

নারী

Brokered Subjects and Conditional Liberty: A Study of Select India-Based Narratives of Sexual Slavery

Jyotirmoy Sil

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Malda College, Malda, West Bengal, India

Abstract: *This paper focuses on three texts that contextualize the horrors of sex trafficking in India, namely, Patricia McCormick's *Sold* (2006), *A Walk Across the Sun* (2011) by Corban Addison, and *Daughters of the Brothel* (2019) by Deepak Yadav. McCormick's *Sold* is based on the real-life experiences of a Nepalese girl named Lakshmi who was trafficked into a brothel of Calcutta (now Kolkata). Addison's novel is a fictional tale of two sisters, Ahalya and Sita Ghai, who were sold to the human traffickers after a calamity (tsunami) hits their village. Yadav's book is a collection of short stories that explores the lives of sex workers in a number of brothels situated by the G.B. Road, Delhi. All these three books depict the violence and trauma experienced by the trafficked women, and the precarious scopes of acquiring liberty from the clutches of brothel owners. Significantly, the narratives of McCormick and Addison tickle the question of Indo-Orientalism for here the brokered subjects are rescued by the American individuals. In the scope of this paper, based on the study of the said texts, an attempt will be made to explore the discourses of sex trafficking in India, exploitations of the brokered subjects leading to the identity crisis, and the problematics/politics of conditional liberty.*

Keywords: *brothel, liberty, prostitution, sexual slavery, sex trafficking.*

Introduction

Sex trafficking has been one of the vilest yet less attained issues in the Third World Countries of South Asia, and accounted for thirty two billion US dollar business (as per United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) ("South Asia"). In India, daily, nearly two hundred girls are forced into prostitution (Sen and Nair 21). Sexual slavery reduces women to the level of commodity; and regular physical exploitation and mental trauma make the brokered subjects lose their prior 'self'. In most cases, the brothel owners forcefully exploit the brokered girls in the pretext of debt burden, and after certain years of sexual slavery the thirst of getting released from it becomes vague as the questions of social/familial acceptability wryly appear. A vast number of literature, documentary, and cinematography thematised this issue with varied focus. In this paper, three texts that contextualize the above issues are studied, namely, Patricia McCormick's *Sold* (2006), *A Walk Across the Sun* (2011) by Corban Addison, and *Daughters of the Brothel* (2019) by Deepak Yadav, and an attempt is made to explore the discourses of sex trafficking in India, sexual slavery

of the brokered subjects leading to the identity crisis, and the politics concerning the conditional liberty from sexual slavery.

Sex Trafficking and (Con)Texts

Orphanage, abductions, extreme poverty are the predominant reasons for human trafficking in India. Patricia McCormick's *Sold* narrates the real-life experiences of a Nepalese girl (rather, child) named Lakshmi who was trafficked into an Indian brothel. In the novel, Lakshmi, an adolescent girl yet to attain her puberty, is sold by her gambler step-father to a stranger (Auntie Bimla) who crosses the border and sells her to Mumtaz, the pimp of a brothel named, ironically, Happiness House, located in a red-light area of Calcutta (now, Kolkata). Lakshmi endures extreme physical and mental trauma, gradually loses hope of getting a free life ever, but, eventually, she meets an American client who is actually gathering proof against Mumtaz and his crew for their legal prosecution. In the end, police rescued Lakshmi and other girls from that Happiness House. Corban Addison's *A Walk Across the Sun* is a fictional story about the two sisters Ahalya and Sita Ghai,

who are sold to girl traffickers by someone close to their father. In the beginning of Addison's narrative, a tsunami (on 26th December 2004) hits the Coromandel coast of South India ravaging Ahalya and Sita Ghai's house, and their father goes missing (presumably, drowned in the sea). They seek help from one of their father's acquaintances who takes them to a trafficker on a truck, and then they are forcefully taken to Chennai, and subsequently to Kamathipura, the infamous red light district in Mumbai. Although *A Walk Across the Sun* is basically a fiction, its narrative is to some large extent based on the real life experiences of its author Corban Addison who had served an America-based organisation, International Justice Mission. Addison, as he revealed in an interview, used to work in India with the said organisation, and he had to go to several brothels disguising himself as a customer to gain information for the prosecution (Faktorovich). Deepak Yadav's book *Daughters of the Brothel* (2019) is a collection of real stories collected by the author from brothels situated by G.B. Road, Delhi. The stories are formed by the author's actual negotiations with the prostitutes working in those brothels, and these painful accounts betray the traumatic experiences of the girls who were once coerced into prostitution, routined exploitations of the sex-workers, cruelty and corruption involved in such business and so on.

