

The Harrowing Reality of Child Rights Violations in Patricia McCormick's *Sold*

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Abstract

Patricia McCormick's *Sold* is a powerful and heart-wrenching novel that pulls back the curtain on the dark, often unseen world of human trafficking. Through its vivid portrayal of young girls trapped in a cycle of exploitation, the book exposes the brutal violations of human rights they endure, offering a painful reminder of the harsh realities that too many face in silence. The novel narrates the journey of Lakshmi, a thirteen-year-old girl from Nepal, who is deceived and sold into sexual slavery. Through a first-person, free-verse narrative, McCormick exposes the harsh conditions of forced labor, exploitation, and psychological trauma inflicted upon trafficked victims. This paper explores how *Sold* highlights fundamental human rights violations, including child trafficking, forced prostitution, lack of access to education, and physical and emotional abuse. By employing a human rights framework, this study critically examines the novel's depiction of injustice and the broader implications for raising awareness and advocating change. McCormick's work serves as a powerful tool for social consciousness, urging action against human rights abuses and reinforcing the need for global intervention.

Keywords: Human trafficking, sexual slavery, child exploitation, forced labor, psychological trauma

Introduction

Human trafficking is a severe violation of human rights, affecting millions globally, particularly women and children from vulnerable backgrounds. This crime, encompassing forced labor and sexual exploitation, strips victims of their autonomy and dignity. Patricia McCormick's *Sold* provides a powerful depiction of this issue, following Lakshmi, a 13-year-old girl from Nepal, who is deceived and sold into sexual slavery. Through its free-verse narrative, the novel vividly portrays the coercion, exploitation, and dehumanization faced by trafficked individuals, especially young girls lured by false promises of opportunity.

While much research focuses on the legal, social, and psychological aspects of human trafficking, literature's role as an advocacy tool remains under-explored. This study aims

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to address that gap, analyzing *Sold* as not only a narrative of suffering but a call for social change. Framed by international human rights standards, it explores how McCormick's portrayal aligns with global conversations on trafficking, forced prostitution, child exploitation, and psychological trauma. The novel emphasizes the urgent need for policy solutions to combat human trafficking.

This research highlights how *Sold* humanizes the experiences of trafficked victims, drawing attention to the emotional and psychological scars of exploitation. As both an educational tool and a catalyst for action, the novel urges readers to recognize the severity of human trafficking and take steps to address it. The study underscores the need for collective societal and governmental action to protect vulnerable children and prevent further exploitation, reinforcing the call for global intervention.

Child Rights Violations in *Sold*

Child rights are fundamental freedoms and protections for individuals under 18, ensuring their survival, development, and societal participation. Recognized globally through frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), these rights obligate governments to protect children from harm, exploitation, and abuse. The UNCRC, the most widely ratified human rights treaty, is legally binding in 196 signatory nations and affirms children's inherent rights, including protection, education, healthcare, and freedom from exploitation (as of July 12, 2022).

Child Trafficking and Forced Prostitution

Lakshmi's experience with human trafficking aligns with the definition provided by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022), which highlights deception, coercion, and exploitation as core elements of trafficking. Article 35 of the UNCRC states, "States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form." Despite these protections, Lakshmi is deceived when a trafficker promises her a job as a maid:

A city woman comes and stands next to me, wearing a dress of yellow...silver bangles on her ankles... 'Where I live,' she says, 'the girls have sweet cakes every day.' ... 'City girls have pretty dresses, fancy baubles... They eat oranges, dates... every day. It is the easy life. ... 'Would you like to come to the city with me?' she says. 'I will be your auntie.'" (McCormick 49-50)

These lines illustrate the manipulative tactics traffickers use, offering material luxuries and false promises to prey on vulnerable individuals' hopes and dreams. As the UNODC (2022) points out, traffickers exploit people's aspirations for a better life, luring them into exploitation. This deception directly violates Article 35 of the UNCRC, which calls for measures to prevent the trafficking of children.

Lakshmi's stepfather plays a pivotal role in her trafficking, as evidenced by the dialogue between her and her mother: "What is it, Ama?" I say. *Ama* wipes her cheek with the hem of her shawl, "Your stepfather has said you must go to the city and earn your keep as maid (54)." This moment highlights how economic desperation leaves young girls vulnerable to trafficking. The trafficker's manipulation aligns with Judith Lewis Herman's trauma theory, which asserts that survivors of trafficking experience psychological fragmentation due to prolonged coercion and betrayal by those they trust (Herman 53). Lakshmi's this experience aligns with the conditions outlined in Article 32 of the UNCRC, which states that "States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development."

