



Research Article

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Questioning Sisterhood Bonds and Sexual Slavery: A Reading of Patricia McCormick's *Sold* (2007)

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to analyse the contribution of women to sexual trafficking and the role they play in exacerbating the phenomenon as projected by Patricia McCormick in *Sold* (2007). While in some other narratives, women complain about women's oppression and marginalisation by their male counterparts, curiously, many women in this novel contribute to the denigration of women, thus, bringing to question the unity of sisterhood. The lack of sisterhood bonds not only endangers the life and well-being of other girls and women but also makes things difficult for the women and other people who are struggling to stop the phenomenon of girls and women's trafficking. Feminism is used for analysis and it is found that, for women's trafficking to be stopped or reduced significantly, women should promote sisterhood and therefore, be one another's keeper.

Keywords: *Sexual slavery, Sisterhood, Trafficking*

Introduction

A story in 2020 on Aljazeera dubbed “Spirit Me Away: The Women and Girls Lost to Trafficking in Nepal” was quite intriguing to me as human trafficking as well as the fight against it has gone on for a long time and I was still surprised that it presented the huge numbers of women and girls trafficked yearly who are promised work and “end up forced into prostitution in one of the hundreds of singing restaurants, dance bars or massage parlours that function as fronts for brothels...Nepal is one of the most lucrative markets. From there alone, at least 54 girls and women are trafficked into India every day”(np). This is reflective of a persistent problem where many are putting in efforts to see how this issue can be resolved and literature is part of that solution. No doubt we find Patricia McCormick who, in a bid to discourage sexual trafficking, projects terrifying and horrible experiences of sexual slavery in *Sold*. Given that it is generally women who suffer from it, I focus on the woman’s role in women’s trafficking which seemingly is what McCormick seeks to highlight in her novel and how the lack of or betrayal of sisterhood exacerbates sexual trafficking.

Sold has been interpreted differently by critics especially in terms of discourse analysis. It appears McCormick does a great job but a reading of Lakshaman (2011) questions the seemingly good intentions of McCormick in writing *Sold* which raises a very pertinent issue but which according to her, at the same time seems like an American neo-imperialist allegory, which presents the “repressed oriental woman” (p.78) who is rescued by an unnamed American, which of course, seems to be what is the narrative that the American wants to read. To Lakshaman (2011) , the novel portrays the “third world women” as one whose liberation and identity cannot emerge from within her own society and culture” (p.78), therefore in a way, not considering the courageous work and efforts that have been put in by Nepali and Indian women in this regard. Her argument is credible but McCormick in an interview seems to advance the reason why she chose to use an American to rescue Lakshmi: an honour to the American photographer who inspired her to write the story. He posed as a customer in order to find the girls and secondly, she was

writing primarily for an American audience, the reasons, especially the latter which I see as flimsy, though. However, she quickly ‘corrects’ herself as she says “BUT if I had to do it over again, I think I would rewrite it to show the brave and effective work that local people are also doing to fight trafficking” (np). In the Author’s Note of *Sold*, she talks about these courageous women and especially the survivors, some sick of HIV/AIDS who patrol the border between Nepal and India to look out for victims. She says: “...they are speaking it out-with great dignity. Some go door to door in the country’s most isolated villages to explain what really happens to girls who leave home with strangers promising good jobs” (np) So, where is their place in the novel? Lakshman (2011) is therefore right when she thinks that McCormick should be able to project a realistic picture of how local people and especially former victims are combating trafficking to her American audience.

