

# FEMININITY AND ITS SOCIO-DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF ANITA SHREVE'S *ALL HE EVER WANTED*

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## **Abstract**

Language is a commanding and supreme agent in the construction of discourse. Our thoughts, emotions and intentions are determined by the language that we speak. It is always language in a certain context or setting which makes an experience a discourse with its particular phraseology and syntax. In this sense, language is responsible for the expressive mode of communication by employing various psycho-lingual schemes. The various ideologies, belief systems, habits and narrations of accounts are therefore, the result of people's psychologies in their respective cultures and linguistic communities. The most important and basic among these schemes is the social construction of various ideologies which are erected and run on the basis of collective psychology of people. For an ideology to be a part and parcel of a certain cultural and linguistic community, it is necessary that it should be in relation to the people's collective thinking and perception within the parameters of their society. If it is not in conformity with people's collective psychology, they will discard it as totally idiosyncratic, subjective and individual, having no reason for acceptance. This paper is based on Anita Shreve's novel *All He Ever Wanted* and explores how the author has been successful in propounding that the prevalent norms concerning femininity are not given; rather they are the result of social construction. It explains how a dominant ideology is constructed in a society by the different viewpoints of people (males here), who use language manipulatively for disadvantage and disfavor of others (females here). It investigates how the recurrent ideologies are modified socially in the interest of masculinity and which in turn lead towards the sufferance of femininity by acquiring the tag of permanence and regulation for them. It highlights the oppressive techniques in masculine discourse and thereby, gives a potent voice to the resistance that should be shown by women, by challenging the dominant socio-discursive practices.

**Key Words/Terms:** Femininity, social construction, discourse, norms

## **Introduction**

Language is the medium to communicate ideas. The kind of communication specifies a certain debate/discussion as a particular discourse type. The communication and exchange of ideas in a certain discourse type is dependent upon the kind of knowledge that the discourse participants have, particular to that discourse type. The knowledge again is based upon the assumptions of the participants that they have learnt overtime. These assumptions include various facts, beliefs and traditions that are regarded permanent and eternal within a

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specific community or culture. The normative character of these facts, beliefs and traditions is based upon the collective conscience and discursive psychology of the people living in a particular community. The various facts, beliefs and traditions to acquire the status of norms are always at the mercy of peremptory thinking and actions of people.

What gives a concept or a belief a normative quality in a certain community, is the discursive psychology of the people of that community. The truths, so-called realities and facts are but the modifications of thinking process in words. Words cannot give precise and accurate delineation to thinking. Human mind cannot be measured in degrees and weight units. We cannot say how much we love or hate a person. The adjective 'very' cannot determine the degree or weight of love or hate. It is simply the emotional ecstasy and paralinguistic features that can determine such feelings. Even then we describe certain concepts as truths while others as lies; some ideas as grand while others as trivial; some of the statements are called maxims while others are rejected as totally false. Why this is so? The answer is that it is the discursive use of language by which people explain their thoughts and judge others' mentality by it. According to Potter:

... I am certainly not trying to answer ontological questions about what sort of things exist. The focus is upon the way people construct descriptions as factual, and how others undermine those constructions. This does not require an answer to the philosophical question of what factuality is. (quoted in Burr, 2003: 16-17)

Society consists of many classes. So far as discursivity is concerned, it is always the linguistic contest, simultaneously between the powerful and the powerless and the knowledgeable and ignorant. Power accompanied by knowledge constructs discourse to serve the purpose of those constructing it. They want the satisfaction of their ideals through manipulating the language by constructing it, according to their own viewpoints. In this way, the ideas expressed take the shape of norms to be followed blindly by the less powerful and ignorant. Referring to Foucault, Burr (2003) argues that both power and knowledge about particular field constituting certain discourse are necessary for the social construction of an idea to become a norm.

Language re(presents) various kinds of ideologies. It is not an objective mode of thought transmission in the narrowest sense of the term. Rather, it is the subjective endeavor of the discourse participant(s) who mold it according to his/her/their own subjective way of thinking. Hence, it carries the multiple layers of meanings within a single message. This diversity in the meaning-making process through language is dependent upon the discursive structures in language. The present paper as a critical analysis highlights the role of language in meaning-making and its distribution and reception. By applying the tenets of CDA as a research methodology, the paper will analyze the deeper layers of meanings behind the obvious and surface structures. It will show how certain linguistic structures, situation, context and words convey the covert ideologies which are socially constructed by the skillful use of language of discourse participants. Briefly, it will explain and dig out what is unsaid of what is there in the obvious discourse structure.

