



An Examination of the Efficacy of the Meyersian Agentic- Skills Account of Autonomy

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Introduction

My primary concern in this paper pertains to the issue of self-determination or autonomy. In particular, I will be focusing on Meyers' (2002) agentic skills account situated in feminist voice theory tradition to reconceptualize self-determination. On her view, self-determination 'is an ongoing process of exercising a repertoire of agentic skills – skills that enable individuals to construct their own self-portraits and self-narratives and that thereby enable them to take charge of their lives.' (Meyers 2002: p.4) The agentic skills, Meyers contends, enables her to address 'the problem of voice authentication' (Meyers 2002, p.16). It furnishes an epistemic device that enables me to *know* that one's voice is authentic and distinguishes it from an imposed patriarch's voice. In my paper, I propose to examine the adequacy of her resolution. Given the procedural account of autonomy that Meyers proposes, a common criticism is that such accounts fail to explain why cases of internalized oppression render an agent nonautonomous. False stereotypes, perpetuated by patriarchal cultures, are internalized to an extent that it appears natural for a woman to reaffirm them in her choices and actions. The contention is that in the absence of a substantive account of autonomy, one can only have an illusion of authenticity – a woman's apparently own voice is inevitably structured by patriarchal norms. To address the problem of false stereotypes, one would need at least a weakly substantive account that proposes some objective values, an affirmation of which implies an absence of the patriarch's voice.

Through my analysis, I would attempt to assess if Meyers' procedural account can avoid the apparently unavoidable slip into a substantive account of autonomy. This is important as substantive relational accounts are infested with perfectionism (Christman 2004) which is deeply problematic for any feminist theory, given its stringent normative prescriptions. Moreover, value-saturated or substantive accounts tend to homogenize authentic selves. They deindividualize autonomy as they foreordain, both a-historically and a-contextually, what one can and cannot choose (Meyers 2002: p.15). Another danger with substantive viewpoints is that they run the risk of excluding individuals from political participation who reject their normative prescriptions.

My broader thesis in this paper is rather modest and is as follows – the efficacy of Meyers' agentic-skills account of autonomy consists in the fact that it creates the foundation for securing effective feminist gains *without* subscribing to any perfectionist, substantivist notion of autonomy. I will begin by examining the notion of autonomy and assessing its relationship with external factors, particularly social dynamics. Equipped with a better understanding of an important aspect of autonomy, I will proceed to establish the second part of my thesis – a rejection of the substantivist account of autonomy and attempt to highlight the need for an alternative account. Subsequently, I will outline and examine Meyers' processual feminist voice theory and its efficacy to address oppression. Thereafter, I will try to defend the Meyersian agentic-skills account from an important objection – that, minimally, any account of autonomy will invariably be weakly substantive as no position is value-free. Finally, I will discuss two examples from the Indian sub-continent and attempt to illustrate the efficacy of her position to provide a well-founded basis and an important starting point for securing effective feminist gains.

Before I proceed further, a clarification with regards to an important constituent element of my thesis is warranted. By effective feminist gains, I mean egalitarian benefits and advancements in the various facets of life, specifically in the personal and political aspects. Such gains, if secured, are effective in the sense that they are not cosmetic – their achievement contributes towards the larger goal of substantive

equality. Discovering one's own authentic voice, recognition of a plurality of authentic selves as opposed to an imposition of a homogenized self, parity in political participation are, on my view, construed as effective feminist gains. I am, however, disinclined to situate the aforementioned gains into fixed categories of personal or political gains. This is so because a gain that appears to be merely personal, such as discovering one's authentic voice, may very well be, and often is, construed as a political gain. For instance, finding one's voice may be essential to express one's political identity and make claims of equal recognition in political participation¹. Thus, the division into personal and political gains should not be construed as rigid and are best understood as highlighting the pervasiveness of feminist gains in multiple domains of our life.

Also, my understanding of substantive equality is based on Anderson's (1999) formulation of equality. Broadly construed, substantive equality contributes towards ending socially imposed oppression and creates conditions for the equal standing of all participating members in a polity. Thus, on my account, a feminist gain would be effective if it contributes towards diminishing, if not eliminating, social oppression and creates the possibility of a political space that affirms a parity in political participation amongst all individuals.

Understanding Autonomy

A common criticism against liberal accounts of autonomy is their endorsement of alleged hyper-individualism. What is problematic therein is the metaphysical individualism that informs this viewpoint which construes the individual as being devoid of any significant connections to the society. Against hyper-individualism, we find the postulation of an embedded self that emphasizes 'the fundamentally relational nature of our motivations, and the overall social character of our being.' (Christman 2004: p.143) Thus, we

¹ My examples from the Indian sub-continent will illustrate the same in greater detail.

find the emergence of the social self thesis in academic literature according to which a person is, fundamentally, relational as well as socially *constituted* – that social dynamics and relations have an important bearing on one's identity and sense of being. It is difficult to contest the elementary intelligibility of the social self thesis. Most liberal theorists today would find themselves in agreement with it but with qualification, their support contingent upon how we specifically understand the way in which the social bears upon the personal.

