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FEMININE VICTORIAN IDENTITY USING FASHION AS A MOTIF IN LOUISA MAY  
ALCOTT'S 'AN OLD-FASHIONED GIRL'

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian Era in America witnessed the Second Industrial revolution, consumerism, the Women's Suffrage Movement, and the American Civil War; immigration and slavery were the major events that marked the century while the order and rule of the patriarchal society continued in the public and private spheres of life. The Gilded Age was a period of materialistic excesses combined with extreme poverty as evident in Louisa M Alcott's 'An Old-Fashioned Girl'. For the women of this era, fashion was important and dress was a representation of their role in society. Also the Civil War altered the lives of women, forcing them to work out of necessity. Literature of this era written for adolescents are a deviation from 'art for art's sake' and based on idealism, while propagating feminine virtues of love, brotherhood, modesty, hard work, truth and justice. The aim of this research paper is to analyze Louisa M Alcott's use of 'fashion' as a motif in "An Old-Fashioned Girl" in portraying the ideal Victorian feminine morals and virtues and true female empowerment amidst the changing social and political tensions.

KEYWORDS: Domestic fiction, fashion, feminism, Gilded Age, motif, Victorian Era.

1. INTRODUCTION

**VICTORIAN ERA IN AMERICA:** The nineteenth century America was a strange period of mystic sexual morality, distinct fashion, individual and imperial conquests where fashion depicted women as confirming to the feminine image or as being controversial to the conservatives. Though fashion and marriage remained an integral part of women's lives, and the spheres of control for men and women were defined as part of the Victorian family dynamics, the adolescent American girl remained a mistress of herself as compared to her counterparts in Europe who were soft, polite and graceful. This era played a crucial role in the development of feminism.

The women of the upper class society in the Gilded Age were considered ideals, and they imitated the high class society of their mother country in terms of dress, morality and mannerisms. The term 'Gilded Age' is derived from Mark Twain's novel "The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today(1873)" depicting the era. Debates and discussions on a woman's role and status in society has been tackled in the Victorian novels where feminine virtues of hard work, motherhood, domestic accomplishments, modesty, angel of the house figure were countered with feminist ideology of gender politics, the woman question and women's rights.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Best known for her timeless collection 'Little Women', Louisa May Alcott, an American novelist and poet, is acknowledged for her versatility in writings and feminist ideologies. Her novels are mostly classified as 'domestic' and 'sentimental' fiction. Unlike Jane Austen who delves into the psychology of her characters, Louisa May Alcott focuses on the morals and real life situations of her characters.

An Old Fashioned Girl (1869) describes Polly as being a fourteen year old, humble country girl who visits her close friend Fanny Shaw, a wealthy fashionable girl living in the city. Although, lured by the city life, Polly doesn't succumb to her temptations giving her upbringing complete reverence. Six years later, when Polly returns to the city as a music teacher, she is a source of financial help to her brother Will, and a pillar of strength and support to the Shaw family during their traumatic period of bankruptcy.

Louisa May Alcott uses 'fashion' as a motif to highlight feminine morality and self-identity of a woman emphasizing that wealth in itself does not bring happiness or buy virtues. According to M.H Abrams, 'A motif is a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature'.

## 2. "FASHION' IN AN OLD FASHIONED GIRL

**FASHIONABLE LIFE-COUNTRY SIDE TO THE CITY:** One summer, Polly, described as old-fashioned by the author visits her good friend Fanny Shaw to witness and experience the city life. The Shaw family comprises of Mr. Shaw, a busy gentleman engrossed in his business, Mrs. Shaw, a pale and nervous lady, their daughters Fanny and Maud, their son Tom and Grandma, who is described as being as old-fashioned as Polly and lives in solitude confined to her room with her antique stuff. Fanny is privileged in studying in a fashionable school where she learns French, German and Italian with no time for English. Polly's first interaction with Grandma at the dinner table gives us a picture of the changing lifestyles in the Victorian Era America where girls dress to the height of fashion and are ignorant of domestic accomplishment and insensitive to their elders which is prominent in Grandma's times. Grandma is impressed with Polly for her respectful manners and etiquettes which she expects of children, and her accomplishment in music.

