

## **Pendulum Riders: An Analysis of Gender Positioning in Roles in Anita Shreve's *All He Ever Wanted***

Abdul Waheed Qureshi\* ,Rab Nawaz Khan†

### **Abstract**

*This paper presents a critical analysis of the selected passages from Anita Shreve's novel All He Ever Wanted (2003), concerning various roles performed by women. These (social) roles are manipulated by men for their own interests and aims, assuming women incapable and incompetent who are negatively portrayed through their associated roles. People strive to acquire the dominant roles and, in this race, men always precede. The pendulum hanging over the point of gender loses equilibrium, becomes awry, and tilts to men's half. Eagly and Wood's (2012) Social Role Theory, which is mainly related to role-oriented concerns of a person, has provided theoretical underpinnings for the study. Females, on the basis of their so-called weaker and inferior social status, are entrusted such roles which identify them to be 'women'. Relevant ideas of prominent scholars have been given in the form of literature review which unmasks the enigma of women with the result that patriarchal society does not allow women to perform important roles which are thought to be reserved for men only. The data has been analyzed through Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model (CDA). The authors have tried to unveil how various linguistic patterns contribute to social structures, thereby creating space for highlighting the injustices and demerits in a social system. The paper is concluded with the rationale that women's debilitation is not given; it is rather the result of the resentment of men against them out of various negative ideologies associated with women on the basis of the roles that they perform in the capacity of 'Women'.*

**Keywords:** oppression, role-oriented, cisgender, identity; CDA

### **Introduction**

In society men and women make two different and individual groups. They are different from one another in many respects. From language to behavior, their interests vary. Same is true of many other things like fashion, clothes, food habits, psychology, likes and dislikes, thinking, formality, and the other abstract ideas like love, enmity, loyalty etc. These individual differences are displayed in many ways by the

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\*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM). Email: waheedqureshi@awkum.edu.pk

†Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan (AWKUM). Email: rnawaz81@yahoo.com

members of the both groups. Both of them try to surpass one another accordingly. In this tug of war, each group tries to dominate the other by means of the behavior which consequently places them in various roles. In the acquisition of this role orientation also, the same tug of war is seen. Each group tries to find a better and due place in order to place itself in. They seem to be riding on the pendulum which leads to power. At the one end of the pendulum, it is men who are active and want to reach the (power) point where from the pendulum is hanging and at the other end, women are there to excel and compete men for the acquisition of power. As great many societies are patriarchal in nature, the pendulum of equality loses its equilibrium and instead of resting on the point of gender, it tilts to the side of men who seem to be standing on the platform of sex. In this gender-pendulum ride, men forever win.

This discourse of gender competition is the result of many roles, professions, and trades which are taken and adopted by the members of both the groups. But, due to patriarchal influence, this discourse is discursively constructed in the discomfort of women. People are made to believe in the numerous false and constructed ideologies of women's weaker social statuses on the basis of the constructs of incompetency, incapability, inability, and impracticality. Society is made into the blind acceptance of the ideology that women cannot perform tasks effectively. They are given less important and meager roles to perform in society. These roles are minor, notorious, enslaving, and having aversion. They have no or less social value as compared to the roles adopted by men for themselves. Men believe themselves to be capable of the roles and responsibilities which are in the best interest of society.

Roles are different in so far as their professional dimensions are concerned. People are different and regard them different and unique from the other members of the same (inter)group and outer group. Stets and Burke (2000) are of the opinion that people with different roles do not discuss the similarities in their roles but the differences that their roles possess. It is also pertinent to mention here that it is this discursive and dialectical discussion of the opposite or different roles that many meanings arise. So, it is the superiority vs inferiority paradigm of roles that people constitute differences in text and talk. Same is true of the present context where men seem to be allocating for them higher social positions and allow women to opt from the rest.

### *Theoretical Perspective*

The research paper in hand critically analyzes the text of the selected novel under the thematic touch of roles which are allocated by men and women for themselves and on the basis of these roles, they have

developed psychological worlds for them. Their worlds are different in every respect from each other and one group does not allow the other to enter in their world. They rear different psychologies, attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and temperaments which are very distinct from one another. But if seen retrospectively, then it will not be an exaggeration to suppose that all the mischief is the result of the activity-driven concerns to which members of both the groups stick.

These different aspects of their distinct worlds like psychologies, attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, temperaments and many others, will provide the conceptual lens for the broader theoretical framework of this research. For this purpose, the authors have chosen Eagly and Wood's (2012) theory of social roles which curtail the mentioned aspects to the different roles, played by men and women in society.