Lakshmi's innocence and lack of awareness make her highly vulnerable to trafficking, as seen in her hopeful belief that leaving home will ease her family's financial struggles; "*This is good news, Ama,*" I say, *my voice full of boldness... "There will be one less mouth to feed here, and I will send my wages home (54-55)."* These lines reveal how traffickers exploit economic hardship and familial duty. Lakshmi's selflessness makes her an easy target, while her stepfather's desperation drives him to push her into forced labor under promises of a better future for their family.

By coercing Lakshmi into labor under the guise of financial necessity, her stepfather directly contributes to the violation of her rights. Johan Galtung's theory of structural violence (1969) explains how systemic inequalities—such as poverty, lack of education, and entrenched gender norms—make marginalized children, particularly girls, more susceptible to trafficking. Structural violence occurs when social, political, or economic systems inflict harm by restricting access to basic needs (Galtung 167). These inequalities, shaped by factors like race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, create environments where vulnerable individuals face oppression, leading to significant physical, psychological, and economic harm (Galtung, 170).

Lakshmi herself articulates this systemic inequality when she observes, "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" (McCormick 14). Her words reveal how deeply ingrained gender biases render girls expendable, intensifying their risk of exploitation. This reality aligns with human rights reports that highlight the intersection of poverty, gender inequality, and forced labor.

Lakshmi's vulnerability is further exposed when she is eventually sold to an older man, who uses psychological manipulation to establish control over her, further demonstrating how traffickers exploit systemic oppression to sustain cycles of exploitation. The trafficker's manipulation is evident as he tells Lakshmi, "From now on," he says, "I will be your uncle. But you must call me husband. Do you understand?" Confused but obedient, she nods. He continues, warning her about the dangers of the

border: “There are bad men there, men with guns, men who might harm you, or try to take you away from me and Auntie.” Overwhelmed and afraid, Lakshmi remains silent. To ease her fear, he reassures her, “Don’t be frightened,” he says kindly. “It is a pretend game. You like games, don’t you (McCormick 82)?” This dialogue exemplifies the psychological manipulation traffickers use to control their victims through coercion and deception. By framing the situation as a game, the trafficker exploits Lakshmi’s innocence, reinforcing Judith Herman’s trauma theory, which highlights how perpetrators use isolation, confusion, and psychological control to break a victim’s resistance and ensure compliance (Herman 45).

From a human rights perspective, as outlined by the UNODC, traffickers often use psychological coercion—such as instilling fear of external threats like “bad men” at the border—to maintain control over victims. This aligns with the Power and Control Wheel framework, which illustrates how traffickers manipulate victims by isolating them, instilling fear, and distorting their sense of reality (2010b). In Lakshmi’s case, the trafficker’s tactics confuse and disorient her, ensuring compliance and suppressing her ability to resist. “You belong to me,” she says. “And I paid a pretty sum for you too.” She opens her book and points to the notation for 10,000 rupees. “You will take men to your room...You will work here, like the other girls, until your debt is paid off” (McCormick 112).

These lines starkly illustrate human rights violations, particularly the denial of freedom, dignity, and protection from exploitation. Mumtaz’s declaration—“You belong to me”—directly contradicts Article 4 of the UDHR, which prohibits slavery and servitude in all forms. Lakshmi’s forced labor under the pretense of debt repayment also violates Article 8 of the ICCPR, which forbids forced or compulsory labor. Furthermore, her exploitation violates Article 34 of the UNCRC, which mandates that states protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse. McCormick’s portrayal of Lakshmi’s suffering serves as a powerful call to action, urging global measures to combat trafficking, protect survivors, and uphold the fundamental rights of every child.

This violation is particularly significant in the context of structural violence (Galtung, 1969), as trafficked children often come from marginalized communities where systemic inequalities heighten their vulnerability. The loss of identity further amplifies their inability to reclaim their rights, as they become nameless entities within exploitative systems. Mumtaz’s total control over Lakshmi symbolizes a broader pattern of oppression, where trafficked individuals are deliberately stripped of their personal histories, reinforcing their role as mere instruments of economic exploitation. The systematic violations of Lakshmi’s rights in *Sold* reflect real-world patterns of human trafficking, illustrating how trafficked children are deprived of agency, dignity, and basic freedoms. McCormick’s novel serves as a powerful narrative, humanizing these statistics while calling for greater international accountability and intervention in the fight against child trafficking and forced prostitution.