Christman (2004) rightly rejects the intellectual, but socially translatable, possibility of metaphysical relationalism – the position that one's relation with other institutions, customs and persons would be construed as *essentially* being a part of one's selfhood. Hyper-individualism that understands the individual as an isolated atomic unit is clearly false. However, a simple rejection of metaphysical individualism does not entail an outright affirmation of metaphysical relationalism, a position endorsed by adherents of an unqualified interpretation of the social self thesis. As Christman (2004: p.145) carefully reminds us –

'For it is one thing to deny that persons can always or should always be conceived without essential reference to social context, and it is quite another to claim that they should be conceived with a *particular* reference to some aspect of social context.'

Christman (2004) identifies two fundamental problems with metaphysical relationalism. Firstly, it ignores that individual identities are variable, contingent and temporally fluid. In fact, it is precisely this aspect of individual existence that motivated the rejection of the traditional liberal hyper-individualism. Secondly, any homogeneous, all-purpose, monolithic conception of the self is problematic as what should be construed as 'self' varies according to the function that the concept performs in a specific model. Thus, how we postulate the self differs in a biological model from how we define a gendered self. It is imperative that we are sensitive to the distinct localities within which the concept of the self functions. For instance, the self may be functioning as the seat of agency or as an object of self-introspection or recognition by others. Moreover, there are cultural variations in self-conceptions. In opposition to the isolated reflection

of individuals on one's desires and values, relational accounts consider human interactions as crucial for the *development* and *maintenance* of autonomy. However, as Christman (2004: p.151) notes –

'It is one thing to say that models of autonomy must acknowledge that we are all deeply related; it is another to say that we are autonomous only if related in certain idealized ways.'

At this juncture, it will be useful to consider a different viewpoint. Meyers (2002) contends that social dynamics and relation *constitute* one's conception of the self and autonomous agency. As I understand it, it would be erroneous to understand Meyers as advocating metaphysical relationalism. Metaphysical relationalism affirms the conceptual necessity of social conditions and relations for autonomy. For Meyers (2002), social dynamics are not so much a conceptual necessity than a practical inevitability. It may be, in principle, possible for an individual to determine one's identity without recourse to the social but the reality of human social existence is such that internalizing the external is inescapable. Thus, we find her emphasizing on the need to acknowledge gender and social conditions as constitutive of the identity and autonomy of the individual. In this way, we find Meyers departing from Christman's own account, in addition to *not* endorsing metaphysical relationalism. For Christman (2004: p.158, emphasis added), social conditions are only supportive of autonomy – they 'enable us to *develop and maintain* the powers of authentic choice' but are not definitive of autonomy.

Drawing upon Meyers, I propose that the social does indeed *constitutes* the personal for an autonomous being. As she notes, 'gender is *constitutive* of who we are' (emphasis added). However, this does not imply that one blindly absorbs the social norms. It is here that one's individuality plays a prominent role as it enables one to adequately reflect and determine how the social dynamics shape one's identity. Insofar as the relational aspect of Meyers' view is concerned, she contends that there are various autonomy-augmenting sites. It would be unfair to privilege any one of the manifold contexts as it would involve ignoring women's peculiar temperaments and priorities. Discovering one's voice is a skilled,

continual task and involves a relational undertaking – the specific relations and social dynamics that may augment autonomy differ with every person and may change for an individual as well.

I also agree with Meyers (2002, pdf 17) that identity is both ‘gendered *and* individualized’. Her claim serves two purposes – firstly, it does not externalize gender. Rather, it construes gender as a significant constitutive element of one’s identity. Secondly, by individualizing identity, she resists understanding gendered identity as a process of mere internalization as if gender were a toxic pill swallowed whole by a person. Consequently, Meyers’ account would be best understood as rejecting gender essentialism. However, she is sensitive to how gender tends to worm its way into one’s identity in myriad ways that one may not necessarily be conscious of and in ways that one is unable to resist and change. Gender, in other words, is *not exhaustive but constitutive* of one’s identity that shapes one’s personality and aspirations. Thus, I contend that on Meyers’ account, one’s agency, identity and autonomy are relational but do not exhibit any kind of metaphysical relationalism.

Before concluding my discussion on the notion of autonomy, I would like to highlight the value or import of this concept. At a fundamental level, the principal aim of any account of autonomy is to explicate a mode of living that one finds valuable. Contingent upon this aspect is the addressal of the problem of the alienation *from* self as a fundamental concern of an account of autonomy. A valuable *modus vivendi* would entail relying on one’s judgment as well as involving a *good fit* between one’s identity, attitude towards oneself and their behaviour. The latter aspect is also highlighted by Christman (2004) and this sense of integration invokes a judgment akin to ‘I feel right in my skin’.

The subjective value of autonomy arises from the appeal and gratification of self-discovery and self-determination. Objectively, autonomy’s value lies in the dignity of the individual and the diverse ways of being that one may fashion for oneself. Consequently, autonomy-suppressing societies are problematic as they are not conducive to personal fulfilment. However, there is another significant moral loss. Such

societies dissuade identification of symptoms of discontent and protect social institutions and prevalent ideologies from probing examination. If institutional and social patterns lead to a distancing of the individual from such social dynamics and the individual experiences self-alienation upon reflection, then these patterns impede autonomy. Thus, Meyers (2002) agrees with Christman (2004) that autonomy demands the *full manifestation* of social structures that shape one's identity.