Eagly and Wood (2012) propose a self-explanatory model of social roles. According to them, it is a three-way process in which the two basic categories of the psychology of human body i.e. sex and gender alternately relate to roles, while at the same time they themselves occur in a way that the former is at the outset. Sex gives a clue to the formation of gender which in turn paves the way for roles to be played by men and women in society. It is in this way that the dialectics of the categories of sex and gender operate and their relationship to the social roles is established. Notwithstanding certain perceptions regarding sex and gender to be relevant and exclusive to themselves, they cannot be completely considered in isolation. It is (social) roles that provide a platform for them to play on.

The biological factor of sex based on the concerns of genitals and hormonal changes, constitutes people into two very different genders i.e. men and women. Their very sex differences are manipulated socially into the formation of the subjects of man and woman with their necessary and so-called qualifying strength and weakness respectively (Eagly & Wood, 2012). These gender differences are again magnified by the social construction of the roles that both the agents play. All the inferior tasks are thought to be reserved to women and men are assumed to be in the natural capacity of doing prestigious and superior jobs that need power, physique, and valor. Hence, it is social roles that decline women's roles and responsibilities and place them in the category of the weak.

#### *Tasks or Psychology: What constitutes the Roles?*

Social roles theory, which asserts that the differences between genders in society occur on the basis of social roles that they perform, needs further debate and discussion. Following is the detailed literature review of prominent scholars with a hope to facilitate the reader(s) with

the better understanding of the various concepts and dimensions that the word *role* has. Gender cannot be seen in isolation. It has many facets: economic, cultural, social, and psychological are to be considered in evaluating the construct of gender. It is not a subjective or individual psychological behavior of any one male or female to consider them as gender. Referring to Moore, Whitridge (2002) asserts that all the categories of making male or female a 'gender'; like fashion, language, relationships, likes and dislikes, behaviors, and identity etc. necessarily first relate to the gendered roles and then to the social roles. Whatever their social statuses are, primarily, people are gendered by being considered as gendered and then they are allocated their roles by the society. A nurse, for example, has been in this gendered position of nurse and then this gendered position is again subsumed in the role of a nurse. Gender roles, progressing alternately to social roles, are also culture-specific. Cultures are also to blame for the creation of this role-orientation based on gender. Referring to Rose's perspective on the aboriginal culture, Lopez-Atkinson (2017) is of the opinion that culture has the greatest impact on the allocation of social roles for the members of society.

“We know very clearly that there is a range of consequences for a female touching a didgeridoo – infertility would be the start of it, ranging to other consequences. I won't even let my daughter touch one”. (Rose, quoted in Lopez-Atkinson, 2017: 30)

Rose considers it inappropriate for a girl to touch didgeridoo bamboo on the basis of the contention of the aboriginal culture that by the touching of the bamboo, infertility would come in the lot of that girl. In this culture, touching this bamboo wood is the task of only boys. Without any logical reason or medico-chemical grounds, this culture has banned girls from touching the tree and allowed boys to do the same. Does sterility not come to boys if they touch didgeridoo? Role differentiation theory as proposed by Parson and Bale (quoted in Sylvia Duarte Dantas, 2002) which argues that it is the basic roles inside the family that people are differentiated. According to her, man is regarded as the provider of the livelihood for the family. His role is more practical. He has to deal with the outside world which means that he has multi-dimensional relationships outside the family. He has to be alert to the challenges of the world and has to face the hardships which will mold and prepare him for the future challenges as well. On the other hand, the role of a woman is totally inside the family. To conclude, the categorization of roles is based according to the needs and demands of

society. What a society needs from all men women, is their blind acceptance of the roles specified by it. And in return, it is these social roles that have placed women on the far-off side of the society. The equilibrium cannot be achieved between the two gender and therefore, the pendulum of gender tilts to the side of men on the basis of their superior roles and greater responsibilities.

*Research Hypothesis*

How do various roles play an important part in the construction of gender in light of the *All He Ever Wanted* (2003) by Anita Shreve?

