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The Role of Food Insecurity in the Sexual Exploitation of Young Girls: Behavioral Control in Patricia McCormick's *Sold*

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Abstract

The scarcity of food in impoverished areas critically endangers the future of the children raised in such conditions, driving them deeper into poverty. Year-over-year statistics reveal that food shortages expose millions of children to devastating health, educational, and behavioral problems. Even more alarming is that this uncertain availability of food contributes to various forms of child trafficking. This harrowing experience of modern-day child slavery is central to Patricia McCormick's third novel *Sold* (2006). After spending months in Nepal — a country with one of the highest rates of malnutrition—McCormick, an American novelist, portrays true-to-life accounts of a young girl's exploitation rooted in food insecurity. *Sold* tells the story of Lakshmi, a young Nepalese girl sold into sexual slavery due to poverty and hunger. The novel not only explores her pain and loss of innocence, but also how she was manipulated into accepting her fate. This study applies Icek Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior developed in 1991, to examine Lakshmi's behavioral control and the manipulation she endures and investigate how food scarcity contributes to the coercion of young, impoverished girls into sexual slavery. TPB, a social-psychological theory, connects intentions to attitudes to explain human behavior, arguing that conscious actions are driven by an individual's normative behavior and societal norms.

Keywords: child abuse, female sexual slavery, food scarcity, TPB, *Sold*, Patricia McCormick

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1. Introduction

Although food insecurity has long been a pressing issue, it was not officially recognized as a critical global concern until the World Food Conference in Rome in 1974. Since then, the link between food scarcity and low-quality lives has been widely acknowledged. In 2014, the Food and Agriculture Organization declared that more than 800 million people are suffering from food insecurity. Despite significant international attention over the past decades, malnutrition and hunger continue to persist in various regions, particularly in the developing world (1). The experience of food insecurity is agonizing, not only because of the fasting and skipping of meals but also due to the emotional pain of watching loved ones weaken in both body and spirit because of hunger.

The term “food insecurity” is defined as the inability “of a community, family or individual to be able to eat sufficiently, in terms of both quantity and quality, as prescribed by the international standards of calorie, protein and vitamin intake” (Ashley 2). While food insecurity negatively affects both children and adults, child malnutrition plays a particularly significant role in fostering social and psychological problems rooted in malnutrition. Child malnutrition is widespread in developing nations, where an average of one in every five children suffers from it, and is responsible for nearly half of all child deaths worldwide (Ashley 4). One of the countries severely affected by this condition is Nepal, a small country located in the Himalayas of Southeast Asia, bordering India and China. With more than 70 percent of the Nepalese population living below poverty line, the country is plagued with significant

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food insecurity (Poudel and Smyth 84). They rely heavily on assistance from India and China (HRW 7).

The primary cause of malnutrition and poverty in Nepal is the country's lack of natural resources, including oil and minerals. Furthermore, only 23% of its land is arable, with the remainder comprising of mountains (35%) or hills (42%). Nepal depends on this small portion of cultivated land to secure food which "accounts for 28.9 percent of the gross domestic product and generates direct employment for more than 66 percent of the economically active population" (Subedi and Yadar 231). As a result, 36 percent of Nepali children suffer from stunting, 10 percent from wasting and 53 percent from anemia (Subedi and Yadar 232). Additionally, Nepalese children are vulnerable to severe human rights violations, such as child trafficking, which ranks as the third-largest crime globally.

One form of child trafficking in Nepal occurs during times of undernourishment, when young girls are tricked into prostitution under the pretense that their work is necessary for their families' survival. This tragic practice has historical roots in the 19th century, when Nepal was ruled by the feudal Rana family (1846- 1951). Initially, deceived young girls served as attendants or mistresses for royalty, however, over time Nepalese women were smuggled to India to work in prostitution as part of political arrangements. Although the Rana regime ended in 1951, human trafficking did not (HRW 7). Studies indicate that by 2002, more than 200,000 Nepalese women were working in Indian brothels (Poudel and Smyth 84).

