Patricia McCormick's *Sold*: A Narrative of Alerity and Savior

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Abstract

The article explicates Patricia McCormick's novel, *Sold*, for its portrayal of the issue of trafficking involving thirteen-year-old Laxmi. In the novel Lakshmi, a thirteen-year-old girl, tells her story from her life at foothills of mountain through the moments of Laxmi being a sexual slave to the moment of being rescued. Using the prominent concepts of literary representation, the analysis reveals that the author constructs a narrative of alterity—we and the other, first by exoticizing Nepali society, people and culture, then by constructing an aspirational psychology of the characters toward Western values. In that sense, the novel mobilizes new forms of cultural essentialism and reinforces a hierarchical perspective. The article concludes the need for a more responsible portrayal of human trafficking—one that recognizes local resilience and the global economic systems that enable exploitation. *Sold* could provide a more accurate and ethical representation of the issue by doing so.

Keywords: Representation, Savior Narrative, Essentialization, Nepali Culture, Exoticizing

Introduction

McCormick's novel, *Sold*, is a fictional autobiography that poignantly explores the representation of Nepali society and culture, particularly the harrowing realities of human trafficking and the exploitation of young girls. Set against the backdrop of Nepal's socio-economic struggles and deeply entrenched gender inequalities, the narrative follows the life of Lakshmi, a thirteen-year-old girl whose dreams are shattered when her family sells her into sexual slavery in India. The story not only highlights the systemic issues surrounding human trafficking but also offers a compelling commentary on the societal pressures faced by women in Nepal, making *Sold* a significant contribution to discussions on gender-based violence and human rights. Metonymically, Lakshmi could be from anywhere in the world.

The novel has received critical acclaim and has been widely adopted in educational settings, serving as a powerful tool for raising awareness about child trafficking and fostering empathy among readers. Farkhanda Shahid Khan explores *Sold* through a radical feminist lens, highlighting how it portrays Nepalese women as commodified objects within a patriarchal system. She argues, “Masculine privileges are threaded through South Asian patriarchal cultures, treating the female gender as an object to be traded and sold” (5). Kristami et al. identify five faces of oppression to dissect Lakshmi's experiences: instances of exploitation in Lakshmi's forced prostitution to repay her stepfather's debt and her commodification by Mumtaz; marginalization in Lakshmi's exclusion from the privileges of city life; powerlessness as Lakshmi is threatened; and cultural imperialism in Lakshmi's subjection to patriarchal traditions and the violence enacted upon her by Mumtaz (280-82). Similarly, Lobna M. Shaddad applies Icek Ajzen’s theory of planned behavior to analyze how food insecurity drives Lakshmi’s trafficking. The author asserts, “Food scarcity contributes to the coercion of young, impoverished girls into sexual slavery” (10). The novel effectively highlights economic vulnerabilities but fails to address structural factors, such as international policies and economic exploitation, that sustain poverty in Nepal.

The analysis by Alobeytha, Mohamed, and Rahman centers on the impact of child sex trafficking on the identity of the protagonist, Lakshmi. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory, the authors examine Lakshmi's identity before and during her trafficking ordeal and argue that traffickers deliberately attempt to erase the child's original identity, replacing it with that of a sex slave through various forms of physical and psychological abuse. The study details how Lakshmi's identity before trafficking in her Nepalese village was shaped by a dysfunctional patriarchal family and a deceptive education system that romanticized city life. This context contributed to her low self-esteem, making her more vulnerable to the trafficker's promises.

Collectively, these interpretations provide a comprehensive understanding of *Sold*, highlighting its exploration of the devastating impact of child trafficking on a young girl's identity and the multifaceted nature of her oppression within patriarchal and capitalist systems, essentializing and exoticizing the Nepali society in which the novel was set. All these criticisms reinforce the dilemma of whether the novel can be read as an instance of the writer's effort in developing empathetic identification with the victim or exoticizing and romanticizing the third-world problems.

However, Dipak Raj Joshi in " Interdiscursivity in McCormick's *Sold*: A Critical Discourse Analysis" analyzes the novel's interdiscursivity, arguing that McCormick's novel suffers from relying entirely on "use of vignettes as the most methodological procedure" to talk about a serious social problem—children trafficking. According to Joshi, "the problematic moments created in the novel are meant for the presence of several subtopics or the micro discourses supporting the macro discourse of sex slavery. But the novel denies or shades the bleaker light to the existence of counter discourse against the evil" (24). Joshi concludes with a question: "Is it really a biased Western interpretation, or the third world countries are overwhelmed by the big blow on their psyche that they remained silent and indifferent to the serious problems like the ones depicted in the novel, and endured them for ages till the beginning of the twenty first century" (24)?