Physical and Psychological Abuse

Upon arrival at the brothel, Lakshmi faces extreme physical violence, psychological coercion, and sexual exploitation, all grave human rights violations under international law. The UDHR and UNCRC explicitly prohibit such abuse, emphasizing a child's right to dignity, protection, and freedom from inhumane treatment. The trauma experienced by trafficked children in *Sold* aligns with Judith Lewis Herman's analysis in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), which explains how prolonged abuse leads to psychological dissociation and emotional fragmentation in victims (35).

Lakshmi endures both physical and psychological violence at the hands of her trafficker, Madam Mumtaz, who uses brutality to control and dominate her and the other girls. Lakshmi describes the abuse, stating, "Each morning and evening Mumtaz comes, beats me with a leather strap, and locks the door behind her" (McCormick 115). This reflects severe violations of human rights, particularly the right to freedom, dignity, and protection from torture. The physical violence inflicted by Madam Mumtaz violates Article 5 of the UDHR, which states, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." By beating Lakshmi and imprisoning her, Mumtaz dehumanizes her, stripping her of dignity and bodily autonomy.

Furthermore, Mumtaz's use of starvation as a means of coercion violates Article 25 of the UDHR, which recognizes the fundamental right to an adequate standard of living, including food and shelter. Lakshmi's statement, "*And so she says that she will starve me until I submit*" (117), underscores the deliberate deprivation of basic needs to force compliance, a tactic often used in cases of human trafficking and forced labor. Such treatment aligns with patterns of exploitation condemned by international human rights organizations, reinforcing the urgent need for stronger enforcement of anti-trafficking laws and victim protection programs.

Lakshmi's experience aligns with the global reality of trafficked children, who are routinely beaten into submission to ensure compliance. The violence she faces also violates Article 19 of the UNCRC, which mandates that children must be protected from all forms of physical and mental violence. Scholars of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) argue that such abuses are not isolated incidents but symptoms of deeper societal structures that perpetuate gender-based violence and economic exploitation. In the article "Structural Violence on Women: An Impediment to Women Empowerment," the authors discuss how societal structures perpetuate gender-based violence and economic exploitation. They reference Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence, noting that "when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance, there is structural violence" (Sinha et al., 135).

Lakshmi's resilience in the face of these abuses highlights the failure of legal and social systems to protect vulnerable individuals from trafficking networks. Her suffering reflects the broader crisis of modern slavery, where trafficked individuals are subjected

to violence, deprivation, and psychological coercion, violating their fundamental human rights. McCormick's portrayal serves as a stark reminder of the global responsibility to combat human trafficking and uphold the rights and dignity of all individuals, especially those most vulnerable to exploitation.

Lakshmi was subjected to severe physical violence at the hands of Mumtaz when she resisted being forced into exploitation. Her refusal to comply led to an immediate and brutal reaction from Mumtaz, who exerted control through physical aggression. As described in the novel, "*Then Mumtaz flies at me. She grabs me by the hair and drags me across the room. She flings me onto the bed next to the old man.*" (McCormick 109). This violent act illustrates the use of force and intimidation to break Lakshmi's resistance and assert dominance over her. Mumtaz's actions were not only physically harmful but also psychologically damaging, as they were intended to degrade and dehumanize Lakshmi. By grabbing her hair and dragging her across the room, Mumtaz inflicted both pain and humiliation, reinforcing her power over the young girl. Lakshmi's suffering was a direct result of the systemic oppression she faced in the brothel, where violence was used as a tool to enforce submission. The act of throwing her onto the bed next to the old man further emphasized her complete lack of autonomy, as she was treated as an object rather than a human being. This scene starkly portrays the physical and emotional torment endured by trafficking victims, highlighting the brutal reality of coercion and abuse. Lakshmi's experience underscores the widespread human rights violations faced by trafficked individuals, where violence is used to strip them of their dignity and freedom.