Such portrayal of stolen innocence is the focus of *Sold* (2006), a captivating novel by the American realistic fiction writer Patricia McCormick (born 1956). Narrated with a sense of anguish, *Sold* depicts the story of Lakshmi, a 13-year-old girl from the Nepali mountains who is tricked into sex trafficking. In the brief descriptive chapters of the novel, Lakshmi recounts how she was sold by her stepfather after a devastating storm destroyed their crops. Lakshmi was smuggled into India under the false promise of

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a decent job that would allow her to support her family. To accept her new reality of servitude, Lakshmi had to convince herself that she was making the right choice. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) can help elucidate this situation. According to TPB, individuals are more likely to engage in a behavior if they perceive it positively, receive encouragement from others, and believe they have control over it (Courneya et al. 191).

2. Theory of Planned Behavior

TPB is a social-psychological theory introduced by American professor Icek Ajzen in 1987 and further developed by him in 1991 to predict human behavior across various domains (Taghizadeh 284; Ajzen and Schmidt 18). The theory aims to address various social and psychological issues, as many modern problems are rooted in human behavior (Hagger et al., 1). It consistently predicts behavioral intentions (Sutton, Theory 227) and aligns with the understanding that human behavior can both contribute to and alleviate social problems (Fishbein and Ajzen 1). It is considered a comprehensive theory because it applies to any target behavior without modification (Sutton, Theory 225). This is because it “is based on the assumption that human beings usually behave in a sensible manner; that they take account of unavailable information and implicitly or explicitly consider the implications over their actions” (Ajzen, Attitudes 117).

TPB comprises three factors that determine the strength of a person's intention: **attitude**, **subjective norms**, and **perceived behavioral control**. Ajzen explains that these three factors differ in nature: one is personal, one reflects social influence, and one deals with control issues (Attitudes 117). He explains that the first factor, attitude, “is the individual's positive or negative evaluation of performing the particular behavior of interest”; the second factor, subjective norms, “is a person's perception of social pressure to perform or not perform the behavior under consideration;” the last factor, perceived behavioral control, “is the sense of self-efficacy or ability to perform the behavior of interest.” He adds that the

importance of each of the three factors depends on the investigated intention. Moreover, in some cases, attitude is more important than subjective norms and vice versa. Also, sometimes only two of the three factors are needed to explain the behavior (Attitudes 118). Thus, TPB is “a comprehensive framework for understanding the determinants of specific intentions and behaviors” (Abrahamse 12). It offers insights into the factors that motivate a specific behavior and the resources and barriers influencing the adoption of new actions (Ajzen and Schmidt 27). This paper uses the three factors of TPB to analyze McCormick’s portrayal of a young girl’s exploitation due to hunger, examining the pressures that lead her to believe that it is better to leave her family and seek employment, that ultimately results in her being sold into prostitution.

2.1. Intention in *Sold*

At the core of TPB lies the individual’s intention to perform a certain action. Ajzen explains that intentions capture “the motivational factors that influence a behavior; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior” (Theory 181). In *Sold*, the intention of 13-year-old Lakshmi is evident from the outset. McCormick’s novel portrays how food insecurity drives Lakshmi to consider sacrificing herself for her family. She expresses her intention to her mother, whom she calls Ama, saying, “Let me go to the city ... I can work for a rich family like Gita does and send my wages home to you” (1). However, McCormick also illustrates that this intention is only supported by Lakshmi’s stepfather, while her mother resists the idea, insisting, “You must stay in school, no matter what your stepfather says” (1). Therefore, the mother makes a concerted effort to dissuade her daughter from leaving home for work by assuring her that things will improve. For example, she says, “With the money from this year’s crop ... we may have enough to make you a new dress. Perhaps from that red-and-gold fabric you’ve been eyeing at Bajai Sita’s store” (28). Despite the mother’s recurrent trials, Lakshmi’s intention remains the same:

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Now that Gita is 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. (3)

The above-mentioned quotation makes it obvious that Lakshmi's intention is strong. TPB explains, "the stronger the intention to engage in a behavior, the more likely should be its performance" (Ajzen, Theory 181). Thus, it can be argued that the reader expects the young girl to carry out her intended plan. However, it is disheartening to see people in the twenty-first century having limited access to basic amenities like electricity. It is also difficult to understand how a 13-year-old girl can believe that her family might be better off without her. This belief fosters Lakshmi's positive attitude toward leaving her family to work as a servant in the city.