Joshi (2019) focuses his analysis on “the overwhelming problems in *Sold*, that include: the depiction of women characters...as evil to women themselves; the depiction of Lakshmi, the narrator as object...” (p.20) and the effeminisation of the male characters who are assumed to be in a highly patriarchal society, the American as rescuer amongst other problems. He sees the writer’s effort as rather trying to exoticise and romanticise “third world problems rather than developing empathetic identification with the victim” (p.20). He concludes that the kind of society and micro discourses the author presents which is of poverty, traditional patriarchy, subsistence economy, illiteracy all in a way support or validate sexual slavery. The views of Joshi (2019) and Lakshman (2011) views are pertinent as though they both seem to point out that McCormick either did not carry out enough research or wrote from a neo-imperialist standpoint, they all agree that she writes on a pertinent issue. Given this, I agree especially with Lakshman (2011) that women have done a great job in fighting against sexual slavery and should have been acknowledged by McCormick rather than jump in to give a picture of the “American saviour.” However, the women who are contributing to sexual trafficking still pose as a real threat to the end of the phenomenon and that is why the problem is persisting. Thus, I

investigate into how the lack of sisterhood exacerbates sexual slavery in the novel.

Sisterhood in feminism is a very important concept as it deals basically with how women bond together to fight patriarchy. It has been generally seen, for instance, in the plays of Bole Butake like *Lake God* and *And Palm Wine will Flow*, Pepertua Lola's *The Lock on My Lips* and Osonye Tess Onwueme's *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama* and *Then She Said It: A Play*, just to name these, that female bonding can play a vital role in supporting women towards achieving their goals especially in patriarchal societies. hooks' (1986) words in are as relevant today as they were at that time. She says:

Women are the most victimized of sexist oppression. As with other forms of group oppression, sexism is perpetuated by institutional and social structures; by the individuals who dominate, exploit or oppress; and by the victims themselves who are socialised to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the statusquo. (p.127)

It is true that women like men may promote sexism, consciously or unconsciously as they have tended to internalise oppression and instead of fighting against sexism by challenging those who propagate it, they use opportunities at their disposal to support the statusquo which is generally against women and women's assertiveness in male-dominated societies. Although hooks focused her attention on the differences between classes, races, cultures and otherwise and especially of bourgeoisie white women who had hijacked the Feminist movement and were preaching about common oppression without consideration of varied experiences and the need to come together to challenge one common problem: sexism; she thought that considering the varied contexts and experiences was to be of importance if they had to make any meaningful impact. Thus, women's bonding in circumstances that challenge their being as women in different communities was to be focused on, rather than claiming a false universality.

Sisterhood, promotes women's support for one another in order to end sexism. In sisterhood, there is the recognition that women, like men can

also promote sexism especially when they are competitive and try to bring each other down. The term sisterhood was first used by Kathie Sarachild in 1968 and this is found on a flier she produced for the keynote address she gave for New York Radical Women's first public action at the convocation of the Jeannette Rankin Brigade. It is a deliberate stand in solidarity with other women of different cultures, classes, races and other different against different kinds of women's oppressions. In "Secret Sisterhood," the author defines sisterhood as "the state of being a sister and being involved with a strong community who are bound together by shared experiences or interests. To each person, sisterhood may mean something different. However, as a whole, it encapsulates an unconditional alliance between like-minded individuals who empower and lift one another" in spite of their differences (np) and to them at Secret Sisterhood, it is important because women live in a male dominated world where women can make meaning out of their lives through bonding. They also think that sisterhood inspires and empowers and equally strengthens well being. Rodak (2020) is of the opinion that that the view of sisterhood has changed over the different waves but sisterhood always questions a concern with identity, that is, who a sister is and "this represents the basis for the construction of a collective identity "{and} an emphasis on solidarity , declined into the acts of sharing, supporting each other, cooperating" (p.120S). Given this view of sisterhood, I argue in this paper that poverty strengthens lack of sisterhood which exacerbates sexual slavery. The suffering of Lakshmi, the main character in *Sold* and other girls under the brutality of several women testifies to this position. The paper will thus focus on poverty, child trafficking, sexual slavery and cruelty which all develop capitalistic tendencies and threaten sisterhood bonds.

Poverty and the quest for freedom

Poverty is the incapacitation of individuals to live an average or moderate life and often entails lack of access to basic needs such as food, shelter, social amenities like schools, clothing, just to name these. The

desire to be free from it is almost a given for every human being. Generally, everyone wants to live, at least, a comfortable life but poverty often forbids people from living such. In this case, it leads to different consequences including the lack of women's support for one another in their individual and collective endeavours, growth and fight against women's oppression.