To summarize, I understand autonomy as fundamental to determining a valuable mode of living – personal or political. Also, as opposed to metaphysical individualism, I advocate the Meyersian view that social relations are constitutive element of identity and autonomous agency. This, however, does not suggest an endorsement of metaphysical relationalism. I resist any temptation to essentialize social relations and instead suggest that agency and identity are constituted but not exhausted by social dynamics.

Substantivist Theories of Autonomy

Having developed an understanding of the notion of autonomy, we are now in a position to acquaint ourselves with substantivist conceptions of autonomy. Some feminist scholars prescribe and proscribe individual judgments and actions, a compliance with which confers autonomy to individuals. Thus, they lay down action-guiding normative prescriptions. As opposed to substantivist accounts, we have value-neutral accounts that abstain from issuing rigid prescriptions pertaining to one's conduct. Substantive accounts can be broadly categorized into value-laden and value-saturated accounts of autonomy.

A fundamental opposition to value-neutral accounts is that choice-preferences grounded in oppressive and subordinating norms of femininity cannot be made autonomously. For instance, Susan Babbit (1993), arguing in favour of a value-saturated account, argues that emancipatory values such as self-respect, dignity, liberation, etc. must necessarily be affirmed in individual decision-making. Any action or

choice that compromises such values must be abstained from, lest one be deemed non-autonomous. A fully functioning agent, on this account, cannot affirm subordinating values. However, even if concerns pertaining to internalized oppression tempts one to reject value-neutral accounts, though mistakenly as I will subsequently illustrate, it need not necessitate an endorsement of value-saturated accounts. One could, as Stoljar (2000) recommends, advocate a value-laden account of autonomy wherein only behaviours and judgments *overly* influenced by patriarchal norms of feminity would fail to be autonomous. The characteristic feature of a value-laden account is the following – if one regularly or excessively complies with oppressive norms, or complies with the most *egregiously* patriarchal norms, or both of the above, then one cannot be considered as an autonomous agent. It is important to note here that compliance with norms which are oppressive in comparatively minor ways does not render one non-autonomous, on the value-laden position.

Put simply, substantive theories of autonomy, comprising of value-laden and value-saturated accounts, are introduced with the specific aim of addressing the problem of internalized oppression. Value-laden theories are comparatively *less* prescriptive than value-saturated accounts but *more* prescriptive than value-neutral accounts of autonomy. The greater the influence of oppressive norms in one's conduct, the lesser autonomy would one enjoy.

I will now illustrate that substantivist accounts are deeply problematic. To begin with, they problematically introduce a perfectionist view of emancipatory values into their notion of autonomy. Perfectionism, as I understand it, refers to the view according to which moral principles hold for a person independently of one's judgment of them. In other words, there are some intrinsic values, emancipatory values for substantivists, which must guide one's thought and action regardless of whether they are endorsed by an individual. This threatens to undermine the efficacy of the concept of autonomy in various theoretical as well as practical contexts in which it functions. As Christman (2004: p.147) informs us, autonomous individuals form the basic unit of a polity – the adult *citizen* whose perspectives and interests

shape the principles of justice, besides democracy. By rendering one non-autonomous on account of a lack of endorsement of specific emancipatory values, we are effectively excluding them from political participation as such individuals are no longer viewed as fully functioning agents².

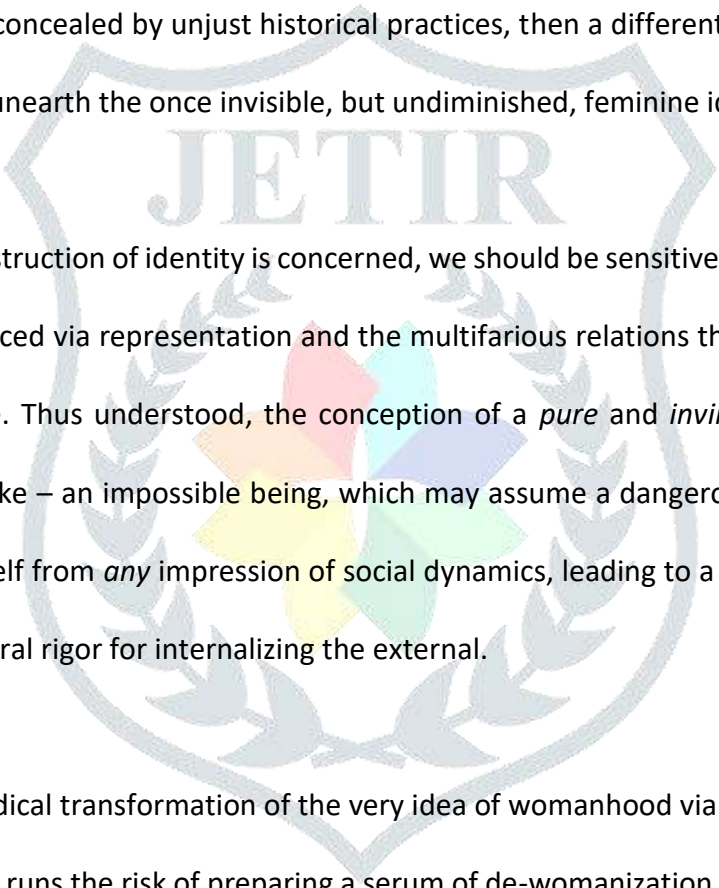
Procedural, value-neutral accounts of autonomy, such as that of Meyers (2002), depart from substantivist accounts in that the former confer autonomy upon one even if they have authentically embraced oppressive or subservient values and roles. A person would be autonomous and worthy of respect if her judgment about oppressive values shares the formal features of the judgment of a person endorsing and acting on supposedly emancipatory values. One may criticize and publicly challenge social practices that denigrate their adherents. However, it would be excessive and dangerous to define autonomy such that women and other subordinated groups participating in practices that oppress them are not considered to be fully functioning agents.