Lakshmi experiences a moment of intense violence and control when Mumtaz, wielding scissors at her neck, commands, "Hold still... or I'll slice your throat" (McCormick 113). A slicing sound follows, and a clump of Lakshmi's hair falls to the floor. She cries out and struggles to break free, but Shahanna restrains her. Mumtaz then warns, "Try to escape with that head of hair, and they'll bring you right back here" (114). After this, Lakshmi is left alone in a locked room, As she says, "After this, they leave her alone in the locked room (114). This brutal act highlights the severe human rights violations faced by trafficking victims. Mumtaz's cutting of Lakshmi's hair serves as a dehumanizing tactic to assert dominance, stripping her of identity and ensuring submission. The physical restraint by Shahanna and the threat of violence instill fear, violating Lakshmi's right to dignity and protection from cruel treatment (UDHR, Article 5). Mumtaz's warning reinforces the inescapable nature of her captivity, as the forced haircut makes her easily identifiable and vulnerable to recapture, violating her rights to liberty and freedom from slavery (UDHR, Articles 3 and 4). Locked in isolation, Lakshmi is denied freedom of movement and protection from arbitrary detention (UDHR, Article 9). Her ordeal exemplifies the brutal reality of human trafficking, where victims are stripped of autonomy through violence and coercion, underscoring the urgent need for global intervention.

In “TWILIGHT,” section, Lakshmi’s trauma intensifies as she is subjected to both physical and psychological abuse, particularly sexual violence. The magnitude of her suffering distorts her perception of reality, causing her to hallucinate figures such as her stepfather, Bajai Sita, the headman’s wife, and Auntie Bimala. Though she recognizes they are not truly present, the psychological toll of her experiences makes these visions seem hauntingly real. At the same time, her captor, Mumtaz, further debilitates Lakshmi by forcibly drugging her each evening with “a cup of lassi” (125), rendering her even more vulnerable to further exploitation. Lakshmi recounts her nightmarish experiences:

“My stepfather appears, wearing his big-shoulder coat and city hat, puffing on a cigarette. Then Baija Sita is standing at the foot And sometimes Auntie Bimala comes...They seem real, but I know that they are not. In between, Men come. They crush my bones with their weight. They split me open. Then they disappear.” (129-30)

The words “crush” and “split” emphasize the intense physical and psychological trauma Lakshmi endures. The violent disregard for her body and humanity is a clear violation of her fundamental human rights, particularly the right to security, dignity, and protection from cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment (UDHR, Article 5). The men’s actions, described as “disappear,” reinforce the nightmarish and surreal nature of Lakshmi’s abuse, where her suffering seems endless, and her oppressors face no consequence.

From a human rights perspective, Lakshmi’s experience embodies the horrors of human trafficking and sexual slavery, breaching critical principles established by the UDHR and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Her drugging, loss of autonomy, and repeated violence expose the systemic exploitation of vulnerable individuals, especially women and children. Moreover, her confusion between reality and nightmare illustrates the severe psychological toll of such abuse, violating her right to mental and physical well-being (UNCRC, Article 39).

This portrays the unrelenting suffering faced by trafficking victims, underscoring the urgent need for stronger legal protections and interventions. As Lakshmi states, “Then they disappear. I cannot tell which of the things they do to me are real, and which are nightmares” (McCormick, 130), this reflects a psychological dissociation often seen in abuse survivors. According to Judith Lewis Herman’s trauma theory, prolonged abuse triggers dissociative coping mechanisms, where victims detach from their experiences to endure their pain. Herman notes that “traumatized individuals develop survival mechanisms that help them endure overwhelming suffering, often leading to dissociation as a way to manage the horror” (Herman 49). This aligns with Article 34 of the UNCRC, which mandates the protection of children from sexual exploitation and abuse: “States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.”

Furthermore, Jean Amery, in his seminal work *At the Mind's Limits* (1980), explores the profound effects of extreme trauma, particularly torture, on an individual's sense of self and agency. He explains how such intense suffering leads to a loss of personal autonomy, making survival a detached, mechanical experience rather than a conscious, intentional act. Amery's reflections emphasize the dehumanizing impact of torture, reducing the victim's existence to mere physical endurance, stripping away the essence of human dignity and self-determination (Amery 29). This disconnection from one's own suffering mirrors Lakshmi's emotional numbness, illustrating the dehumanizing effects of trafficking on a child's mental and emotional well-being. Lakshmi's harrowing journey in *Sold* reflects the real-world experiences of countless trafficked children. McCormick's novel serves as a powerful condemnation of the systemic failures that perpetuate such atrocities, urging immediate action to address human trafficking and protect the rights of vulnerable children worldwide.

