

Exploring Female Agency in Mitali Perkin's *Rickshaw Girl*

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Abstract

Female agency is a significant notion in the discourse on women's empowerment and feminism. It refers to women's ability to act and make decisions freely, with a sense of control and authority over their life. Mitali Perkin is an Indian American author of children's and young adult literature; her female characters are allowed the opportunity to pick heavily reliant on financial independence. Obtaining financial independence is one of the finest bases for discovering one's agency. Recognizing and fostering female agency in the context of financial independence is critical for deconstructing the patriarchal system, resolving gender inequities, and establishing a more equitable society.

Keywords: Agency, Female Agency, Feminism, Financial Independence, Women Empowerment.

"If any female feels she needs anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agency."

—*Feminism Is for Everybody* by bell hooks

The agency is determined by decisions made within a social-material system. Making choices is a decision-making process in which the social environment and structure determine people's values and list of potential options. A person's capacity to act independently and make choices, despite being bound by prevailing social structures is known as agency. The term agency is linked with identity, liberty, choices, and inspiration. We have not lately given much thought to the issue of "agency." It dates back to an earlier era and is well ingrained. The idea of agency is based on the agent. A person or thing that has a significant impact on the situation, or someone or something that acts, is an agent, according to The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. When we take action, we take ownership of it, are in charge of it, and succeed in feeling like we have agency. P. Millican and Michael Wooldridge give a lovely explanation of the terms "agent" and "agency," using the example that an agent "is something that looks to operate independently. We recognise agency when a toddler carefully selects one

chocolate from a variety after carefully considering their options." (547)

According to the "triadic reciprocal causation theory," American psychologist Albert Bandura has developed a philosophy of action and human agency (Bandura 1175). He rejects the idea that an agent is just the outcome of their surroundings or their own volition. According to him, an agent is determined by ambient factors, internal influences (behaviour), and personality. These three criteria all take into account gender identification as well as mental processes, including cognition, memory, foresight, and judgments. In sociology, agency refers to the interaction between an agent's choices, behaviour, and way of life and the current social structure along with race, class, gender, and cultural norms. An agent or agency reproduces new norms and connections by penetrating the social system. According to British sociologist Anthony Giddens, social factors govern human behaviour. This idea implies that an agent is free to create his environment and existence without being restricted by social structure. Empowerment and the idea of agency go hand in hand. One of the two components of empowerment is the agency's growth, and the other is the institutional context. Both assist the agent in successfully exercising agency. The "opportunity framework" and agency interact

positively, perhaps stimulating the desired empowerment. Giving the agent the freedom of choice to value his ideas (acts) inside the advantageous opportunity framework makes it possible to bring about great development and transformation in any disagreeable condition. Modern thinkers like Nietzsche, Albert Bandura, Giddens, and others have discovered how various elements, such as social and political institutions, tradition and culture, resource availability, a person's psyche, discriminations, non-rational elements, strong will, and so on, interact with one another when acting as an agent. All these elements, whether enabling or hindering, impact a person's ability to make decisions and act.

In terms of feminist research, it is imperative and vital to bring up the subject of agency. Male and female children are treated and acted on differently, starting in infancy and even from birth. Instead of valuing their uniqueness, people are required to conform to gender norms in behaviour, attitudes, and behaviours. Because of the dominant masculine social structure, women are continually denied access to their agency. Feminists like Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Bartky attempted to find a way to overcome the conflicting gender roles and rebelled against them by forging alliances with other feminists to obtain a genuine ideology of female agency. Yet, feminists like Hilde Lindemann emphasize the storytelling of women's difficulties so that they may take action to stop discriminatory practices and develop the power to reinterpret their subjectivity as a result of their agency. The term "agency" now denotes a psychological or internal characteristic that a person possesses. Women's capacity as agents can be assessed by their ability to control their finances, make decisions about their own lives, including marriage, having children, and relationships, and by their capacity to prevent violence of all kinds, including sexual, emotional, physical, and mental. They can also be assessed by their ability to speak out against gender bias.