Moreover, in calling for a radical transformation of traditional femininity by prescribing a set of emancipatory values for shaping one's identity and acting as an autonomous, substantivist accounts 'promiscuously stigmatize women as victims' as well as 'homogenize authentic selves and autonomous lives' (**Meyers 2002: pdf 29**). They fail to take into account the social constitution of the self. Thus, substantive accounts *deindividualize* autonomy since a-historically and a-contextually, they prescribe what one can and cannot choose autonomously.

To understand the aforementioned concern better, it will be useful to consider a pair of dilemmas that structure issues pertaining to women's identity and agency. They arise in the context of the problem of internalized oppression. The dilemma pertaining to identity revolves around the question of a radical transformation or a valorization of the feminine identity. Given the historical and systemic subordination

² I find Christman's observation valuable as it also enables us to understand the inextricable link between autonomy and agency, particularly political agency.

of the feminine identity, do we radically reconstruct the idea of womanhood or understand femininity as a locus of genuine, though suppressed, value? The dilemma about agency revolves around a woman's ability to freely choose and act in the face of structural oppression – does the suffusion of patriarchal norms in social dynamics *gravely compromises* feminine agency or is it primarily *concealed but not diminished*? It appears to me that the two dilemmas are inextricably interlinked. If a woman's agency is historically and critically compromised, then it invites feminist scholars to deconstruct traditional femininity and reconstruct a radically new idea of womanhood that accords autonomous agency to women. If, however, the feminine agency is predominantly concealed by unjust historical practices, then a different approach suggests itself – feminist scholars must unearth the once invisible, but undiminished, feminine identity and valorize it.

The logo for JETIR (Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research) is a watermark in the center of the page. It features a shield-shaped emblem with a laurel wreath border. Inside the shield, the word "JETIR" is written in a large, serif font. Below the text is a colorful, multi-petaled flower or starburst design in shades of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue.

Insofar as the construction of identity is concerned, we should be sensitive to the fact that identities are, at least partly, produced via representation and the multifarious relations that individuals share with the society and the state. Thus understood, the conception of a *pure* and *invincible* identity is a myth, perhaps an ontological joke – an impossible being, which may assume a dangerous shape by pushing the individual to isolate oneself from *any* impression of social dynamics, leading to a state of perpetual blame for a supposed lack of moral rigor for internalizing the external.

In advocating a radical transformation of the very idea of womanhood via an emphasis on modern, emancipatory values, one runs the risk of preparing a serum of de-womanization, in a manner of speaking. Such radicality refuses to acknowledge and respect a woman's dignity under the most challengingly oppressive times. Traditional femininity, on the substantivist account, must be fundamentally discarded as it is *merely* constructed in opposition to the ideal of masculinity, thereby rendering womanhood as an embodiment of the weak, fragile, dependent, unintellectual and the servile. The problem with such an account is that it entails, at some level, an acknowledgment and an affirmation of the patriarchal stereotype of reducing femininity to the sensually attractive but politically undesirable ideal.

Also, women may feel unknown in their femininity owing to the normative pressures of patriarchy that serve to, at least minimally, impede a woman's agency. The feminine identity determined from without, either by patriarchal subordination or progressive substantivist feminist ideologies, can fuel self-alienation. A woman's self-conception would be, as it were, *fixed for her*.³ Thus, an emphasis on discovering a voice of one's own becomes crucial to the feminist project of theorizing about autonomy. Rigid prescriptions of specific emancipatory values as a prerequisite for autonomy would trap a woman within an infernal circle, advising her to, as Fanon puts it, 'adopt the humility of the cripple' (Fanon 2013: p.80) and contributes little to the endeavor of achieving effective feminist gains. Moreover, severely instructive conceptions of identity and autonomy run the risk of homogenizing and essentializing womanhood based on oversimplified similarities and legitimize the image of women being victims.

Given these concerns, I propose that we reject the substantivist temptation and look for alternative accounts of feminist autonomy. In the two sections that follow, I will introduce Meyers' agentic skills account situated in feminist voice theory tradition to reconceptualize self-determination and attempt to defend it from the charge of being weakly, but nonetheless, substantivist in nature.

