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**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **The Road Less Trodden in Jo's Journey to Self-Actualization in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women***

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**Article History:** Submitted-12/06/2019, Revised-30/08/2019, Accepted-04/09/2019, Published-10/09/2019.

### **Abstract:**

The historical, economic, social and political events of the nineteenth century had a profound impact on the lives of women and the writings of women. *Little Women*, written and published in 1868 is Louisa May Alcott's semi-autobiographical novel where Jo March her female protagonist mirrors her personality and her life. The fictional life of Jo March coincides with the real life of Louisa May Alcott depicting the challenges and experiences of a woman in a patriarchal social order and the limited opportunities available to them, yet being subjects of judgment by the conservative societies. This paper focuses on the growth and development of Jo March in Victorian America when demand for equality of women became the dominant voice in society. Louisa May Alcott was conditioned in a transcendental environment which had a great impact on her writings which are also in agreement with John Locke's philosophy of education. The family's role in informal education plays a pivotal role in *Little Women* that empowers Jo on her journey to self-actualization.

**Keywords:** Victorian America, Little Women, Louisa May Alcott, Locke's philosophy, Transcendentalism.

### 1.1 Introduction:

Transcendentalism or New England Transcendentalism (1836-1847) was a movement that found expression in America during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The members of a minority group of activists and intellectuals, included philosophers, religious leaders, poets, essayists, teachers, social reformers among others. They were in search of truth and liberty and took a keen interest in literature, philosophy, social reform as well as the Church; but refused to be confined by any creed. They organised clubs where they gathered and discussed their philosophy and also met at Amos Bronson Alcott's School of Philosophy in Concord, Massachusetts. Their metaphysical and abstract ideas were criticized by many. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Alcott's father, Bronson Alcott were the prominent leaders, among others. Louisa herself attended many meetings that shaped her personality in bloom.

Bronson Alcott involved himself caring and observing his elder two daughters, Anna and Louisa during infancy. Steered by the transcendental philosophy, he was engaged in the grooming of his daughters from an early age. Besides reading and writing in their father's study, the children played with books and dictionaries, constructing bridges and houses. Bronson adopted the 'Socratic' method of teaching that he used in the Temple School, encouraging children to engage in dialogues, giving way for self-expression. Bronson's observation of children right from the cradle and involvement in the education of his children by a practice-based approach is in agreement with Locke's philosophy of education for children. The active participation of Alcott's parents through her early years into adolescence and her experiences of sisterly affection and bonding are reflected in *Little Women*.

In grooming a child, John Locke a political theorist argues about the importance of the education of both the mind and the body which enables practical knowledge. In grooming to self-sufficiency, Locke asserts the development of reason through education that makes them useful to themselves and mankind. In Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, he reinforces the family education as a private activity with utmost public significance. While comparing school education and family education, he emphasizes the importance of education at home in acquiring virtues. For him, school education could be substituted at home through the guidance of the father or a tutor. In grooming children, parents play a crucial role in inculcating healthy habits that endure through adulthood. For this, physical and mental habits aid in developing virtues while avoiding vices.

In America, the lives of the nineteenth century Victorian women were simpler yet difficult. Women from the middle and working class households woke up early, completed household chores, sent children to school and also went to work to support their families; for the rural families dinner was the main meal whereas for the urban it was supper. The American Civil War also opened up a number of challenging opportunities to women in America which included nursing, spying and soldiering but post-war many women resumed their household responsibilities. Although unacceptable, women working outside their homes took to being teachers, seamstresses, millers, washerwomen etc. while those educated chose to be a teacher or a governess. Mrs March, the mother of Jo, the female protagonist in *Little Women* is the unconventional Victorian mother when she advises her children, "better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands," (Alcott, "Little Women" 88) She values individuality, self-respect and character more than wealth, and accepts poverty with a smile encouraging and motivating her children when she senses despair in their voices, and knows what keeps them happy.

Louisa May Alcott's America witnessed the debate of women and their roles in the domestic and public spheres of life. The women's rights movement, with which Alcott identified herself, was suspected of posing a threat to the home and the men. Alcott's characters in her novels encourage suffrage and women's individuality and discuss women's rights and roles. However, she does not discourage or prevent women from their domestic roles of being a wife and a mother. Alcott had progressive views of women.