Nonetheless, the ability of each person to make wise decisions will determine the real positive consequences, and encouraging "agency" is a crucial idea for gender equality and women's empowerment. As stated by Shoshana Pollack in the paper "Reconceptualizing Women's Agency and Empowerment: Challenges to Self

Esteem, Discourse, and Women's Lawbreaking," "man obtains a sensation or feeling that she can act as an independent self-determined entity" (82). But, the social structure in which they live, poor self-esteem, dependence, oppression, violence, and other issues make it difficult for women to act as agents. According to Pollack, one of the factors influencing women's criminal behaviour is their poor self-esteem, which results from being marginalized and humiliated. It also acts as a barrier to making the right decisions and moving on the right path. Gayatri Spivak discusses the subalterns of third-world nations in the colonial setting in her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". The gender-dominated moral rules in their specific location and culture prevent the subaltern women from speaking in their eyes. Having an understanding of how women's agency has been treated historically and culturally is crucial to understanding Indian women's viewpoint on an agency or as a change agent for the individual as well as the collective.

Modernization still retains the same core components of tyranny and injustice in the twenty-first century. Just the method has been altered. Although there are numerous efforts made to improve women's position in society by building globalization and feminism, etc., which aids in promoting women's empowerment, their lives, and identities are still largely shaped by their insufficiency in financial, educational independency and discriminatory factors such as race, gender, and cast. The entire patriarchal foundation of Indian tradition, value system, and culture assigns women the role of the provider and tolerator and compares them to the ground. When women are compared in such a way, they are prevented from acting as true agents for themselves.

Indian society, ruled by men, views women's concerns as secondary despite women making up more than 48% of the population. Several of the most important democratic principles—such as equality, fairness, and safety—are not being upheld in their entirety despite numerous attempts. The much-anticipated discussion over what empowerment truly means comes to a head with this. The majority of society's males tend to misinterpret empowerment, a vast concept that often has a positive meaning since they've not personally experienced its

effects. The process of acquiring independence and the capacity to exert influence over your circumstances is what the Cambridge Dictionary defines as empowerment. Fundamentally, having the flexibility to make decisions is how one gains control. Making decisions helps to build confidence so that one may assert their rights. Yet having financial independence is the source of all of this authority. One way to assist Indian women in overcoming challenges in numerous spheres of life is through financial freedom.

Women still perform the bulk of domestic work worldwide, including housekeeping and childrearing. Feminist researchers have questioned traditional family theories that mask this inequity. For instance, they have questioned the prevalent economic theories of the family that view the head of the home as an agent of the entire family's interests. The gender roles that still exist in society are typically defined by how males are seen as providers and women as mothers. However, many women continue to rely on their male spouses for financial support, making them susceptible to falling into poverty in the case of a divorce. Women might be physically, sexually, or psychologically abused by their partners or other male figures because of their economic dependence and lack of financial autonomy, according to the 1992 Global Fund for Women Report. Due to the asymmetrical capacity of women to leave a marriage, males have a far stronger position and advantage in negotiations.

According to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, economic disparity, dependency, political ambiguity, and unhealthy social relationships between men and women in the social framework are the leading causes of women's oppression. According to Marxist feminists, the creation of private property made women the exploited class and made them the property of males. Due to their financial reliance on their families and jobs, which kept them in the labour force, women experienced oppression. Hence, Marxist feminists argue that women must participate equally in the process of economic production. Virginia Woolf's essay in "Room of one's own states", "A woman needs money and a room of her own if she is to be able to write," which is the most apparent appeal for women's financial independence. She emphasizes further that having artistic talent is not a miraculous gift bestowed at

birth, but rather a talent that emerges among the educated and affluent class upon meeting two crucial requirements: first, having one's own room, which represents a woman's right to her own space as a person, and second, having sufficient financial means. The feminist author and activist Betty Friedan affirms that economic parity significantly increases women's empowerment in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. Women may be a more powerful, more equitable force in politics when they have income-generating occupations. Women who are financially secure treat themselves and others with greater respect.

Women's agency has been tracked by a number of authors, both male and female. In an effort to remedy their historical exclusion from exercising their right to freedom of action, they make an effort to investigate the difficult role of women as a change agent. In terms of Indian English writing, Mitali Perkin is an Indian American author of children's and young adult literature who has offered women's autonomy a fresh perspective. She tries to provide his female characters with the opportunity to carry out their chosen activity freely. Inspiring agentic performances were given by her female characters regardless of their age or situation. She exposes the sexism of males and their lack of awareness of women's need for financial assistance. In Perkin's, the female characters are given the autonomy to choose options and decisions for themselves which provides them with the position of agency. She demonstrates convincingly that no limitations can prevent a woman from exercising her agency if she is willing to bring about change and is capable of doing so.