A Feminist View of Autonomy: Meyers' Processual Feminist Voice Theory

To lead one's *own* life and not merely be led through it, it is imperative that one has a voice. Silencing is indicative of amputation that, in turn, signals oppression. It may disable agency. There are primarily two possibilities for an individual – either to articulate, in one's own way, one's experiences and goals or simply internalize someone else's definitions and prescriptions. The motivation for a feminist voice theory stems from the fact that women have been 'systematically deprived of opportunities to discover themselves for themselves, to understand themselves as they deem fit, and to pursue their lives on their own terms


³ A somewhat related concern against substantivist accounts surfaces while attempting to address the problem of adaptive preferences. I discuss this issue at a subsequent stage in this paper.

according to their own light.’ (Meyers 2002: pdf 30) This is important because autonomy theories are animated by similar concerns of securing self-determination via self-definition and self-knowledge. While outlining an autonomy theory, it is crucial that one does not polarize individuals into incompetent, paradigmatically female victims and free, quintessentially male agents. Rather, it must be sensitive to a plurality of self-conceptions that are self-articulated. Consequently, I recommend that it is helpful to address issues of self-determination via a theory of voice.

A serious challenge for voice theorists presented by the problem of internalized oppression. Since oppressive ideologies and gender constructs worm their way into one’s psyche and self-conception, it becomes necessary to disambiguate the authentic individual voice by distinguishing instances of one’s own voice from occasions when one would be lip syncing someone else’s voice. Thus, we need to differentiate not only an ideologically oppressed voice from an emancipated voice but also an imposed voice of progressive feminist ideology from that of the individual’s own voice. Such trepidations characterize ‘the problem of *voice authentication*’ (Meyers 2002: pdf 31). Understood thus, it becomes evident that the aforementioned problem involves epistemological puzzles. In particular, how do we *know* that one’s voice is authentic? Various competing accounts offer distinct solutions but for the purposes of this paper, I will be focusing on Meyers’ proceduralist account embedded in feminist voice theory.

A key concern of Meyers is the issue of self-determination. Insofar as a woman’s identity is gendered and is rooted in patriarchy, it impedes one’s ability to operate as a self-determining and autonomous agent. Thus, she suggests that we reconceptualize self-determination via a ‘*feminist voice theory*’ (Meyers 2002: pdf 18). However, what is distinctive about her contribution is that she furnishes an epistemic device that is absent in traditional accounts of feminist voice theory. It enables one to differentiate the patriarch’s voice from the individual’s own authentic voice. Authenticity, in this sense, stems from self-determination which Meyers (2002: p4) construes as ‘an *ongoing process* of exercising a repertoire of *agentic skills* – skills that enable individuals to construct their own self-portraits and self-narratives and that thereby enable them to

take *charge* of their lives.’ Agentic skills place individuals in touch with themselves as well as enables them to discover and recognize what they would *really* want and are concerned about. By differentiating one’s desires and goals from oppressive prescriptions as well as by enacting them, feminist voice theory informed by Meyers’ agentic skills delineate a theory of autonomy by securing self-determination. Meyers’ (2014: p.121) ‘agentic competency account’ suggests that ‘autonomous people exercise a repertoire of agentic skills’ while they choose and act to navigate through oppressive contexts. She lays down the following skills as fundamental to her account –

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- (i) Introspective skills
 - (ii) Communication skills
 - (iii) Memory skills
 - (iv) Imagination skills
 - (v) Analytical skills and reasoning skills
 - (vi) Self-nurturing skills
 - (vii) Volitional skills
 - (viii) Interpersonal skills

It is important to note here that agentic skills are not devoid of any and all value-affirmation. Rather, Meyers explicitly lays down a panoply of epistemic and psychological values that underline these skills. For instance, values such as perspicacity, resourcefulness, creativity, rationality, self-esteem, stability, resilience, tenacity and corrigibility, among others, inform the agentic skills highlighted earlier. Evidently, Meyers’ conception of autonomy is *value-utilizing* as her account presupposes the affirmation of various values⁴.

⁴ I will discuss this issue in greater detail in the next section of the paper.

An advantage of Meyers' (2002: pdf 34) position is that it successfully escapes extreme viewpoints by not pigeonholing individuals into distinct categories of 'free agents, incompetent dependents, or helpless victims'. The key thing to note here is that it affords a 'measure of self-determination' to women even in instances of subordinating, structural dominance as well as admits of 'autonomy fluctuations' (Meyers 2002: pdf 34). As the aforementioned agentic skills are rather commonplace and their exercise entails no esoteric knowledge on the part of the subject, in spite of male supremacy in patriarchal societies, women secure at least a modicum of self-determination. Moreover, proficiency in such skills is a matter of degree, contingent upon one's chance circumstances and one's motivation for exercising them. It could be the case that one's socio-political settings may not be conducive to fostering agentic skills or one may be insufficiently motivated to employ them. Thus, rather than stripping one of autonomy, Meyers allows for variability in the degree of autonomy that one enjoys. She is sensitive to the seriousness of internalized oppression and the institutionalization of patriarchal subjugation. It avoids slipping into cynicism in the face of coercive social realities as it allows women to identify and resist oppression by employing their agentic skills.

A key question arises at this juncture - has Meyers solved the problem of internalized oppression *entirely* or does she offer a *qualified solution* – a solution with limits? A complete resolution of the problem presupposes total individual control over the social elements that may shape one's identity, a full understanding of the numerous nuanced ways in which oppressive values operate in the society as well as a complete control over one's psyche that determines one's individuality. Such an ideal of complete self-control is, at best, dubious and is similar to the desire of constructing a pure identity unblemished by any social elements. Since enculturation is a social reality that structures both the psyche and the body, it is necessary that we eschew such myths of total individual control.