More pronounced is the reading of Manika Subi Lakshmanan. She critiques *Sold* as a neocolonial allegory, arguing that it reinforces the Western savior trope. She notes that "The representation of repressed Oriental woman" (78) only to be rescued by an unnamed "American" (84) perpetuates the myth of Western intervention as necessary for salvation. However, Lakshmanan explores the possible readings of the novel:

> One can almost dismiss the American presence as the necessary narrative ploy that makes the text relevant to an implied American reader. It can also be read as an instructive narrative about a nation's export of goodwill, individual freedom, and enlightened modernity. From a humanitarian point of view, one may argue that the right to protect is above and beyond nations, cultures, and ideology. Others may contend that imagination is an artistic license that should not be conflated with political nuances. (87)

However, all these readings do not pay attention to a view that destabilizes the novel's overall intention. The missing point of interpretation and analysis in this novel is reading the novel for its Western gaze and savior narrative. The novel minimizes local agency by positioning an American as the primary catalyst for Lakshmi's escape, thereby underrepresenting Nepali-led anti-trafficking efforts. Moreover, the novel overshadows local resistance movements, such as governmental actions and INGOs and NGOs, portraying Nepal as a society incapable of self-reform. Ironically, 2006, the year nove was published, was the year when Nepali people were at the apex of political and historical consciousness in which Nepali citizens discarded both 10-year-long armed insurgency and 237-year authoritarian royal rule.

This article expounds the novel in its terms of representation—or misrepresentation— which refers to the tendency of portraying people, societies, cultures, and traditions in a distorted manner. It further argues that such portrayals often depict those represented as miserable, wretched, and dejected, reinforcing a hierarchical contrast between the depicted subjects

and the dominant Western perspective. In this sense, it is a decolonial reading. Theoretically, it sues Edward Said's notion of Orientalism. Regarding the politics of representation of the Western writer, Edward Said in his *Orientalism* states, "Orientalist discourse presents a vision of the contemporary Orient, not as narrative, but as all complexity, problematic, betrayed hope- with the White Orientalist author as its prophetic, articulate definition" (238-39). In particular, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary works frequently obscure the true realities of the Orient, exaggerating differences and persistently contrasting them with Western ideals to assert the superiority of Western culture, norms, and values. Western writers, when describing the Orient, often frame their narratives through the lens of alterity. This article, therefore, engages with the theoretical insights of Edward Said to examine this representational practice in the novel. Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, asserts that Western writers invariably depict the Orient through the framework of Western thought, shaping representations that are deeply influenced by imperialist ideology. He elaborates:

> The Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways. The Orient that appears . . . is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later in Western empire. (69)

Viewed through this perspective, the novel under analysis presents an argument that highlights how the author constructs a narrative that marginalizes and inferiorizes Nepali and Indian societal realities.

A Narrative of Aterity and the Savior

In Hudson's interview, McCormick mentioned the intention of writing a novel, despite she is a journalist: "There's great journalism about trafficking, but I think when you turn it into fiction and when you really sink into the experience of another human being experiencing this, it calls on your empathy" (Hudson para 5-6). In another interview, she also admits a difficulty of telling others' stories: "Sometimes I feel I don't have

permission to tell a story that's not about me. That's why I need to interview so many people who have been affected by the types of experiences I'm writing about. When I interview someone and they tell me their story, they're giving me permission" ("Interview and Presentation with Patricia McCormack" para. 5). The interviewer mentioned that McCormick also "told us that all interviewees want to be understood, and they want their stories to be shared for the rest of the world" (para. 5).

However, telling a story about another person puts one in a double jeopardy. On the one hand, one tries to put oneself in another's shoes and look at the world from the other's perspective, which is often a difficult task. The position being outside keeps intervening. Finding a position to tell the stories of others is never without an interplay of power dynamics. On the other hand, telling other stories needs a lot of identification with the persons who own their stories so as to mitigate the risk of limited point of view and knowledge. Speaking for others entails positioning as a speaker. It involves who is speaking in whose name or for whom. This question is anything but trivial. Wendy Salkin in *Speaking for Others* argues one of the perils of speaking for others is the invitation of disempowerment. This peril "may seem to arise most naturally in the cases in which" the person 'is not a member of the group they represent," but the problem may arise even when the representative is a member of the represented group (15). Depending on the reference or the context, speaking for others is a hegemonic act (Noyes 7-41). To eradicate the possible disempowerment and avoid the hegemonic way, persons dealing with people, culture, and society different theirs need more internal and insider approach, an emic perspective in their research. Even if McCormick is telling a story in good faith and out of empathy, her position and location clash with her intention.