Since most of the poor of the world are women, poverty has gained prominence in feminist discourses and has been generally referred to as the feminisation of poverty. It is an increase in the difference in the levels of poverty among women and men or among female versus male and couple headed households. It sees women as more vulnerable to poverty and having little prospects for emergence from poverty and therefore, they are marginalised. Chulu (2022) in "A Feminist Perspective that Poverty is Gendered: Do Women have Lesser Access to Resources in comparison with men?" asserts that "...women because of their being women especially in rural households have suffered massive marginalisation in almost every sphere of life in developing countries" (p.2) and this involves wealth ownership. With little means to sustain themselves and their families, women sometimes opt for different means to get themselves out of poverty, one of which is contributing voluntarily or involuntarily to human trafficking and especially that of girl children. According to H.D. Pandaya, "while trafficking victims come from a range of backgrounds...trafficking is linked inextricably to people with a lack of resources, notably job opportunities. Criminals take advantage of these vulnerable people, offering them a way to escape the harsh realities of their lives....Traffickers target people who have few economic opportunities and those struggling to meet basic needs" (1). No doubt therefore, that Simkhada (2008) says that "many girls involved in sex work in Asia do so because they are compelled by economic circumstances and social inequality" (p.234). Thus, human trafficking is prevalent among the poor in society and most of the poor are women. It is particularly true of Nepali girls who are trafficked to India and other places. As Simkhada (2008) notes "India is a major destination for sex-trafficked girls... with large numbers of Nepalese..." (p.235). Leaving

home may sound like a kind of relief from the much dreaded poverty but the harrowing experiences of living and serving in a brothel are very challenging.

In Patricia McCormick's *Sold*, a novel about the trafficking of young Nepali girls and women, poverty is the order of the day in Lakshmi's family. Poudel and Carryer (2000) state that "the trafficking of girls and young women in Nepal has its roots in gender politics and sexual inequalities, linked to widespread economic poverty" (p.76). At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to the poverty infested nature of their family which is symbolically represented by their house. When it rains for instance, water drips down into the house because they do not have a tin roof like the others in the neighbourhood. In the novel, we read: "Even before the rest of us have stirred, Ama has spread pots and pitchers around the floor of the hut to catch the water sipping through the gaps" (p.28). Ama's family has made her not to afford a tin roof which symbolises some kind of comfort. Although she and her daughter Lakshmi work so hard, they are unable to get the least comfort because they have to take care of Ama's husband. Thus, it is not surprising when Lakshmi, about their hard work, says of his stepfather:

When he looks, he sees cigarettes and rice beer, a new vest for himself

I see a tin roof. (p.2)

So, the proceeds of whatever she and her mother cultivate and sell are for the comfort of her stepfather. Lakshmi thinks if it were not for this, they will have a tin roof and which in the novel is a symbol, not of affluence as Lakshmi may seem to see, but of basic comfort, warmth and health. She says: "A tin roof means that when the rains come, the fire stays lit and the baby stays healthy" (p.1). That is why Ama and Lakshmi work very hard in the field, fetching water from long distances to water the rice and make a good harvest, especially without the rains as we hear from Lakshmi that

...Ama and I must each make twenty trips down the mountain to the village spring, waiting our turn for water to bring to the rice paddy.

My stepfather dozes in the shade, wearing nothing but a loincloth, too hot even to climb the hill to his card game. (21)

Ama's husband is a contrast to Gita's father who is not ready to fetch water or even build the paddy walls as Gita's father does. Gita's father like the men who leave home and go to work in the factories is thus, not 'effeminised' men as Krishna, Uncle Husband and Ama's husband as one will read from Joshi (2019). His interest is in gambling. He cares less about everything and everyone but himself and Ama is not concerned that her husband does nothing to sustain his family. She is of the opinion that "Even a man who gambles away the little we have on a fancy hat and a new coat... is better than no man" (p.41). Therefore, to Ama as to her culture, it is absolutely important to have and keep a man. It is probably based on this that her husband has the audacity to behave anyhow he likes. Thus, the culture has made Ama to understand that a man is a man, whether he contributes to the wellbeing of the family or not. Although her husband has a disability, he claims it is inability and does nothing to improve the status of his family. Lakshmi narrates:

Most of the men his age leave home for months at a time, taking jobs at factories or on work crews far away. But no one, he says, will hire a one –armed man. And so, he oils his hair, puts on his vest and wristwatch that stopped telling time long ago, and goes up the hill each day to play cards, talk politics and drink tea with old men.