### **Research question**

- i- How are truth and reality norms constructed discursively in society?
- ii- How does Anita Shreve's *All He Ever Wanted* demonstrate patriarchal construction of female identity?

### **Literature Review**

Language not only communicates ideas but also constructs them. This construction is often (though not always) based on the language usage by the members of society. They twist it, mold it and re-build it to serve their pragmatic purposes. The construction is two-fold. On one hand people, as discourse producers use language in a discursive way to suit it to their collective behaviors and on the other hand, other fellows as the discourse consumers, again re(construct) language while at the same time interpreting it. There are certain pre-conditions for this constructing, de-constructing and re-constructing of language like mental aptitude of the people, societal limits (geographical boundaries of the language community) and arbitrariness of language. Beyond all these, the power factor is the most remarkable one in the construction of ideology and stamping it with the mark of a norm i.e. reality. Paraphrasing the notions of Zuckermann, Duchêne (2008) translates:

Basically it may be said that ideology should not be understood as an individual related idiosyncrasy but rather as the mental-cultural “image” of what really exists. However ideology shapes and structures what exists and manifests itself in diverse individual utterances which dispute and compete with each other. Thus, ideology is based on a general notion: It arises from complex discourse practices which on their part stem from evolving or existing structures of economic, political or cultural power, dominance and violence. Consequently, ideology fulfils a “positive” cementing function as well as a function that legitimates what exists with its partly covert, partly overt power relations. (p. 27)

What turns an ideology into a reality is the collective psychology or shared thinking of people in a society about certain phenomenon. It is discursivity which produces contesting aspects in the consideration of ideology to be true; and is always the result of power. The various social positions arising from social institutions are in competition to have their say in constructing ideologies into truth-claims by covertly implementing them, through discursive use of language.

The truth-claims and normative realities are but the social constructions in language. An experience or habit is not always real. It is made real by the discursive use of language. Language is used in such a way as to carry with it multiple meanings. Power, as the active agent in discourse construction, gives a definite dimension to this multiplicity in meaning. It is why, how certain experiences and habits are made norms, to depict reality. In Blood’s (2005) view, the various anorexic feelings of women about their bodies constitute a discourse type of women’s deficient psychology. But the reality is different. There is nothing true in the statements of women that have a direct relationship with the various practices of women like dieting or various exercises for weight loss. According to her, “it is important to attend to the way women make sense of their own difficulties and to the ways that language constitutes a particular reality for each woman” (Blood, 2005: 122) which means that reality itself is not in the habit/practice; rather, it is language/description in which women make their particular habit a reality. Many such descriptions, with the passage of time, take the shape of a dominant ideology through the medium of knowledge repertoire. The learning

about some domain (in this case for example, anorexia leading to dieting) itself creates power. In the words of Fairclough:

Power and knowledge directly imply one another ... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (quoted in Blood, 2005: 48)

The truth of the matter lies in the fact that a redundant description of experience in itself creates a domain of knowledge, having place for many contesting ideas. This in turn leads to the formation of power which is exercised by some dominant against those who have no knowledge. The ignorant take those descriptions of practices/habits for granted, which are the result of those in power in society; constructing socially what is told.

An important aspect of reality not as given but constructed; needs to be highlighted epistemologically. Reality is based on the “social stock of knowledge” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 56) available to discourse participants. This knowledge is present in their mental world and available to them at their disposal. This knowledge is based on the experiences of social life which are integrated in and through language. As language is a common factor, due to this the experience conveyed in language is also common and is shared by and believed in by all equally. This commonality leads to the taken-for-granted nature of an experience, action, behavior, concept formation and beliefs — the real world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). But the reality is always social. McCallum (1999) asserts that “any expression or articulation of an experience, including self-experience, is also social because it is articulated in a language which is always already socially and ideologically oriented” (p. 102). Whatever expression of experience that we as discourse producers make is always in language. As language is the property of humans, used in society in a discursive way, it is constructed. Our knowledge and experiences of the world are, therefore, socially constructed. We cannot leave the arena of society in using language. Society puts certain demands on us, under which we are obliged to look into phenomena as they appear. Coming to the point in an accurate way possible, it can be said that language, ideology, reality and discourse are located at the ends

of a continuum. We cannot specify exactly where one appears and the other ends.