**Research Design and Method**

The present research is a pure qualitative study of the novel text with the aim to highlight the importance of language in the making of social ideologies as realities. It is a textual analysis and the researchers have used CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) as method of interpretation for the textual data. Under the methodological framework of Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, some most important passages were randomly selected for the purpose of analysis and interpretation. In the model, the first of these three stages i.e. *description*, deals with the superficial features and structure of the text. The second stage of Fairclough's approach i.e. *interpretation*, deals with the text as far as discursivity is concerned. It looks at various parameters in which linguistic structures lead to social ideologies. It considers the questions of the production, exercise, and maintenance of social ideologies through language. Certain ideologies are thought to be permanent and others as invalid. The stage of interpretation deals with the various techniques in which such a treatment is given to social realities on the basis of language. People twist, implicate, and manipulate language to serve their purposes. Therefore, the numerous intricate ways in which language is used for the purpose of socio-ideological concerns, produce discursivity that leads to the construction of phenomenon as truth. In the last stage of Fair cloughian approach i.e. *explanation*, the broader social structure is seen as a construct. This stage, conjoins various discourses from the broader social structure in an intersexual tradition. The various social realities as the discursive constructions are seen deeply on a macro level and their relationship to the existing discourse is seen. It provides a broader social dimension to a limited discourse and its implications on a broader level are seen in relationship to the overall structure of society.

In the context of the present data in the form of text, the authors have simultaneously used all the three stages. Under the formal treatment of

labelling the various aspects of the text, it is seen as how it is through the cunning use of language that people dramatically engage in certain relationships with each other and how they socially construct certain ideologies in their own favor and in the discomfort of others. Social roles and their negotiation have been discussed at this stage. Further, the relationship of this negotiation is seen vis-a-vis the broader social ideology (Fairclough, 1992). It is seen, how this construction of social roles and its maintenance create difference between genders and how one gender (man) is thought to be different from the other/opposite gender (woman)? Referring to van Dijk, Qureshi and Khan (2018) are of the view that the possibility of reality as real is only through texts on the basis of the entity of language that is negotiated in multiple and intricate ways and is made to believe; the role of CDA then gains extreme importance. We, as members of society have no other option to maintain or resist an ideology but through discourse in any form. Therefore, CDA as method was used by the authors keeping in view the ontological and epistemological concerns of text with the creation and perpetuation of an ideology as real and permanent.

*Gendered Roles:* The novel's action opens with Nicholas', discussion of the fire incident at the hotel. It is evening and there is hustle and bustle at the hotel. Men and women equally come here to dine and drink. Suddenly, there breaks out a fire in the hotel which creates panic. He says:

- (1) *A few men attempted heroics and tried to go back into the hotel to save those who remained behind, and I think one student did actually rescue an elderly woman who had succumbed to paralysis beside the buffet table. (Shreve, 2003: 2)*

*Description, Interpretation and Explanation:*

The extract is a piece of an order of a larger discourse type of a horrible accident, in this case a hotel on fire. The hero or the main character that is Nicholas is telling about how the event took place and mentions the possible causes that it began because of the sprinkling of "few drops of oil" (Shreve, 2003: 2) by the cook. The piece of extract is an example of a masculine discourse in which the male narrator that is Nicholas is trying to persuade the readers to submit that yes it were "*men*" who were busy in saving the wounded people and those entangled by the flames of the fire. We, as passive readers are to listen to the details of the events narrated by Nicholas because of the fact that he, being the witness himself, has the actual information of the events which give him a certain

power of authority. In this regard, his role is that of an active speaker telling the details, as against the readers' who, because of the lack of information about the event, assume the role of passive listeners. Therefore, the extract has an inherent power factor for the narrator who, on the basis of his masculinity, discursively constructs the details to serve the purpose of masculine idealization. The juxtaposition of "men" and "heroics" reveals the necessary gender qualification. The theme of the story is set by certain key words like those which expose gender biases. "Heroics" are the manly acts which are often performed by "men" in society. The use of the word "heroics" in place of 'bravery' and 'valor' is not out of purpose here. It is used to refer to the dogmatic and decisive nature of men. It means the determined acts of bravery which "a few men" intend to perform. The noun phrase "one student" also serves a certain purpose here. It gives an anaphoric reference to some 'male' student and back to "men"; since we are told that among the host of people, it is only 'men' who save others i.e. all the other males, children and females. In the same way "did actually rescue" stresses the act of saving and gives credibility to manly actions. Men "rescue" women; the word "rescue" is rich in its experiential value which not only means to save but to save from dangers, to save from extremely critical conditions. Women may also save 'casually' but men 'always' "rescue". The context of 'a hotel on fire' serves the purpose of deciding that it is an extremely chaotic situation in which various individuals (the male individuals here) are trying to save people from burning in the fire. In patriarchal societies, men are often credited with bravery and women with cowardice. The values and belief systems in such societies limit women to inferior roles and statuses. Men as strong, brave, expeditious, and potent to cope with particular intense situations, are the major concern of the dominant gender ideology.