2.2. Attitude (Behavioral Belief) in *Sold*

Attitude toward behavior refers to the degree to which "a person has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question" (Ajzen, Theory 188). David Trafimow highlights the significance of attitude in social psychology, noting that "if an attitude is a 'predisposition for behavior' and one wishes to predict behavior, a good understanding of attitude is desirable" (23). Attitude is considered an antecedent to actual behavior, predicting the adoption of behavior (Adapa 4). Lakshmi's beliefs that drive her to consider leaving her family intentionally can be analyzed through the three components of attitude as stated by Manju Kumari and Krishna Nath Pandey: **cognitive, affective, and conative** (15).

2.2.1 The Cognitive Attitude

The cognitive component involves the mental process of knowing. Lakshmi is acutely aware of the poor conditions in her area. For instance, she understands the harsh climate of her hometown in northern Nepal, a mountainous region covering 35 percent of Nepal's total land area. Due to its challenging topography

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and significant food insecurity only 6.73% of the population resides there: “18.8% mildly food insecure / 28.9% moderately food insecure / 13.8% severely food insecure” (Subedi and Yadar 234). Additionally, the average output for a poor farmer in the mountainous areas is insufficient to sustain a household due to outdated production technologies (Babu and Gulati 23).

The harsh climate is vividly depicted when Lakshmi describes the dry and rainy seasons in her hometown. This, and the resultant hardships, immediately capture the reader’s attention. During the dry months, Lakshmi notes that mothers “tie rags around their children’s eyes to shield them from the dust bellowing up from the empty riverbed. This is the season when they bury their children who die from coughing disease” (10). Additionally, during these months, her people suffer from severe drought; Lakshmi recounts, “I watch as Ama makes an offering of marriage petals, red Kumkum powder, and a few precious bits of rice to her goddess, praying for rain. But the only water that falls comes from Ama’s eyes” (23). Conversely, in the rainy months, mothers must “pick leeches from their children’s feeds and give them tea to ward off the loose-bowel disease. This is the season when they bury children who cannot be carried to the doctor on the other side of that river” (11). Lakshmi adds, “the rain is so fierce, so relentless, so merciless, it finds every crack in our roof. Ama and I pack the walls with scraps from cloth, but each day they melt a little more” (2). The dire climate and resultant food insecurity are primary stressors for Lakshmi, further shaping her belief that she can alleviate her family’s suffering by working as a servant for a wealthy family.

Additionally, the poor economic situation exacerbated by the harsh climate provides another cognitive reason for Lakshmi’s attitude. For instance, the novel opens with Lakshmi’s mother expressing concern that, “one more rainy season and our roof will be gone” (1). A tin roof becomes little Lakshmi’s dream:

A tin roof means that the family has a father who doesn’t gamble away the landlord’s money playing cards in the tea shop.

A tin roof means the family has a son working at the brick kiln

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in the city. A tin roof means that when the rain comes, the fire stays lit and the baby stays healthy. (1)

Lakshmi's poverty is further highlighted by her observations of her mother's struggles. She says, "Ama has been gone since daybreak. She said she was going to the village to sell our hen and her chicks. But I wonder, when I picture Bajai Sita and her little lizard face, if Ama will get more than a pocketful of rice" (35). She also adds, "I wonder, though, how long it will be before the owner of the tea shop knocks on our door. Or how many nights until my stepfather comes home with another debt to repay" (36-37). Such poverty and hunger affect Lakshmi's judgement, convincing her that the only way her mother and little brother can lead healthier lives is if she has money and the only way to achieve this is by finding a job.