Denial of Basic Rights and Education

Lakshmi's story in *Sold* underscores the systemic denial of fundamental human rights, particularly the right to education, healthcare, and basic necessities, which are crucial for a child's well-being. Both the UNCRC and UDHR emphasize that children must have access to these rights, yet trafficked children like Lakshmi are deprived of them, perpetuating cycles of poverty and dis-empowerment. "After five days of no food and water I don't even dream" (McCormick 119) illustrates the extreme deprivation Lakshmi faces.

This moment not only highlights her physical starvation but also the psychological toll of her trauma. The inability to dream symbolizes the loss of hope and escape, marking a profound dehumanization. The absence of basic needs such as food and water serves as both physical and psychological torture, stripping Lakshmi of her humanity and reducing her existence to mere survival. This reflects the broader issue of human trafficking, where victims are deprived of their rights and subjected to unimaginable suffering.

Ama's words to Lakshmi, "You must stay in school, no matter what your stepfather says" (McCormick 7), express her deep love and concern for her daughter's future. Despite the harshness of their life, Ama's rough, work-worn hands symbolize the sacrifices she makes, valuing education as a means to escape the cycle of poverty. From a human rights perspective, this moment emphasizes the fundamental right to education, as outlined in Article 28 of the CRC and Article 26 of the UDHR. Education is crucial in breaking poverty cycles and preventing exploitation, such as child labor and trafficking.

Lakshmi's stepfather's opposition to her schooling represents common barriers many girls face in accessing education, such as gender discrimination and economic hardship. Ama's insistence on schooling highlights the struggle of mothers who recognize

education as a tool for empowerment but lack the resources to secure it. This moment underscores the need for global policies that ensure free, accessible, and compulsory education, particularly for girls who are often deprived of these opportunities due to patriarchal norms and financial constraints. Ama's plea reveals the risk of exploitation Lakshmi faces without education, reinforcing the importance of protecting children's rights to education, security, and freedom from forced labor.

Lakshmi's mother's initial hope for education symbolizes a desire for self-sufficiency and empowerment, but this dream is tragically shattered when Lakshmi is sold into forced prostitution. This violation directly contradicts Article 28 of the UNCRC, which states: "States Parties recognize the right of the child to education... and shall make primary education compulsory and available free to all." Despite being trapped in a horrific environment, Lakshmi's determination to learn is evident through her actions: stealing storybooks from David Beckham Boy, pretending to attend school with her friend Gita (McCormick 161), wanting David to teach her (169), and learning Hindi and English (170). She continues to learn new words (171) while confined to the brothel. These acts reflect her longing for education—a fundamental human right.

However, her attempts to learn are carried out secretly, hidden from Mumtaz, underscoring the severe violation of her rights. Lakshmi's desire for an education is an expression of her human dignity and autonomy. The need for secrecy highlights the oppressive environment in which she lives, where her basic rights are either denied or deliberately suppressed. Instead of having access to a safe educational space, Lakshmi is subjected to exploitation and must secretly pursue education to empower herself.

This reflects a violation of Article 28 of the CRC, which guarantees every child's right to education. Mumtaz's control over Lakshmi—suppressing her desire to learn through threats and coercion—demonstrates the profound impact of human rights violations, such as child trafficking, forced labor, and the denial of education, on children's potential. These violations prevent children from accessing opportunities for development, keeping them trapped in cycles of abuse and exploitation. Denying education to trafficked children ensures their continued vulnerability and economic dependency, a strategy traffickers often use to maintain control.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that education is a tool for liberation, and depriving children of education ensures their continued oppression and exploitation, emphasizing the power of literacy as a means of empowerment (123). The fact that trafficked girls who know English are valued more demonstrates how education could have provided Lakshmi with an escape route. Amartya Sen's "capability approach" posits that education is a fundamental enabler of human freedom, empowering individuals to make informed choices and escape exploitative circumstances (Sen 344). In *Development as Freedom*, Sen highlights that education enhances human capabilities, thereby expanding the freedoms individuals can enjoy (Sen 345). Article 29 of the UNCRC further asserts that education should be directed toward "the development of

the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (UNCRC 1989). However, Lakshmi is denied this right, making her more susceptible to continued exploitation and dis-empowerment.