Alcott achieved her passions, dreams and goals and chose to be a free spinster and a true feminist. Her writings proved Alcott to be a true novelist appealing the youthful readers with local and universal values and establishing the ultimate rightful place in literary history. Her description of the domestic life and female adolescent psychology earned her love, fame and reputation of the young readers. Alcott's fame can be attributed to the success of "Little Women" based on humble home and family life she reminiscence with her sisters. She proved to be pivotal for the rise of American women fiction where her female protagonists experience self-actualization.

Self-actualization is the intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism or more accurately of what the organism is." ("A Theory of Human Motivation") For Maslow self-actualization was the ultimate purpose of behaviour. Abraham Maslow, a Jewish psychologist was one of the

founding humanistic psychologists. According to Maslow's humanistic theory of personality, people move from basic needs to self-actualization to achieve their full potential. As the pioneer of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow approached the study of personality psychology by focusing on subjective experiences and free will.

## **1.2 Analysis of Jo's Journey to Adulthood:**

Jo, a mirror image of Alcott herself is a tomboy who enjoys sports and outdoor activities with her friend, Laurie living in the neighbourhood and is always up to some mischief. She is fifteen years, tall, slim and brown with long limbs like that of a colt. She is outspoken with her comical nose and grey eyes and long, thick hair which are a distraction to her in her outdoor pursuits. She is gifted with the art of writing. During the family's financial crisis, she agrees to work as a companion to Aunt March; the only attraction being Uncle March's huge library where she thought she could read.

Jo is nostalgic about the library where she built railroad and bridges in her childhood with Uncle March and learnt the play game method, the transcendental way where all the elders of the consociate living contributed to a child's learning and grooming. She is frank, honest with a good sense of humour. In her teens, Jo is rebellious and disagrees with her sisters getting into arguments, and refuses to dress and act according to the societal expectations from a young girl. Meg her elder sister and close companion advise her, " You are old enough to leave off boyish tricks, and to behave better, Josephine.

It didn't matter so much when you were a little girl, but now you are so tall, and turn up your hair, you should remember that you are a young lady." (Alcott, 5) Jo rebels against the stereotypical Victorian image of a woman in being free-spirited and adventurous seeking freedom from the monotonous life of a Victorian woman with a will to remain in her adolescence. Jo remarks, " ... It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway..." (5).

She wants to join her father in the Civil War and is full of remorse with her destiny in being restricted to home and knitting. She even advises Lawrie, her friend living in the neighbourhood to leave his grandfather and sail away in a boat to pursue his freedom to which her elder sister checks her for the bad advice in shirking one's duties and responsibilities towards the family. She

dislikes being a girl and associates herself with her fatherly qualities. She is treated like the son of the house and refuses to conform to the typical stereotype of a Victorian female. Jo's liberty is constrained with her elder sister, Meg around who ensures she behaves lady-like in public.

Jo is reminded of the mannerisms of dressing, body language and conversation skills with strangers in society during a party they attend at Mrs Gardiner's house. Jo is innocent, frank and always seeks adventure which she is sure to get. She has a good sense of humour which impresses the Uncle John, ".You've got your grandfather's spirit if you haven't his face. He was a fine man, my dear, but what is better, he was a brave and an honest one, and I was proud to be his friend." (47) Jo is honest and bold, and could win over hearts with her simplicity; unlike her sister Meg, she is practical and not sentimental. Jo's journey to self-actualization begins when she undergoes self-realization of the damage her temper can do in hampering her life ahead.

Her anger almost cost her, her sister Amy's life when she ignored Amy during outdoor sports with Laurie which she repents for. On her journey to self-actualization, Jo has to overcome her temper, her biggest bosom enemy which flames up and defeats her. According to Maslow, an individual has to overcome one's internal conflict, fears, doubts, and the expectations of the society which has pre-defined notions of being acceptable. In accepting her weakness and the need to overcome it, she exhibits the 'problem-centeredness' trait of Maslow's self-actualized individuals.