Another cognitive reason for Lakshmi's attitude is her stepfather's laziness and exploitation. Her stepfather, who injured his arm as a child, could not afford medical treatment. Lakshmi says, "his poor mangled limb pains him during the rainy months and gives him a great shame" (1). He consistently oppresses Lakshmi's mother, such as when he demands that she sell her earrings—part of Lakshmi's dowry for her engagement to a boy named Krishna. Lakshmi's stepfather's negative impact on her family is apparent in her comparison with Gita's family:

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, his little boy splashes in the mud. My stomach churns with something bitter. I do not know if it is hunger. Or envy. (34)

Lakshmi further contrasts their situation with her stepfather's attitude: "When he looks, he sees cigarettes and rice beer, and a new vest for himself. I see a tin roof" (2). Despite his shortcomings, Lakshmi's mother remains grateful. Lakshmi narrates, "Ama says we are lucky we have a man at all. She says I am to honor and

praise him, respect and thank him for taking us in after my father died” (8). The stepfather’s inability to provide and his reliance on Lakshmi and her mother for support drive Lakshmi to consider the difficult decision of leaving her family for a better job.

2.2.2 The Affective and Conative Attitudes

The affective component of attitude relates to emotions and “is obtained by examining the feeling of the individual about the impact of the behavior and assessing the benefits of these behaviors” (Ali and Soar 8). This component investigates how a person “will hold a favorable attitude toward a given behavior if he/she believes that the performance of the behavior will lead to positive outcomes” (Al Maskari 46). Lakshmi’s feelings about her mother’s sacrifice are evident when she describes her distress over her mother selling her earrings to support the family, “I watch for Ama on the path below, and wonder what will be lost next. Later, when I see her climbing the hill to our hut, I know. It is the joyful noise of her earrings. And the proud set on her head” (35). Although her mother tries to reassure her by giving her money to buy a cake, Lakshmi responds by saying, “I tell her I’m not a child anymore. I tell her not to waste her money” (42). This is why when the stepfather decides that Lakshmi has to find a job, she feels that this decision is beneficial for the family:

This 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 ... There will be one less mouth to feed here, and I will send my wages home” ... If I go, you will have money enough for rice and curds, milk, and sugar. Enough for a coat for the baby and a sweater for you ... Enough ... for a tin roof. (48-49)

Thus, young Lakshmi is convinced that pursuing this course of action will lead to a positive outcome. Studies prove that during food shortage, children usually discuss “their desire or ability to contribute to their family’s resources, including wanting to get a job or giving their own savings to their parents for food or bills” (Leung et al 7). Furthermore, the above-mentioned quote also illustrates the third component, the conative aspect, which pertains to the desire to

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act. For Lakshmi, leaving her hometown to work becomes her primary aspiration. In other words, she is compelled to believe that she must find a way to secure food for her family.

2.3. Normative Belief (Subjective Norms) in *Sold*

Norms are unwritten rules that influence behavior within a society, creating pressure to conform to certain expectations. Thus, subjective norms refer “to the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior” (Ajzen, Theory 188). Subjective norms arise from social influences and can be measured in two ways. The first is the **injunctive norm**, which reflects what a person believes others think about the behavior; the second is the **descriptive norm** which is “a perception of what other people are actually doing” (Flanagan and Cardwell 312). In the beginning, only the injunctive norm is evident in Lakshmi’s case.

Icek Ajzen and Peter Schmidt define injunctive norm as “the expectation or subjective probability that a given reference individual or a group (e.g., friends, family, spouse, coworkers, one’s physician or supervisor) approves or disapproves of performing the behavior under consideration” (20). This is evident when Lakshmi’s stepfather encourages her to leave for a job and asks her to be happy since she is “the first member of our family to leave the mountain” (51). His approval is motivated by the 800 rupees he receives from selling her. The stepfather is fully aware that he is selling his young stepdaughter, not sending her to work as a servant for a wealthy family. Meena Poudel and Ines Smyth highlight that in Nepal, family members often sell their daughters, noting, “traffickers often use family members and close friends of the targeted women and girls to lure them and avoid detection by authorities” (84).

