

**TRANSCENDING VICTORIAN CULTURAL IMAGE OF THE ‘ANGEL
OF THE HOUSE’: JOURNEY TO SELF-ACCTUALISATION
IN LOUISA MAY ALCOTT’S ROSE IN BLOOM**

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ABSTRACT

Literature has empowered women through self introspection and self-learning encouraging women writers to take on the role of change catalysts in social change and asserting the individuality of women. Children's literature in the nineteenth century served as a useful guide in regulating the lives of adolescent girls. The nineteenth century Victorian Era image of the ideal woman or wife was ‘the angel in the house’. Popularly known for her Little Women, Louisa May Alcott is the shining star of the nineteenth century girls’ literature when formal education was not a privilege for the women. The aim of this research paper is to highlight the journey to self actualization of the female protagonist Rose Campbell in ‘Rose in Bloom’, in a patriarchal society by mapping her growth and development through adolescence on Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy. This paper focuses on charity as the Victorian Christian image in American culture that enables Rose to self-empowerment and ultimate happiness while adhering to the social norms and codes of conduct.

KEYWORDS: Angel of the House, Girls’ Literature, Maslow’s Needs Hierarchy & Self-Actualization

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INTRODUCTION

“If a girl showed passion or behaved badly she was considered to be heinous. However, if a boy behaved badly he was just exhibiting masculine traits” (Daniel, 39)¹.

During the nineteenth century known as the Victorian Era, males and females were expected to conform to strict gender roles. Hence novels written for a female audience was meant to instruct them morally. These novels came to be known as ‘didactic’ novels, fiction that reinforced gender roles, instead of trying to empower girls. Thus didactic fiction was “fuelled by the wish to control as far as possible, if not stifle independent feminine desires” (Rowbotham, 12)². Maria Edgeworth’s Belinda (1801) emphasized the importance of modest desires in women. “It was important for girls to read novels that had a heroine that could guide them in how to behave and express themselves in a proper way” (Rowbotham, 22)². As a result, women were expected to abide by writings that were socially acceptable.

The nineteenth century Victorian woman was expected to be the ‘angel of the house’ defined by the male patriarchy as being patient, passive, feeble, sympathetic, self sacrificing and last but not the least pure. The pure woman was restricted to the shelter of the private sphere of the home where purity was a guarantee not only of a

home as heaven within the domestic sanctuary, but a source of social security. Education and employment of women outside homes was accused of weakening the family because it deprived them of domestic training.

The American girls' literatures were moralistic with positive social values for the new American Republic. Popularly known as the 'shining star' of American Girls' Literature, Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) wrote novels for girls which adhered to the restrictive standard of female behavior but Alcott's characters show subtle deviation from the expected stereotypes of the patriarchal society; her style is not typical of the 19th century female writers of the era.

Maslow's Needs Hierarchy

This research paper integrates humanistic psychology to analyze Rose Campbell's voyage to adulthood in achieving self empowerment and happiness. Humanistic philosophy believes in every individual taking responsibility for one's own actions, behaviour and experiences. According to Abraham Maslow "..... he has within him a pressure towards unity of personality, towards spontaneous expressiveness, towards full individuality and identity, towards seeking the truth rather than being blind, towards being creative, towards being good, and a lot else. This is the human being so constructed that he presses towards what most people would call good values, towards serenity, kindness, courage, honest, love, unselfishness and goodness. (Maslow 1968, 155)³ Maslow defined self-actualization by claiming that "[w]hat a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization." (Maslow 1943, 370-396)⁴

Maslow's needs consists of five levels, the four levels depicting the deficiency needs associated with physiological needs while the top level is called the growth needs or the psychological need which creates an upward movement in the hierarchy. Maslow's basic or deficiency needs are the physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, and self esteem. Self actualization is the final and greatest level of development. Maslow describes self actualization as a person's need to be and do that which the person was 'born to do' The desire of 'becoming' the best possible transcends physical and mental well-being into being of higher consciousness, aesthetic and peak experiences. He emphasizes on moral and ethical behaviour that will guide one in 'discovering' and becoming oneself.

Rose Campbell's Journey to Self Actualization

The novel published in 1875 is about Rose Campbell's endeavour to find way in the nineteenth century Victorian patriarchal society. Alcott's female protagonist Rose is an orphan under the care of her guardian Uncle Allec. Rose's journey to self actualization begins at the age of nineteen after her two years world tour to Europe with her Uncle and Phebe, her companion and help. Uncle Allec designs this voyage for her considering it the best finishing school for her status. Social conduct and mannerisms were of high priority in the Victorian Era besides being fashionable, and Uncle Allec had a foresight to developing her morals and values, being traditional in meeting the desired standards of women. Uncle Allec resists the Victorian patriarchal system in the opportunities that are available for females. His ambition is to transform Rose into a modest, confident and strong-willed angel rather than grooming to make her the 'angel of the house'. Moreover, she must seek happiness in her pursuits.

Rose is an accomplished adolescent girl and keen to become a doctor like her uncle. She possesses an inner desire for cognitive needs. Her aesthetic desires are fulfilled after her journey around the world which transforms her into a beautiful and a graced adolescent. During her Christmas after Rose's return from the world tour, she realizes that all her friends do not make her happy because they do not sincerely love her. Rose is hurt when she realizes that her friends she trusts so much cannot be trusted and indulged in manoeuvring, plotting and planning. The realization that all that glitters is

not gold saddens her from within but similar to a self actualized individual she accepts people and her environment with an open heart.