In *Sold*, McCormick depicts the severe exploitation of sex workers through Pushpa's experience, highlighting the violation of her basic human rights. Despite suffering from health issues, Pushpa is forced to comply with her employer's demands. Mumtaz threatens to throw her onto the street unless she works, and though in pain, Pushpa begs for mercy, even coughing blood as she struggles (McCormick 201). This scene underscores the denial of her right to health, rest, and dignity in favor of profit. Such treatment reflects broader systemic oppression, violating human rights frameworks like Article 25 of the UDHR, which guarantees the right to health and well-being. The deliberate withholding of medical care is a severe violation of the right to health, as outlined in Article 25 of the UDHR, which states; "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care." The World Health Organization (WHO) has also reported that trafficked individuals face severe malnutrition, untreated injuries, and chronic illnesses due to restricted medical care (WHO 2021).

Lakshmi's experiences in *Sold* reflect the broader reality of child trafficking victims, who are systematically denied education, healthcare, and agency over their own lives. McCormick's novel serves as a harrowing critique of societal indifference, emphasizing the urgent need for stronger legal protections, rehabilitation programs, and global efforts to combat child trafficking and exploitation.

Forced Labor and Economic Exploitation

In *Sold*, McCormick exposes the economic dimension of human trafficking, where young girls like Lakshmi are reduced to commodities for financial gain. Denied wages and forced into labor, she is trapped in economic servitude, aligning with the ILO's definition of modern slavery, which states that victims of trafficking are often forced to work under coercion, deception, and physical or psychological threats (2005). This practice violates several fundamental human rights protections, including Article 23 of UDHR and the principles of the ICESCR.

Lakshmi's desperation is evident when her mother says, "One more rainy season and our roof will be gone." In response, Lakshmi pleads, "Let me go to the city... I can work for a rich family like Gita does, and send my wages home to you." She convinces herself, "I will work hard... I will learn my numbers so that I can bring money home to *Ama*" (McCormick 7). This exchange reflects the harsh reality where poverty forces children into vulnerable situations. Like many trafficked individuals, Lakshmi believes employment will improve her family's life, unaware of the exploitation ahead.

From a human rights perspective, Lakshmi's situation reveals a violation of children's rights, particularly the right to protection from economic exploitation and hazardous labor (CRC, Article 32). Her innocence and determination to support her mother expose the systemic issue of child labor, where young girls are often misled and trafficked under the pretense of employment. The promise of a better life in the city, as seen in her reference to Gita, is a false hope used by traffickers to lure children into situations of forced labor and exploitation. This also reflects the broader issue of socio-economic inequality and the failure of governments to provide adequate protections and opportunities for marginalized families. Without access to education, social security, and safe employment opportunities, children like Lakshmi become easy targets for trafficking networks. Her dream of learning numbers to support her family highlights the importance of education as a fundamental right (UDHR, Article 26), one that should empower children rather than push them toward dangerous labor. Ultimately, Lakshmi's story represents the countless children who fall victim to human trafficking due to poverty and lack of opportunity, emphasizing the urgent need for stronger enforcement of child protection laws and economic policies that prevent such vulnerabilities.

The quote, "Your family will get nothing, not one rupee, if you do not obey your new auntie" (McCormick 54), highlights a severe violation of human rights through economic exploitation and forced labor. By threatening to withhold financial support from Lakshmi's family, the trafficker coerces her into submission, stripping her of her freedom and autonomy. This act directly violates Article 4 of UDHR, which prohibits slavery and forced labor, and Article 32 of CRC, which protects children from economic exploitation. Lakshmi's situation exemplifies how traffickers manipulate financial desperation to trap victims in exploitative conditions. The combination of economic control, emotional coercion, and physical threats ensures her compliance, reinforcing the systemic violation of fundamental human rights in human trafficking.

The "MATHEMATICS" section in *Sold* starkly illustrates Lakshmi's commodification, where her value is reduced to a brutal calculation of how many men she must endure to repay an imposed debt. Unlike the simple arithmetic she once practiced in her village, she is now forced to track the money her body generates, reflecting, "If I bring half dozens of men to my room each night, and each man pays Mumtaz 30 rupees, I am 80 rupees closer each day to going back home. If I work for hundred days more, I should have nearly enough to pay back the 20,000 rupees I owe to Mumtaz" (McCormick 147). This exposes the dehumanizing reality of forced labor and sexual exploitation, where Lakshmi is coerced into servitude under the illusion of debt repayment. Her worth is stripped of dignity and measured solely in economic terms, a stark violation of Article 4 of the UDHR, which prohibits slavery, upholds the right to fair and freely chosen work. Such treatment also violates Article 23(1) of the UDHR, which states, "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment." However, Lakshmi has no choice—she

is trapped in a system where her body is treated as an instrument of profit, deprived of autonomy, dignity, and fundamental human rights. This chilling statement exemplifies how trafficked victims are forced to labor under exploitative conditions, often deprived of basic necessities like food and rest unless they generate revenue for their traffickers.