To conclude, if seen deeply, the real world then does not exist; to put it the other way round, reality does not exist. The various phenomena, physical objects, concepts, truths, roles, actions, behaviors, knowledge and belief systems are only the social constructions of language. They are the result of various contestations among people into the process of construction. Our observations and knowledge obtained from them is not true or accurate. They are mere constructions through language in various forms and shapes i.e. discursivity. In the view of Gergen, “in effect, the world does not determine the form of our utterances or our phonemes; we employ language together to determine what the world is for us” (quoted in Hibberd, 2005, p. 9). Gergen seems to give priority to language (the language of thought probably), where language has certain tags for representations. These linguistic tags are shared by all through their shared ability. But as he points out, there is nothing real in the tags; it the narrative procedure, i.e. “the descriptive language” that “will have a strong determining effect on the account to be rendered of the world” (quoted in Hibberd, 2005, p. 9). It is hence through language guided by discursive patterns that truth claims and knowledge and belief systems are characterized as real.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Discourse as the subjective and pre-planned phenomenon provides the basis for the social construction of language. As language is the product of individuals’ psychological makeup of their experiences of life in society, it becomes socio-discursive. The socio-constructivist approach asserts that the language used in a discourse is not natural, neutral and permanent but is created and devised to suit to one’s motives. It is tricky, cunning and discursive use of language to construct various facets of meanings and therefore, ideologies. According to Haslanger (2012):

Although it is fair to say that generally speaking, social constructions are artifacts, this leaves much open, since there are many different kinds of artifacts and ways of being an artifact. In perhaps the paradigm case of artifacts, human beings play a causal role in bringing an object into existence in accordance with a design plan or to fulfill a specific function. (p. 86)

Haslanger (2012) is of the opinion that as a whole, the world both materially and conceptually (the material objects in it and the concepts and ideas in it) has many facets. The same objective has been explained by Marx from the constructionist's point of view while referring to societies that they "reproduce themselves materially, socially, relationally, consciously, economically, and linguistically" (quoted in McKenna, 2004, p. 13). In many ways we consider these facets objects and concepts and in turn define other phenomena in relation to them. But to consider them true or perfect objects, ideas or concepts and to define them on the basis of pre-planned scheme, manner or process, is always by means of the discursive use of language. We are affected by certain conditions which bind us to define and categorize objects, concepts and ideas the way they are. This compulsion is put on us by the societal attitudes and behaviors, according to which we construct objects and ideas. Haslanger (2012) is also of the view that some phenomena like national languages and terminologies like names of cities are, of course, not the schemed constructions. The fact for this is that they are not concerned with the limits of society. They have no social dimension and are above it. It means that a system, phenomenon, concept, ideology or institution is constructed only if it has some direct link with society and is affected by it directly — hence; referred to as the social-constructions.

What does then social constructionism put into question? According to Lock and Strong (2010), a cup, a jar and a vase are the result of creative work of potter. It depends upon his/her aesthetic taste how s/he molds the clay; otherwise, there is nothing inherent in the material of the clay. In the same way, people have no pre-planned schemes to define themselves or the entities and thus to create ideologies, truths and norms. It is the process of relationship, on the basis of which they define themselves, understand others and thus create various linguistic modes of presentations i.e. various ideologies and truth claims. They argue:

In this sense, social constructionists are interested in delineating the processes that operate in the socio-cultural conduct of action to produce the discourses within which people construe themselves. This is not to deny that humans have certain propensities, of course, but it is to claim that many of these propensities are rather amorphous, like clay, to begin with. We

do appear, for instance, to have a special interest in human faces from very early on in our lives, and this interest is intrinsic to the establishment and growth of our relationships with others. But those relationships come to be structured and conducted in very different ways, and place very different moral demands upon people, across time and space. (Lock & Strong, 2010, pp. 7-8)

In this terrain, social constructionism works in the context of post-structuralism and critical hermeneutics which consider language a dynamic and moving system to construct ideas. Social constructivist approach sees language as the creative builder of ideas which works on the basis of synthesis and analysis and hence interpretation. Social constructivists regard the creative aspect of language in giving meanings to various ideologies. They regard ideologies and truth-claims as the formation and construction of the subjective thinking of people in a society, based on the arbitrariness of language. The ideologies, truth-claims, institutions, and power-structures are not natural; rather they are the constructions of individuals in a society, in many different discursive ways.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a research methodology. CDA seeks to investigate the underlying factors responsible for the construction of discourse and resists the power factor active behind the construction of discourse. It criticizes the dominant structures and hegemonic relationships responsible for the running of institutions, knowledge systems and truth and reality norms. As the paper is textual analysis, therefore the research strategy is kept to be Fairclough's Three Dimensional Model of CDA. According to Fairclough (1995), any text is to be analyzed from three different angles: texts themselves as they are i.e. their structural aspect; discourse as it is constructed, erected and exercised in society; and the relationship of discourse to the society. The three dimensions in the simplest words and as Qureshi (2014) while referring to Corbett, puts it:

Also respectively refer to three major perspectives in the field of discourse analysis like the tools or medium of discourse, for instance a dialogue or speech; the register or the situation and context in which certain discourse is taking place; and the power-politics leading to the process of discourse to take place;



the power factor being at the back of each and every discourse.  
(p. 105)

There are two main reasons behind the use of this methodology for the current research. Firstly, this methodology is special for textual analysis. The paper is based on the textual analysis of a novel. As text is a form of discourse (written), therefore, CDA is used as method of analysis. Secondly, as Griffin (2005) says, CDA is primarily concerned with the deeper relationships between participants, their discourse and its social construction, the paper under the methodological framework of CDA will interpret how people construct the “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1972) by the socio-discursive use of language.

### **Summary of the Novel**

In *All He Ever Wanted*, Shreve touches on some of the most important issues in family life. This novel is the criticism on the oppression of women, bound in the relationship of marriage; interpersonal relationships between a husband and a wife or generally, between a man and a woman. Etna Bliss, the heroine and pivotal female character is compelled by Nicholas Van Tessel, the main male character and hero, to marry him. She is given no choice of her own even to think about marriage properly. In the end she agrees out of her compulsion despite the fact that she does not love him. Shreve shrewdly presents her ideas on the subject of love, an indispensable right of women in society, being a necessary ideal in matrimonial relations. As men are all-powerful in patriarchy, women are often not on equal footing with men and cannot produce complete mutual understanding which results in total loss of relationship in the end.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data analysis and interpretation is done keeping in view the principles laid by Fairclough’s Three Dimensional Model of CDA. The paragraphs are randomly selected from the novel and a brief reference to the context is provided to inform the reader about the necessary background. Moreover, the text is put in quotation marks and italicized in analysis and interpretation section, in order to separate it from general discussion. As suggested by Fairclough (1992), three stages in his three dimensional model could be used separately. This paper has a certain diversion. I have used all the three stages together during the process of interpretation and analysis.

**Reference to the Context:** On one surprise visit to Etna's home, Nicholas waits in a gorgeous room for her to come. The aristocratic and tender nature of the room motivates him much. He mentions many artistic and romantic things for example the paintings, crockery, curtains, and furniture etc. He becomes suffocated by the claustrophobic feelings and says:

- (1) *[I]n silver and wood and ... (A man's body ... for comparison.)*(p. 23)

### **Identity and Its Social Construction**

The extract is a piece of discourse from psychology. Nicholas is alone in the room where Etna lives. He is psychologically contesting many ideologies which lead to the demarcation of class of women from that of men. In this type of discourse of psychology, Nicholas as the active discourse participant is involved in the dialogue with his self. His 'self' as the passive listener listens to him and takes for granted everything that it is told. It is because of the knowledge that Nicholas has, of the observation of room. This role of the participant observer, gives Nicholas an authority over his self, which, in this situation, is a passive listener because of its lack of knowledge of the concrete observation through senses i.e. of sight. The clause "*leached the vitality from the body*" presupposes that the body i.e. "*A man's body*" is a vitalized one. The formal use of brackets explains here the conceptual and expressive use of the term "*body*" that it is not used as a generic term to allude to all the bodies that is men's and women's alike. Shreve mentions the necessary psychological makeup of men. Through Nicholas she dives deep into the psychological world of men, who associate tenderness, beauty, and romance with women. Nicholas compares the beauty and pleasure of the room with "*woman's taste*", i.e. he qualifies women with the so-called womanly attributes and gives them their identity as tender. Such an ideology is ideologically contestable as it diverts to sensuousness. The romantic feelings associated with women's identity also refer to sexual orientations towards them. We care for and give value to those things in society which are tender and lovable and women are also among them. These things are relevant particularly to "*a man's body*" which again symbolizes the indispensable men's psychology of liking for women. There is a clash of ideologies in this extract. On the one hand women's perception of living i.e. the decorated accommodation is highlighted.