The Mitali Perkins novel, *Rickshaw Girl*, is a powerful and approachable portrayal of Bangladesh through the eyes of a little kid that addresses tradition, legacy, and the changing position of women. This book tells the tale of Naima, a confident adolescent. Her father's rickshaw is the only source of income for her family. Naima strives to support her family despite her few resources. Perhaps if she were a male like her buddy Saleem, she could operate her father's rickshaw and provide money for the family. However, as Naima chooses to drive the rickshaw while pretending to be a male, she wrecks it, and the family's debt increases as a result. Because of this, her younger

sister's schooling is in jeopardy, and her mother's one and only set of bangles may be auctioned. This strengthened her resolve to support her family and demonstrate the benefits of being a female. Naima possesses a distinct gift; she can paint lovely alpacas, which are customary designs that Bangladeshi ladies use to adorn their houses on important occasions. She then dresses up as a guy once more and goes to the brand-new rickshaw repair business to sell her artistic abilities in order to get money for her father's repairs. Naima is shocked to learn the owner is indeed a woman when she gets to the repair shop. When Naima's father finds out of the things she's done, he is immediately ashamed of her for challenging the norms of her gender. But, Naima's father recognizes his daughter's talents and cherishes her contribution when the shop owner gives her paid employment at the business, in addition to saying that Naima's painting will pay for his repair.

The "man" in the house is typically considered responsible for managing the money in most cultures, and this is also true in Naima's situation. As a result, women are frequently forced to carry the dual weight of household duties. In order to assist her family, she comes forward and decides to take an unorthodox route by dressing as a man. Her choice to empower herself defines her act of agency in her own unique way. Unknowingly, Naima makes an effort to challenge gender norms and stereotypes. Her ability to subvert conventional gender stereotypes comes from dressing up as a man. The journey of Naima from a miserable young adult to finding her agency in her own ways can be clearly seen between the two statements by Naima herself. In her first statement, she states that "if only I had been born a boy, she thought. Then I could earn some money. Even a little would help!"(21). Later, when she meets the repair shop owner and finds out that the owner is a woman, that blows her mind. That incident forced her to realise that to earn or get employed, she doesn't have to change her identity. Naima, when asked about her dressing up as a male, chose to unravel herself and proudly told her story like water from a picture. The epiphany resulted in a great deal for Naima in finding her act agency, which can be analysed from her second statement and she states that "it's a good thing I

turned out to be a girl. The words chimed like sitar music in Naima's mind"(77). The widowed woman of repairing shop owner is a true example of agency in execution. Where Naima's decision-making and taking charge of her actions are in a progressing stage. The woman fully exercises her agency, giving Naima the strength to do the same. Typically, salaried women's husbands or fathers handle their personal finances. They must follow the advice of the more senior male family members, even though they're running businesses. In the case of this woman, who takes over the management of her father's repair shop after her father and husband passed away. Both Naima's and the repair show owners' lives' decision and action revolves around finding an Agency for themselves without surrendering to the typical norms of society related to gender roles.

The character of Naima and the shop owner hence proved the fact that no barrier can pull one down if the vision is clear in the mind. Attaining financial freedom is one of the best roots to find one's agency. Perhaps, if Naima didn't have left no stone unturned to meet her goals, she would have not met the shop owner who helped her changing perspective on women owning their agency through financial freedom. The concept of financial literacy helps women to make their own judgments. It will enable women to reconstruct their lives on their own terms, regardless of the emergency, unanticipated circumstances, or sad occurrences, just like this woman owner who, despite losing her family, gained much potential for herself to start a business of her own, and to build her agency. The fight for equality is highly dependent on financial freedom. It will be simpler to address issues like salary inequality and gender equality the more informed gender minorities become. A gender-neutral society may be achieved by women taking on a variety of responsibilities in labour and care and by utilizing their financial literacy to become financially secure and have agency.

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