Ama says we are lucky we have a man at all. She says I am to honour and praise him, respect and thank him for taking us in after my father died. (p.8)

Apparently, Ama has on the other hand taken in this man to babysit. When Lakshmi in the preceding quotation uses the expression "he says", she somehow insinuates that from her judgement, the man can still be useful for himself and his family but he makes just no effort and this brings in a lot of dreaded consequences which could have been avoided

should he have come in even with minimal support. One of the consequences in his lack of support to the family is seen when the heavy rains and monsoon winds destroy all their crops and they feel completely devastated and Ama weeps bitterly. Bhadra and Shah (2007) state that “the brunt of poverty falls disproportionately on women and girls resulting in human deprivation, in terms of access to food and nutrition, access to education, access to other human development opportunities and excessive work burden” (p.10). This is what Ama and Lakshmi face. Looking at this misfortune and doing everything to pick up the broken pieces of it in vain, Lakshmi says

Finally, when I stand, my hands aching with emptiness, I see Gita’s family in the plot below ours. Gita’s father did not spend his afternoons in the tea shop; he spent his days building paddy walls that could stand up to the monsoon. Now he faces the swallow-tailed peak, his hands in a prayer of gratitude. His rice plants bow to the sun. (p.37)

Lack of family support on the part of Ama’s husband, therefore takes a great toll on them. They are unable to support themselves not only because they have little to live on but because Ama’s husband is entitled to the benefits they make which he squanders, acting as a liability to Ama and her daughter; does nothing to support them and they consequently continuously drive down the poverty lane and exposure to trafficking.

The efforts that Ama puts in to rescue the family of poverty is visible on her hands. Lakshmi says: “Ama strokes my cheek, the skin of her work-worn hand as rough as the tongue of a newborn goat” (p.1). The simile, “as rough as the tongue of a new born goat” shows the extent to which Ama struggles in vain to keep her family going. The family’s level of poverty without any hope of changing is what makes Lakshmi to think of alternative ways to ameliorate their living conditions. It is this incessant desire to get a ‘tin roof’ that Lakshmi thinks she can go to town to improve on their condition. The sharp contrast between their home and Gita’s motivates her to this choice. Lakshmi says



Now that Gita has gone to work as a maid for a wealthy woman in the city, her family has a tiny glass sun that hangs from a wire in the middle of their ceiling, a new set of pots for Gita's mother, a pair of spectacles for her father, a brocaded wedding dress for her older sister, and school fees for her little brother.

Inside Gita's family hut, it is day time at night. (p.2-4)

The description of Gita's house show signs of relative affluence. Far from encouraging that young Gita, a girl of about thirteen should be trafficked to the city to afford this kind of "affluence" for her family, the contrast helps to make the reader visualise the depth of poverty in the Lakshmi hut.

It is as result of poverty that Lakshmi, in spite of her age, will pretend to be fine when she is not. Her mother has gone through a lot and she will not want to push her into making a worst situation terrible. A case in point is during the village festival where Amah wants to give her a feel of other kids but she is reluctant to accept. She says:

As we draw near the bonfire, Ama presses a coin into my palm.
'Run off and buy a sweet cake' she says' like other children.'

I tell her I'm not a child any more. I tell her not to waste her money.
But she insists.