In being oneself, one has to nurture one's capacities with awareness, honesty and self-introspection so that one is free to respond to internal and external events in the form of values. Jo takes responsibility for her actions and behaviour. Marmee's patience, the humility on her face and the confidence she instils in her girls, is a pillar of strength to Jo during that hour of regret. Marmee advises Jo, "Watch and pray, dear, never get tired of trying, and never think it is impossible to conquer your fault." (71) Jo is in a fit of disappointment over herself for having to do something dreadful someday and cries to Marmee for her help. Marmee educates her on anger and temptations as types of self-denial, which Alcott learnt during her adolescence from her mother Abigail Alcott.

Marmee remarks, "... resolve with all your soul that you will never know another like it. Jo, dear, we all have our temptations, some far greater than yours, and it often takes us all our lives to conquer them. ..." (71) Marmee is her role model and she idolizes her in overcoming her

weakness of anger from her mother who actually has learnt to appear so calm and composed on the surface without letting the family know it, which has taken her forty years to do so.

Marmee reminds her of the sacrifice she has made for the country by letting her beloved husband in the Civil War, and how she controlled her emotions because her faith in the Almighty gave her strength for a happier future. Marmee's faith and confidence in her children touches Jo when Marmee discloses, "A startled or surprised look from one of you when I spoke sharply rebuked me more than any words could have done, and the love, respect, and confidence of my children was the sweetest reward I could receive for my efforts to be the woman I would have them copy." (72) Jo has been groomed in the March family where all the members respect each other's individuality.

Marmee supports Jo's individuality by believing in God: ... 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. ...." (73) Jo is casual about household chores but Marmee educates her on the importance of being domestically accomplished without hurting her dignity, "Suppose you learn plain cooking. That's a useful accomplishment, which no woman should be without." (105) Marmee's grooming has made Jo obedient and receptive to overcoming her weaknesses.

She agrees to work like a bee while enjoying her work and promises Marmee to learn plain cooking for her holiday task, and be a success the next dinner party she has." But she understands the importance of being useful to the neighbours and community she lives in; she is on her way to rising above herself from the grooming being promulgated by Marmee. The spontaneity Jo exhibits in accepting herself drive her to achieve self-actualization.

She remains undeterred by conventions; are autonomous and self-motivated. Marmee's support helps Jo in transcending earthly temptations and ego, awakening the spiritual tendencies according to Maslow the "Fourth Force" in the hierarchy of needs. Marmee advises Jo to have faith in God and communicate with her sorrows, problems, hopes and sins as she goes to Marmee.

Jo achieves the self-realization of keeping the bitterness of remorse and despair at bay and her openness to the learning of self-denial and self-control for long lasting and ultimate happiness.



Jo's self-esteem is heightened with her mother's praise and commendation, which according to Locke is the much-awaited reward from parents. Marmee's appreciation for Jo instills a desire in her of becoming a good girl with more seriousness. The letter is encouraging for Jo when Marmee notices her efforts in controlling her temper and writes, "[...]. Go on, dear, patiently and bravely, and always believe that no one sympathizes more tenderly with you than your loving-Mother." (108) Like her mother, Jo is full of pleasant surprises for Marmee and her sisters and as she learns to control her temper with Marmee's support; she proves her worth in being an accomplished writer. Two of her stories are printed in the paper, and the name 'Josephine March' infuses her with the happiness of being self-reliant and the help she can render to her sisters.

Her self-realization "to be independent and earn the praise of those she loved were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step towards the happy end." (140) Jo learns to sacrifice her temptations and transcend her own self in being useful to herself by keeping the needs of the family before her own personal desires. When Father is ill, she proudly sacrifices her prized possession, her beautiful long hair for a few dollars to help her ailing father. Her mother's words, "There is always light behind the clouds" (148) comfort her. Self-actualizing individuals are not self-centred, rather other-centred and devoted to their duties.