The quote, “If a customer likes you, he may give you a sweet or a tip. Hide it where no one can see or Mumtaz will take it and eat it by herself” (McCormick 147), highlights the financial control traffickers impose on victims, ensuring they remain powerless and dependent. This exploitation directly violates Article 23(3) of the UDHR, which states, “Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity.” However, trafficked girls like Lakshmi are denied financial independence, reinforcing their entrapment.

This economic coercion also aligns with the ILO’s Forced Labour Convention (No. 29), which condemns labor conditions where individuals are “forced to work under threat of punishment and deprived of their earnings.” Additionally, feminist economic theory underscores how women in impoverished conditions are disproportionately vulnerable to economic exploitation, especially under patriarchal oppression, as seen in *Sold*.

Lakshmi’s tragic experience in *Sold* exposes both economic exploitation and the denial of fundamental human rights. Shahanna introduces her to a grim reality called “city subtraction” (McCormick 153), where half of her earnings go to Mumtaz. However, as Shahanna explains, even this portion is further reduced by additional costs—rent, bed, pillow, and medical fees to prevent pregnancy (153). These deductions ensure that Lakshmi and the other women remain trapped in a cycle of financial servitude, stripped of autonomy and unable to escape.

Lakshmi’s realization that she is “buried alive” (154) reflects the suffocating hopelessness of her situation. No matter how hard she works to repay her so-called debt, Mumtaz’s economic control ensures she never gains financial independence. This mirrors systems of forced labor, where traffickers seize victims’ wages, violating their right to just and favorable remuneration (UDHR, Article 23) and their right to be free from exploitation (CRC, Article 32). Beyond economic oppression, Lakshmi’s forced separation from her family, education, and former life underscores the systematic stripping of her rights. Reduced to a mere commodity, she is expected to serve customers without regard for her dignity or well-being. Her story powerfully illustrates the psychological and physical toll of trafficking, emphasizing the urgent need for stronger protections against economic and gender-based exploitation.

Lakshmi’s situation exemplifies multiple human rights violations, including forced labor, denial of education, economic exploitation, and physical and sexual violence. As she is trapped in the brothel, she is denied her freedom and dignity (Article 4, UDHR), reduced to a commodity whose labor is exploited without fair compensation (Article 23, UDHR). Her right to education (Article 26, UDHR) is also denied, as she is unable to

pursue learning and personal growth. Additionally, the physical abuse and sexual violence inflicted on her violate her personal security and protection from abuse (Article 5, UDHR). Her inability to escape this cycle of exploitation underscores the deprivation of her fundamental rights, leaving her vulnerable and powerless, with no recourse for justice or protection.

This moment highlights psychological entrapment and loss of autonomy, as trafficked victims lose control over time, agency, and self-determination. The inability to leave mirrors conditions of modern slavery, which anti-trafficking organizations like Polaris and UNODC classify as; “Situations where victims are held through force, fraud, or coercion, and are unable to walk away.” Lakshmi’s situation directly contradicts Article 8 of ICCPR, which prohibits slavery and states that; “No one shall be held in servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” Contemporary human rights organizations, such as Anti-Slavery International, highlight that victims of trafficking lose all sense of ownership over their own lives, much like Lakshmi, who gradually resigns herself to captivity.

Through Lakshmi’s story, *Sold* exposes the economic machinery of human trafficking, demonstrating how victims are stripped of financial agency, subjected to forced labor, and treated as property rather than individuals. McCormick’s novel serves as a powerful indictment of global human rights violations, emphasizing the urgent need for legal, economic, and social interventions to dismantle modern slavery and child exploitation.

The Role of Literature in Advocacy Against Human Rights Violations

Literature has long functioned as a powerful tool for social change, offering a humanized perspective on systemic injustices. Through narratives that evoke empathy and awareness, literary works like *Sold* play a crucial role in advocating against human rights violations. By portraying the lived experiences of trafficking victims in a deeply personal and emotionally compelling manner, McCormick not only educates readers but also inspires action. This aligns with the principles of human rights literature, which seeks to give voice to the oppressed and call for legal, social, and political reforms.