'Tonight,' you will be a child. (p.45)

This discussion between Ama and Lakshmi and her pretence evokes pathos. Under normal circumstances, Lakshmi should be behind her mother to provide for her such 'goodies' as children normally would. Lakshmi's thinking not only portrays her as a compassionate daughter but also as a child who has had a fair share of poverty, and the poverty has made her to begin to take herself off the category of children to that of adults. Evidence of her being a child is how she joyfully eats the cake "...licking the last of the sweet cake crumbs from (her) fingers" (p.46). In her attitude, we see the effect of poverty on a conscientious child. It is also because of this consideration that when her step father takes the

decision that she will travel to the city and work as a maid, she accepts, for Ama's sake. When Lakshmi discovers Ama hiding herself and weeping because of such a decision, she is determined to make her cry no more. Their discussion goes thus:

'What is it, Ama?' I say.

Ama wipes her cheek with the end of her shawl. 'Your stepfather has said you must go to the city and earn your keep as a maid.'

The news is like a tiny earthquake, shaking the very ground beneath my feet. And yet, for Ama, I stand firm.

'This is good news, Ama,' I say, my voice full of boldness I did not know I had. There will be one less mouth to feed here and I will send my wages home.

Ama nods weakly.

'If I go, you will have money enough for rice and curds, milk and sugar. Enough for a coat for the baby and a jumper for you.'

She smiles and strokes my cheek with her work-worn hand.

'Enough,' I say, 'for a tin roof.' (p.51-52)

We note that Ama is powerless in her home. The decision is taken by her husband and cannot be counteracted. Women have no say and therefore, are supposed to heed to what their husbands say even if they are not happy about it. After all, as she posits elsewhere in the text, is it not better to have a worthless man than to have no man at all?

Lakshmi seems to understand the situation so well and knowing that Ama is helpless about it, she has to make Ama feel and believe that all is well. Yes, Lakshmi is going to be sold off for an inconsequential eight hundred rupees by someone who has no impact, to say the least, on her and her family and there is nothing Ama can do about it. Describing such news in the simile comparing it to an earthquake is symbolic of how shattered she feels but Ama must not know about it and she must therefore advance all sorts of reasons why it is a worthwhile venture.

How pathetic! Poverty and suffering have made Lakshmi to be empathetic with her mother to the point of accepting to carry the family's responsibilities on her shoulders, even at a tender age. The interesting part of the poverty of this household is that it is orchestrated and made worse by the 'man' of the house. Ama and Lakshmi's hard work could make a difference – give them the opportunity to live a barely comfortable life but since he is the man who determines whatever happens to everyone and everything under his command, he squanders the proceeds from their hard work without contributing anything and without any moderation and they are therefore, bound to remain in poverty. In an insatiable search for freedom from poverty, ironically, Lakshmi is sold into sex slavery which is far worse than the poverty she and her family are going through

The struggle for freedom and the betrayal of sisterhood

Sisterhood is betrayed when one expects that women should show love to other women, help to develop their dreams in the face of societal and patriarchal threats. Sisterhood is characterised by trust, honesty, loyalty, affection and love which all help to promote other women as well as build in them the self esteem which is required to challenge male chauvinism which looks down on women and therefore contribute in treating them as commodities as is the case with trafficking. Kaufman and Crawford (2011) aver that in Nepal, the root causes of trafficking are multiple "including endemic poverty, the low status of women, and migration in an attempt to escape insurgent violence" (p.652). This subordination of women therefore greatly contributes in the commodification of women and women need to resist these conceptions. hooks (1986) says

Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless...we are taught that women are natural enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of sisterhood. (p.127)

Bonding can therefore, go a long way in making women to fight against the inequalities perpetrated against them. In the case where sisterhood prevails, Lakshmi should be able to achieve her dreams like going to school and providing a tin roof for her family through hard work and support from other women but the women are suffering from sexism. hooks says, "sexism teaches women woman-hating, and both consciously and unconsciously, we act out this hatred in our daily contact with one another" (p.130). Interestingly, in the text, it is realised that women participate in the trafficking and enslavement of girls and women which seem to confirm the male chauvinistic view that women are women's enemies. Characters like Bijai Sita, Bimla, Mumtaz, Shilpa play a very significant role in enslaving and dehumanising Lakshmi as well as other girls.