Lakshmi, influenced by her stepfather’s attitude and the promise of money, believes she is doing the right thing. She reflects, “It is a rich and happy day for our family, an 800-rupee day, a festive and auspicious day, and so I add one more thing for Ama: a costly treat that only the headman’s wife can afford - a bottle of Coca-Cola, the sweet drink that people say is like having tiny

fireworks in your mouth” (54-55). The belief that she is making the right choice is reinforced by her trust in two people: Bilma and a man she calls Uncle Husband. She trusts them because her stepfather has instructed her to do so. Lakshmi believes that Bilma and the man will take her to a place where she can find a job. Instead, these two individuals pressure the young girl into the painful experience of being smuggled to another country, India. They convince her that she will work there as a servant for a wealthy family, and that her salary will be sent to her mother. Lakshmi complies with everything they say because she trusts them and values their opinions. According to her, this action will save her beloved family from hunger and poverty.

One of the situations that demonstrates Lakshmi’s obedience is when Bilma gives her a pink dress to wear. Lakshmi describes it as “one long piece of cloth, with no beginning and no end, material so light and fine, I feel more naked than dressed inside it” (72). She adds, “I cannot imagine how I will walk freely in such a long, flowing gown, or how I will be able to hold the firewood and scrub the floors in such a fine and flimsy dress” (73). Despite hating the dress, Lakshmi complies because she believes it is important to the two people she trusts. Kumari and Pandey explain this behavior by stating, “the rationale for the effect of subjective norm is that a person may choose to engage in a certain behavior, even though it is not a favorable one at first” (15). This explains why young Lakshmi follows their instructions despite her discomfort; the action is recommended by trusted individuals.

Another instance of Lakshmi’s obedience occurs when she crosses the border into India. Although crossing the border is not difficult because in Nepal, the border policemen “are also bribed to allow traffickers to transport girls to India” (HRW 2), the man accompanying her needs to ensure that Lakshmi remains compliant. To gain her trust and silence, he offers her candy, which makes Lakshmi happy as she rarely eats sweets. She recalls, “During the hungry months I have eaten porridge thickened with dirt, rotten potatoes, boiled weeds. I nod. I like sweets. I like them more than I

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can say" (78). The man also promises her many more if she behaves well in front of the border officers, warning her that the border is a dangerous place with bad men who will try to take her away if she misbehaves. These words, along with the promise of more sweets, make her willing to do anything he asks. She says, "I am grateful, in this strange new world of moving thunder and invisible borders, that he is my Uncle Husband" (83). As a result, the young girl is deceived; she is ready to do whatever the man asks, just for the promise of more candy.

Being submissive allows Bilma and the man to cross the border and sell Lakshmi to a woman named Mumtaz, the owner of a brothel "Happy House," for 10,000 rupees. Lakshmi describes Mumtaz and her feelings after receiving her new job:

It seems as though this Auntie Mumtaz is my new mistress. She is a strict one, to be sure, but I will prove myself to her. And then my mother will have a new dress, shoes for the cold season, even a new shawl made of the finest yarn. My little brother will have fruit and curds twice a day and a jacket of yak fur. Even my stepfather can get new spectacles and a vest, I suppose. And our roof, our new tin roof, will be the shiniest one in the mountainside. (94)

These words reflect the innocence and purity of the 13-year-old girl. She believes she can work hard, earn enough money, and send it to her family to save them from hunger. However, all her dreams are shattered when Mumtaz says, "You belong to me ... And I paid a pretty sum for you ... You will take men to your room ... And do whatever they ask of you. You will work here, like other girls, until your debt is paid off" (106). Lakshmi is not the only Nepali girl to be deceived; nongovernmental organizations report that Nepali women and girls make up "half of the city's estimated 100,000 brothel workers. Twenty percent of Bombay's brothel population is thought to be girls under the age of 18, and half of that population may be infected with the human immune deficiency virus (HIV)" (HRW 1). This incident marks a turning point for young Lakshmi,

as she realizes that her fate is far worse than she could have imagined. She will not be working as a servant but instead is forced into prostitution.