In another interview, McCormick mentioned that she "spent a month in India and Nepal tracing Lakshmi's steps— going from a poor, isolated village in the foothills of the Himalayas to the teeming red-light district of Calcutta" and futher mentioned that, as an trained investigative reporter, she besides taking notes and photos and observing the sights, smells, foods, sounds, and the customs to "give the book authenticity" she also

"interviewed women in the red-light district, girls who had been rescued, and a man who had sold his girlfriend in exchange for a motorcycle" ("An interview with Patricia McCormick" para 4). However, dealing with such an important issue needs more than a month's research, even if one is a workaholic. She, in the same interview, mentioned she "was a foreigner in the busy streets of Kathmandu and Calcutta and was as bewildered and awestruck by these places as Lakshmi is in the novel" (para 5). Was she also overwhelmed to study Nepali society and culture?

"Each year, nearly 12,000 Nepali girls are sold by their families," McCormick writes in the author's note, which is problematic. The figure is not credited to any sources. This figure is according to a report published by the International Labour Organization's Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). Moreover, this is a speculative number based on a certain set of research samples. The figure is based on surveys, interviews, and secondary data rather than solely hard evidence. A key limitation is that it stems from a survey of just 100 'vulnerable' households. Additionally, the extrapolated data does not differentiate between children trafficked for sex (the majority) and those trafficked for labor (a significant minority). The same report clearly mentions: "Due to the scant information and broad nature of the assumptions, the figure must be read with caution. It is obvious that more research is needed" (IPEC 19). A 2006-07 report by the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal acknowledges the lack of scientific data on "the numbers of trafficked persons, places of origin and destination, and purposes of trafficking in Nepal" owing to the fact that "trafficking involves the clandestine nature of operation, collection of representative data has been also very difficult" (NHRCN 11). Sadly, explicating such data and reports does not seem to fall under the responsibility of "trained investigative journalist."

Essentializing Nepal

McCormick's writing about the people, culture, and society of Nepal is essentializing. By setting the narrative in a remote Himalayan village, McCormick set out to expose the so-called "banal realities" of the third

world. In that sense, the author reduces the Himalayan village to its basic form without acknowledging the changes that have taken place over time. For example, despite the protagonist, Lakshmi goes to school, is keen to learn, and is the first girl in the class; for the author, she is an "ignorant hill girl" (McCormick 106). As readers read the accounts of the village, they find the village more remote than the residents there find it: “[t]he rice plants are brown and parched, coated in dust. The wind rips the weakest of them out by the roots and tosses" (McCormick 23). Of course, the mountain villages in Nepal are at difficult geographies and have tough life in some seasons. However, it is impossible to imagine that villagers "trip[s] down to the mountain to the village spring to bring up the water to the rice paddy (21) though they often irrigate their agri-garden with brought-up water.

A particularly revealing example of this representation occurs in the section "The New Student," where the author describes Lakshmi’s house-cleaning ritual as a superstitious practice rather than a hygienic routine or a practice that Lakshmi needs to cultivate not to serve anyone but herself as a life skill (McCormick 5). The novel implies that Nepali people clean their homes not to maintain a healthy environment but to ward off evil spirits. This misrepresentation is evident when Lakshmi states, "I wipe the hard mud floor with a rag soaked in dung water and explain: This will keep our hut cool and free from evil spirits" (5). While the use of dung water in traditional practices has practical benefits, McCormick underscores the element of superstition, reinforcing the notion of the Nepali people as irrational. The author overlooks the hygienic rationale behind this practice and instead highlights an assumed cultural primitivism. Although Lakshmi is portrayed as a student with modern awareness—stating, "I brush my teeth with a twig from the neem tree" (5)—McCormick’s selective emphasis on "evil spirits" constructs an image of Nepal as bound by archaic beliefs. This narrative strategy draws a core orientalist assertion that "the difference between East and West is between modernity and ancient tradition" (Said 269). As a modern American writer, McCormick positions Nepali characters, including Lakshmi, as emblematic of traditionalist and

superstitious belief systems, reinforcing a dichotomy between the progressive West and the backward East.