Sold does more than depict suffering—it acts as a catalyst for awareness, advocacy, and action. By exposing human rights violations through compelling storytelling, McCormick’s novel serves as both a testimony and a call to action, urging readers, activists, and policymakers to work toward ending human trafficking. Through Lakshmi’s resilience and ultimate assertion of self-worth, the novel highlights literature’s role in not just documenting oppression, but also inspiring resistance and hope.

Sold is more than just a novel—it is a powerful expose of human rights violations that continue to afflict vulnerable populations worldwide. Through Lakshmi’s harrowing journey, McCormick unveils the brutal realities of human trafficking, forced prostitution, and systemic exploitation. This study underscores the crucial role of

literature in raising awareness and inspiring action against such abuses. Combating trafficking requires a collective effort from policymakers, activists, and society to prevent more children from suffering Lakshmi's fate.

Beyond its gripping narrative, *Sold* is an urgent call to action, exposing the global scope of human trafficking and the unimaginable abuse victims endure. Lakshmi's transformation—from a hopeful village girl to a victim of modern slavery—reveals the hidden, ignored realities of trafficking victims worldwide. McCormick illustrates how traffickers exploit poverty, manipulate families, and entrap victims in cycles of abuse, emphasizing that trafficking is not just an individual tragedy but a deeply embedded social issue requiring global intervention.

The novel serves as both a tool for advocacy and a platform for dialogue on the rights of women and children. It compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths and recognize the need for active participation in dismantling trafficking networks. By shedding light on the mechanisms of exploitation, *Sold* challenges passive awareness and calls for proactive solutions.

Lakshmi's moment of hope in "Digital Magic" (McCormick 251) reflects the crucial role of external intervention in rescuing trafficking victims; "*A man from America comes and asks me if I want to leave. 'Do you want to leave here?' he says*" (253). This moment mirrors the work of organizations like UNICEF, UNODC, and Polaris, which identify, rescue, and rehabilitate trafficking survivors. It aligns with Article 6 of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, which calls for "measures to provide assistance and protection to victims, including their physical, psychological, and social recovery."

Sold is a vital literary intervention—one that not only exposes the horrors of trafficking but also urges readers to engage in real-world efforts to combat this global crisis. This novel underscores the importance of global cooperation in combating human trafficking and highlights the need for stronger intervention strategies. Lakshmi's desire to return to a "clean place" represents a symbol of hope and resilience, transcending the trauma she has endured. Her statement, "The clean place, I say. 'I want to go there'" (McCormick, 256), reflects the power of memory as a source of strength, illustrating how survivors find solace in visions of a better life. From a psychological perspective, this aligns with Judith Lewis Herman's trauma theory, which posits that survivors often use mental imagery and personal narratives as vital coping mechanisms to sustain hope (45). This passage reinforces the idea that literature provides a space for healing and empowerment, reminding readers that the human spirit can endure even in the harshest conditions. Lakshmi's final assertion, "My name is Lakshmi. I am from Nepal. I am fourteen years old" (McCormick, 269), is a reclaiming of her identity and a powerful act of resistance against the forces that sought to erase her existence. This moment resonates with the principles of human rights advocacy, particularly Article 1 of the UDHR, which

states; “*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*” By asserting her identity, Lakshmi demonstrates her agency, countering the systemic oppression that tried to strip her of her dignity. This moment mirrors real-world survivor narratives, where victims of human trafficking reclaim their identities, ultimately becoming advocates for change. In this way, Lakshmi’s journey underscores the transformative power of literature, amplifying the voices of the oppressed and calling attention to the need for a global movement against human trafficking.

Conclusion

Addressing the human rights violations highlighted in the novel requires a multifaceted approach. Policymakers must implement stronger laws and more effective systems for victim protection and rehabilitation. Activists must continue their work to raise awareness and push for international cooperation in eradicating trafficking. Society, as a whole, must work to dismantle the societal structures that contribute to the conditions in which trafficking thrives—poverty, lack of education, and gender inequality. Ultimately, McCormick’s *Sold* is a serious reminder that the fight against human trafficking is far from over. Through literature, we are reminded of the faces behind the statistics and the urgent need to act, to ensure that no child, like Lakshmi, is subjected to such inhumane treatment. The book inspires hope by showing that, even in the darkest circumstances, the human spirit can survive and resist, but it also challenges us to take responsibility for ending the cycle of trafficking for good.

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