Women, for example, like to use red color in their bedrooms; red beds, red sofas, walls painted in red, red bouquets, red pillow cushions, everything red. Ideologically, red is associated with women; brides, red rose presented to women on Valentine day, red as the symbol of love for women etc. Women take for granted such ideologies and relate them to their identification. Men, on the other hand clash with such womanly identities. Assuming female identity with gaudy colors, luxuries, and romantic affiliations, men associate them (women) and each and everything that relates to such an identity, with tenderness. In the same way whereas female psychology is more relational, male's on the other hand is more practical. He uses it to serve other interests also that of love and sex. It shows how women are ideologically oppressed (Sultana, 2010) in various ways within patriarchal societies (Qureshi, 2014). In the context of this interpretation, it is no exaggeration to suppose that this construction of femininity on the basis of degraded social status as reality, is mere the result of men's biased authority towards women. Also, women are no less responsible in the construction of this reality. It is them (women) who have consented and submitted blindly to whatever is told to them; they have taken for granted their degraded social status, constructed discursively by men in society. They are recognized on the basis of their lower social status and this identity is the result of various meanings negatively attached to their cause.

**Reference to the Context:** Nicholas comes towards a sitting room for coffee at the inn where he and Etna are staying for the night. He is nervous about the honeymoon activities. Since he is not an expert in sexual matters, he thinks about the other people in the world as a whole and concludes that almost all the people suppose at a hotel, have had sex in one way or the other and that everyone tries to hide his/her sexual life. He thinks:

- (2) *I will look at a middle-aged woman ... might label shocking.* (p. 116)

### **Ideology and Its Social Construction**

The hero of the novel, Nicholas, is engaged in a monologue. He is concerned about sexual matters here. He thinks about the various respected, composed and honorable people, having done sexual intercourse. This extract can be regarded as a piece from a discourse of hypocrisy where the so-called honorable people at "public" places are

extremely corrupt in private lives and that no one has spared from the effects and “pleasures” of sex. The words like “pleasures”, “wanton”, “squander”, “connubial”, “delight”, and “animal-like” make this piece of writing a sexual discourse. In the same way the words like “primly”, “prim”, “public”, “laced and buttoned”, and “polite society” make the piece of extract a discourse of honor. The text is important in so far as the ideological struggle is concerned. We can see the contrast between the opposites i.e. the opposition between what is there in public life and that of private life. Moreover, “secret pleasures”, “public places”, “connubial delight”, and “polite society” are collocations cum presuppositions. It is due to these collocations and presuppositions that we get at the ideological importance of certain things, concepts, and processes, and it is these collocations and presuppositions that allude to the belief systems in which certain discourse like this operates. The repetition of word “woman” has a relational value here. Its redundant use makes the fact clear that the whole hypocrisy is vested in the female folk; that it is only women who are “pleasures” seeking, that they are “wanton in the night”, that they “squander” their selves in sexual relationships, and that it is only they who are “incapable of such animal-like activities”. On the whole, according to Nicholas, it is only women, these honorable women (in his opinion) and not men (in his opinion the honorable and composed men of higher social statuses) who play the double game. He ascribes this double role or hypocrisy i.e. modest at “public places” and prostitutes in private life to women only, by referring to “spinster”. The phrases “secret pleasures”, “connubial delight” and “animal-likeactivities” are euphemistic expressions to refer to sexual intercourse. They are metaphorically used to make the extract a sexual discourse. It is on the basis of all these formal features of the text in hand that certain relations take place between men and women which are ideologically significant in patriarchy. The nominalization “the woman laced and buttoned” alludes to modesty on part of women. This nominalization treats the text on a general thematic level and one can capture the gist of the whole text on the basis of context of the text and also other texts in the intertextual fashion. Anywhere in the world the truth of this statement is the same i.e. women’s modesty. It also inter-textually relates the extract to the wider social aspect of human nature. The text is important in so far as its whole structure is concerned. It can be regarded as an order of the

larger discourse of the hypocrite nature of women. Shreve has given value to the undermined social position of women. She presents Nicholas with a view to consider all women having had sex and that no woman is spared from this human urge. He thinks all women corrupt, prostitutes, immodest, sexually perverse, and indulging in adultery in the guise of the so-called honor and respect. He thinks that all the respected women are perverse in the darkness i.e. in their private lives. According to him, all of them have had sex and that no one is a virgin. They have tasted the pleasure of sex with men. No matter, according to him, how much a woman is pious in her social life, she is in the same ratio immodest and characterless in her private life. Before her marriage, she has lost her virginity and that no woman who looks decent and chaste, can claim chastity. Shreve is conscious of the maltreatment to women in patriarchal societies and she has given voice to their plight, by potentially criticizing patriarchy and its ideologies (Qureshi, 2014). On the basis of these negative attributions, patriarchy has constructed the dark picture of women as a reality in the form of various ideologies which degrade the position of women.