In Patricia McCormick's novel, *Sold*, the female characters are portrayed as impoverished, powerless, and vulnerable, ultimately victims of patriarchal oppression. Women in the novel exist in a state of submission and suffering, subjected to systemic domination. The protagonist, Lakshmi, a thirteen-year-old girl, epitomizes this victimhood. Her life is irrevocably altered by the actions of her stepfather, who sells her into sexual slavery. McCormick vividly writes Lakshmi's daily struggles, writing, "Each morning as I go about my chores straining the rice water, grinding the spices, sweeping the yard" (5). The author further describes the burdens borne by Lakshmi's mother:

> All day, as she trudges up and down the mountain, a heavy basket braced on her back and held fast by a rope around her brow, she is bent under the weight of her children. . . . But my ama, with her crow-black hair braided with bits of red and beads, her cinnamon skin, and her years hung with the joyful noise of tinkling gold, is to me more lovely. (5)

Lakshmi's mother, known as Ama, is likewise entrapped by patriarchal norms. Another female character, Gita, is also deprived of educational opportunities and is compelled to work as a servant for a wealthy family in the city to support her family. The novel highlights the stark reality in rural Nepal, where men are expected to be the breadwinners while women and girls bear the burden of economic hardships.

Lakshmi's plight worsens when she is introduced to a seemingly benevolent stranger who offers her employment as a maid in a wealthy household. Eager to help her family, she embarks on a journey to India, only to discover that she has been deceived and sold into prostitution at a brothel called "Happiness House." The brothel is controlled by an authoritarian figure, Mumtaz, who ensures that Lakshmi remains indebted and powerless, exploiting her to the extent that escape appears impossible. Yet, Lakshmi clings to her mother's words: "Simply to endure is to

triumph." Through her endurance and the support of other girls in the brothel, she survives her harrowing ordeal until she is eventually rescued by an American. The novel, written in spare and evocative vignettes, captures the brutality of human trafficking while simultaneously portraying a narrative of resilience and triumph.

From a critical perspective, McCormick's representation of Nepal and its people reflects an Orientalist framework. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, asserts that "Orientalist discourse presents a vision of the contemporary Orient, not as narrative, but as all complexity, problematic, betrayed hope—with the White Orientalist author as its prophetic, articulate definition" (238-39). In *Sold*, McCormick perpetuates this discourse by depicting Nepali people as inherently powerless.

The section titled "Calendar" is structured into four parts, aligning with the four seasons of the Western world (Sold 10). As an American writer, the author imposes this seasonal division onto the Nepali calendar, which traditionally consists of six seasons. In doing so, she misinforms readers by conforming Nepali time cycles to a Western framework. This structural choice reflects a broader pattern of representation that privileges Western norms while overlooking indigenous perspectives. The author further intertwines these misrepresented seasons with the harsh realities of rural life, stating:

> In the cold month . . . the women bury the children who die of fever… In the dry months. . . they bury the children who die from the coughing disease… In the rainy months . . . they bury the children who cannot be carried to the doctor on the other side of that river. . . In the cool months . . . who would be born only to be buried next season. (10-11)

By framing the narrative through cycles of suffering, the author presents an overwhelmingly bleak image of Nepali village life. This selective depiction ignores the richness of cultural traditions, ceremonies, and moments of joy that also define these communities. Instead, she fixates on fire and food scarcity, as seen in Lakshmi's statement: "Collect

basketfuls of dung and pat them into cakes to harden in the sun, making precious fuel for the dinner fire" (10).

For Western readers, such descriptions reinforce an image of the "uncivilized" Orient, reducing an entire society to themes of deprivation. The novel's representation of burial practices in connection to the seasons further underscores this one-dimensional portrayal. Rather than acknowledging the full spectrum of life—including celebrations and communal bonds—the author perpetuates a narrative that aligns with what Said describes as the Orientalist tendency to translate and interpret the East for a Western audience:

> The Orientalist was an expert whose job in society was to interpret the Orient for his compatriots. The relation between Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object. (222)

This latent orientalism continues to shape representations of the East by emphasizing its perceived hardships while concealing its complexities. In *Sold*, this selective portrayal is evident as the novel dwells on the burial of children across different seasons but omits depictions of festivals, communal gatherings, and moments of happiness within Lakshmi's family.