2.4. Control Belief in *Sold*

Perceived behavioral control (PBC) is the third component of the TPB and measures “the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior” (Ajzen, Theory 188). It can be defined as “an individual’s approximation of how easy or difficult it will be for those individuals to express certain behavior” (Taghizadeh et al., 284). It also “acts as both a proxy measure of actual control and a measure of confidence in one’s ability” (Conner and Armitage 48). Simply put, it is “the individual’s perception of the degree of control over the behavior, which determines the intention and the behavior” (Richard and Filiatrault 44). Yogesh Kumar Dwivedi argues that “the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm and the greater the perceived control, the stronger the person’s intention should be to perform the behaviour in question” (19). One can argue that Lakshmi’s PBC can be divided into four phases: **Initial Control Belief, Disruption of Control, Adapting to Reality and Terminal Control Belief.**

2.4.1. Initial Control Belief

The first phase, initial control belief, is related to Lakshmi’s strong attitude and subjective norm, however, they are directed toward a false action. Lakshmi believes it is easy for her to perform the action; she can leave her family to work in the city, which is driven by the dire conditions of food insecurity and poverty. Consequently, she thinks she has full control over her actions. However, when she realizes the true nature of her situation, she is shocked. This ends her initial control belief phase.

2.4.2. Disruption of Control

During the disruption of control phase, young Lakshmi’s belief that she controls her actions fades away. Therefore, she completely refuses the idea of becoming a prostitute, however the brothel owner is relentless. Mumtaz tortures Lakshmi to force her obedience. Lakshmi recounts, “Each morning and evening Mumtaz

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comes, beats me with a leather strap, and locks the door behind her” (109). Mumtaz also uses hunger as a weapon, not only depriving Lakshmi of food but also forcing her to smell it, intensifying her suffering and trying to break her spirit. However, Lakshmi bravely resists, saying, “I don’t permit myself to smell the aroma of the bowl of curried rice that Mumtaz passes under my nose, or take note of the churning of my stomach” (112). She further reflects:

What she does not realize is that I already know hunger. I know how your stomach gnaws on itself searching for something to fill it. I know how your insides keep moving, unwilling to believe they’re empty. I also know how to swallow your spit and pretend that it is soup. How to close your nose to the scent of another family’s supper fire. And how to tie your waistcloth so tight that, at least for few hours, you can fool your belly into thinking it’s full.” (111)

Psychological studies prove that children who grow up with food insecurity “have grown increasingly tolerant and adaptive to their family’s food situation, including normalizing skipping meals and feeling hungry, or eating whatever food was available in the home” (Leung et al 7). Therefore, Lakshmi’s initial reaction to her new situation is one of refusal. She feels insecure and realizes that she has been deceived; she loses control over her actions and falls in a state of disruption.

When Lakshmi remains defiant despite hunger, Mumtaz changes her approach. She administers her a cup of lassi, making Lakshmi fall into a state where she cannot think clearly or control her actions. Lakshmi describes this experience, stating, “Mumtaz appears each day at dusk and forces a cup of lassi between my clenched jaws.” She adds, “in the endless twilight after the lassi, and before the morning others come ... men come. They crush my bones with their weight. They split me open. Then they disappear. I cannot tell which of the things they do to me are real, and which are nightmares” (123). The pain and suffering of the young girl are clear in her words:

I hurt.

I am torn and bleeding where the men have been.

I pray to the gods to make the hurting go away.

To make the burning and aching and the bleeding stop. (125)

After being subjected to rape, one of the most severe violations against children, numerous signs of trauma become evident in young Lakshmi. For example, she tries hard to wash the smell of men on her body and says, “there is a bucket of water next to my bed. But no matter how often I wash and scrub and wash and scrub, I cannot seem to rinse the men from my body” (129). Such words reveal her mental instability; she cannot accept the harsh reality of becoming a prostitute at such a young age, after having been an innocent child cherished by her mother, family, and community for so many years.