Discovering one's voice is a skilled, ongoing process and, through the exercise of agentic skills, we can create the foundation for addressing the problem of internalized oppression that manifests itself in

myriad ways. One's aim should be to understand one's aspirations and be able to alter one's desires, emotions, values and relationships, in case one is convinced of the need for it. To this effect, I think the agentic skills serve as a valuable toolkit. Any pretense of transcending the influence of social oppression is a masculinist affectation. One must note here that agentic skillfulness does not, by itself, provide the resources for ensuring that a woman's voice is not wholly subsumed by internalized oppressive ideology. It may be the case that the brute force of misogyny and patriarchy leads to epistemic silencing of a woman. I think that this should not be a problem for Meyers as her account offers an important first step to recognizing and resisting subordination. Certainly, agentic skills are a sufficient condition to be autonomous. But these skills are *not sufficient* to address internalized oppression. In fact, the search for such a sufficient condition is misplaced as it involves the pursuit of a chimera. Newer cultural imageries and social norms would present fresher challenges for a feminist project. However, her 'skills-based, processual view of autonomy' ([Meyers 2002:pdf 34](#)) offers an important starting point to address the challenges of the feminine experience.

Positioning Values in Autonomy Theories: Meyers' Double Axis Thesis

Having outlined Meyers' view, I will now proceed to examine how she would avoid the substantivist trap in spite of affirming certain values. There are two ways in which values may structure autonomy theories and play a defining role. Either an account of autonomy prescribes or proscribes certain forms of individual conduct or else a procedural account of autonomous choice invokes a set of implicit background values. Meyers (2014: p.115) maps this distinction onto two conceptual axes – the 'Directivity Axis' and the 'Constitutivity Axis' – which constitute her 'Double Axis Thesis'. As we are informed –

'The Directivity Axis reveals whether an autonomy theory preempts or honors the judgment of individual agents, whereas the Constitutivity Axis lays bare the normative gears that drive competing accounts of autonomous choice and action. I call the claim that these axes represent philosophically distinct and significant ways autonomy theories deploy values the Double Axis Thesis.'

(Meyers 2014: p.115)

Thus, autonomy theories on the Directivity Axis either prescribe action-guiding directives or abstain from making such judgments. They could be broadly situated under three categories – value-saturated, value-laden and value-neutral accounts. Value-laden and value-saturated theories offer some degree of value-prescriptivity regarding individual judgments to traverse through the patriarchal, oppressive structure of the society whereas value-neutral theories, also situated on the Directivity Axis, abstain from issuing such prescriptions. Meyers' own account of feminist autonomy is value-neutral. However, value-neutrality does not imply value-absenteeism. Values feature in her autonomy theory but only when we locate her account on the Constitutivity Axis. In such a case, theories are *value-utilizing* since they invoke values apart from autonomy to explain autonomous choice and action. Thus, we may understand Meyers as offering a value-neutral *and* value-utilizing theory of autonomy.

One must note here that Meyers' postulation of the two conceptual axes has been subject to much criticism. One might contend that both substantive and value-utilizing theories incorporate norms and values while delineating their conception of autonomy. Consequently, one might be tempted to argue that the distinction posited by Meyers between the Directivity and Constitutivity Axes is null and void. According to Benson (2005), Meyers' own account is weakly substantive as it affirms a set of values. The alleged criticism against Meyers that she masks a weakly substantive account under the veil of a value-neutral theory presupposes a Single Axis thesis – that 'all autonomy theories are somehow prescriptive and thus to some degree substantive.' (Meyers 2014: p.128) The question before us, then, pertains to the sustainability of the conceptual distinction between the two axes.

I contend that one must reject the Single Axis Thesis as any credible theory of autonomy will inevitably incorporate a set of values at some level. More importantly, there is a serious trade-off when we admit of the Single Axis Thesis. It trivializes the possibility that the distinctive attributes of an individual may yield authority for determining autonomous conduct. What lies at the core of autonomous choice and action is self-governance via the use of practical intelligence (Meyers 2014: p.129). Should that be the case,

individual judgments and conduct will be informed, minimally, by some implicit values. It is these implicit constitutive values that are placed on the Constitutivity Axis and differ significantly in nature from the values placed on the Directivity Axis – the latter being explicit emancipatory values that have a bearing on one's autonomy.

To better appreciate the conceptual distinction between the two axes, I would like to draw our attention to feminist debates regarding the hallmarks of autonomous conduct. Some philosophers argue in favour of individuality and freedom whereas others are concerned primarily with the responsiveness of an agent to reasons. The Constitutivity Axis demarcates *constitutive value sets* that implicitly inform autonomous choice procedures and is not concerned, unlike the Directivity Axis, with questions pertaining to the reasons that an agent may have to act in a given situation. So, whether you are acting out of oppressive norms or not, such reasons for acting do not matter on the Constitutivity Axis. That is a consideration for the Directivity Axis.

The Double Axis Thesis perspicuously embodies two distinct possibilities regarding accounts of autonomy – (a) the precedence of self-expression over reason-responsiveness, and (b) that all procedural accounts of autonomous choice either implicitly or explicitly invoke a set of values. The value-neutral end of the Directivity Axis encodes the former insight whereas the constitutive value sets comprising the Constitutivity Axis express the latter insight.