The novel's reliance on imaginative geography becomes particularly evident in its inconsistencies. Initially, Lakshmi's village is described as a remote and underdeveloped place, devoid of transportation infrastructure. The environment is painted so bleakly that readers are offered no relief from the pervasive sense of despair. Yet, a contradiction arises when the stepfather suddenly wins a motorcycle in a game of chance and is seen riding it. The author states the "One-armed man" is riding a motorcycle (McCormick 8). Previously, the stepfather was described as physically impaired due to an injury in childhood, making him incapable of physical labor. The sudden shift—where he is now able to ride a motorcycle—

introduces a narrative inconsistency that casts doubt on the novel's credibility. This paradox suggests a deliberate narrative choice to entertain the readers, whoever they are, rather than faithfully representing Nepali village life. Such discrepancies underscore how the novel's representation is shaped less by an authentic engagement with Nepali reality and more by an imagination designed for consumption.

West as Aspirational

In contrast to the portrayal of Nepali people and culture as superstitious and stagnant, McCormick constructs a narrative that positions Western culture as dominant and aspirational. Characters like Lakshmi exhibit a fascination with Western customs, particularly in their eagerness to learn English. Lakshmi expresses joy in acquiring new words and sentences:

> "Today the David Beckham boy taught me some more words. Now I can say: sit, walk, book . . . I learned some sentences, too:
> 'My name is Lakshmi.'
> 'I am from Nepal.'
> 'I am thirteen.'
> I also learned that the David Beckham boy's name is Harish. David Beckham, it seems, is some kind of American god." (McCormick 168)

Here, Harish—a young boy who idolizes David Beckham—becomes a symbol of Western cultural influence. His name, a seemingly Anglicized version of the South Asian name Haria, further reflects the erasure of indigenous identity. The boy's excitement over a Western football star and his imitation of Beckham's style illustrates the aspirational appeal of Western culture. Similarly, Western consumer products, such as Coca-Cola and television, are prominently featured throughout the novel. Characters express an almost obsessive fascination with Western entertainment, particularly reality shows, reinforcing the idea that Western culture is both desirable and superior.

The novel also underscores the preference for American customers in the brothel, emphasizing the perceived prestige of English-speaking clients. Harish's role in teaching Lakshmi English further reinforces this hierarchy: "Whenever Harish sees me, he says, in the new language I am learning, 'How are you today?' I reply, 'Fine, thank you. And you?' I love the way these new words feel in my mouth" (173). Lakshmi's enthusiasm for learning English is depicted as a means of escape from her grim reality, suggesting that Western language and culture offer a path to empowerment. However, this narrative also reflects the Orientalist tendency to frame Western influence as a civilizing force. McCormick, as an American writer, embeds various American cultural elements into the story, portraying the characters as devoted admirers of Western values and traditions. Lakshmi, for instance, is depicted as a lover of American products, expressing a desire for Coca-Cola (146), which serves yet another symbol of Western dominance.

The characterization of Harish as the "David Beckham boy" exemplifies the novel's tendency to assert superiority of occidental values. The author presents characters who idealize Western lifestyles, language, and affluence, as evident in Lakshmi's statement: "Everyone there is as rich as a king" (174). McCormick's emphasis on Western values implicitly works on the part of characters to take the Nepali and Indian values in lesser account, if not, inferorize. Said highlights the consequences of this cultural representation:

> There is a vast standardization of taste in the region, symbolized not only by transistors, blue jeans, and Coca-Cola but also by cultural images of the Orient supplied by American mass media and consumed unthinkingly by the mass television audience . . . Its role has been prescribed and set for it as a 'modernizing' one, which means that it gives legitimacy and authority to ideas about modernization, progress, and culture that it receives from the United States for the most part. (324-25)

In *Sold*, American consumer products and cultural exports function hegemonically. The characters attach themselves to Western lifestyles, idolizing American entertainment and language. The brothel girls seek solace in watching American television shows, using them as an escape from their painful realities. McCormick presents this as a form of psychological relief, as seen in their admiration for a TV show:

> It's "The Bold and the Beautiful," says Shahanna. 'It's from America. It's our favorite show.' Inside the TV, a little pink-skinned man is talking to a woman with hair the color of straw. She raises her hand to slap him across the face, but he catches her wrist in his grip and stops her. Then, without warning, they are kissing. The Happiness House girls clap and cheer and crackle like hens. (136)

Here, McCormick sets up a stark contrast between the American characters on screen and the Nepali girls watching them. The American woman is portrayed as bold and beautiful, while the brothel girls "cackle like hens," an animalistic depiction that strips them of agency. This contrast reinforces a binary in which American women are empowered and desirable, while the Nepali girls are passive and unattractive. The same dynamic is at play when Pushpa's son is referred to as the "David Beckham Boy" (140), further highlighting the perception of Western figures as aspirational.