Jo overcomes her temptation of money or wealth as necessary for marriage with Marmee's grooming of virtues and love over worldly pleasures. She explains to Jo: Money is a good and useful thing, Jo, and I hope my girls will never feel the need of it too bitterly, nor be tempted by too much. ... I'm not too 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... (182) Marmee convinces Jo on genuine happiness through her experience, and Jo never questions her but accepts her family values. Jo is autonomous, characteristic of self-actualized individuals is stable and consistent in the face of hard knocks and free from anxiety.

The change is visible when Father returns from the war after a year and notices the transformation in Jo from a wild, adventurous tomboy to a young lady, and appreciates her for being helpful, strong and tender-hearted, and commends her for the twenty-five dollars she sent for Father. Like Alcott herself, Jo is independent and is not convinced about marriage, telling Lawrie, "I'm not one of the agreeable sorts. Nobody will want me, and it's a mercy, for there should always be one old maid in a family." (222) Like the self-actualized, Jo has a philosophical



sense of humour, joking on herself and treating them as learning metaphors. For her, friendship and adventures with Laurie highlight the male-female friendship without the motive of marriage and the changing stereotypical roles of women in the nineteenth century. She does not want to sacrifice her friendship for the traditional Victorian romance, thus asserting her individuality.

According to Maslow, Jo's affection and friendship for Laurie is the 'peak experience' of the self-actualized who do not form intimate relations easily. As fortune smiles on Jo with the recognition of her literary expressions, she is in a conflict between fame and money considering cash more important than money getting impatient to publish her works but seeks the advice of her parents who are a pillar of strength at all times.

Father advises her to be patient and Marmee explains to her, " Criticism is the best test of such work, for it will show her [Jo] both unsuspected merits and faults, and help her[Jo] to do better next time. We are too partial, but the praise and blame of outsiders will prove useful, even if she gets but less money. (242) Jo's father likes the metaphysical streak in her writings, which is typical of Transcendentalism and reflects Alcott's own influence. According to Maslow's hierarchy, Jo has transcended the physical plane and mirrors her peak experiences.

Maslow points out the two processes essential for self-actualization as self-exploration and action. The deeper the self-exploration, the closer one comes to self-actualisation. As a governess in New York, she meets Professor Bhaer, a fatherly figure working as a tutor whose intellect and principles she admires, in spite of his appearance and appalling table manners. Jo's democratic attitude towards the Professor is a peak experience of the self-actualized. The self-awareness of herself endows her with the acceptance of others. As a teacher, he offers Jo the formal education she aspires for and together they are able to start a school of their own. They share a symbiotic relationship based on mutual trust which according to Tocqueville is the outcome of American democracy.

The marriage based on Locke's philosophy of husbands and wives being equal and a companionate marriage is materialized, and Jo's individualism does not reduce her to a typical Victorian housewife. Her marriage to Professor Bhaer is based on reason and rationalism rather than status or money. On the personal and professional front, Jo is able to fulfil the expectations of the family and society, while pursuing her ambitions.

Marmee's sowing and reaping enable Jo, in her quest for self-actualization while making her family proud and securing the reputation of the family from being an old maid. On her journey to

self-actualization, Jo is faced with anger and temptation, types of self-denial which she has to overcome; but her strength is being an accomplished writer which she is able to capitalize. Grooming of the March parents, especially Marmee's warmth and support is the key to her transcending the physical plane and experiencing the transpersonal, by releasing her ego and accepting herself, people around her, circumstances. Her closeness and love for nature, Marmee's preaching and her self-exploration enables her to further enhance her peak experiences and achieve self-actualization.

### **1.3 Conclusion:**

Alcott credits Jo's parents especially Marmee for her distinct grooming practices and being an ideal, virtuous mother who is a role model for Jo and her three sisters. Jo is able to overcome her weakness of short-temperedness because of her mother's patience and support. Jo is treated as the son of the house who in turn keeps up to her family's expectations and values. Marmee's unconventional grooming from the nineteenth century mothers in America empowers her daughter to autonomy and individuality. Jo is able to remain unaffected by culture through her sharp wit and individuality that she boldly takes 'The Road Less Trodden' for the nineteenth-century Victorian woman as she proudly walks into adulthood. Thus the philosophy of Transcendentalism was a way of life that strengthened the emotional equation of the young women of nineteenth century America on their journey of learning and growth.

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