First, we begin with the women who contribute in selling Lakshmi into slavery. It is in Bajai Sita's store that all the financial negotiations and transactions are made with Lakshmi's step father for her sale who according to him as society has no value. We read: "A son will always be a son, they say. But a girl is like a goat. Good as long as she gives you milk and butter. But not worth crying over when it's time to make a stew" (p.9). This tallies with what Ama tells her when expatiating on the differences between sons and daughters. She gives Lakshmi a long lecture on the differences, the do's and don'ts which all emphasise on the subordination of women.

...You must carry yourself with modesty, bow your head in the presence of men...never look a man in the eye...once you are married,...you must eat your meal only after your husband has had his fill. Then you may have what remains...if he turns to you in the night ...if he burps at the end of the meal, it is a sign that you have pleased him. If he turns to you in the night, you must give yourself to him in the hope that you will bear him a son...if your husband asks you to wash his feet, you must do as he says, then put a bit of the water in your mouth.

I ask Ama why. 'Why,' I say, 'must women suffer so?'

‘This has always been our fate,’ she says. ‘Simply to endure’ she says ‘is to triumph.’ (p.17)

It is this view of women that makes Lakshmi’s stepfather to sell her out without a second thought, without her mother’s consent and facilitated by women as Bajai Sita and Aunty Bimla. When Lakshmi is introduced to Bajai Sita as someone who “wants to go and work in the city” (p.55) as if it is her decision, the question she asks, “Are you willing to do whatever is asked of you?” (p.55) is insinuating that she can as well be a slave in whatever dimension. Human beings should be able to make choices and not just do everything or anything that one is asked to do. It is also problematic to think that Lakshmi is going to work as a maid when she is trafficked to work as a sex slave. Simkhada is right to say “some enter sex work voluntarily, others do so by force or deception” (p.237). Lakshmi definitely enters by force and deception. From every indication, Bajai Sita is at the centre of the deception and trafficking of girls in this community. She buys Lakshmi for eight hundred rupees and hands her over to Aunty Bimla who is to take her to the city for work.

The role Bajai Sita and Aunty Bimla play in trafficking Lakshmi cannot be overemphasised. The fact that Aunty Bimla takes Lakshmi, treks with her for four days and sells her over to another man, shows how they contribute in this chain. Aunty Bimla’s inhumanity is also reflected in so many of her actions. For instance, to push Lakshmi to move fast on a very distant journey which her age should normally not permit, she uses strategies like throwing gravel behind her legs: “I feel a tiny sting on the back of my legs, and I realise that Aunty has thrown a handful of gravel at my heels to keep me moving forward” (p.59). Additionally, she makes Lakshmi to lose her identity which is reflected in her clothing. When she wants to sell her over to Uncle Husband, Lakshmi says: “Aunty takes me in to one of the rooms. There is nothing in it but a stained straw mat. ‘Take off those filthy hill clothes’” (p.75). Aunty Bimla certainly wants her to look good and ‘modern’ so as to fetch her more money but fails to understand that this is her identity. Virginia Woolf rightly asserted that clothes are more than a piece of fabric as “vain trifles as they seem, clothes... are more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They

change our world view as well as the world's view of us....There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them;they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues and our liking" (qtd by Akdemir, 2018, p.1389). Akdemir (2018) further states that "clothing is an "identification" tool that functions in determining the symbolic boundaries between people in a sense" (p.1389). It is therefore not surprising that when Lakshmi puts on the one that Aunty has for her, she says "The new dress seems to be one long piece of cloth, with no beginning and no end, and material so light and fine I feel more naked than dressed inside" (p.75). The discomfort she feels in the new clothes is a contrast to how comfortable she feels in her hill clothes. Her identity is in the hill and throwing away the clothes which symbolise who she truly is, is throwing away her identity. The long piece of cloth symbolises and foreshadows the long suffering that Lakshmi will undergo in this perilous quest for freedom of poverty.

