and pluralistic in her patterns of family communication characterized by high conversation and low conformity. Rose indulges in regular and meaningful conversations with Marianne guiding her, advising her and warning her of the consequences. But Unlike Alcott's Rose who is protected from the environment by Uncle Allec, Marianne is not as fortunate and bears the burden of her pains and sufferings.

The Dashwood family is low in conformity to traditional family structure characterized by heterogeneous values and morals. Marianne is disrespectful of her elders including her elder sister for which she regrets later; she is concerned for her personal growth over family interests. Encouraged by the mother, Marianne believes in independence, private space and diversity in thoughts, values, beliefs and attitudes.

Elinor's patience and guidance enlightens Marianne to acknowledge her sensibility that she inherited from her mother and overcome her pains and sufferings to thrive on the road to self-actualization. Like Austen's other heroines, Marianne has to transcend her basic needs as defined by Maslow's Needs Hierarchy and heighten her self-esteem in order to be self-actualized. Marianne's sister, mentor and friend Elinor plays a significant role with Austen's spirit of sisterhood in the patriarchal society. Marianne regains her lost esteem through her self-awareness and self-introspection and experiences happiness and peak moments of self-actualization in her marriage with Col Brandon. Marianne learns to accept herself, the society and her environment in acquiring Elinor's sense in being logical and sensible in her judgment of society. Marianne's lack of reading limits her awareness of the world around her but Elinor's support and the sisterly affections supplement her past ignorance. Austen's heroines are limited to the spirit of sisterhood with one of the sisters and are in constant conflict with their mother and othersiblings.

Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* bonds with her elder sister Jane and Aunt Gardiner; Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* with her younger sister Susan and Marianne with her elder sister Elinor. Like Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice* Elinor is the second daughter of the Dashwoods. Rose in *Rose in Bloom* is privileged for her distinct grooming under the tutelage of Uncle Allec and is in high self-esteem.

Rose is independent and autonomous asserting her individuality in being equal to the Campbell boys highlighted by Alcott in her marriage with her cousin Mac that represents a symbiotic relationship of love and learning. Rose ascends on Maslow's Needs hierarchy during her adolescent years after returning from Europe and attending a finishing school. Rose experiences transient moments of self-actualization that enhances her confidence and self-worth in being a part of the larger Universe. Alcott's female characters differ in the spirit of sisterhood from their parent counterparts; Rose shares this bond with Phebe and Aunt Plenty asserting equality irrespective of age, money and status, similar to Polly in *An Old Fashioned Girl*. Austen's sisterhood is restricted to the family circle and status.

In Victorian England, the Industrial Revolution which instilled a voice against the unfair advantage of the aristocracy was the outcome of the rising middle-class or the nouveau rich who earned a fortune and joined the race in social class mobility. The challenged faced by Austen's heroines is the ignorance of their mothers and the casual attitude of the fathers in grooming them and assisting them

in discovering the world with grace and dignity owing to unrestrained liberty.

Austen's fathers are extravagant and indulge in hobbies the author highlights as an emulation of the aristocratic lifestyles that trickled down the social hierarchy because of social class mobility. The middle class in Victorian England took pride in associating with the upper-class in having high connections. Austen's heroines are mostly well-read if not well-bred protecting them from their faulty grooming and preparing them to be educated mothers in a socially changing environment. Alcott's heroines are virtuous and assist the family financially in being self-sufficient.

The Industrial Revolution and The Civil War caused the working and poor class to depend on their adolescent daughters to earn a living and support the family. Alcott's Jo in *Little Women* and Polly in *An Old-Fashioned Girl* take responsibility in supporting their younger brothers and sisters in pursuing their dreams and goals. Rose in *Rose in Bloom* hails from a well-to-do family but believes in individual identity and contentment through charity work.

Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott wrote during an era most challenging for women owing to social changes. As precursors of change for their respective cultures and societies, they mirrored the lives of young women in Victorian England and America which was not a bed of roses. Their novels are a source of introspection for young women in balancing their personal desires and social expectations.

### III. CONCLUSION

Austen's characters do not question the social obligation of marriage in finding true happiness, but find genuine love and companionship in their husbands based on mutual respect and common moral values. Further, Austen's characters are dependent emotionally and financially on their husbands whereas Alcott's characters look inwards and are self-dependent for true happiness. Moreover, Alcott's female characters are a pillar of strength and moral support for their families.

Mrs Dashwood represents the ignorant mothers of Austen's novels whose faulty parenting styles and family communication patterns have a devastating impact on the grooming of her daughters in being educated and socially agreeable. Uncle Allec of *Rose in Bloom* is an example of authoritative parenting style encouraging meaningful conversations and conformity to the family values, beliefs and traditions. Alcott's parents are models of John Locke's educated individuals who have been groomed by the family

in being useful to themselves, the community and society. Alcott's heroines are not in competition with other women rather competing with themselves in learning from the family and the environment they live in. Austen's heroines are models of Locke's parents in a revolutionizing and changing era, unlike their parents who are empowered through self-awareness and self-education. Austen and Alcott have sculptured their heroines with a beauty that is skin deep and appreciated in their societies.

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