Meyers' (2014: p.130) Directivity Axis enables us to sustain 'the dynamism of the feminist liberatory agenda.' Given the perils, no feminist theory would want to risk silencing women's voices. The value-neutral account of autonomy, as advanced by Meyers, prevents the suppression of diverse perspectives and concerns of women. It does so by *not*, preemptively, denying autonomy to women who choose a certain belief system to live their life, given that it may be inconsistent with emancipatory values. Since value-

neutrality is its zero-point, the Directivity Axis accommodates a highly flexible view of the range of autonomous choice. And, value-neutral theories resist any temptation to substitute autonomy with moral rectitude. In this way, the Directivity Axis upholds the dynamism of feminist agenda.

Meyers and Progressive Movements in India: An Analysis

Up till now, I have primarily examined the efficacy of Meyers' account in conceptual terms. I will now attempt to examine the suitability of the Meyersian account of agentic-skills to provide a basis for securing effective feminist gains in a non-western context. I do so by discussing two instances from the Indian sub-continent – (a) Women at the Bagh, which narrates the resistance of Muslim women in Delhi, and (b) Chipko Movement, which discusses a tribal protest in the Himalayas.

(a) Women at the Bagh:

There has been a visible political unrest in India since the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Bill, 2019 in December last year. In conjunction with the National Register of Citizens, the implementation of the amendment has raised concerns regarding its discriminatory provisions. A widespread and well-founded, concern is that the bill, now an Act of Parliament, would lead to a loss of citizenship for millions of Indian Muslims and, in the absence of a home country, they would be rendered stateless and locked in detention centers⁵.

In light of the perceived injustice, thousands of people gathered at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, the capital city of India, and staged a peaceful protest via blocking a road. What was distinctive about the protest was

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with the specific details of the bill and the nuances of arguments offered in favor or against it. The purpose of the example is to examine the suitability of Meyers' account, specifically in an Indian context.

that Muslim women were its face, an occurrence highly unusual in India. In fact, a majority of the protestors were actively engaging in oppositional non-partisan politics for the first time in their lives. The protest saw several group discussions being organized that involved a constructive dialogue with scholars, activists, politicians and ordinary citizens. It enabled the women at the Bagh to strategize better as well as preserve the moral credibility of the movement.

As a majority of the protestors were Muslim women, a popular assumption was that they were uninformed. Moreover, there were allegations of protestors being *jihadis* and tyrants who were being paid by foreign governments with vested interests to destabilize the Indian polity. It is apparent that many efforts to suppress the movement attacked the protestors for who they were – their Muslim and feminine identity. These details are important because they highlight the popular presumption that women, in particular Muslim women, lack agency and can only be duped or paid to express someone else's viewpoint. In simple terms, they are primarily viewed as non-autonomous agents. This may serve as a helpful reminder that given such prevalent social biases, one should be cautious not to outright disregard the oppressed and the marginalized as non-autonomous agents while constructing an account of autonomy.

The protestors were also subject to violence by miscreants and police authorities. However, the women at the Bagh continued protesting, undeterred by vitriolic propaganda against them and numerous violent intrusions. This indicates that external violence poses a challenge for individuals to act autonomously but it would be erroneous to suggest that it necessarily diminishes autonomy.

We can see that the agentic skills were central for Muslim women to discover their own voice. We find communicative, reasoning and interpersonal skills at display in the public discussions contemplating the nature and course of the protest. The protestors also exercised their memory skills by remembering the struggle of the founding fathers of the country to construct a secular India. We find the protestors

exercising volitional skills by singing songs of protest and encouraging one another to challenge the bill even in the face of violence and state crackdown.

The employment of agentic skills was crucial for protestors to interrogate and resist unjust practices as well as occupy a place in the mainstream political discourse in India. By discovering their collective voice, the protest brought into prominence the experiences and hardships of a marginalized identity. Overall, the example of the resolute and intellectually informed protests at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi illustrates the significance of Meyers' agentic-autonomy account for women, especially the marginalized. The extensive exercise of agentic skills illustrates that Muslim women at the Bagh were highly autonomous agents. The example also illustrates that agentic skills serve as an important enabling condition to unearth authentic voices of resistance that seek to establish substantive equality. And, we can attain such gains without imposing the rigid normative prescriptions that inform substantive accounts.

One should be cautious not to view the Meyersian agentic skills as a panacea to overcome political oppression. What the example of Shaheen Bagh highlights is the significance, *not the sufficiency*, of exercising the repertoire of agentic skills in securing political gains. They are not sufficient as the success of a political movement rests upon myriad factors such as mass mobilization, public solidarity, effective political strategy, etc.

(b) Chipko Movement:

Another instance where we can find the significance of Meyers' account is the Chipko Movement in India in the 1970s. Chipko, which literally means, 'embrace', was amongst the earliest movements in independent India that affirmed tribal woman's voices in sustainable development. It mobilized the tribal inhabitants of the Garhwal Himalayas against commercial felling of the trees in the region. Even after

repeated requests and small-scale protests to stop the auctioning of the Himalayan land to contractors, the then government went ahead with the project of commercial deforestation for economic development.