Uncle Allec's distinct grooming, different from the traditional Victorian grooming has turned Rose into a rebel against the Victorian ideals of a woman. She counters Charlie's patriarchal views with strong conviction and asserts that women possess minds and souls, ambitions and talents coupled with beauty and accomplishments which entitles them to learning, loving, being loved and living. Charlie is shocked at her strong mindedness when she refuses to be judged by her father's assets and wants to be recognized by her courage and self-reliance by making a living on her own. On her return from Europe Rose wants to begin at once to endow hospitals, built homes, adopt children and befriend mankind. When she is discouraged by Uncle Allec, Rose wants to take up philanthropy as a generous profession by being a steward to her father's wealth and considers a blessing to bring happiness to others. Rose is able to transcend herself and think for the welfare of others, which according to Maslow is self actualization. She is also able to transcend the culture as seed and is empowered by making it her sun, food and water. Rose strives for a life of satisfaction that when she loses her beauty and gives away her money, she should know who really cares for her. Rose feels empathetic towards the other girls of her times who are not as privileged as her to have Uncle Allec's guidance and points out to Uncle Allec, "I wonder people are in such haste to 'bring out' their daughters, as it's called. To me there is something almost pathetic in the sight of a young girl standing on the threshold of the world, so innocent and hopeful, so ignorant of all the lies before her, and usually so ill-prepared to meet the ups and downs of life.....poor little women are seldom provide with any armor worth having, and sooner or later they are sure to need it, for everyone must fight her own battle, and only the brave and strong can win." (Louisa May Alcott, 8)⁵

Rose's reverence for St. Francis who gave the best years of his life for charity, over Charlie's preference for St Martin whose charity is limited to dividing his cloak with a beggar shows her value of genuineness rather than outwardly projection. When Charlie is attracted to theatricals, she offends him with a light sense of humour saying that it was more respectable to be a second rate doctor than a second rate actor. She detests outwardly glamour and superficiality.

As she experiences the freedom of experiencing the society, she detaches from the physical appearances and delves into the real self of the people around her. She does not dress according to fashion or the expectations of the society. She has strong conviction in simplicity, inner goodness and self-discipline. Uncle Allec's guidance and training was driving her to be more realistic, democratic in her values and belief, and maintain stability in the face of hard knocks in life. Also, she has close relationships with few, genuine friends and family members. Her peak experiences of interpersonal relationships, acceptance of self and her philosophical approach to life give her the opportunity of peak experiences of the self actualized.

Her morals, values and ethics help her in discovering and becoming herself towards self actualization. Rose is perceptive of the reality and has the ability to seek and see the truth, which according to Maslow is a distinguishing feature of the self actualized. She is grateful for Uncle Allec's determination in her perfect grooming and is strong willed to resist the temptations of the times. She is sure of keeping Uncle always proud of her and, at the same time preserving her morals and virtues, which Louisa may Alcott satirically calls it old-fashioned.

Although she seeks Uncle Allec's permission to experience the society after witnessing the fashion and glamour on her world tour, she is firm on her morals and values. The nobility of her character added to her beauty and charm which

even Mac, another cousin of hers could not resist. Uncle Allec is modern in adopting the feminist approach to Rose being independent and self-reliant, but holds on to traditional values, beliefs and morals of truth, modesty, kindness, love, respect and close family ties and traditions which have been highlighted as old-fashioned. Rose on her journey to self-actualization is able to strike a balance between her individuality, family traditions and the societal morals and values, which is a driving force to her right decisions and ultimate happiness in becoming what she thinks she is meant to be, self-actualized.

According to Maslow the deeper the self-exploration, the closer one comes to self-actualization. Rose's journey to self-actualization enables her to realize her potentials and self-worth, with deeper self-exploration as she moves from a spoiled girl at adolescence to a fully functional individual which according to Carl Rogers "[is] a result of interaction with the environment [.....] and relationships of the 'I' or the 'me' together with the values attached to these concepts." (Rogers, 489)⁶ Rose is open to learning from her experiences, living each moment of her life with dignity and has independent decision-making. Rose has taken complete responsibility of her life while fulfilling the social obligation of society. Her greatest strength is her philanthropy which enables her to transcend her own self and show concern for humanity.

CONCLUSIONS

Rose is not bound by the gender stereotype of being an 'angel of the house' and asserts her individual identity in public through her charity, the Victorian Christian virtue. Uncle Allec proves to endorse Baumrind's best parenting style of authoritative parenting which according to research "[is] the optimal parenting style for raising adolescents". (Steinberg 2001)⁷ 'Charity' emerges as a cultural motif in Alcott's *Rose in Bloom* and an icon of true happiness along with Victorian feminine virtues of love, compassion, truth and modesty for Alcott's readers. Charity empowered women of the nineteenth century to create an image and individuality in the public sphere, the domain otherwise dominated by men. Rose is able to transcend outwardly glamour and superficiality and achieve self-actualization in her journey to adulthood with the help of Uncle Allec's perfect grooming.

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