The difficulty of entrusting oneself to another is always so huge that betraying it can be so bad. Poudel and Carryer (2000) rightly aver that "the people who deliver young girls and women into the hands of brokers are generally people in whom the girls have placed their trust and this shows the degree to which such practices are covertly accepted" (p.75). Lakshmi blindly trusts and believes in Aunty Bimla to take her to the city so she can work as a maid and ameliorate the condition of her family. It is as a result of this trust that she follows her, in the very long and arduous journey. Unfortunately, she is entrusting her life to the very wrong person who will sell her off even before they get to the supposed city. She needs to make her change her clothes and look city-like so as to attract a huge sum of money from the buyer. Lakshmi's naivety, which is normal for her age, at such commodification of human beings, will not let her see that she is being sold. She says:

Aunty names a price as high as a Mountain.
The man spits
The man names another figure.

The turnip nose man answers with a smaller amount. Aunty goes high. The man goes low.

Eventually they agree and the give man gives Aunty a roll of rupee notes. I do not know what they have agreed to. But I do know this: he gives her nearly enough money to buy a buffalo. (p.78)

The commodification of Lakshmi is not only bad but it is terrible as it is executed by someone she trusts and refers to as Aunty. The fact that Lakshmi calls Bimla, Aunty testifies to the level of trust she has developed for Bimla even if it is not reciprocated. Steven Stonsy in "Trust and Betrayal: Learning to Trust Wisely" says that "Human beings need to trust. Trust allays anxiety, helps lift depression, and makes it possible to consistently invest interest and enjoyment in one another" (np). The community is certainly a communal and it is therefore easy to trust. But Lakshmi, unfortunately, suffers from blind trust as she puts her trust in a wolf that will eventually devour her. According to Stonsy (2014) "blind trust puts faith in someone without regard to demonstrated reliability or trustworthiness. It is more a reluctance to experience the doubt, anxiety and loneliness of distrust than an endorsement of the other person's better qualities" (np). Therefore, Bimla does not deserve Lakshmi's trust but to Lakshmi, it is a survival strategy in the midst of her fears. It is pathetic to hear Lakshmi, after she's been sold still continuously tries to find out from her buyer if she will still meet her Aunty, ironically thinking she can protect her from any impending evil. Thus, when she senses danger as she steps into her "cell" in Mumtaz' brothel, she tells Shilpa, Mumtaz' worker and spy: "My Aunty Bimla is coming for me.... When she comes to the door, will you tell her I am here?" This is so pathetic as the reader knows exactly what has transpired but little does Lakshmi know that her trust had long been betrayed by her supposed Aunty. Bajai Sita and Aunty Bimla are therefore, responsible for Lakshmi's trafficking.

The actual sex slavery and imprisonment which Lakshmi like other women in the text suffer is orchestrated by Mumtaz, the lady to whom

Uncle Husband sells her off for ten thousand rupees. Lakshmi's hopes of working as a maid and changing the poverty state of her family are quickly dashed when she realises she will be working as a sex slave in Mumtaz' prison. Obligated to sleep with all kinds of men: "old, young, dirty, clean, tall, short, dark, light, bearded, smooth, fat, thin" (p.149) and forbidden to escape, she has to bear the brunt of sexual slavery and live with the trauma. Mumtaz' cruelty in connivance with Shilpa, her girl and collaborator, towards the girls and women like Pushpa, the desperate sickly lady who is in the brothel with her two children and obliged to sleep with men on condition that she will be thrown out if she does not, Anita, who once tried to escape but her jaws were smashed by Mumtaz' goondas (cruel agents), and "now one side of her face is dead" (p.159), Monica who has a child at home and who is unable to escape because "...Mumtaz will take the child,... she will maim it – cut off a hand or foot – and sell the child to a beggar woman.... Soft hearted people will give an extra rupee or two if you have a sick baby" (170), the little girl who hangs herself when she is unable to bear the brunt of sexual slavery and it means nothing to Mumtaz among many of her acts is to speak of Mumtaz' cruelty to fellow women.