**Reference to the Context:** Due to her work at the charity house, Nicholas tells us, Etna needed a transport of her own and that he had bought for her a nice car. Despite the fact that he could not build compromise with his matrimonial life due to its extreme intricacies and hidden struggles, he wanted Etna to have all the facilities of life. He says:

(3) *I had purchased for her a Cadillac ... Nicholas Van Tassel's wife.*  
(p. 125)

### **Incapability and Its Social Construction**

In this paragraph Nicholas tells the reader i.e. the passive listener, what he did for his wife, Etna. The extract is a site for the covert ideological power and its exercise. This fact of the power politics makes the extract a discourse of responsibility in a nuclear family which is evident from the use of word “*woman*”. The word has a relational value in so far as it provides us a cue to the discursive construction of a female as “*woman*”. The adjective “*little*” is important from experiential point of view. Other word like ‘pretty’ could be used in its place but the writer has deliberately avoided that. “*Little*” is expressively important in the sense that it carries the shade of ‘frivolity’ with it and associates it with “*woman*”, making her trivial. Same is the case with the other adjective i.e. “*green*”.

Ideologically we know that the use of “green” color is avoided almost everywhere and in every society of the world by men. The fact that women use certain gaudy colors like red, “green”, purple, and yellow etc. is ideologically engraved in our belief systems; they have no pragmatic value because they can also be used by men without any loss. Such an ideology leads to gender differentiation on the basis of use of colors and this thing is even more evident in non-Western societies like Asia, where women’s use of colored clothes and their different tailoring styles make them different from men. Same is true of the adjective “boxy” and noun “gold” which also make women’s status inferior. “Boxy” refers to ‘small’ and hence to the inferiority. The ideological assumption is that women use small vehicles like “coupe” in comparison to men who have large cars like Rolls-Royce. “Gold” here has both a relational and expressive value. The jewelry and ornaments are the property of women and this property has also an ideological background, active behind it. Men do not wear ornaments and if they do, they are not noticed. There is no necessary connection between women and their use of jewelry. It is the belief system which has specified norms for us to follow without any rationality. We, as the active members of society have no choice but to follow them blindly. Leading to their inability or incapacity to do hard work, the weaker status of women, is clear from the clause “*thus enabling a woman to manage it*”. The phrase “*electric starter*” is metaphorically used to refer to the absence of hard work, which is ironical and alludes to the weakness of women; showing them so weak to start even a vehicle. In the same manner, the conjunction “*thus*” works here as an expressive modality that women are incapable to carry out difficult tasks. Other conjunctions like ‘so’, ‘in this way’, ‘hence’, and ‘therefore’ could also be used and in each case the truth of the supposition would have been the same i.e. women are incapable of performing hard tasks to the extent that they cannot even start their vehicles, which is such an easy task to do i.e. turning the key. The same is true of the clause “*one of only four women in Thrupp*” which is ideologically important in the sense that it also renders women incapable of difficult tasks like ‘driving’. This truth is validated in the next subordinate clause “*who could drive an automobile*”. “*Could*” here is a relational modality in so far as the truth claims here are concerned i.e. women can drive cars, is the relation of Etna, in respect to other women of the Thrupp, not the whole women folk. Moreover,

“*could*” can also be treated as an expressive modality, as it shows the probability value. Nicholas is not certain whether the other three women, who are famous for knowing the art of driving, really possess driving skills or not. Also “*could*” as an expressive modality shows the imperfection in the remaining three women’s art of driving, if they knew it at all. The ideological contestation in the extract is the patriarchal affiliation of females’ merit with males. Nicholas, a patriarch, degrades female, on the one hand, in the role of “*woman*” due to her weaknesses and on the other hand, credits her in the role of “*wife*” that it is “*my wife*” who can drive and that she is among the four women in the whole of Thrupp, who know driving; hence giving her an extra credit. “*My*” used as a possessive case here, denotes Nicholas’ possession of Etna. She is the property of her husband and must be recognized on his behalf. He identifies her with his own name that she is “*Nicholas Van Tassel’s wife*” i.e. Etna’s personal identity is recognized on the behalf of her husband, that her capability is due to her husband and that she can do nothing by herself without the support of her husband. It is how patriarchal forces limit the capabilities of women in almost all the spheres of life. Men in patriarchal societies do not allow women to use their potentialities. If, for some reason they find an opportunity to expose their talent, the whole credit then goes to men, their heads. These normative and underlying injustices are so often exercised that they take the shape of belief, blindly followed by the people, which in turn leads to various forms of women’s oppression (Qureshi, 2014).