Social Roles: Nicholas and Etna are discussing the subject of education. She says that she has had no formal education. She refers to her disliking for Mathematics and other science subjects, in which she is totally dull. She tells him that she is sure about the fact that her uncle William Bliss also approves of her inability and that he also considers her extremely dull. Nicholas on the other hand is surprised to hear this. He is not ready to accept this allegation because he thinks her extremely wise and cunning. He says:

- (2) *'Oh, I seriously doubt that', I said, somewhat recovering my composure and adjusting my portrait of Etna Bliss to include this new information. Such qualities were slightly unnerving*

*in a woman but might prove valuable, I could see, in a wife.*  
(Shreve, 2003: 46)

**Description, Interpretation and Explanation:**

Nicholas and Etna are involved in a hot discussion through dialogue. Both of them try to assert their peculiar viewpoints. Etna tells that she is a dull woman who does not understand things plainly, to which Mr. Nicholas does not agree. Nicholas feels the hardships that he confronts in getting her, and he thinks that all this is due to the shrewdness of Etna that she is not so easily convinced. It is clear from his statement “*Oh, I seriously doubt that*”. This speech-act is an ironic statement, in which he is warning Etna of her audacity. It is because he understands the formalities that he has been employing in his relationship with her; she is not coated pill to be swallowed easily. The use of the word “*qualities*” experientially means characteristics. But ‘characteristics’ is not used here, because the word “*qualities*” has an expressive value. It gives an attributive character to the word. Flirt, cunningness, and exploitation are the attributions that we attach to women (particularly young women) in patriarchal societies. Hence, Shreve’s use of the word is not without purpose here. On the basis of this word she tries to show the negative behavior that is often attached to women in patriarchal societies, by calling them coquettes. The juxtaposition of “*woman*” and “*wife*” has both relational and expressive values. Being logical and wise is a bit frightening in a young woman i.e. a girlfriend, beloved, and mistress. If they are wise and cunning, it is impossible to seduce them. On the other hand, the same ignorance is a precious thing in a wife. If wife is dull, has no discretionary power that is, if she cannot consider the meaning of the illicit relationship between her husband and his secretary for example; it is then to the advantage of her husband i.e. the man. Here we can see the underestimated role of woman based on her identity. This role of woman in the form of “*wife*” identifies her with family life and children rearing. This also refers to and presupposes the family discourse in which women are oppressed in matrimonial relations. The degree of certainty and credibility is strengthened by the use of modal auxiliary “*might*”, which acts as an expressive modality because it functions as Nicholas’ (who is also the speaker) authority to evaluate the truth of his statement that ‘yes, it is good if your wife is ignorant’. ‘May’ is another terminal point of the expressive modality “*might*” which could also be used but in that case, it would not have served the purpose of the truth or certainty of the statement. The truth of the situation is also strengthened by the use of the conditional or conjunctive “*but*” between the two simple sentences i.e. “*Such qualities were slightly unnerving in a*



woman” and “*might prove valuable, I could see, in a wife*”. The other words and conjunctions from the same class of conjunctive words which could be used in place of “*but*” are ‘which’, ‘nevertheless’, and ‘however’. In all these cases the meaning would be the same i.e. ‘ignorance on the part of a wife is valuable as compared to any other woman’. This is the concessive relation i.e. the agreed and submitted aspect of an ideology, of the ideological assumption of ‘shrewdness as a quality in any other woman than in a wife’. Therefore, it is through classification scheme, in which those women are grouped who have peculiar interests and qualifications like all unmarried females grouped as ‘women’ and all married females classified as ‘wives’. Such a classification in patriarchal discourse is always in want of change because how accurate it looks to be, in the same ratio it is not that much accurate; after all it is the product of patriarchy which always classifies women on the basis of negative characteristics.

### **Conclusion**

Keeping in view the analysis and interpretation, it can be guessed that society has given a secondary social status to women as contrary to men. Women, on the basis of their so-called inferior social status which is again based on the minor roles performed by them, have achieved for them a less prominent position as compared to men. Men can perform heroics but women cannot. The supposed weakness, physical and psychological, has pushed women to accept inferior tasks to perform. They cannot perform heroics; they cannot save people from fire, natural disasters, and calamities. It is only men, who are capable of doing the deeds of valor and strength. In the same way, family is supposed to have the roots of this role-construction. In a nuclear family, father, who is the head and is thought to be the sole earner, will psychologically dominate the family. Giving responsibilities lies with him only and he will allocate tasks for all the members to perform. Under the impact of patriarchy, he will by no means, allow women to perform and do good and respectable job. So, it is the gendered roles that are responsible for the degradation and denunciation of women in society.

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