The author's description of characters like Aunty Bimla, Mumtaz and Shilpa portrays the author's disdain of the characters. When Bimla, for instance, tries to cajole Lakshmi, unknowing to her about the beautiful lives city girls live, where she begins to see a possibility of moving to the city to work as a house maid and change the poverty situation of her family, Lakshmi says, "... This delicate stranger, it seems, is speaking to me. I steal a sideways look at her.... She smiles, drawing her shawl to her lips with the dignity of a queen" (p.46) and later on "she smiles, and I see then, what was behind the shawl she always drew to her lips: a mouth of blackened teeth" (p.64). The sharp contrast between how Lakshmi first sees Aunty Bimla and who she really is, conveys not only appearance versus reality but the author's hatred towards Bimla's character. About Shilpa, Mumtaz' spy, she says, "a figure rises from the corner and steps toward us. She has the reed thin body of a girl and the hollow cheeks of an old woman. She is under the folds of her yellow dress, frail as a baby

bird" (p.95) and for Mumtaz, it is said, "a fat woman in purple sari lounges on a cot. She has folds of flesh like roti dough around her waist and a face as plump as an overripe mango" (p.95). The imagery evoked in these descriptions symbolise the kinds of terrible things that the concerned are involved in and certainly a desire for them to dissuade from their actions which endanger the lives of other girls and women.

Conclusion

For a long time, women have complained about patriarchal marginalisation of women. Curiously, sometimes women contribute in the promotion of patriarchy in diverse ways. The fact that the women who oppress Lakshmi and other girls and women such as Bimla, Shipla, Mumtaz, do it for the erotic pleasure of men who visit the brothel is to say that they are unable to support one another as women and therefore, implicitly promote patriarchy and sexism. Toni Morrison (1979), once cried out, in an address saying, "I want not to ask you but to tell you not to participate in the oppression of your sisters....I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, emotional violence, competitive violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women. (qtd by hooks, 1968, p.130). Although the setting, USA, is quite different from the one we are discussing in this text, that is, India and Nepal, the words remain true across contexts and should be taken note of and acted upon.

If equity should be established in patriarchal societies, women ought to bond and promote other women and fight against injustices towards women collectively. If women consider that one woman oppressed is all women oppressed, then, patriarchy will easily be dismantled. If Bajai Sita, Auntie Bimla and Mumtaz just do not play the significant roles they play in the novel, the men who may want to promote the trafficking and sexual slavery of the girl child will be frustrated and there will be no woman for them to depend on for this leading to failure on their part and victory for the women and society. Girl trafficking and sexual slavery affects not only those who indulge in the acts but some others like the children of the sex slaves as in the texts and their family members like

Monica's who disown her because they are unable to bear the shame of their daughter engaged in prostitution. If sisterhood trust is maintained, the evil will be avoided and society as well as family relationships will be more balanced. In all, the betrayal of sisterhood can lead to grievous consequences, especially in a men's world and therefore, sisterhood should be encouraged and practised if women must collectively fight against male chauvinism.

Given that girls' trafficking in general and in Nepal in particular is disturbing, efforts are put in to curb it and one of those efforts is through literature. Patricia Mc Cormick has somehow responded to Poudel and Carryer's (2000) plea that "to eliminate the practices that either actively support or ignore trafficking within Nepalese Society, a very strong and multifaceted commitment is needed" (p.78). In this light, *Sold* (2007) has the potential to educate, through its harrowing descriptions, not only the Nepalese girls and community but the entire world of the physical and psychological hardship that trafficked girls go through. The very close relationship that is found between *Sold* (2007) and the other non-literary works testifies to this. Therefore, I hail McCormick for picking up such a theme to write on, though not disagreeing with Lakshaman (2011) who sees it being presented from a neo-imperialistic perspective. Sexual slavery still exists; Nepali girls constitute a high target and McCormick has brought to light this problem in her narrative, with women playing prominent roles to exacerbate it and it is important that these women make it easier for the women and men fighting against this evil by getting rid of any contribution to the sexual slavery chain.

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