**Reference to the Context:** Nicholas imagines the love history and love affair of Etna with Samuel Asher, her ex-boyfriend whom she intended to marry. He thinks that Etna was probably engaged at that time with someone other and that even she broke her engagement for Samuel’s sake, to marry with him. But Samuel, under the influence of his patriarchal parents and family honor, Nicholas imagines, could not do this because he was engaged to another girl i.e. Ardith. He took her to a private room, Nicholas imagines, making her understand. He says:

- (4) *Etna is imploring Samuel. She is weeping. ... does not permit this.*  
(p. 267)

### **Honor and Its Social Construction**

Nicholas, disturbed by his growing tension with his wife, assumes that she might be doing all this with him because of her sickness of him. He

thinks and imagines his wife in sexual association with her former lover. The extract is a piece from an imaginary discourse of the so-called supposed honor. The contemplation of Nicholas provides the power for this discourse type since he regards women's honor and ego blown to ashes, on the basis of contemporary socio-patriarchal knowledge of ideology. The words "*imploring*" and "*weeping*" provide us with the intertextual context for this discourse type. Women in patriarchal societies often have to entreat to men to be kind with them. It is a routine process that such entreats are exercised time and again in patriarchy. The extract is also an excellent example of the fundamental patriarchal discourse in which a woman is oppressed on the basis of a certain man's instigation to break up with her fiancé. In the same way the situational context for the discourse is provided by the fact that Etna has "*broken her engagement*" and that now she has no other choice but to marry Nicholas. "*Announces*" has a relational value here since it is used to refer to all the people who are present there at Samuel's home. The usual word could have been 'says' which has no meaning of declaration before the general public. "*Imploring*", "*weeping*", and "*announces*" are also used as collocations; since they make the piece an impulsive event in which a woman, Etna, tries to justify herself among patriarchs. "*She has broken her engagement, she announces*" is in simple declarative form in which the subject position of Etna is that of an informer. The subject position of Etna then is a giver of information that "*she has broken her engagement*" and that of the addressees', the receivers of information, who passively listen to her information. This position of Etna makes her a powerful discourse participant. The speech-act value of this utterance is that of confirmation. Etna confirms that she really has "*broken her engagement*". The simple declaration of Etna i.e. "*she has broken her engagement*" has the value of a demand for an action on part of Samuel, to marry her, because it is due to him that she broke her engagement and that he will have to repair it i.e. by marrying her. "*Who*" is used by the writer three times which gives an anaphoric reference to "*Samuel*". The repetition has a serious aim here. It gives an extreme responsibility value to "*Samuel*" who is the only person responsible for her destruction. "*What is a man to do?*" is a rhetorical question asked by the writer. It shows power relations. The subject position of the speaker/writer i.e. Shreve, is that of the demander of information from the addressees i.e. the



readers. So discourse participants are involved here in relations of power i.e. the powerful position of the speaker/writer. The question contextually categorizes “*man*” when he is entangled in a difficult situation. This non-generic word is used with a specific purpose here. The more usual alternative word is the generic ‘people’ but here the writer is limiting the difficult situation to “*man*” only; not to the general people including women and children. The clause “*more private room*” refers back to a man’s action; what he will manage to do if faced with such a situation i.e. of molesting a woman’s honor and leaving her without any compensation. The clause also presupposes Samuel’s hidden motif i.e. he does not want the secret of his sexual relationship with Etna open to the general public; therefore he takes her to a “*more private room*” to discuss the matter with her unnoticed by other people in his home. The writer also idealizes women’s perception by putting “*announces*” and “*more private room*” in opposition to each other. While women do not bother about speaking the truth that “*she has broken her engagement*”, whatever the consequences (of not being married by other men as well because of her status of ‘divorced’) may be, men do fear the disclosure of their secrets; the secrets of their sexual life, that it will ruin their so-called honor. Therefore, Samuel takes Etna to a “*more private room*” to pacify her and make her understand that he cannot marry her as “*he cannot break his engagement*” because “*his honor does not permit this*”. The difference between women’s and men’s attitudes is also made clear respectively by the opposition of clause “*she has broken her engagement*” vs. “*he cannot break his engagement*”. “*Honor*” has a significant ideological and relational value. It ideologically relates Samuel to Etna. Samuel is engaged to another woman Ardith to whom he is betrothed. He cannot break his promise of marriage with her and he cannot be disloyal to her. Samuel is the product of patriarchal culture who, on one hand, has sexual relations with Etna and molests her to the best of his erotic powers i.e. “*wildly?, passionately?wistfully?*” (Shreve, 2003: 266). He does not have any regard for “*honor*” as far as it is a matter of sexual gratification. On the other hand, he is an honorable man and cannot stain his “*honor*” by leaving his fiancée. Shreve has exposed the dual-naturalness of patriarchy. Patriarchy has culturally and ideologically placed men in the position to make legitimate what is in their favor. They are allowed to make honor dishonor and vice versa. “*Honor*” is a toy in their hands.