Sexual Slavery, Commodification of Female Body, Persecution

In *Sold*, the woman trafficker sold Lakshmi to Mumtaz only for five hundred rupees as "she has no hips" and "plain as porridge" (McCormick 53). The worth of the brokered girls, as shown in Addison's text, is also determined by the question of the girl being "sealed pack" (that is, virgin) (Addison 49, 71) or not. *Sold* depicts an ugly scenario where a child was reduced to

a sexual object and the people who bought her had the intention to capitalise on customers' pedophilia. Lakshmi, in *Sold*, is merely a child who is served to the pervert customers of the brothel, The Happiness House, and Mumtaz, the pimp, does not hinder to commit such inhuman crime. In *A Walk Across the Sun*, Ahalya insists on sending her to the customers instead of her younger sister Sita as she is yet to reach her puberty. Soon after her first painful experience, which is traded for a high price (Addison 72), she becomes like any other prostitute of Suchir's brothel. Sumeera, "badi ma" (49), the pimp of the brothel, determines her rate and sells her body on hourly basis to the customers. Subsequently, Sita is sold to the drug smugglers who use her body as a drug mule. In a painful scene, Sita is forced to swallow the drug stuffed condoms (Addison 142), and the readers realise that she will be forced to defecate those packets later as well. Sadist customers fulfill their pervert fantasies by hurting the prostitutes inhumanely. Yadav's "Ladies of the Night" (from *Daughters of the Brothel*) narrates how once a very young girl, who newly came to a brothel at G.B. Road, was traumatized after a policeman customer burned her face with cigarettes (49). Often, the brothel owners find cruel ways to get rid of the aged prostitute whose bodies are not sellable anymore. In the story "Daughters of the Brothel", Sona, an aged woman with the deep scars in her face, relates to Yadav the unbearable pain when someone emptied an acid bottle upon her face, and subsequently, she was forced out from the brothel where she had been working for years: "Someone emptied a bottle of acid on me when I was sleeping. I cried. I wept, and I couldn't understand what was happening for a minute. My skin was burning, and it felt like thousands of needles piercing through my body at once or even worse" (133).

Brokered Subjects, Conditional Liberty and Politics of Representation

As soon as the trafficked girls are sold to the brothel owners, it becomes quite impossible for the victims to escape without, at least, paying off the debt burden upon them owing to the buying price that just keeps on increasing somehow in accumulating all the costs (buying cost, living cost, interest, and so on). Ahalya is dragged into Suchir's brothel by a young man who intimidates her saying, "You are ours now. Suchir paid forty thousand rupees for you. You will do what we say and you will repay your debt. That is the way here" (Addison 48-49). As per *A Report on Trafficking in Women and Children in India 2002-2003*, in India, often the brothel owners set ploys with corrupt police officers to entrap the reluctant sex workers in debt. Around forty percent of the respondents (out of 4001 subjects in 13 States/UT of India) claimed that they were arrested by the police in raids and the brothel owner managed to get them out of the jail; and eventually, they were compelled to work in the same brothel owing to their debt burden (Sen and Nair 86). The sex trafficking rackets are organised bodies that, in most cases, include corrupt police officials. The involvement of the corrupt police officers in the human trafficking gives vent to the brokers as the former function to protect the culprits from prosecution in exchange of regular douceur. When Ahalya and Sita are forced to board a train to Mumbai from Chennai, the girls try to intimidate the two traffickers by saying that they will disclose everything to police, and Prakash, the trafficker, replies that this would do no good as the police commissioner is their "friend" (Addison 55). In Deepak Yadav's story, "Ladies of the Night", Fatima, a sex-worker at brothel no. 56 situated by the G.B. Road, informs the author that every other day some girls are brought in the brothel forcefully, and there is no use of complaining to the police since, "Police

don't take any interest as long as they get their share of the loot" (Yadav 44). In "Daughters of the Brothel", Ajit Singh, the coordinator of a non-government organisation named Guria that seeks to rescue the trafficked girls, comments, "I have seen several cases in which a trafficked minor girl managed to sneak out of the brothel and reached the police station. But the policemen sold the girls back to the brothels. Moreover, if you ask them to arrange a team to raid the brothel in the morning, they wouldn't do it even by evening. They are absolute bastards. They feed upon the weekly bribe they get from the brothel owners to let minor girls get into the trade. Their demand for sexual favours with the minor girl is also not new" (Yadav 148). Significantly, in *Sold*, Shahanna, a prostitute, tells Lakshmi that Mumtaz, their pimp, does not let them use condoms with the intention to entrap them by getting them pregnant. Once the girls of The Happiness House beget children they will not leave and, rather, do anything to stay there (McCormick 148). Pushpa suggests Lakshmi to keep a number of condoms hidden under her bed, insists on using them, and never let Mumtaz know.