In December 1977, when the government and the contractors had officially commissioned the felling of trees, members of the Garhwal tribe, led by Bachhni Devi, turned out in large numbers and formed a human wall, with three people *embracing* each tree. Sacred threads were tied to the trees by the women which was symbolic of a vow of protection. As ironical as it may seem, Bachhni Devi's husband was himself a contractor and was a potential beneficiary of the deforestation project.

The motivation behind the Chipko Movement can be understood by the fact that the tribals rely on the forests not only to satisfy their material needs of food and shelter but also, and more importantly, view them as an abode of their deities and as embodying the history of its people. The Garhwal forests also constitute the identity of the tribe as, in addition to the above-mentioned aspects, they believed that the universal spirit that inhabits their body also inhabits the trees⁶. Thus, the aim of the movement was to protect forests, preserve a history and culture as well as maintain livelihoods. The demand of the local tribe was to declare the Himalayan forests, which are the main source of livelihood for the inhabitants, as *protection forests* as opposed to being treated as production forests meant for commercial exploitation. The voices of the local tribes were ultimately recognized by the Government of India which declared a fifteen-year ban on all commercial felling in the Himalayan region.

For one's claims to be recognized, one has to raise a voice. It is an important first step, and for it to not be a misstep, the voice must be authentic. It is through the exercise of their agentic skills that the members of the Garhwal tribe were able to discover their own authentic voices and reject the contractor's voice as well as the government's propaganda of economic growth at the cost of the environment. We can

⁶ This reaffirms Meyers' claim that the external *constitutes* one's identity and autonomy.

find a variety of agentic skills exercised by the members of the tribal community to identify their authentic voice and make claims towards a political recognition of their self-conceptions. To begin with, the members of the Garhwal tribe exercised communicative and interpersonal skills. They would sit together at night and hold detailed discussions with one another as well as various activists and scholars who had joined them in the protest. Collectively, it enabled them to understand the perception of others, get useful insights and advice, as well as the support of others.

The collective dwelling over the issue also allowed inhabitants to employ their memory skills. Even though the Chipko Movement was the first of its kind in independent India, tribals have had a long history of resistance. The protestors would sing folk songs that valorized their ancestors' struggles and provided the motivation to persist with their demands. The strategy of embracing trees illustrates the employment of imaginative skills. Moreover, not succumbing to the pressures of rehabilitation and persisting with the demand of forest preservation shows a judicious exercise of analytical and reasoning skills. Also, the resistance to state pressure and a resolute commitment to their collective self-portrait displays the use of volitional skills.

I would like to highlight that the Chipko Movement had a ripple effect in the Indian political space. The display of women leadership and successful collective resistance of a marginalized group redefined the political landscape. It led to more women exercising their agency in political space and make claims of equal recognition. Thus, the collective expression of the tribal voice paved the way not only for the benefits of the tribal people in India but also to other marginalized communities.

It is important to note here that had the tribals decided otherwise and opted for rehabilitation, they would have still counted as having acted on their *own* voice, on the Meyersian view. And, consequently, *regardless* of the final decision made by the members of the tribe, they would have been

construed as autonomous agents. This, in turn, would enjoin the government to recognize them as affected citizens and equal participants in the planning and execution of the project.

On the substantivist view, had the tribals chosen otherwise, they would have simply acted on the oppressor's voice and not their own, thereby failing to be autonomous agents. This would simply add credence to the popular urban narrative that tribal people lack agency and therefore, their interests should either be disregarded as they are not equal political participants or their interests should be protected by paternalistic interventions by the urban elite as the tribals are incapable of reflecting adequately and choosing judiciously to protect their self-interest.

What my analysis of the Chipko Movement, as well as of the protest at Shaheen Bagh, shows is that Meyers' agentic-skills account encapsulates a fundamental aspect of progressive political movements that strive to attain substantive equality – voice authentication via the exercise of agentic-skills. Exercising one's agentic skills in times of oppression can enable the most marginalized sections of the society to identify their voice and lay claims to political participation and recognition. Meyers' account is not merely helpful for women or those socialized by norms of femininity. The agentic skills can, and often are, employed by a people to collectively challenge the potentially disabling silencing of systemic oppression, to discover their own authentic voice and to articulate their own self-conceptions.

Conclusion:

To conclude, I have highlighted the conceptual merits as well as the practical applicability of Meyers' agentic skills account of autonomy. I contend that the agentic skills serve as an epistemic device to establish the authenticity of one's voice. The authentic voice is a critical starting point to establish the foundation for securing effective feminist gains. In our search for authenticity, I argue that we must resist the substantivist perfectionist view of emancipatory values as they homogenize self-conceptions and more importantly, by

stripping autonomy from oppressed individuals who reject their normative prescriptions, they run the risk of excluding individuals from political participation. I also argue that Meyers avoids the substantivist trap – that all accounts of autonomy invariably prescribe some values – via the Double Axis Thesis. She does so by constructing a value-neutral and value-utilizing account of autonomy. The former aspect of her account is the zero-point of the Directivity Axis and the latter aspect is situated on the Constitutivity Axis. I also examine the suitability of the Meyersian account in the Indian context by considering two progressive movements. I conclude that not only can Meyers' view be empowering for women but also for others, particularly in the assertion of a collective political identity.

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