Polly's exposure to the city life begins with a theatre she attends, which she says is 'fashionable' but gorgeous and vulgar like the French invention of Paris. Polly's dream of being a part of this fairyland gets devastated with her realization of being a disgrace to the good, old-fashioned elves she knows and loves in her country home as she is unable to accept the girls performing on stage dressed in jockeys, by virtue of her being an 'old-fashioned', country girl. On returning home, Grandma observes her expressions and consoles her by saying,

"I think you are right, my dear, but you have lived in the country, and haven't yet learnt that modesty has gone out of fashion" (Page 14)

Polly's exposure to 'New Fashions' on her visit to Fanny's school, flirtations among the adolescents, the 'fashionable' ice cream parlour, 'fashionable' dressing and fancies of children, her visit to a concert forces Polly into introspection of her own fine upbringing that gives her a sense of pride when she recollects her mother's words on good mannerisms and conduct, and the relationship she shares with her siblings which are missing in the 'fashionable' society of the wealthy class living in the city.

While contemplating between the simple, happy life at home and the luxuries in the Shaw's home, city life gossips, their customs and mannerisms, Polly likes her life the best for which Louisa M. Alcott calls it another of her 'old-fashioned' ways. However, the 'old-fashioned' Polly is full of love and reverence for her elders and siblings and sensitive to the respect and integrity of her family, missing in the 'fashionable' Shaw family. Moreover, Polly has a strong desire for outdoor activities in the unfashionable side of the park nearby unlike the 'fashionable' hobbies, lifestyles and interests of the adolescent girls of her age brought up in the fashionable city. Polly refuses to be carried away by the modern French styles being aped by the wealthy, fashionable Americans. Grandma is the only person who appreciates Polly for her youth, health, intelligence and modesty which are her idea of 'fashion' ornaments, although considered old-fashioned in the modern Victorian city life.

**FASHION AND POLLY'S EMERGENCE INTO ADULTHOOD:** Six years later Polly returns to the city as a music teacher after taking the hard lesson which twenty years of poverty has given her. But contented and satisfied, she lives in a shabby, rented house to support her brother, Will attend college. As a music teacher Polly does not command the same respect she used to and is not an invitee for the parties she used to attend being Fanny's friend. The thorn that wounds Polly in her attempt to fight for a living that always bars a woman's progress is the discovery, that working for a living shut a good number of doors on one's face even in democratic America.

Polly's visit to the 'Swing Circle' meet, a Woman's Rights Meeting is an eye-opener for Polly where she gets acquainted with the wealthy, 'fashionable' women who are near-sighted, not just literally but metaphorically and the so-called organization, a 'fashion' symbol for the rich, elite women. On experiencing the fake and farcical 'Sewing Circle' meet, Polly remarks,

"Purpose and principle are the best teachers we can have, and want of them makes half the women of America what they are, restless, aimless, frivolous and sick."(Page101)

Polly imitates the 'fashionable' ways through her mild flirtations with Mr. Sydney a gentleman with whom Fanny is in love, instilled by her natural instinct to enjoy and have fun like others.

Being 'old-fashioned' Polly refuses Mr. Sydney's proposal for marriage for the simple reasons that she is not in love with him and the thought of self-sacrifice does not tempt her; besides Fanny Shaw bring her close friend. Although she undermines herself for the 'fashionable' proposals and decides to remain a spinster throughout her life, she marries Tom towards the end when he realizes her strength and calmness in handling tough situations in life which is evident from the moral support she rendered to the Shaws during their period of bankruptcy. Tom appreciates Polly by saying to her,

"Young men often laugh at the sensible girls whom they secretly respect, and affect to admire the silly ones whom they secretly despise, because earnestness, intelligence and womanly dignity are not the fashion". (Page 89)

Polly also becomes a role model for Fanny who envies the sunny side of her poverty.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Louisa May Alcott's use of fashion as a motif depicts the need for women's education in the light of growing feminism and the struggle for an individual identity in America. Alcott's female protagonist detests the French fashion which is popular among the wealthy, fashionable city girls and the fading American morals and virtues. The wealthy city girls who claim to be a part of the Women's Movement are full of vanity and pride and are devoid of dignity. Louisa May Alcott highlights the need for women empowerment through a formal education rather than fashion. She supports modernism in its true essence where education is the most fashionable ornament along with Victorian virtues of modesty, love and patience as symbols of true womanhood, rather than self-sacrifice in a male dominated society.

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