After regaining consciousness, Lakshmi is informed by Mumtaz that her debt is 20,000 rupees, instead of 10,000, and she must work to pay off this inflated amount. This tactic of using inflated debt to control young girls is a common exploitation method used by brothel owners:

This purchase price, plus interest (reported to be ten percent of the total), becomes the “debt” that the women must work to pay off... a process that can stretch on indefinitely. Only the brothel owner knows the terms of the debt, and most women have no idea how much they owe or the terms for repayment. Brothels are tightly controlled, and the girls are under constant surveillance. Escape is virtually impossible. Owners use threats and severe beatings to keep inmates in line. Additionally, women fear capture by other brutal agents and arrest by the police, who are often the brothel owners’ best clients. Many girls and women are brought to India as virgins; many returned to Nepal with the HIV. (HRW 2)

Like other girls, Lakshmi was deceived and now must adapt to her grim new reality. Stephen Sutton argues that “a person’s attitude toward a particular behavior may be automatically updated when new information about the behaviour is received” (225). This shift

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in attitude involves Lakshmi accepting her dire circumstances until she can pay off her debt. Hence, Lakshmi is forced to enter the next phase, adapting-to-reality.

2.4.3. Adapting to Reality

Despite her attempts to adapt, Lakshmi finds the new reality extremely challenging. She expresses her distress, criticizing other girls who seem to have accepted their fate more easily: “How they can eat and laugh and carry on as normal when soon the men will come is so perplexing that, while they laugh, I fight back tears” (137). Few girls try to convince Lakshmi that it is better for her to accept her destiny in order to have both strength and money to survive. For example, a girl named Pushpa tries to comfort her by saying, “If a customer likes you, he may give you a sweet ... You must eat it right away. Or Mumtaz will take it and eat it herself” (141). Anita warns her about Americans, saying that they “will try to trick you into running away ... Don’t be fooled. They will shame you and make you walk naked through the streets” (142). However, the most painful words come from Shahanna, who explains the threats of “goondas” working for Mumtaz; she says, that if Lakshmi tries “to escape, they will hunt you. If they catch you, they will beat you. If you get a disease, they will throw you out in the street. If you try to get back in, they will beat you” (156). She also adds, “Policemen are supposed to stop people like Mumtaz from selling girls ... but she gives this one money each week and he looks the other way” (159). One has to argue that all of Shahanna’s words are true; “Brothel owners pay protection money and bribes to the police to prevent raids and to bail out underage girls who are arrested” (HRW 2). Faced with these grim realities, Lakshmi feels powerless and fearful, unable to see a way out of her situation.

What hurts Lakshmi the most is when Shahanna says, “We all need to pretend ... If we did not pretend, how would we live?” (144). These words push Lakshmi to think about the life these girls and women are leading:

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But in the evening, it is harder to pretend. As soon as dark falls, the bigger ones go up to the roof. They fly homemade paper kites until they are too tired to stand, daring to come down to sleep only late at night after the men have finally gone. The younger ones ... are given special medicine so they can sleep under the bed while their mothers are with customers. (145)

It is the stories and actions of other girls in the brothel that force Lakshmi to accept her fate as a prostitute. She does not willingly accept this reality but feels she has no other option. Therefore, it is arguable that Lakshmi's descriptive norm — the norm that reflects what people are doing and how their action affects others — becomes clear only during the PBC stage. She accepts her situation after hearing stories of other girls, which make her believe that escape is impossible. Shahanna not only instills fear in Lakshmi about the consequences of leaving the brothel but also instructs her on managing her meager earnings. Shahanna explains:

Half of what the men pay goes to Mumtaz ... Then you must take away 80 rupees for what Mumtaz charges for your daily rice and dal. Another 100 a week for renting you a bed and a pillow. And 500 for the shot the dirty-hands doctor gives us once a month so that we won't become pregnant. (147)