Scopes of rehabilitation after liberty from sexual slavery for many years is an ominous question for the trafficked girls/women. In McCormick's *Sold* and Addison's *A Walk Across the Sun*, noticeably, the misery of the victims are rescued by the philanthropic American White characters. In *Sold*, the sexual slavery reduces Lakshmi to the level of a sellable body and makes her forget her actual identity/self. That is why when the American customer comes back with police to rescue her and others, she murmurs her own identity before introducing herself to the rescuers, "My name is Lakshmi, I repeat I am from Nepal, I am thirteen" (McCormick 204). *A Walk Across the Journey* features a larger than life protagonist Thomas Clerke, a

lawyer and member of an America-based NGO named The Coalition Against Sexual Exploitation (CASE) that operates its rescue missions in South-East Asia. Clerke, after rescuing Ahalya from Suchir's brothel, ventures in a perilous journey to rescue Sita from the drug smugglers. In this context, it is to point out that, even in recent times, in various West's narratives—covering movies, documentaries, novels, travelogues, prose—the Third World countries including India are exaggeratedly projected as unsafe vile spaces. Such narratives (that mainly come from the United States of America nowadays), by repeatedly depicting the atrocities, corruption, criminal activities, apart from focusing on poverty, tend to create a somewhat distorted epistemology of the contemporary East. More often than not such contemporary Orientalist texts feature a saviour from the West who interferes into the affairs of the wretched in the Third World country and makes a difference. Sex trafficking in India, apparently, is one of the coveted subjects of contemporary Indo-Orientalism. Indelibly, this Indo-Orientalism that prefers to render India as a dark space overlooking its vast versatility in terms of culture, social and economic categories is somewhat reflected in McCormick's *Sold* and Addison's *A Walk Across the Sun*. Although *Sold* is out and out a story based on a real incident, the question of Orientalist presentability still lingers. In the latter novel, Thomas Clerke, the American lawyer turned CASE activist, becomes an ultimate filmy hero who ventures to the extreme to rescue Sita from the drug smugglers. The American documentary film, *Born into Brothels* (2004), depicts the deprivations of the children born in a red-light district of Kolkata. However, here, the attempts of Zana Briski, an American philanthropist to train those children photography so that they can pay off the school tuition fees

seems to be a fuzzy solution as it was unlikely to be a sustainable solution for their financial crisis.

Conclusion

The question of liberty from sexual slavery gets problematised by the issue of identity crisis and post-freedom social acceptability. In a cruel irony, after a certain period of time, the brothels become the solely available shelters for the trafficked girls who were once forced to stay over there and coerced into sexual slavery. At one point, for them, the prospect of liberty from brothels generates an ominous fear owing to the uncertainty regarding the future shelter, food, and basic necessities needed for survival. When Mumtaz, in McCormick's *Sold*, decides to throw Pushpa away to the streets as the latter's body remains of no use to her, Pushpa pathetically begs Mumtaz to let her stay in her brothel (McCormick 195). Yadav's story "Daughters of the Brothel" reveals how the brothel owners often imbibe cruel ways to get rid of the aged prostitutes (Yadav 133). In Addison's novel, Ahalya is rescued at her early stage of sexual slavery before she loses her complete 'self' to routined exploitations. In the course of sex trafficking, forced sexual slavery, consistent persecution, identity of a 'prostitute' replaces the respectable (in terms of society) female identity, and the latter, in most cases, tends to accept the 'fate' pondering over their socially abandoned states. And, hence, considering the complexities of the conditional liberty in post-trafficked situations, stringent measures are demanded from the society/authority's end to eradicate the sex trafficking rackets completely from India at any cost.

Works cited:

Addison, Corban. *A Walk Across the Sun*. Silver Oak, 2012.

Briski, Z. and Kauffman, R. (Directors). *Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids*. (Documentary). THINK Film, 2004.

Faktorovich, A. "Interview with Corban Addison, Bestselling Humanitarian Novelist." *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, Anaphora Literary Press, Oct. 2, 2015, <https://anaphoraliterary.com/journals/plj/plj-excerpts/interview-with-corban-addison-bestselling-humanitarian-novelist/>

McCormick, Patricia. *Sold*. Hyperion, 2006.

Sen S, and Nair, P.M. *A Report on Trafficking in Women and Children in India 2002–2003*, Volume

1. Institute of Social Sciences, National Human Rights Commission and UNIFEM, 2004, <http://nhrc.nic.in/Documents/ReportonTrafficking.pdf>

"South Asia: UNODC initiates regional cooperation projects to address human trafficking across borders." UNODC, <https://www.unodc.org/southasia/frontpage/2014/July/south-asia-unodc-initiates-regional-cooperation-projects-to-address-human-trafficking-across-borders.html>

Yadav, Deepak. *Daughters of the Brothel*. Bigfoot Publications, 2019.