The interplay between identity and difference is evident in how the novel represents the idea of salvation. As Lentricchia and McGowan observe, "representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone" (12). In *Sold*, Lakshmi perceives American people as her saviors, reinforcing the trope of Western intervention as the only escape from her suffering. When she hears an American's voice, she reacts with hope:

> 'I am here for a young girl,' says a man.
> 'What kind of place do you think this is?' says Mumtaz. 'There are no young girls here.'

> I know this voice. It is my American. I squeeze Anita's hand.
> 'It is an American,' I whisper. Her eyes go wide.
> 'He is a good man,' I say. 'He will take us to a clean place.'
> (McCormick 261)

Lakshmi's belief that an American will save her underscores the novel's reliance on Western intervention as a redemptive force. This depiction aligns with Said's argument that "both learned and imaginative writing are never free, but are limited in their imagery, assumptions, and intentions" (McCormick 202). McCormick's portrayal ultimately reinforces a west-centric worldview, positioning American culture as the standard against which all else is measured.

Her representation, though veiled, operates at a deeper structural level within the narrative, ultimately reinforcing western hegemony in the discourse surrounding human trafficking and global intervention. The novel positions American characters as saviors, reinforcing the trope of Western superiority. In that sense, at this point, Tristam notes that *Sold* "suffers from a terrible case of white saviorism complex. The johns all seem South Asian. The saviors all seem American, as if western sex tourism weren't a limitless pipeline keeping the brothels thriving." Similarly, Kumari and Banerjee provide insights into the author's motivations, narrative choices, and ethical considerations. McCormick emphasizes the co-existence of hope and resilience even in the darkest circumstances. She details her research in India and Nepal to ensure authenticity and expresses regret over the inclusion of a "white savior" character, acknowledging the problematic narrative it reinforces (1-2). This is evident in Lakshmi's longing for rescue, as she repeatedly refers to her anticipated liberator as "my American" (261). The brothel's occupants similarly idealize white customers, despite the presence of affluent Indian clients, whose potential role in their liberation is conspicuously absent from the narrative.

The man who attempts to rescue Lakshmi is an American with a camera, but the author's note acknowledges that the real impact comes from survivors and local organizations. These groups go door-to-door in remote

villages, warning girls about traffickers, patrolling the Nepal-India border, and confronting criminals in court. According to the United Nations, 41% of trafficking survivors escape on their own (16). Yet, with few exceptions, Americans in the novel are portrayed as saviors—even down to the soap operas the girls enjoy, like The Bold and the Beautiful. This framing feels like a marketing tactic to engage readers, but it distorts reality by absolving America's role as a wealthy consumer of the trade while reinforcing the idea that Nepali people cannot save themselves without Western intervention. In *Sold*, the author reinforces this narrative by portraying Americans as the only true rescuers. Lakshmi, a 13-year-old Nepali girl, repeatedly expresses faith in her "American" savior, framing Westerners as godlike figures. Even in the brothel, the girls wait for a white customer rather than the many wealthy Indian or other non-American clients. Some of these individuals are wealthier than Americans, yet the novel deliberately omits their involvement. By doing so, it subtly enforces the notion that salvation must come from the West rather than from within.

Conclusion

The novel *Sold* presents a troubling narrative that reinforces Western saviorism while downplaying the role of local efforts in combating human trafficking. Although the author acknowledges that survivors and local organizations have the most significant impact—educating at-risk girls, patrolling borders, and facing traffickers in court—the story primarily depicts Americans as the ultimate rescuers. The novel largely omits such realities, instead portraying a young Nepali girl, Lakshmi, as dependent on an American figure for salvation. Even within the brothel, the girls are shown awaiting a white customer rather than wealthy Indian or other non-American clients, further entrenching the idea that only the West can provide rescue. The author implicitly argues that sexual slavery is symptomatic of the backward state of women's rights in India and Nepal. This portrayal mobilizes new forms of cultural essentialism, reinforcing boundaries between a homogenized "we" and an equally homogenized

"other." By doing so, the novel distorts the complexity of human trafficking, erasing local agency and absolving Western complicity. A more nuanced approach would highlight local resilience and the broader global structures that sustain exploitation.

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