They play with it, break it, reshape it, or destroy it to mean anything. No one has any say in their actions. Patriarchy has given free hand to men to exercise their powers over women. It is Samuel's "family", his patriarchal parents who will "never permit him to break his engagement" with Ardith. "Family" has an ideological value. The writer has used it to refer to the power of patriarchal father in a nuclear family. The verb "permit" shows the necessary obligations which a son has towards his father. Why a man (son) will follow another man's (father) instructions? Is all this due to patriarchal makeup of the society? Yes. Men regard each other's interests with respect. They do not criticize each other even if they do wrong because of the cultural ideologies in their hands. Women are often molested by men on the pretext of marriage. As soon as men do their business, women are hit below the belt. Such is masculinity and its ideology to oppress women and there is no one to check this unjust socio-patriarchal ideology and thinking (Qureshi, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

Femininity is discursively constructed in many ways. Women are oppressed due to their weaker social status and minor social roles which are socially constructed by male agency. Women's oppression, degradation, lower social position, and flawed psychology are not natural, determined or biological. These negative attributes are discursively constructed into reality in society by the institution of masculinity. Shreve's *All He Ever Wanted* shows the discursive construction of femininity in society. This paper has critically analyzed the role of language in the construction of certain concepts like degraded identity, minor roles, lower status and humbleness, associated with femininity. It has explained how powerful people socially construct powerful ideology and hence powerful institution (masculinity) and use it discursively in the disfavor of the weaker ones (femininity). Shreve has tried to show how women are oppressed in man-constructed world of authority, behavior and discourse by highlighting the role of language in the construction of various ideologies, through various interactions and dialogues of the characters.

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## Appendix

### Textual Parts Referred from the Novel *All He Ever Wanted* (2003)

1. It was a room that with its rosewood spool turnings and carved oak trefoils, its glided mirrors and marble-topped tables, its serpentine tendrils of overgrown plants and cast-iron lanterns, its stenciled stripes and floral motifs, its flocked wallpaper and glass curtains, its oriental rugs and Chinese vases and fringed tablecloths and its iron clock — not to mention the dozens of daguerreotypes in silver and wood and marquetry frames that seemed to cover every available surface — leached the vitality from the body. (A man's body, at least, for one deduced immediately that the room reflected a woman's taste; even Moxon's rooms, at their very worst, might have been considered spare by comparison.). (p. 23)
2. I will look at a middle-aged woman, for example, who sits primly with her purse on her lap, barely concealing her impatience with the waitress, and I will think: What secret pleasures has this woman known? Is she prim in public places but wanton in the night? Does she squander herself in various transports of connubial delight? Does she favor, in private, practices that she might feel compelled to condemn in public? The woman laced and buttoned as she sits at a corner table, her packages beneath her seat, seems incapable of such animal-like activities. And yet no guesses — one *knows*, unless the woman in question is that rare species, a spinster with no experience of love whatsoever — that she has

- once or twice or often, or even daily, comported herself in a manner that we, in polite society, might label shocking. (p. 116)
3. I had purchased for her a Cadillac Landaulet coupe, one of the first cars to have an electric starter, thus enabling a woman to manage it. It was quite a lovely little thing, a green boxy affair with a gold stripe. Etna was one of only four women in Thrupp who could drive an automobile ... and I would think, with considerable satisfaction. That is my wife. That is Nicholas Van Tassel's wife. (p. 125)
  4. Etna is imploring Samuel. She is weeping. Perhaps she puts her reddened hands on Samuel's arms. Samuel tries to calm her, but she will not be calmed. She has broken her engagement, she announces. She cannot marry another man. She loves only Samuel, Samuel who must not marry Ardith. Who must not go away to Toronto. Who must not leave her.

What is a man to do? Samuel tries to take Etna into another, more private room to speak with her, but Etna, nearly wild now, will not go. Samuel offers to fetch a carriage for her to take her home. Etna shakes her head. Samuel tells her finally that he cannot break his engagement, that his honor does not permit this. (p. 267)