Lakshmi remembers her math teacher and how she used to give her difficult problems to solve. Now Lakshmi has a "different set of calculations ... If I bring a half dozen men to my room each night, and each man pays Mumtaz 30 rupees, I am 180 rupees closer each day to going back home" (147). As a result, she decides to save all her money to survive. She even sacrifices her meals, "each day I hear him coming, the sound of his teacups clattering in his caddy as he arrives at the kitchen door. And each day he comes to our room, I turn back so I will not be tempted to spend even a single rupee on a luxury I have learned to live without" (211). This dream of returning home makes Lakshmi willingly change her opinions and obey Mumtaz, even though she remains deeply unhappy and distressed.

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2.4.4. Terminal Control Belief

The adapting-to-reality phase does not last long for Lakshmi, as a pivotal moment occurs when Shilpa, Mumtaz's spy, reveals to her, "Bilma may have given your family a little sum of money when you left home ... but the rest — the money from the customers — goes to Mumtaz. Your family will never see one rupee more." She adds, "you will never pay off what you owe ... Mumtaz will work you until you are too sick to make money for her. And then she will throw you out on the street" (238). At this point Lakshmi's dream collapses: "I shut my eyes and shake my head from side to side. She is wrong. Because if she is right, everything I've done here, everything that's been done to me, was for nothing" (239). Confronted with this harsh truth, Lakshmi resolves to leave the brothel, even if it costs her life. As a result, the fourth phase, terminal control belief, starts with Lakshmi trying to find a way to take charge of her life.

Lakshmi rebels because staying longer in the brothel means witnessing more instances of inhumane treatment. For example, the smell of hot chili indicates that "someone has crossed Mumtaz, that Mumtaz will smear chilies on a stick and put it inside the girl, and that all of us will be awake through the night, listening to the girl moan" (257). When Kumari, a new girl, is subjected to this punishment, the harsh realities of the brothel, coupled with the revelation about her money, give Lakshmi the strength to seek help from the Americans. One American man, who comes to her room as a customer, offers to help her. He shows her, on his camera, other girls that he had saved, and asks her to support him when the police arrive by stating that she is being kept in the brothel against her will. The novel concludes with the American keeping his promise and arriving with Indian policemen to rescue Lakshmi. Lakshmi encourages her friends to join her in speaking out, however they are too afraid. Only Lakshmi has the courage to step forward and declare that she is staying there against her will, saying:

My name is Lakshmi.

I am from Nepal.

I am fourteen years old (263)

This ending highlights Lakshmi's triumph over fear as she bravely revolts against her captivity in the "Happy House," a name that starkly contrasts with the suffering faced by its occupants. Her exposure of Mumtaz serves as a lesson to all the women in the brothel, reminding them of their fundamental right to safety and healthy behavior. Although the ending does not reveal Lakshmi's future or her reintegration into society, her final act of defiance offers hope to the readers by demonstrating resilience and triumph over adversity.

3. Conclusion

Many children around the world, especially girls, are at risk of exploitation due to widespread starvation. In *Sold*, Patricia McCormick portrays a 13-years-old Nepali girl who is robbed of her innocence when she is sold into prostitution after a monsoon destroys the family's crops — an incident that turns her life upside down. To understand the compelling procedure that controls Lakshmi's attitude, this paper applies TPB, a social-psychological framework. The theory explains how an individual forms intentions to perform specific actions and is used here to illustrate how effectively an author can portray the emotional reactions following child trafficking and rape in fiction.

The TPB connects Lakshmi's intentions, attitudes, and societal norms to explain her behavior of finding a job in the city, highlighting how food insecurity exacerbates the coercion of impoverished girls into trafficking. By analyzing McCormick's *Sold* through this lens, the paper provides valuable insights into the intersection of poverty, exploitation, and behavioral control. Ultimately, the novel serves as a call to action for the world to acknowledge and address the pain, suffering, and hunger faced by others, and to work towards ending these grave human rights violations.

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